This has been edited by *Hiryo* and *Justlovereadin*’. Between the three of us I have no doubt we still missed small mistakes, but I hope that they aren’t numerous enough to stop you from enjoying the chapter.

**Chapter 21: Not the Redhead You’re Looking For**

“And I say that a simple bra just won’t do! Ranma’s at least a size C, pushing size D, and Evil-Erza’s barely an A-cup. There’s just no way to keep people from noticing that big a difference with a sports bra, no matter how strong the elastic.”

“But unless we find some way to hide her back of them, the breast bands will be too obvious, have you seen what Knightwalker’s wearing? Her upper back is completely visible, and there’s no sign of any kind of strap there beyond her armored bra.”

As this minor argument was going on, Ranma found herself blushing as Wendy 2.0 and Cana argued about how best to keep Ranma’s bust from giving the game away when she started to pose as Erza Knightwalker, the two girls intermittently gesturing down to the half-naked form of Evil-Erza and then to Ranma’s own currently bare-chested female form. The fact that Cana intermittently reached around and felt her up as she attempted to pull the breast bands around Ranma’s chest had something to do with her blush, although how Wendy 2.0 was kneeling next to her, her own prodigious chest pressed into Ranma’s leg, also helped empower the redhead’s blush to new levels.

“I still think that Ranma’s hips and rear are going to be just as big a problem. I mean their legs are as tone, but Ranma’s hips are a bit wider and her rear is actually a rear rather than two ruts with a slim road separating them,” Edo-Wendy said, changing the subject slightly since there really was no way to determine which method was best without actually trying them both, the armored bra and the makeshift breast bands, on, and that would bring this bit of fun to an end too soon for Wendy Mardene’s liking. Playing dress-up was always fun, and knowing there was a guy’s mind in there, dealing with all the sensations they were causing his currently female form, made it even more fun.

*‘It’s just cold out’ my perfectly bubble-shaped ass*, she thought, biting back a giggle as she looked up to see the cherry-red tips of Ranma’s breasts still hard as little rocks. That and making fun of Evil-Erza’s body with her just lying unconscious to one side was also kind of hilarious. *I still can’t believe that he was able to beat her like that. And he doesn’t even look hurt! Are all the mages from Earth Land so strong or is just him?*

“Hmm you’ve got a point on her rear I suppose,” Cana replied, circling around Ranma’s back and then giving her rear a light pat smirking slightly. “On the other hand, that’s easier to cover up, and very few people are going to notice the differences in their hips. No, men, and women too, always notice the chest. Everything else comes after. If we can cover up the differences in these,” she reached around Ranma, lifting her breasts slightly in her hands, laughing, “Then everything else will follow.”

“Okay, that’s it!” Ranma blustered, pushing Cana off and away from her with one hand while lightly pushing Edo-Wendy away from him with his other hand. “I’ve had just about enough of this. You two are being too freaking handsy right now.”

“I didn’t notice you complaining earlier,” Edo-Wendy replied looking up at the redhead with a wicked laugh. She wasn’t interested in girls, but Ranma’s reactions, and the whole fact his mind was still a man’s, made the whole thing hilarious even if her(his) body wasn’t a turn on.

As the girls continued to argue, to escape the ongoing discussion, Ranma allowed his thoughts to turn to the girls in his life, spurred on by memory of how, during the battle earlier, he had compared Evil-Erza to ‘his’ Erza, rather than the original Erza or something like that. This was actually the first time since talking to Jenny back in Akane Resort that Ranma had simply thought about the girls, rather than just going with the flow to a limited extent, letting the girls make the original moves and then him laying down a few rules. But after realizing the depths of his emotional response to meeting Evil-Erza and hearing about the depths of her murderousness, Ranma felt that it was time think deep thoughts about the girls, whether he wanted to or not.

*Man, going with the flow is so much easier than all this thinking about emotions stuff. But then again, that’s what got me in trouble in Nerima. Well, while I haven’t let things get that bad, I don’t have rivals, and the girls have never come to blows. But even so, just, y’know, letting things go on without really thinking about the emotional side of things is not fair to them or me.*

*Okay, enough about that, first let’s think about Seilah first,* Ranma thought. I’m not certain how I feel about her, oh I’m **definitely** attracted to her, heck, not a few hours after meeting her I can say I’m attracted to Wendy 2.0, but that certainly doesn’t matter much. *And as for Seilah, I don’t know if that’s purely physical or not. We don’t exactly have much in common, and there are bits of her personality that I just don’t like, even if I’ve taken her on as a sort of friend and travel companion.* *She’s too focused on books, she is antisocial to the extreme at times and Seilah’s dismissive of other people as well as too arrogant. Although I’ll admit, that last one isn’t exactly an issue I could call her on without being a hypocrite.*

At that thought, Ranma let his lips quirk into a smirk then Wendy 2.0 interrupted his thoughts at that point, lifting her hand and poking him right below the breasts. “How are your breast so firm anyway?” Behind Ranma, Cana nodded her head and gave up trying to tie Ranma’s chest down with the breast band, wringing her hands out irritably.

Ranma shrugged. “A lot of upper body and just work I suppose.” With that, she posed for a second with her arms above her head, then to either side, unmindful of her current partially nude state.

That moment of inattention ended abruptly in a squeak as Cana tickled him under the arms, causing Ranma to whirl towards her, but Cana simply stepped back a pace and watched as Ranma’s breasts barely bounced at all before coming to a stop. “Seriously, how did you get them so firm! And do you think we could do something about mine?” she asked, sounding somewhat plaintive. *We’re the same size but she’s so much firmer than mine! Oh god, am I going to have sagging tits when I get older?!*

“Yours, hah!” Edo-Wendy said, huffing and putting both of her hands underneath her own breasts, pushing them up and then letting them fall, smirking evilly as Ranma’s eyes tracked the movement before he could stop himself. *This is so much fun!* unlike Cana, Edo-Wendy would never really act like this around another woman, but teasing Ranma was just a lot of fun*. And let’s not forget how he looked when he took off his shirt before changing to his female form. Mmmh, yummy!* Wendy thought, shivering a little at the memory.

Oh, the men in Fairy Tail were all in decent shape, but not even the two strongest had the mix of muscle and supple speed Ranma possessed. But watching Ranma move gave both a sexual and sensual thrill, like watching a giant cat in human form move, all sinuous perfect body control combined with yummy abs.

“Um, I guess I could give you some exercises to do if you’re worried about that kind of thing,” Ranma said with a slow nod, “but we should really get back to making me look like Evil-Erza.”

“Oh, yeah, right.” Cana shook her head and moved forward, holding the breast band up to Ranma’s chest. “Suck it in,” she ordered. “We need to get those tits of yours under control.”

“Coming from someone who’s my size if not a little more that phrase doesn’t really hold much impact,” Ranma said irritably, unconsciously repeating a bit of Cana’s thoughts from a second ago. But he did what she asked, but then had to bite back a low moan as Cana’s fingers accidentally brushed her nipples. *Fuck, I can never get used to how much more sensitive those are when I’m in my girl form.*

Backing away slightly at that and feeling a little guilty now about essentially feeling up another girl when she already had a girlfriend, Cana joined Edo-Wendy behind Ranma. Both of them now began pulling the breast band tight while twisting it around Ranma’s chest again and again. At each twist though, Ranma’s chest threatened to pop out and overwhelm them.

Juvia was not there. She’d found a few more compasses in various other pouches on the legions which hadn’t fled already or died during the battle. The plan was to take the remaining legions and then scare them all off towards the north, where the guild house had originally been from the battlefield. They wanted to make it look as if the Army had won the fight, not been wiped out. This had forced Ranma to gather up most of the bodies he could find and bury them. A few losses were fine, after all, they couldn’t completely cover up the damage the battle had done, but that meant there were still too many bodies.

After Ranma had dealt with the bodies, it had fallen to Juvia, who had the most combat experience and ability to figure out how the battlefield should look, to set up more of the ruse. As she was doing so, Juvia had discovered that there had been a few survivors. Thankfully, none of them had been able to stay on a legion during Ranma’s hurricane assault.

Ranma had taken a few minutes to search around for them through the woods at high speed, dumping their unconscious forms in the ravine nearby while the girls stripped off Knightwalker and then got Evil-Erza into another pair of clothing, which Ranma had donated to the cause from his emergency ki-space reserve. Ranma only kept a few items of clothing in there, toothpaste some medical supplies, beef jerky and emergency flint and tender since his ki space had been largely replaced by the greater utility of what he could do with Requip.

Now Juvia came back from this objective to watch, blinking as she saw Wendy and Cana behind Ranma, trying to force the breast band just that little bit tighter, while Ranma looked as if she was bored, simply staring out with dull eyes, her mind elsewhere.  *Juvia wonders if she should be involved or should simply turn around and wait until they call on her.*

This decision was taken from her when the breast band broke and both women went sprawling on their rears, while the breast band separated, and began to fall from Ranma’s chest. Ranma grabbed it, turned and looked at them. “Well I don’t think that’s going to work.”

Unfortunately, they still had to figure out some solution that could somehow make Ranma pass for Evil-Erza. And Juvia had a suggestion, “Why don’t we use a modified corset? While traditionally made to force the breasts out and the waist in, Juvia could take just the top and change the corset to press down on the chest rather than push them up and out.”

“And where are we going to get one of those?” Wendy asked, gesturing towards Cana and herself. “I don’t wear one, what about you?”

As Cana shook her head, Juvia blushed, poking her fingers together, looking away. “Juvia can create one, if we can find the material. Juvia is something of a seamstress.”

“A vest cut down to just to cover the upper chest maybe?” Ranma asked.

“That would work as a starting point,” Juvia said with a nod. “Although given what you just did, we might want to use leather straps rather than cloth.”

Cana nodded. “I’ll cut a few of those, if you and Juvia can find a vest we could use.”

“Ah, I’ll do it, after all we’ll have to clean it after we take it off the body,” Ranma said shaking her head. For all Ranma done in her life, grave robbing was still a bit beyond the pale to him. But it was for a good cause and he’d rather do it himself rather than force the girls to do it. *Besides, I was the one who murdered them all after all.*

While Ranma worked to undo the vest from one of the soldiers, one of the ones who had only been armed with magical crossbows, her thoughts wandered back to the girls in his/her life. Bisca was easy enough, far easier to think about than Seilah, and Ranma’s mixed feelings towards her. Bisca had been fun, a great conversationalist and good enough cook, Ranma could trade recipes with her, which could not be said for Seilah obviously or even Erza. She had also been able to teach Ranma things about animals she had never known before.

And in a way, Bisca had been the most normal of the girls Ranma had ever been around. The next normal would be Jenny, who as a model and a general party girl wasn’t really all that normal at all, just normal in comparison to Erza or Seilah. Bisca also hadn’t been all that bothered by Ranma’s dual body, but had not liked sharing him at all, even with Erza who she loved as a fellow guildmate. It had been a wrench when she broke up with him but now about two days after the event, he’d gotten over it, sort of.

But it was Erza and Jenny he thought about most. Jenny had wormed her way into his mind and heart with the courage she’d shown in the fight against the Oración Seis, her energy and the simple enjoyment of life that she possessed was something Ranma knew she shared with Jenny. The fact that she was drop-dead gorgeous, just like all the other girls in his life, was also something to dream about*. Preferably at night, without anyone else around,* he thought, blushing a little as he remembered a few nights when that had been a bit of an issue. *I love Wendy but eesh, sometimes I wish she wasn’t quite as clingy at night.*

But Erza was the one Ranma thought about the most. They had so much in common in terms of their desire to be stronger, to defend their friends, how they viewed the world, their likes and dislikes. Ranma enjoyed talking to her, and simply enjoying each other’s company. And while her devotion to Fairy Tail was a problem given Ranma’s wanderlust and job as a Ranger, Ranma was no longer certain that was an insurmountable issue given Erza had seemed happy enough to be away from them for more than a month on the road.

*And I could always use Magnolia like a base of operations, come back there every winter. When this is all over, she and I are going to sit down and talk about where this relationship of ours is going,* Ranma decided. *And where we want it to go.*

Soon enough, everyone was gathered once more, and the three girls attempted to put the makeshift corset, a leather chest binder reinforced with strips of metal Ranma had supplied after taking them from the heavy legion saddles, on Ranma’s chest. They had scant success for a time, which Ranma teased them about, going: “come on, put your backs into it you lot.”

Ranma got some really good glares from that one, and Juvia poked Ranma hard in the stomach right where the corset ended. “Ranma should be silent for a bit, Juvia thinks. Or else we might find some way of making this permanent.”

Eventually the trio were able to get the corset tied down over, which they fitted the breast band Cana and Wendy had been trying to use earlier. Over that, they fitted the armored bra before finally hiding the back of everything underneath a cloak that they fastened around Ranma’s neck. “Knightwalker sometimes wears one, so it won’t be that unusual, and it will hide our work in the back there,” Edo-Wendy explained.

The three girls stepped back and then everyone looked to Wendy 2.0. “What do you think?” Ranma asked

“It’s not like I’ve ever been that close to Knightwalker,” Edo-Wendy grumped. “Still,” she went on after a moment, “it looks good to me.”

“Great, now it’s your turn.”

“Our turn?” the trio of natural girls asked, all of them cocking their heads to one side.

Ranma nodded, then held up a pair of handcuffs. Cana laughed. “Kinky! But sorry Ranma, I’m taken.”

“You seemed fine with feeling me up before,” Ranma retorted, before shaking her head. “But no, I didn’t mean it like that! I meant that the three of you are going to pose as my prisoners.”

Edo-Wendy looked at Juvia thoughtfully, then slowly nodded. “If we do up her hair like our Juvia, sure. Her clothing isn’t all that far away from what our Juvia wears, so it could pass muster if we get the hair right. But Cana? There’s no way we could find enough material to make her out to look like our Cana even if we had the time.”

Juvia nodded her lips twitching as Cana gagged at the very idea of dressing like her alternate. “This is true, re-creating this world’s Cana’s appearance would take quite a lot of silk and lace, which strangely enough, seems to be in scant supply around here.”

“How about we die her hair then?” Ranma asked, gesturing around into the woods. “I bet I could find enough pigments and stuff to do it.”

Cana frowned, pulling at her long brown tresses and then slowly nodded. “If it’s to get us in and let us search around for our friends, or this Anima thing they might be stuck in, dying my hair black or something is a small price to pay.”

“Keep that thought in mind,” Ranma said with a chuckle, “especially when we start. I said I could find some things to make a dye, I never said it would be painless or smell good. In fact, I’d bet it’s going to smell awful.”

Cana twitched, but nodded again. “You’re a little too professional about all this you know.”

“This isn’t my first undercover operation,” Ranma said shaking her head.

“Is that what they call it where you’re from,” Cana jabbed, gesturing to the cuffs. But Ranma just rolled his eyes. Having gotten used to their teasing this point.

Thankfully for Cana, the dying process took barely ten minutes, and it wasn’t nearly as bad as it could have been, though yes, the mix of charcoal, henna and indigo was quite smelly. Although to her amusement thanks to her Dragon Slayer senses, Ranma suffered even more than the brunette. Still, the four girls were soon ready and moved off through the woods, towards where the last two legions were waiting for them tied to a tree.

There Ranma pulled out the handcuffs again, putting them first on Edo-Wendy, who pretended to try to break out of them. “Behave or else,” Ranma said growled, trying to get into character now.

“Or else what, you’ll put me over your knee?” Edo-Wendy said with a smirk, turning around and twitching her hips from side to side.

Cana guffawed at that, while Ranma and Juvia blinked, flushing and looking away. Besides her age, this Wendy was so much more outgoing and world-wise than his, it was amazing to think of them as being alike in any way. But Ranma still shot back, saying now, “I think you’d probably enjoy that a little too much. Instead, I’d simply tie you to Cana when we meet up with the others and let the two of you explain what’s going on to Lucy.”

“Low blow,” Cana muttered, shaking her head and her earlier humor disappearing. “Still, let’s get this over with.” Cana and Juvia mounted one of the legions, then Ranma tied them down there, before putting Wendy the Older behind him. She was a bit freer to move around, something Ranma instantly regretted, feeling her large breasts pressing into Ranma’s back.

Barely ten minutes into the air, and heading southeast by the compass however, Ranma’s torture was interrupted because they started to see more flying creatures in the distance. Ranma quickly twisted around, pushing Wendy 2.0 back and to one side, tying her so she was across Ranma’s saddle rather than astride behind her. Edo-Wendy protested, but Ranma shook her head. “My eyes’re better than most and we’ve got incoming.”

That shut the bigger-breasted woman up, and sure enough, the dots in the distance soon resolved themselves into legions coming towards them. Soon there were about forty of them, and Ranma’ staring forward could see they were being led by a giant cat-like person, his fur visible on his arms and the portions of his face not covered by a helmet.

Ranma whistled, shaking her head as she took in the distant cat-man’s muscles. “Damn, is he an Exceed too?” she asked, while also praising Carla – she could do this in her mind at least - for helping Ranma to get over his/her terror of all things cat.

“I have no idea,” Edo-Wendy said shaking her head. “Some of us think he might be, but his body type certainly doesn’t match the legends of how the Exceed should look like. Your two friends are more like the legends about them, really.”

“What’s his name? Ranma replied, trying to speak without moving her mouth.

“Panther Lily,” Wendy whispered as the other flyers came closer, even as more legions appeared coming over the horizon. “He’s one of the king’s Four Generals, although he isn’t as mad about hunting us down. He’s always been more about securing the internal security of the Royal City and Edolas as a whole.”

“Can you coach me how to talk like Knightwalker? I don’t know if I can pull it off just from hearing her talk while we were fighting.”

“Take the initiative,” Wendy said quickly. “Hail them first, then shout at Panther Lily for being late and then I suppose make up a story to match what we left behind.”

“That last at least I can do.” With that, Ranma cupped one hand over her mouth shouting, “It’s about time you and your rabble arrived, Panther Lily!”

“Just because my troops and I are not as enthusiastic about hunting down the last magic guild out there, which is rather a paper tiger at this point, doesn’t make us a rabble,” Panther Lily shot back. “And I wouldn’t go tossing stones right now. You look a little ragged around the edges, and where is your spear?”

Ranma held up the shattered remains of the spear, which the redhead had grabbed before getting into her saddle, growling loud enough to be audible even over the distance between the two flyers. “Fairy Tail seems to have gotten some new allies. They called themselves Dragon Slayers and were very tough! They held me and my Legion off while the rest of that cowardly guild retreated and when my Ten Commandments exploded during a dual attack two of them got away. I was still able to capture two of the guild members and then one of the newcomers.”

“Capture?” Panther Lily asked, his eyes narrowing behind his helmet. “Why would you of all people try to capture them, especially after losing your Ten Commandments?”

“We need to know more about these Dragon Slayers such as where they came from, why they’re allied with Fairy Tail and worse how are they so strong?” Ranma said with a shrug. “They did a number on my battalion, but the rest of my troops are still following the two who got away from the air. I killed the one that made the most trouble so that only leaves this one to answer our questions,” she said gesturing towards where Cana was strung across the other Legion. She then smirked, trying to make it as villainous as possible. “I can guarantee it.”

Panther Lily frowned at that, flying his Legion closer to look at the two prisoners, who feigned unconsciousness with all their might. He nodded slowly before he looked back at Ranma. Erza looked a little battered to his eyes, and she seemed to be slumping in the saddle more than she normally would, her cloak was dirty and smudged with blood as was her armor. When he spoke, it was in a more conversational tone than he’d been using now that they were close enough to have an actual talk. “The King is planning a major parade to show off his new Anima. In fact, the last order I received was we were to pull back and head home all of us to join the certain the parade. Sugar boy and pretty boy have already turned back. I doubt that he’d be happy to see you showing up in the capital so scuffed and dirty, it might ruin his moment.”

Panther Lily didn’t see Wendy whispering to Ranma just loud enough for him to hear thanks to his Dragon Slayer hearing as she gave Ranma some advice. “Grumble about it, Knightwalker’s not someone who likes parades.”

“That’s ridiculous!” Ranma promptly scoffed, shaking her head. “We should all band together to hunt those damned lawbreakers down, take the two last Dragon Slayers before they can make more trouble!”

“But those are the king’s orders,” Panther Lily said, shrugging his shoulders.

Erza grumbled but slowly nodded. “Fine!”

“And don’t head directly there, the king won’t appreciate you showing up like that. Prisoners are well and good, but you’ll need to be immaculate when you hit the capital,” Panther Lily said critically. “Besides, they might have some magic spears for you to use.”

Ranma in her Erza guise shrugged her shoulders, looking away and almost pouting. “They won’t be my own Ten Commandments though.”

“No, they won’t,” Panther Lily said soothingly. “But they’ll still be something.”

Again, Ranma grumbled while Panther Lily gestured to his troops. “Do you want any of my men to accompany you?”

Without even being prompted, Ranma new hours it would react to that one, and she stiffened and stared at him angrily. “Are you implying I cannot get three helpless prisoners back to the capital on my own?”

“Not at all,” Panther Lily said, holding up his paws placatingly. “I just was asking if you wanted to have a few more men to watch them, that’s all, not that you needed them.

“Best you remember that!” Ranma scowled at him, then gestured, and her Legion continued on its way. Do you think we did it?” she whispered.

Wendy shrugged. “I have no idea about how the four generals get along with one another, so maybe?”

Behind them, Panther Lily stared after the two legions frowning and pawing at one of the scars on his face underneath his helmet. There had been something off about the redhead and he thought her voice wasn’t quite right, how she emphasized her words or some such. She also didn’t seem quite as prickly as normal.

But after a moment, the large Exceed put that down to her having been battered so badly and losing her weapon in the bargain. He shuddered a little at what Knightwalker no doubt had planned for those three prisoners for being part of that fight. *But hopefully at least she’ll get some information out of the them before they break*.

That was another reason why he had wanted her to take a detour. After all, Erza could easily have gotten herself cleaned up and got in a new weapon at the capital as well as the base, but she would still kind of been simmering with anger before she had to confront the king. Being called off the hunt like this was one of the worst things anyone could do to her, as Panther Lily knew from painful experience, having been put in this position before.

Yet there was still something niggling at his senses, something off about the redhead bothering him. Turning his legion around, he gestured one of his trusted lieutenants over to him before pointing in the direction they had been going while he and the rest of his trooper turned directly back towards the capital in a direction almost straight south in comparison to the route that Erza would be flying. “Take five of our men with you and continue forward until you find this place where General Knightwalker said these Dragon Slayers and she fought. I’ll want a full report on what you find.”

“General?” the man asked surprised. “Do you doubt General Knightwalker’s report?”

“No, but I think she’s underplaying how difficult it was and I want to know why she is all alone,” Panther Lily said, part of his worry solidifying around that observation. “I know she can handle herself obviously, but normally Knightwalker would at least have someone to fly that other Legion for her. I think her command was battered far more than she let on, and she sent the whole lot of them after this Dragon Slayer threat.”

“That is a bit odd,” the other man said with a slow nod. “Although, it could be that she’s just daring them to try to run away so that she would have an excuse to kill them.”

“Knightwalker’s a huntress, she doesn’t play with her toys like that, although maybe with her Ten Commandments destroyed in the battle, she might be looking to have some… fun…” Panther Lily said slowly shuddering a little as did the other man. He thanked his lucky stars every day that he had been sucked aside to Panther Lily’s command. The giant Exceed wasn’t human, but he was the most humane of the Four Generals when it came to his underlings and his dealings with other people. “By your leave, commander?”

Panther Lily nodded and urged his Legion to follow the rest of his troops as his lieutenant broke off with five of them continuing on in the direction they’d been following.

**OOOOOOO**

The Fairy Tail guild had teleported hundreds of miles away to the southwest, appearing pretty much smack dab in the middle of a small desert that was near the borders of magic country. Once everything inside was stabilized, and Seilah had basically terrified the Fairy Tail guild into agreeing to help, she and Wendy left the guild along with Levy, heading outside. The two mages watched as Levy pulled out what looked like a giant balloon, hooking it to some other kind of device neither of them had seen the like before. She then lit a match, lit a portable burner sticking out from the mechanical device and then backed away hurriedly.

The balloon quickly began to fill up from the hot air that the device created and she moved forward again to hook up long ropes to the sides of the balloon, creating what Ranma would have easily identified as a hot air balloon ride of some kind, although much more ramshackle and haphazard than most, with a bit of steampunk added in. She then hooked herself up to it with a harness, and after making sure another rope tied the device to the large tree of the guild, was soon rising into the sky, the air hot air of the balloon causing it to rise.

Wendy gaped at it, then giggled shaking her head. “That looks cool!”

“Perhaps for those among you who cannot fly without such mechanical aids,” Seilah said teasing the girl slightly which caused Wendy to pout at her. Then she leaned down and held out her arms for Wendy, who clambered into them and the two of them took off, soaring up into the air to join Levy.

The short-haired girl with the unfortunate height issue gaped at Seilah, scowling angrily. “So that whole mind control thing you did is your only magic?”

“Curse,” Seilah said pedantically. “My Macro is a curse. As for flight, all of my people can do that. It is a genetic ability, rather than magic.”

Levy shook her head. “If it does the impossible, can’t be explained, and goes shazam, it’s magic.”

“Your thoughts on the matter mean nothing at all to me. Concentrate on what you have come up here to do instead of prattling,” Seilah said calmly, staring around them.

In her arms Wendy shook her head, resigned to Seilah letting out her pricklier side with the Fairy Tail people in this weird Edolas place. *I think that their refusal to stand up for themselves bothers her, or perhaps the way they used Ranma-nii to buy time? I don’t know why, it’s not like he would have objected.*

Young as she was, Wendy confused Seilah’s attitude towards Fairy Tail with anger. It wasn’t, not really. Contempt came much closer. Seilah held contempt for the members of Fairy Tail here, believing them weak both in will and ability. She had long gotten over her general disgust with humanity of course, but when she met weaklings like this, her contempt for them came out.

Levy growled and shot back something, but Wendy had stopped listening, staring around them. It looked almost like the southern portion of Desierto, with rolling hills of sand in every direction. Their giant tree was most certainly standing out a lot, and she wondered if the guild would have to move soon, and if the tree could actually live here for very long regardless. *I mean, I know it’s alive, it’s got green leaves and everything, but I don’t see any tree surviving very long here*.

There didn’t seem to be much people around. She could see a town just over the horizon from where she was flying in the air, and some kind of herd or something was kicking up a lot of dust in the distance. It looked to be moving almost parallel to the current position, but as she watched, it changed direction, coming towards the giant tree. Wendy frowned thinking, then asked Seilah, “Seilah, do you think that that cloud over there could see the tree from where it is?”

Seilah broke off from exchanging insults with Levy to stare in that direction, slowly nodding. “I believe it could. In which case, the fact that it changed direction towards us is a little worrisome.”

Levy looked in that direction too, pulling out a spyglass made of bronze and glass, which looked almost homemade, but serviceable. She looked through it for a moment at the incoming cloud then grinned. “That’s no trouble, that’s one of our own coming home. Pity he’s on team Lucy’s side of things though. Still, I’ve had years to get used to that unfortunately.”

“Odd, I thought you said that you couldn’t control where the guild went,” Seilah said coolly. “Is that in fact not the case?”

“No, I still can’t do that, but this area is kind of his primary haunting zone, because there’s literally nothing around to get in the way of his racing.”

“So, it’s coincidence?” Seilah asked sardonically.

“Pretty much,” Levy said with a nod.

“Let’s get down then,” Wendy said definitively. She then smirked. “I want to see your Natsu meet ours.”

“And I would not mind having some more tea with Alter-Cana,” Seilah said with a nod, calming down somewhat.

Since getting the balloon to descend was a slow and laborious process and Seilah and Wendy were in no rush to return to terra-firma, they arrived down on the ground at the same time a four wheeled lacrima powered car emerged from the cloud of dust its passage had created. It zoomed around the Guildhall for a few seconds, then slowly came to a halt in front of them. The driver’s side window was pulled down, and the man inside stuck his head out.

At the sight of him, Wendy gasped. Because it was Natsu! Same pink hair, same face if a little softer and he wore goggles over his eyes. His clothing was different, but he did have his own scarf though it didn’t look as special as the Dragon’s scale scarf that Natsu had. “Levy! What are you all doing out here?”

“A better question is, if you’re out here and everything’s fine, why the heck haven’t you reported in?” Levy shot back, smacking the car’s side with one hand. “Did you lose yourself in racing around again? Lucy is going to give it to you now.”

“I can take her!” Edo-Natsu said with a laugh. “I might not be the strongest in the guild, but I’m darn certain I’m the fastest when I’m behind the wheel!”

“Say that to her face, I dare you,” Levy said dryly.

“Hah, you just see if I don’t,” Edo-Natsu growled, before putting his car into the park and getting out of it slowly, manifest reluctance clear in his body language. He paused then, and as he closed the door, his entire attitude seemed to change from an arrogant confidence to looking fearful and timid. “Ooh, um, do you think she’ll really be that angry with me? I don’t want another Lucy kick (patent pending).”

“Whether or not she will, you have to face the music sometime Pinky,” Levy said with a smirk, moving over to grab his arm before he could pull the door open and leap into his car again. “Come on, you can’t spend all of your life in that racer of yours.”

“Why not?” he almost whined. “I’d love to stay in it if for the rest of my life. And who are these two?” he asked, almost looking as if he wanted to hide behind Levy now that he noticed Seilah and Wendy. In particular, he stared at the horns on Seilah’s head in some fear.

“This is Seilah and Wendy, they come from Earth Land, and are mages.”

Edo-Natsu frowned at that, before deciding the horns must be some magic thing, setting his concerns about them to one side. But he then pointed Wendy. ‘But she’s so young, and she looks like a miniature version of…”

“We’ve all known about the whole parallel world thing, it’s just coming face-to-face with it is bit of a bit of a shock. You should’ve seen their version of Cana earlier,” Levy cut in, though she understood where he was coming from.

“But if that’s the case, who’s she supposed to be?” Edo-Natsu asked pointing rudely at Seilah, who raised one cold wintry eyebrow in response.

“I see at least this Natsu has the same manners of ours,” she said dryly, before turning away huffily and moving towards the door. “Come.”

With Levy pulling him, this world’s Natsu reluctantly followed the two outsiders entering the guild quietly. Once he was in, he seemed to shrink further while almost whispering the words, “I’m home,” in an attempt to not get any attention he couldn’t deal with outside of his magic car.

But his whisper was utterly drowned out by Levy’s shout of “Oy, you big-titted whore, look who just pulled up!”

“Don’t call me that you…Natsu!” Lucy Ashley shouted, pushing through the crowd and ignoring her anger at her rival’s words for the moment to engulf Natsu in a hug, which caused him to light up like a lighthouse. “I’m so glad you’re back, alright, and above all normal!”

“Wh, wha… er, I mean, um, Lucy?” Natsu stuttered, his face still resembling a tomato. “Erm, I, I thought, er, aren’t I in trouble, I mean I don’t want to be, but this is…”

“Oh hush,” Lucy said, moving around and taking Levy’s position on his arm, pulling him deeper into the guild. “I’ll give you a lecture about not reporting in if you were all right later. But for now, I’d like you to meet someone.” Soon they were face to face with the alternate versions of themselves and Lucy Ashley grinned. “This is your alter. Natsu Dragion, meet Natsu Dragneel.”

The two Natsu’s looked at one another, then Natsu Dragneel reached forward and poked Natsu Dragion in the face, causing him to whimper a little and push his hand away feebly. Natsu instantly started to frown, poking him more and more causing Natsu to back away and actually hide behind Lucy Ashley, who smiled happily as if everything was once again right with the world.

Natsu however simply shook his head. “What the heck! If he’s my altered, why’s he looks so weak?!”

“H-hey!” Edo-Natsu shouted, sticking his head out from behind Lucy Ashley to do it. “I’ll have you know, I’m the best driver in the guild.”

“Who cares about that!?” Natsu Dragneel said, shaking his head. “You look like you’re quaking in your boots.”

“W, well of course. That’s because I’m not in my car,” Edo-Natsu replied, before rallying slightly. “You’d be singing a different tune if I was, let me tell you.”

Natsu looked ill at the very idea. “You mean you really do willingly get behind the wheel of those things? That’s just wrong.”

Ignoring the byplay Seilah moved through the guild heading towards where Cana was, sitting down at her own table, her parasol open and a small tea service set out in front of her. She looked up and smiled as Seilah sat across from her, although her smile was just a tad strained.

Seilah had utterly terrified the entire guild with how she had simply taken control of their bodies like that, without seeming any buildup of magic or any device they could see. To these people who called themselves magic users but who didn’t have any inherent magic to them, they had never run into anything like that before, so powerful yet so seemingly easy for Seilah to use. Still, to Cana, Seilah seemed relatively calm and quite knowledgeable about books and different genres. She also seemed very interested in cooking, and that was one of Cana’s chief hobbies, even if she didn’t cook herself.

Behind the demonic woman, Natsu Dragion had noticed the second Lucy now, and nearly shrieked in astonishment. “What, another Lucy!?” He peered closer, staring Lucy Heartfilia up and down for a moment, “Um, but she doesn’t look like my Lucy.”

“’Your’ Lucy?” Lucy asked, looking at Lucy Ashley.

“Yep,” Lucy said happily, hugging Natsu to her.

This wasn’t a good move because Natsu Dragion had just noticed the two Strauss twins of Lisanna and Anna. Instantly his eyes rolled back in his head and he collapsed, causing Edo-Lucy to fall to the ground with him, shaking her head as she found herself pinned under the pink-haired speedster’s wait. “Hey! Someone help me here, he’s heavier than he looks.”

Edo-Gray moved over quickly to help him, asking, “Are you all right my friend?”

“I’m going to be sick,” Natsu Dragneel said seriously, his face going a little green as he backed away. “First he likes getting into a moving vehicle, and now he’s best friends with Gray!? Ugh, that’s so wrong!”

“But you’re dating him?” Lucy asked her alter, shaking her head. “I just can’t see that.”

“Well believe it, dyke! Natsu and I got together more than a year and a half ago, and we haven’t looked back since.” She shot a look towards the two Strauss siblings that was almost a scowl.

But Anna, this world’s Lisanna, shook her head waving her hand in front of her face. “Don’t worry about me. Natsu and I were always just friends we were younger. I can’t say that he and I wouldn’t have got together if I had stayed here, but I’m not interested in Dragion now, I’ve got my Natsu already,” she said, smiling over at Natsu.

He grinned and gave her a thumbs up before elf man surprised most of the guild by growling angrily at him. “Grr, I still think you’re not good enough for her or either of them really!”

“Oh yeah, why don’t you just bring it on, and we’ll see how strong I am!”

“Strength alone isn’t enough to woo a man’s sister!” Elfman shot back angrily getting into Natsu’s face. “You have to have heart and brains too!”

Jet leaned over to Droy. “Do you think we could maybe convince him to stick around? This whole protective big brother thing is bringing out a more masculine side in Elfman. Maybe if we can keep them around long enough it’ll become permanent?”

“Maybe,” the other one said with a nod. “Perhaps trying to defend his sister’s honor will give Elfman that final kick he needs to truly become a decent fighter.”

“Wait, what do you mean you can’t see it?” Edo-Lucy asked staring at her alter angrily. Just because you like to rug munch doesn’t mean I do!”

“I’ll have you know that I and Cana got together not because I’m interested in girls, although that is of course a factor, but because we fell in love,” Lucy said huffily, shaking her head. “Love matters far more than shape or gender.”

That won a nod from most of the guild, despite the fact that Lucy was getting the impression that this world was a lot more rigid about that kind of thing than her own was. *Although judging by the way the boys were staring off into the distance, perhaps their approval has nothing at all to do with the idea of love conquering all. Ugh, boys!*

Yet there were a few exceptions to that, and one of them, Edo-Gray, smiled happily. “That’s right, Love can conquer all. Isn’t that true Juvia dear?”

Edo-Juvia just scoffed, pushing them away quickly and moving through the crowd. “Get away from me until you get rid of some of those clothing! Just looking at you makes me hot.”

Lucy blinked as she heard that, staring after Edo-Juvia and wondering if she understood how that phrase could be taken, before her own alternate’s words brought her back to the here and now. “I’ll stick to guys thanks and this guy in particular.”

“Suit yourself. I just hope he has better table manners than ours,” Lucy said teasingly, causing both the Strauss twins and Natsu to grumble at her.

Sighing, Wendy stood up, from where she had followed Seilah to the tea table. This had been fun, but they had more serious things to talk about. She then moved through the crowd being almost unobserved until she was near where the Edo-Levy, Edo-Lucy and the Earth Land crew were standing talking to one another. She then hopped onto a table and raised shouting at the top of her lungs, “Excuse me!” Once everyone was quiet, she went on. “Aren’t we supposed to be making plans to get into this royal city place and rescue our friends?”

Natsu Dragion looked at her, then looked around the guild, in particular over to where Cana was sitting before shaking his head. “Um, I feel like I’m missing something here,” he said in a shaky tone, still almost hiding behind Lucy Ashley. “Where is our Wendy? And who is this Ranma person she mentioned?”

“Oh yeah, you’ve been out of the loop for a bit,” Edo-Lucy muttered, scratching at her hair right below its skull for a moment. “Well these folk are from Earth Land, they’re our alternates, though evidently the differences between what world of the next can be quite a bit more than we thought. Cana’s alternate is the degenerate lesbian wino, my alternates a bisexual slut…”

“Hey what was the slut comment for?!” Lucy shouted angrily.

“I felt like it!” Ashley muttered back. “Anyway, their version of Wendy is…” she blinked, then looked over to Wendy, “How old are you?”

“I’ll be thirteen in a month,” Wendy said. “At least Ranma and I both think so, since that was the time my mother usually celebrated my birthday. How old is my alternate?”

“She’s pushing 26 now. Although at least your birthday dates are close to the same,” Edo-Cana said in her overly polite, girly tone. “She and I have had actually discussed going on a shopping trip together for her birthday, since she hadn’t been away from the guild very often of late. The two of us had wondered if we could extend the kitchen of the guild a little more and her cakes are simply marvelous.”

Seilah calmly sipped the tea that in her opinion was one of the best she had ever had, staring at Edo-Cana calculatingly*. Yes, I think I am definitely going to steal them both if I can get away with it.*

“Anyway, they had their alternate Cana, and an alter Juvia, though she didn’t seem all that different from ours maybe a bit quieter?” Lucy paused in thought then shrugged. “But they had this guy, Ranma, who decided to fight Knightwalker, the stupid…” she paused as she felt Seilah’s eyes on her and went on hurriedly. “Um, anyway, they’re out and about somewhere, if they were able to get away. But the rest of their guild was captured by the Anima weapon, and they want to see if we can break them out somehow. And well, against our better judgement we’ve decided to help them break into the capital at least.”

“Right, so we need to make plans. And I really wouldn’t bother worrying about Ranma-nii,” Wendy said, clapping her hands and once again trying to make everyone get on task here. Wendy didn’t think Ranma would run into anything he couldn’t punch through, and he would no doubt be searching for her anyway. “So, can we please get back on topic here?!

Everyone else filled Natsu Dragion in on what it happened, and he frowned thinking. “Well, ironically enough we’re only about six hours or so away from the castle by train from here, and there’s a town nearby that has a train station. It was set up by the army just in case Mistralsco ever invaded. We could take a train in to the Royal City. The town produces a lot of glass and other items from the sands around here.”

Edo-Lucy frowned. “Why don’t you want to take them in your car? It’d take barely two hours if you drove all the way, right? Is your magic car running out of juice?”

“Not yet,” Edo-Natsu replied with a smile of pride in his Fireball, even talking about it giving him more courage. “My car isn’t just fast it’s magically efficient too, you know that! But security has been majorly heightened around the royal city today, lots of legions in the air and guards at the entrances. I could get away from them in Fireball of course, but I don’t think you could get into the city without being spotted. So I thought it might be best to sneak in with the regular cargo than walk in.”

“Heh, that makes sense,” Lucy Ashley said with a smile, rubbing her head against her beau’s. “That’s my Natsu, cute and surprisingly smart too.”

While his Edo-alternate muttered about how she didn’t have to add the ‘surprisingly’ part to that statement, Natsu Dragneel groaned, already holding his stomach as his overactive imagination told him precisely how sick he would get on a train trip of six hours. Wendy too whimpered a little but nodded her head gamely. “If that’s what we have to do this will have to do.”

The two Strauss twins looked at one another, then over to their Edo-siblings, before whispering in Natsu’s for a moment. He listened to them, then sighed and nodded. “I think Lisanna and Anna should stay here, to catch up with their siblings more.” Then he brightened up. “Plus, that’ll free up more staffs for me, Happy, Carla and Wendy if you want one.” Natsu was looking forward to fighting with the staffs just to see how fun it was to wield other types of magic.

*Hmm, I wonder if I can eat some of Ranma or Laxus’ magic, maybe add them to our own. Although… if you add fire to water, don’t you just get steam? Steam Magic? Hmm…* a shudder went through Natsu as he imagined that kind of reaction happening inside his body and he shook his head. *Nope, not going there. But… doesn’t air aid to fire? That would work! I’ll have to try it sometime in the future.*

“No thank you,” Wendy said with a shake of her head. “I can get by without them.”

“Well…” Edo-Natsu began, looking very reluctant. “Um, if I were you all, I would start moving now if you want to save your friends in the Anima. I heard in town that the king’s throwing this massive parade with the new Anima at the heart of it, and um, he’s then going to, to start cutting it down and mining it for magic…” He stopped talking and hid behind Edo-Lucy again as Natsu began to snarl, his fangs flashing as the other Earth Land mages all scowled in anger.

With a bit of a plan in place and now knowing they were acting under a time limit even worse than they had feared, Wendy soon led the way out of the guild. Seilah reluctantly followed them, leaving behind more than half a cup of tea. But given what Natsu it just told them about the Kings plans going forward for their Anima, time was of the essence and even Seilah knew they had to move.

Edo-Lucy and Edo-Natsu had been roped into helping them, while the rest of the guild promised to follow on after they had infiltrated the capital. Edo-Natsu would help transport them to the town, while Edo-Lucy would help them when they reached the capital. Seilah was unhappy that only the two of them were willing to come with them, but she knew that this kind of undercover work was best done with a small group. She also reasoned they would be coming back for Lisanna and Anna, since there was nothing that would cause Natsu to leave his two ‘mates’. There would be ample time to kidnap Edo-Cana and Edo-Wendy later.

As they moved towards the door, Edo-Natsu stopped by a row of hooks that held hats, gloves and cloaks. He and Edo-Lucy began to hand them out, saying that “Because of the parade, security on people going into the capital is going to be tight. Once in the city we should be fine with simple disguises, but we’ll need to all hide on the train somehow.”

Seilah was given a large hat and Natsu was given some stuff to put in his hair, which would hopefully make it look blonde eventually, but it was doubtful that it would work. Lucy was fine with her different hairstyle and clothing. The two Exceed though would have to pose as simple cats for a time while in the town and then the capital. But they would be very effective as watchers while they were on the train.

As they were walking from the guild to Natsu Dragion’s parked vehicle, Wendy tried to take her mind off the upcoming journey, frowning in thought as she stared above the vehicle into the distance. Then a thought occurred to her. “By the way, we know Ranma-nii, Natsu and I got out of that Anima thing because were Dragon Slayers, and it couldn’t quite figure out how to transform our bodies into magic or whatever, like it couldn’t with Seilah. But we weren’t the only Dragon Slayers there. So… where did Gajeel go?”

The others shrugged ignorance, and she shrugged herself, putting that to one side as she got into the passenger side of the small car and crawled into the back. The next instant, Seilah climbed in after her, nearly squishing Wendy until they switched places, with Wendy leaning back against Seilah’s large breasts as a headrest, with their own Natsu behind beside them, and Lucy squashed in the front with her alter in the passenger seat.

Natsu Dragion of course took the driver’s seat, and his attitude had entirely changed the instant he got into the car. His back straightened, his eyes gleamed as he pulled down his goggles, snapping them into place and sending a wicked grin over his shoulder at his alternate and the others. “Well, I know you’re in a rush, so I suggest you buckle up! This bird is about to fly!”

 The two Dragon Slayers had barely a second to stare at one another in horror before the vehicle started up and they were off. The car careened over the desert landscape to the Doppler effect sound of twin groans of agony.

**OOOOOOO**

Gajeel sneezed then shook his head, blinking as he stared into the face of the unconscious guardsman he’d been holding off the ground as he punched his lights out. Seeing the snot and mucus covering the man’s face, Gajeel could only wince. “Oops, um sorry about that man,” he said, kneeling down to tear at the sleeve of one of the man’s equally garbed friends and wiping the unconscious man’s face. Beating someone to a pulp that was all fine and dandy, just par for the course for the Iron Dragon Slayer. But sneezing into his face, that was just a little too humiliating. And dirty, which was the part Gajeel was more worried about. *No way am I going to spread disease or anything like that. Ugh.*

Dropping the unconscious man’s form, he looked around him frowning irritably. “Where the hell am I?!” he nearly shouted, not for the first time that day. The first time he’d shouted it was when he had woken up in the never to be sufficiently damned woods, woods furthermore, which were very different from any land he could recognize.

Gajeel was a heavy sleeper, something of a survival trait when he was young considering his father, Metalicana, had snored in his sleep like a volcano going off. Because of that, he hadn’t actually woken up during the attack, which had somehow sent him to wherever he was. He woke up only when he started to crash into the forest, but his Iron Dragon Slayer durability had seen him through that event. He’d then spent an hour looking around him and wondering what the hell had happened before deciding to just choose a direction and go, unwilling to just wait around for someone else to find him.

After that, his luck seemed to have changed and he had chosen the right direction to come out of the woods within a day of hiking. Even better, when he came out of it he was close to a town, reaching it at around sundown.

Then the moment he’d marched into the town his luck had turned in the form of an idiot with a spear demanding he halt and hand over papers. When Gajeel simply glared at him and marched past, the man had made the mistake of calling his friends to try to bring in Gajeel by force. This led directly to the pile of unconscious bodies at his feet right now.

Looking down at the seven men he’d just schooled, Gajeel clenched his hands into fists, one after the other an evil smirk appearing on his face. *Whatever else, I’ve still got my strength, and Dragon Slayer durability. The face on that one guy who stabbed me in the back, that was hilarious! Although why the hell I’m not able to use my magic, I’ve got no idea. That was pretty embarrassing trying to call on my Iron Dragon Club and nothing happening.*

The problem was, now that Gajeel had beaten these idiots down like this, all of the townsfolk had run inside and locked their doors. Now, that wouldn’t have stopped him if he was desperate, but he wasn’t the sort to kick people’s doors in just to get information from frightened townsfolk for shits and giggles. *Not anymore anyway. I’ve moved on and moved away from that kind of crap.*

He scratched his chin thoughtfully staring around him, then shrugged and headed deeper into the town, quickly cutting sideways, moving through a series of alleyways until he came out on another’s street where he heard the sounds of people moving about and such normal sounds. Luckily the noise of his fight with the locals hadn’t reached here, and he found a lot of people moving around their daily business, with an open air bizarre to one side and a series of bars to another.

Smiling, Gajeel moved into the crowd, keeping his eyes and ears open for anything he could use to identify wherever the hell he was. He heard the term Edolas often enough, and Sycca when addressed to a few people who had packs on their backs. This told him he was in a country called Edolas, while the town was called Sycca. But a few things began bothering him as he looked around. First was the lack of any kind of book or magazine store, heck he couldn’t even see a stall selling newspapers or magazines. Next was the proliferation of guards. There seemed to be one guard for every five people or so.

He also noticed the lack of magical items or anyone shouting about how magic was used to harden this or that pot, or forge this blade was unusual, but Gajeel didn’t think it was significant. *Heck for all I know I might have somehow been transported to another nation like Midi. I know they hate wizards.*

Finally, there was a certain feel in the crowd around him. It wasn’t anything he could put his finger on, but it was like worry and concern or something like that. Not fear, he could have picked that out, he’d seen it often enough while part of Phantom Lord. But uncertainty like this, that was new to him, and didn’t seem to be anything to do with the town, but something else, something long term maybe? It certainly wasn’t anything urgent or something the townsfolk could do something about. *Huh… could it be Tax Day? I know most people hate and fear Tax Day.*

Gajeel had mingled through the crowd for about half an hour taking in what limited wares it had – it was obvious this town wasn’t exactly a mecca for trade – and had been ready to start asking a few questions when a few more guards entered the market. He tensed, but instead of searching around for him, they instantly began to clear a small space by a large wall, while two more men pulled out a large box.

A sixth man, his helmet taller and with a plume stuck in it, hopped up onto the box a second later. He then pulled out a large scroll of some kind and began to shout at the top of his lungs, his voice cutting through the normal tumult of the town. “Hear ye, hear ye, I bring an official proclamation from His Most August Majesty King Faust!”

Instantly, and with an obedience that Gajeel found a little disturbing, the crowd began to quiet down, even the kids among them. In less than ten breaths it was silent, every eye turned to the speaker, who smiled and went on reading from the scroll. “His Most August Majesty has long been aware of the rumors of inequity in the distribution of that most precious and rare of resources, the magic that sustains our economy and our nation’s way of life. However, in His infinite wisdom and knowledge, His Most August Majesty has recently found a source of magic that will see to the needs of our nation for years to come, and soon magic will be free to buy and sell as never before.”

There was some cheering at that, and some muttering. It was evident that as obedient to the voice of the government as these townsfolk were, they had learned not to listen to anything they said without a grain of salt. But then the man went on reading and that wariness dissipated. “Furthermore, in an effort to show the truth of this source to His people, His Most August Majesty has ordered that tomorrow at noon there will be a parade throughout the capital to show the common citizenry the Anima and His Most August Majesty’s power. But even that is not enough for His Most August Majesty, who has further declared that the capital city will open its gates to select individuals, allowing them in to view the parade.”

There were shouts and much more cheering now, but the man just raised his voice and shouted through it. “To that end, each town will hold a raffle, the fifteen winners of which will receive a card designating them as able to enter the capital city and view the parade on His Most August Majesty’s coin.” The cheering reached a tumult then, and he had to shout for order several times before people calmed down. As he was doing this, two more guards were setting up a raffle machine to one side of the box.

Before the man could issue any orders after quieting the crowd however, another voice spoke up to take advantage of the moment. “That is all very well and good, but you haven’t told us anything about how His Highness is going to distribute the magic of this Anima. Will it go to the capital as it has always done, and towns like this only get the barest scraps?”

This drew the crowd up shorts and the man glared around into the crowd, trying to pick out the speaker. “Of course, His Highness has never confided that kind of planning in me. But surely part of his reason for opening up the city as he has is to show that there will be enough magic for all.”

“Can we get that in writing?” the questioner asked, causing laughs to abound through the crowd. “Furthermore, how much of the magic will be released to the public at all? How much more magic, money and time will be spent on enlarging the army when there has never been any significant external threat? Will the king ever admit that the time for such ‘temporary emergency measures’ has passed? The magic crisis is one thing, but it cannot be solved by more money spent on soldiers!”

Needless to say, this was not a popular opinion with the guards, and several of them started forward while their leader shouted, “That is borderline sedition whoever you are! The King sees far more than you do, and if he sees the need for a powerful army, who are you to say otherwise!?”

The voice in the crowd, which Gajeel felt sounded vaguely familiar, might have had a response to that. But twelve more guards had just rushed to the edge of the market, spreading out as their leader leaped up onto the box, whispering something to his fellow as he scanned the crowd. Gajeel winced and began to make his way to the side of the crowd but before he reached it, the two officers spotted him and the man with the scroll shouted out, “You there, you’re under arrest for assaulting an army officer! Men, seize that black-haired man!”

Pushing through the crowd, Gajeel made his way back into the alleyways before the guards could close on him, intending to lose himself rather than get into another fight with this bunch. It wasn’t that he was worried, but that man’s speech had gotten him to think, and it was now very clear he was nowhere near the Ishgar that he knew. *Have to find out how I got here, and how to get back before I make myself more of a public enemy than I already have. But what the hell were they talking about, magic a finite resource? What the hell is up with that?*

“Pssst, over here,” a voice whispered. This caused Gajeel to turn just in time to see what looked like a fedora disappear around a crate next to one wall. Shrugging, he moved in that direction, only to find another, even smaller alleyway, which was set between two buildings that seemed to have grown over it when their second stories were added. From there, he saw he was following a man in a fedora and long brown coat, who opened what looked like a backdoor into another, equally small alleyway. From there they followed through a series of tiny alleys that were equally grown over for several minutes until they came to a seedy-looking bar, its doorway not a door at all but a hanging piece of cloth.

The man Gajeel had been following stopped there and turned to look at him, giving Gajeel the first glimpse of the man’s face he’d had. “We’ll be safe here, the guards can never come this far into the slums without word getting around,” the man said, smirking at Gajeel.

Gajeel stared back at his own reflection, a little smarter looking perhaps thanks to wearing glasses, his face a little rounder than Gajeel’s and without the studs. But it was still Gajeel, and he smirked, now knowing why that voice he’d heard before had sounded so familiar. Another person might have been freaked out, but not Gajeel. “GEHIGEHIGEHI!” he laughed, and his opposite number laughed too, reaching out to clasp hands with him. “Us cool man, we have to stick together right?”

“Too right,” Edo-Gajeel said with a laugh again.

Inside the bar, Gajeel’s look-alike, was greeted by name. The two of them were then gestured to a booth at the far back, where the two of them could watch for the loan the door, yet also be unseen by most. “The name, Gajeel,” Gajeel’s look-alike said. “Gajeel Newshound, I’m an investigative reporter who specializes in targeting the government for its more obvious flaws. I’m also,” he said in a whisper, pulling down the neck of his coat and showing his upper pec and the Fairy Tail Mark there. “A member of Fairy Tail. Can I assume you’re the same in Earth Land?”

“The Fairy Tail thing is new for me, but yeah,” Gajeel said, still grinning, and causing his alternate to smirk. Then he leaned back and thought aloud. “So, I’m in some kind of alternate dimension or something? A mirror world? This can’t have been a spell, it’s way too big.”

“I wouldn’t know about the spell part, but everything else you said is generally correct. This is Edolas, and as far as I know, we and Earth Land are sort of mirror images of one another in terms of people and basic geography, the shape of mountains and such like. But everything else is different, with the biggest difference being that magic here is a finite resource. It exists in the air only in the tiniest of particles, so tiny that no human being could ever learn to use it. The King, in his infinite wisdom decided years ago that magic should be controlled utterly by the government.” Gajeel reflected that you could use his Edo version’s tone to cut wood it was so sharp.

“Ouch. So… Fairy Tail’s a Dark Guild then?” Gajeel asked, shaking his head. *Oh, the irony.*

“If by dark you mean illegal yes. We’re the last ones around, all the others were gathered up, forced to disband or just wiped out by the Fairy Hunters.” Edo-Gajeel shook his head grimly. “As to your presence here? Several years ago, the king he started to develop a device, which could reach across the dimensions to drain magic from Earth Land, during which the magic becomes a crystal substance we call Anima. You’re the first person I’ve ever met who comes from Earth Land, yet your very presence makes me wonder about whether or not there have been others, others who have not been so lucky. Is there anything that sets you apart from your fellows like that?”

“I’m a Dragon Slayer, it’s a Lost Magic, one that isn’t very well known,” Gajeel mused, thinking things through.

“Indeed, since I’ve never even heard of dragons outside children’s story books, I suppose it would be. Still if you’re here all alone, and this Anima is the largest they’ve ever ‘created’…“

He trailed off, waiting for Earth Land Gajeel to make the connections. It didn’t take long. While Gajeel was antisocial, arrogant, prickly and somewhat delusional in that he thought he could sing as well as he could play the guitar, that didn’t mean he was stupid. In fact, he was quite intelligent. He grasped what the fact this Anima could be drained and what that meant to a mage stuck within easily. But unlike a certain fire-breathing Dragon Slayer, he didn’t rant and rave about it. Instead he just leaned back, touching the studs on his face thoughtfully, then slowly nodded, determination filling him.

“Tell me, how would you like a real scoop?” he said leaning forward with a wicked grin. “‘Fairy Tail mage crashes Kings parade’, or some such? I’ll leave the choice of headliner to you, of course.”

His alternate grinned back, their odd laugh escaping his mouth once more. “GEIGEHEHI! What do you want me to do?”

**OOOOOOO**

As Gajeel had shouted his last ‘where the hell am I now’ upon finishing his fight with the guards, a certain young man on Earth sneezed. Looking around with narrow eyes, he wondered why he had the urge to find a lawyer and sue someone for copyright infringement.

Shaking that thought off, Ryoga Hibiki moved through the streets of Nerima, for the first time in more than six months, frowning as he looked around and thought to himself how little it had changed. *Ranma’s gone and nothing has changed. That’s… a little weird really. I mean, he was sort of the center of all the madness around here, wasn’t he?*

It had taken a long while for the news that Ranma had disappeared to get back to Ryoga given the fact he had, after seeing Akari last, decided to get even more lost than normal by standing in one place twirling himself around while blindfolded then running off in the random direction chosen. This had caused him some issues, and Ryoga knew he was no longer welcome in that city with the giant green statue which he thought might be Los Angeles, and the other place with the opera house that looked like a series of waves crashing together. Still, it had gotten him away from Akari, which was the most important thing at the time.

When his terror had finally run its course though, for some reason, Ryoga’s powers of simply eventually discovering his way back to his rival had not brought him back to Nerima for several more months. *Still I’m here now, and if Ranma really is gone, and hasn’t come back, then maybe Akane and I…* Ryoga smiled as the very name conjured up images of daisies, wildflowers, and a springtime day to his mind.

“But hold, do mine eyes deceive me, is that my old compatriot, my fellow rival to that hated sorcerer Saotome, Ryoga? Verily, I have not seen thee in more than half a year!”

Ryoga turned to stare in the direction of the voice, and slowly nodded his head, tensing up slightly. He and Kuno might have been occasional allies, but more often than not, they fought each other just as much as they fought Ranma. The fact that the man looked almost as if he was happy to see Ryoga was also odd.

Kuno’s next words though gave the reason for that happiness, as Kuno gestured around him grandly like he was on a stage. “Have you heard ought of the pigtailed girl? That foul sorcerer Ranma disappeared one day in thanks to the work of that dabbler Gosunkugi. For certain, justice can come in truly bizarre ways, but I suppose a simple pebble in the wrong place can upend even a giant. But to my dismay, that foul Sorcerer Saotome must have somehow ensorcelled the pigtailed girl to force her to follow him to wherever Gosunkugi’s righteous magics took him. Perhaps you, with your odd ability to find yourself and elsewhere, have discovered her,” Kuno paused, scowling now, “or his presence, for verily they must be together.”

“No one cares about your pigtailed goddess brother dear!” said Kodachi, causing Ryoga to twitch even more than Kuno’s greeting as she moved around the taller swordsman. Kodachi was dressed in a decent woman’s business suit, almost severe in cut, and decidedly far more normal than anything else Ryoga had ever seen on her.

But the haughty look she sent Ryoga’s way showed that underneath she was still the same Kodachi. “I have not heard of my Ranma-sama either, since he was most foully assaulted by the magics of that little peasant boy during his time of great weakness. Only a foul creature like that voodoo-lover would even think to attack a child thus!” Kodachi spaced out for a moment, looking out into a personal vista only she could see. “He must have been so cute as a child! And he would have been so defenseless, he would have had to cling to his new Nee-chan and HOOHOHOHOHOHO!”

“I’m sorry,” Ryoga said slowly, utterly unused to actually having a conversation with these two that didn’t involve one or the other waving weapons or poisons around at the very least. Though Kodachi’s laugh at least set him enough at ease to not look around for alien pods attempting to replace him. “I only just heard about Ranma’s disappearance a week ago, so I can’t help one way or the other.”

Kodachi made a tsking noise at the back of her throat, then shook her head. “In that case, you probably know even less than this one, since he was there when Ranma disappeared,” she said, actually glaring at her brother for a moment.

But she subsided as he turned to her shaking his head. “You know I did not plan that sister dear. Certainly, I would never have anything to do with disappearing the pigtailed goddess, and if I had known that the Foul Sorcerer would most heinously take her with them, I would never have allowed Gosunkugi to attempt it.”

“Yes, but then you turned around and thanked him, thanked him for getting rid of my love!” Kodachi wailed, shaking her head and turning to one side, a hand up to her brow. “Oh, what have I done to be cursed to have such a lout for a brother!”

“\*Ahem\*,” Ryoga coughed, getting the arguing siblings attention. “What are we talking about here? How did Ranma disappear, and what did you mean earlier when you said de-aged? Don’t tell me those aging mushrooms…”

“Oh yes, you are involved in the original mushroom escapade as well, weren’t you?” Kodachi said with a nod. “Well, it turns out that the odd male kunoichi that works with the okonomiyaki chef…

From there, she explained what she and her brother had learned about Ranma’s disappearance. This had only occurred, in this world, about four months ago, but everyone had moved on from then slowly but surely, as Ranma had in his new world, although he would have been astonished by how little time had passed on Earth since his forced expulsion from that world. Yet perhaps it wasn’t so unusual that time moved differently between one dimension and another which were so distant from one another.

Telling Ryoga about what had happened to Ranma took them several blocks, and by the time she finished, Ryoga looked around to realize they had reached the one bus stop that stopped in Nerima. It was a sort of no-go zone for the martial artists and safe because of that. If you fought here, no one else in the district would sell you anything, from food to rocks and other kinds of repair equipment.

As Kodachi moved forward towards the bus, Ryoga blinked, coming back to the here and now after trying to digest all he’d heard. That Ranma might have been making the rounds of the fiancés was one thing, since Kodachi had no idea why he was doing so, not exactly being on speaking terms with her former rivals. Even Ukyo, who was easily the friendliest to her rivals, wouldn’t really tell Kodachi anything. His being de-aged was a smaller factor, something that Ryoga knew would irritate Ranma rather than really change anything in his head. *But what the heck was he talking to Akane at that ice cream shop for? Why did he then go to meet Ukyo?*

*And then disappearing because of voodoo-boy. Gosunkugi has the weirdest luck I have ever seen, and since this is me saying it, that’s a major thing. How he can be beaned by a random baseball while walking around across the football field on the other side of the school, and have none of his self-made stuff work, yet always find these weird magic item shops is beyond me.*

“Oh, um where are you going?” he finally asked somewhat lamely, realizing now that he really should have been paying more attention to the way that Kodachi and her brother were both dressed.

“I graduated of course a few months ago, top of my class too. As if there was any doubt that a Kuno who put his or her mind to it would achieve anything less,” she said, sneering at her brother, who huffed and looked away “As such I am off to college. At Tokyo University.”

Ryoga gaped, then gave her a handclap. “Well done! I could never even dream of going to college myself, missed too much school thanks to my never being able to find my room when I tried to get there or leave, but still, good for you.”

“Thank you. But I must depart. This discussion of Ranma-sama’s disappearance has been unpleasant, but I have had to move on from him alas. Time and life wait for no man, nor does my future, no matter how handsome the man might have been.” With that Kodachi nodded at Ryoga, then exchanged a kiss on the cheek with her brother, before resolutely turning away and moving on to the train.

As the bus pulled away, Ryoga blinked staring not at the bus or the idea of Kodachi moving on. That made some sense, since she’d never been the most ardent of the fiancés. No what startled him was the destruction on the other side of the street the bus’s driving off allowed him to see. There were several shattered buildings utterly demolished in a straight line down the street. “What happened there!?”

Kuno winced, shaking his head and looking rather nervous. “Ah, that, that is where that old crone from China and the ancient perverted gnome who used to live with the Tendos fought months ago. They seemed to have something of a major argument after the pigtailed goddess… and the foul sorcerer I suppose, disappeared.”

Ryoga shivered, actually looking as nervous as Kuno for a moment. “What the hell, those two fought for real! Oh, that would not be good!”

“Verily you have a mastery of the understatement such that it would take a God to rival,” Kuno replied dryly before changing the subject, twisting to face Ryoga directly. “But tell me true, you have not seen hide nor hair of the pigtailed one, or the goddess?”

“No, I haven’t Kuno, like I told you,” Ryoga said, still staring at the destruction that two Grand Masters had created when they fought. It was humbling almost, and he remembered that Ranma had caused even more destruction than this at least two times. *His fights with Herb and Saffron were on that level, I mean he destroyed mountains in them. So… does that mean he was on the same level as Cologne and Happosai?* Ryoga really didn’t like to think that idea.

“But verily we were rivals, each of us trying for the fierce tigress Akane’s affections, so why should I believe you?” Kuno said, suddenly holding one of his wooden swords and pointing it at Ryoga. “Indeed, now that I think upon it you were more often than not in league with the file sorcerer! Perhaps you have had a part in spiriting my pigtailed girl away with him! And now you have come back to gloat!”

“What is the color of the sky in your own world Kuno?” Ryoga asked quizzically. “I’d honestly like to know.”

“Enough insults, I attack!”

*No matter how much has changed, Nerima still remain the same in one aspect,* Ryoga thought to himself as he grabbed the sword, and then punted Kuno away with a single kick to the stomach sending him flying away over several rooftops to smash down somewhere out of sight. *Kuno is always obsessive quick to attack and never quite sees the world like the rest of us do and nothing can change that*.  *But that leaves me to make my own way to Ucchan’s. If I want answers, I should go to the source, and she and I got along, somewhat. Thank goodness, I’ve got a new tool to help me get over my family’s curse.*

With a faint frown of concentration, Ryoga moved over to a map nearby and began to input the name Ucchan’s into his brand-new phone. *Thank God for cell phones, fantastic little inventions.*

With the cell phones help Ryoga was, after several dozen false starts and one instance where he actually had turned around entirely, eventually find his destination, what should’ve been the okonomiyaki joint. But that place had been small, typical mom-and-pop little restaurant Ukyo ran practically on her own, this one wasn’t. It was huge. It had taken over a building to either side of the original, and wasn’t called Ucchan’s, but Nerima’s Surprise for some reason.

*Damn, I suppose someone’s moved into the big time here. Good grief, I wonder what else has changed here.* Shaking his head and uncertain what to think about this on top of everything else he’d learned, Ryoga pushed open the door and walked inside where he got another surprise in the form of a voice from behind him saying, “can I help you?”

Ryoga twisted around, his heavy steel-reinforced umbrella automatically coming off of his shoulder in a wide arc that would’ve smashed a car to pieces, only for it to be dodged, and for a needle to appear right in front of his eyes forcing him to jerk his head out of the way. “I apologize for surprising you,” said the same voice, “but we do not allow violence here. Can I assume that that was simply a reflexive action and not one honestly intended to cause violence? Or will I have to escort you off the premises?”

Ryoga scowled, his own hand having flashed up to grab the needle just before it would’ve embedded itself in his eye. This guy was fast! And though the needle wouldn’t have hurt much since Ryoga had been able to move away from where he would’ve impacted his eyeball, and instead would’ve taken it on his forehead, the speed was kind of worrisome. *If, that is, the guy’s learned that stinking speed technique of the Amazons. If he hasn’t then he’s dead meat.*

Then he blinked, recognizing the ‘woman’ in front of him despite she was wearing something that would have looked more at home in Paris in the Renaissance era. “Aren’t you that male kunoichi, um… Kotat, no, Konatsu, right?”

“I am,” the crossdresser said with a smile that only served to make him look more feminine. “And as it is no longer rush hour, I will even admit that you figured me out. Then he blinked too, staring. “I remember seeing you once or twice as well, you are Hibiki-san, correct?”

“That’s right sugar,” said another voice, one that Ryoga recognized as that of an honest to goodness real female rather than a young man who could pass as a disturbingly pretty woman. Although to be fair, Ukyo too had once passed herself off as a man. “Why don’t you come on over here Ryoga, been what, six months since we saw you around here. What you been up to, are you still with that pretty little pig gal o’ yours?”

To Ryoga’s relief Ukyo hadn’t changed much physically. Her hair was shorter or at least it seemed to be from what Ryoga could tell, and she was still dressed up like a boy. Right now, she was currently wearing a tuxedo, most of her hair slicked back beyond a ponytail at the back, and her smile was just as wide and welcoming as normal. But despite the clothing, she looked normal enough to Ryoga to put them at ease despite the question. “Um, I kind of was when I left Nerima the last time, not any longer.”

“Why not?” Ukyo asked. “I thought it was love at first ‘sueehh’!”

“That was sort of why…” Ryoga said slowly. “The thing was… she also was, was interested in my pig form adding to her…stock.”

Ukyo blinked, then blinked again and slowly turned green as she finally figured out what he was saying. “You mean...?”

“Yep, and I most decidedly was not going to go there,” Ryoga said, shuddering. “So yeah, can we please change topics?”

Ukyo nodded, still looking pale at the very idea. “Yeah, let’s do that. You heard about what happened here?”

“I heard about Ranma going missing and then I arrived and got the perspective of the Kuno siblings. I kind of assumed automatically that their views were biased.”

“Maybe a bit,” Ukyo said with a laugh. “But Kodachi actually helped us try to investigate what happened, although we never did find that damn little shop that sold Voodoo Boy the scroll.”

“I could’ve told you you’d never find it. Those kinds of shops, they can never be found by anyone actually searching for them,” Ryoga said definitively. “Still, tell me what’s all been going on? Right before he reverted to type, Kuno said that the Grand Masters the old coot and the ghoul had a serious fight?”

“Knockdown, drag out super-serious fight yeah,” Ukyo said shuddering. “It was nasty in the extreme! I mean, I knew they were tough, but those two, they put on a show for everyone. It was months back and we’re still fixing some of the repairs.”

“Who won?”

“That’s da million-dollar question now ain’t it?” Ukyo said, her thick Osakan accent giving her voice a little lilt. “Truth of the matter is, no one really knows. They both walked away from it, Happy’s never been seen since, said something about Nerima being boring without Ranma here, and Cologne left with Shampoo a little while after. Hell, I don’t even know what da heck they were fighting about. Not even Shampoo knew before she left.”

Ukyo sighed. “The two of them returned to China and boy ya betta believe Shampoo wasn’t happy about that none.”

“About giving up on Ranma?” Ryoga asked. “She always seemed a little more obsessed about the chase then you, no offense.”

“I like to think I’m a little saner than she is yeah sugar,” Ukyo replied with a smirk. “If you want to get more though, you might want to stop by the Neko Hanten. It’s still goin’, since Mousse stayed behind. Apparently, he was more than just their chief washer and overall whipping boy. The business has been booming ever since he hired Kasumi as their new cook.”

“Kasumi?!” Ryoga gasped, shaking his head. “I mean yeah okay, she’s a magnificent cook but cooking for a restaurant?”

“I know,” Ukyo wailed suddenly, shaking her head. “I wish I could’ve hired her myself, but Mousse offered her more money, and I already had one Tendo sister as a partner, I wasn’t about to hand over more shares to another.”

“What?” Ryoga asked, lost again.

“This place, Nabiki helped me expand,” Ukyo said, gesturing around. “It was her idea, and while I was against the whole crossdressing thing – if you guess boy or girl right you get half off your meal - it’s been an awesome draw!”

“What is? I mean the food looks kind of the same no offense.”

“Why mess with perfection? Kasumi would’ve been able to add more to the rest of my menu, but nothing can compare to my own okonomiyaki!” Ukyo said proudly. “But now we’re a pizza and crossdressing and dress-up restaurant. We’re now the biggest draw in the area.”

Ryoga felt a headache coming on. Ukyo and Nabiki in business? Ukyo and the ninja boy-girl using their crossdressing as a draw? Last he’d heard, Ukyo hated Nabiki for her part in the Wedding Incident, and the whole crossdressing thing embarrassed her, something she was trying to move past. *What’s next, her employing that guy who liked to dress up in random stuff and was chasing after her?* “Right… okay, that makes sense, making the best of your talents… I guess. So, you’re happy… I guess?”

“Yep,” Ukyo said with a nod. “Ranma disappearing like that was a major wrench, but he and I had talked and we both basically decided that we wanted our lives to go in very different directions. He wanted to pick up traveling again, get better at martial arts and everything and I wanted to settle down and have my restaurant. Two very different things.”

From there, seeing Ryoga’s confused look Ukyo explained how Ranma had been planning to go around to each of his would-be suitors and sitting down with them and talking to them. “He started with Akane and went on to me. I think he was going to sit down with Shampoo before he disappeared, but Voodoo Boy interrupted him. Well, along with the whole mushroom thing. Double whammy that was, let me tell you. I couldn’t even reach the top of my countertop for a while.”

“Wait, so he and Akane, they broke up?” and in Ryoga’s private world an Angels choir began, and he smiled as he fought to stop himself singing, ‘oh happy day’.

“Well yeah, I got Akane to tell me about it later and basically the two of decided there was a little too much incompatibility in them for the long run. Not certain what, that’s about, although Ranma’s girl form was part of it, and maybe the way they viewed the Art? Don’t know about it, but beyond just havin’ fun, Ranma didn’t really take anything else seriously beyond the Art. Never really got that vibe from Akane. Oh, and I oughta tell you, I think she’s planning to move to America soon.”

“What?” Ryoga yelped. “I have to go!” Ryoga said, before smacking aside several of Ukyo’s specially shaped throwing daggers and her assistance needles.

“Hey what about paying!” Ukyo said with a scowl, looking down at the okonomiyaki she had made for Ryoga then back to the slowly closing door.

“Mistress, do you want me to go after him?” Konatsu asked with a scowl on his all-too pretty face.

“Nah sugar, it ain’t like he ate any of it or nothin’ I’ll just change the toppings and we can eat it before the rush hour starts,” Ukyo paused, “huh… think there was something I was gonna tell Ryoga if I saw him if I saw him before…. Oh shit…” Ukyo’s face paled visibly and then shook her head. “Ugh, well, Ryoga made this bed, he gets to sleep in it.”

Outside, he quickly began to search for the Tendo house on his phone, and slowly, with ferocious attention to his phone made it there within 40 minutes. To Ryoga this was a godsend, the fastest he’d ever found himself to the place he was trying to get to. Jubilant, he moved up to the door and knocked on it quickly.

Just as always, the door was opened by Kasumi, who smiled politely at him. But just for a brief second, Ryoga thought her eyes had glimmered with something that was at odds with her normal kindness. Then she addressed him, and that image dissipated quickly. “Ryoga, how are you? We haven’t seen you in several months.”

“Ah, no, um, I haven’t been able to find myself back in this time. I, um, I was wondering if Akane was home?” Ryoga asked hesitantly.

“Oh yes, she’s here. I think she’ll be happy to see you,” Kasumi said, gesturing Ryoga to follow her inside.

In the dining room, Ryoga found Akane, and once more birdsong and sunshine appeared in his personal world. “A, Akane!” he stuttered, smiling. “Um, how are you today?”

“Ryoga!” Akane looked up at him, and for a moment her smile displayed just a bit too many teeth to be called a real smile, but Ryoga, in his enthusiasm missed this entirely and after a second it was over and she was gesturing him to sit down, his back to the outer screen that opened out into the backyard. “How are you doing, are things working out with Akari?”

“Um, no, er, they aren’t. She um, our lives are just moving in two very different directions. She wanted stability, and well, with my direction curse I couldn’t give it to her,” Ryoga said, mixing what he had heard from Ukyo about her talk with Ranma and his own life into a believable lie. “But, um, I heard about what happened here with Ranma disappearing and everything else.”

“Yep, he’s gone, and so is Genma. He moved in with Nodoka a few weeks after Ranma went missing. He said something about making up with her for the good of the Saotome School or some such rubbish,” Akane replied. In reality, Kasumi and Akane had overheard the Saotomes talking about having another child in order to carry on the legacy, but that was a horrifying thought on many levels, and neither of them wanted to think about it.

“And um… how, how do you feel about Ranma being gone?” Ryoga asked.

“Honestly, I’m fine with it. He and I, we were kind of stuck in this rut of name calling and responding and not getting any closer, and like you said with you and Akari, we wanted very different things out of our lives. He also had basically discovered he would never be rid of his curse, and I couldn’t handle that,” Akane said with a sigh. Then, watching as Ryoga, who was an open book at the best of times, brightened up still more, she went on, her smile turning toothy once more, as one hand disappeared under the table. “But hey, that’s in the past and I’ve already got a job lined up in America as an action actress and stunt woman.”

She waited a beat, watching as Ryoga built up the courage to speak before going on herself. “In fact, if you’re here, do you want to come with me?” She watched as utter delight suffused Ryoga’s face, then went on in the same upbeat tone. “I could probably get you a job too… after all, a pig able to do martial arts would be a big draw for the kids’ market!”

Like that, the inner heaven that Ryoga had been building up since hearing that Akane and Ranma had broken up even before Ranma disappeared simply shattered, leaving him staring in shock at Akane as she stood up, making her way around the table towards him. “W, what? I don’t understand…”

“Genma and my father both knew about your other form,” Akane said almost conversationally as a red aura started to spring up all around her. “They had this damned fool idea about Ranma’s rivalry with you and his trying to protect me from your pig form could be a way to drive us closer. Kasumi, Auntie Nodoka, Nabiki and I told them how fucking stupid that was of course. But I was always angrier at you!”

By this point Ryoga was scrambling to his feet, shocked and almost catatonic at having his secret exposed like this, after having built up his expectations and hopes so far. In fact, he was so shocked he didn’t realize that Akane had just cursed in front of Kasumi and hadn’t been reprimanded for it.

“You fucking pig!” Akane roared, bringing down her ki-hammer, enhanced to look like a war god’s favorite toy or perhaps a siege weapon for a giant, its end the shape of a wolf’s head with glowing red eyes. Ryoga barely dodged in time and the thing struck the floor where he’d just been sitting pulverizing it and leaving a huge crater in the ground underneath.

“You used that form, got me to tell P-chan all my secrets, then turned around and used them to attack Ranma! You stayed in my room while I changed, even once when I was in the baths! I thought you were a friend and you manipulated and abused that trust for your own selfish ends, you absolute bastard!” Akane boomed, twisting around and bringing her hammer up in a backswing that Ryoga couldn’t dodge in time.

He found himself flying out of the room, his head ringing and the side of his head throbbing like he’d just been smashed by a train. He rolled as he hit the ground and turned to gape as Akane charged out after him. “Die Ryoga!”

Ryoga barely had time to stand before the hammer caught him in the chest, hurling him up and into the sky.

Several blocks away Mousse blinked hearing a sound coming towards his restaurant and quickly exited out the back, leaping up onto the roof. Unlike Ukyo’s the Neko Hanten hadn’t grown, since it was still just him and Kasumi for now, along with two waiters, who were but a pale imitation of his former love, Shampoo. Heck, even Ranma in his female form would have been better than those two. Still, they let him dress them up in skimpy clothing, so there was still some draw. And Kasumi’s food was famous district wide so that was a bonus. Still, it was nothing like it was without Shampoo around. *Ah, my love, when will you come to your senses and let me… gah, can’t think about that right now.*

Mousse peered around until he located the source of the noise and saw Ryoga plummeting towards the restaurant. Without a second’s thought he lashed out with both hands shouting, “Hidden Weapons Technique: Weighted Net!”

From his hands, two nets flew out at high speed capturing Ryoga in their embrace. Mousse then rushed to one side, pulling on a rope connected to the two nets. “Secret Art: Heavy Haul!” With that, Mousse pulled Ryoga to one side, redirecting the momentum of his fall towards the ground. A second later Ryoga made a Ryoga sized crater in the ground over which Mousse stood for a moment before slowly pulling on the nets hauling the still trapped martial artist out of the hole. “Sorry about that Ryoga, but I really don’t want you smashing into my restaurant.”

“No, no problem. Why should anyone care about me? I’m just a pig after all, to be trampled underfoot,” Ryoga grumbled. He looked to be nursing a massive bruise on half of his face and seemed to be slurring his words, his body shifting into the most depressed slump Mousse had seen in a very long time.

That thought brought Mousse up short and he kicked out hard at Ryoga’s chest. “None of that! I don’t want you to blow up my restaurant with a Perfect Shi-Shi Hokodan either.” He sighed, then put a companionable arm around Ryoga’s shoulder as his other hand punched a small button and retracted the two nets, pulling them off the other martial artist. “Come on, I can pretty much guess what happened here. You need a drink I think.”

“Why are you even still here?” Ryoga asked looking at his fellow animal companion. “I would’ve thought you would’ve rushed off after Shampoo.”

Mousse winced. “Let’s just say that what Akane tried to do to you, Shampoo already did do to me. She challenged me to a match. If I won, she would welcome my courtship. If not, I would have to leave her alone. Then she nearly put me in the hospital,” Mousse said with a laugh that was not at all funny. “I vowed not to come home again until I am strong enough to defeat her. I’ve been here, running the restaurant and training for that day. But enough about me, come on, I said you could use a drink, and now I do too after talking about my love.”

An hour later, the two of them were sitting in a bar together shooting back drinks, as they talked about everything. About how Mousse had lost the match, how Shampoo had thrown him off his game by using her body, then compared him negatively to Ranma time and time again, before breaking his legs when he lost his glasses. “That led to me getting my contacts for the first time, and I haven’t looked back since.”

Ryoga nodded at that, then told about how Akari had turned into a pervert. Then he ranted about how Ranma’s family had turned even Akane, sweet Akane against him. “Everything, everything was so more certain with him around, with him around to challenge, him around to, to blame!” Ryoga shouted, causing many a person nearby to move away from the two of them as they wobbled their way down the street.

“Agreed! If I had proved once and for all, that I was the better man than Ranma, if I had beaten him before he disappeared like a coward, then Shampoo would’ve been mine! Now here I am, unable to prove it, unable to regain her love!”

“Exactly!” Ryoga shouted, thrusting a hand up. “And you know what that means!”

As one, they shouted, “Ranma!” Then before they could finish the shout they were splashed by a passing truck as it smashed into a puddle in the street. Yet even so they continued in their new forms, the pig and the duck shouting aloud in quacks and snorts, “Ranma, this is all your fault!”

**OOOOOOO**

Ranma sneezed as the Legion came in for the landing at the base they had been told to head towards and grumbled, shaking her head. “Great, a number two.” At Edo-Wendy’s confused noise from behind her, Ranma explained. “Someone just blamed me for shit that wasn’t my fault. It happened so often I started to be able to notice a difference in my sneezes when it was about someone blaming me, vowing vengeance or just talking about me behind my back sometimes.”

“I don’t believe in that kind of thing,” Wendy said behind him shaking her head. “If it was true, trust me when I say Lucy and Levy would probably be sneezing all the time given how much the rest of the guild talk about them behind their backs.”

“Quiet you!” Ranma said, leaning back and actually spanking the large-breasted woman on the rear.

He flushed a little as instead of yelping, Wendy let loose a little moan. She then twisted her head just enough to look up at the redhead as Ranma had turned to look back at her, giving Ranma a ribald wink.

Shaking his head at that, Ranma leaped off of the Legion, tossing its reins to one of the nearby soldiers who had raced up to her. “You!” She shouted pointing at another man while hefting Wendy off of the Legion like she was a sack of potatoes “Take this one and those other two. I want them shown into a prison cell for now. I’ll want them fed. I want them able to answer questions later. Nothing is to happen to them, and no wounds that I don’t put on them myself are to suddenly show up on their bodies. Am I clear?”

Such was the rage and fury in Ranma’s face, that every man there, around fifteen in sight with more racing out of a nearby barracks, bowed quickly, looking utterly terrified.

“And you,” she shouted, twisting around and hurling her broken spear shafts towards one of the other men. It embedded in the ground right between his legs despite having hit with the blunt end, causing him to shriek with fear and leaped backwards. “You bring me the best magical spear you have in this base! And if it’s not up to snuff, expects to be running back to the capital city with a hundred-pound weight on your back! In full armor to get me more!”

“Is it just me, or is she getting into this a little too much?” Cana whispered from where she and Juvia were still handing sideways off their legion.

“Juvia thinks that you like that kind of ‘is it just me question’ too much,” Juvia retorted, as the two of them were pulled off the legion and then led away. Behind them, another guard came dragging Edo-Wendy.

“You, where are the baths?” Ranma asked, pointing to another soldier getting into this act as Cana had said. It was kind of fun to see the peons scurrying around to please her like this. “And you,” she went on, pointing to another soldier “get me some food and bring it to the best room on the base. I will have my food before the bath. Then we can have the three of them have their own baths.”

“My, my lady?” questioned one of the soldiers with the plumes of an officer. “You wouldn’t prefer us just to wipe them down, or use buckets?”

“No,” Ranma said with a growl, her hands clenching and unclenching. “I want them close at hand.” Ranma let her eyes flicked down towards each of the girl’s breasts as they passed her by and then looked away, her hands twitching, and the man wisely backed away.

Before Ranma could be shown her room however, two more officers ran out of the building she was being led towards. One of them had a taller plume on his helmet than the others Ranma had seen while the corpulent man at his side was noticeably older than most soldiers. He wore no helmet, but had a long red cloak, and some marks on his specially made armor. They both bowed to Ranma, with the man in the plumed helmet saying, “General Knightwalker, we were not expecting you here. I um, I’m afraid we don’t have any quarters for someone of your august personage.”

“I’ve been on the trail of those Fairies for weeks. Do you think I care where I sleep? So long as you have a bath for me, I will be fine with that,” Ranma replied bluntly. “Food will be nice too.”

“Um, yes, but may I ask, will your battalion be following you?” the man asked, looking around. “Erm, it’s just that someone like you general should not be…”

“I can look after myself you irritating little man!” Erza growled, before looking around and stepping forward, to speak to the two men in lower tones. “Most of my battalion is still out in the field trying to find the Fairy Tail guildhall, but we ran into a major battle out there. The fairies somehow found some new friends, Dragon Slayers they call themselves. There were four of them, and they held my battalion and me off for a time before I killed one and knocked out the other. But I lost my Ten Commandments spear to them and it was the toughest fight I’ve fought in a while. Also then I was told about the parade, so I came here to rest and recuperate before I head back to the capital.”

Given the somewhat torn and battered state ‘Erza’ looked, and the news about her spear, to say nothing about the simmering fury she seemed to be barely controlling, the camp supervisor could only nod. “Of, of course my lady. In, in that case, let me show you to your room.”

Ranma nodded haughtily and walked into the building behind the man on his heels. The room she was shown wasn’t much, but she was assured that the camp’s bathhouse would make up for it and was being cleared of anyone using it and cleaned even now. She just nodded at that, and sunk down onto the bed, being careful to keep her cloak around her shoulders and back to keep the breast band and all the rest hidden underneath it.

Later, as she was served a meal, the soldier he had ordered to find the best spear on the base came into the room, holding a generic flame lance out towards her. Ranma had seen these in many a hand in the battalion he’d fought and Ranma let a scowl appear on his face. “Dammit! Are there other any other types?”

“Erm, Lady General. We have two thunder spears, and one explosive spear on the base, but they don’t have as many charges left as this flame spear.”

“Bring them all,” Ranma ordered.

“My my lady? I thought…”

“Are you paid to think,” Ranma said softly, grasping the spear out of the man’s hand and whipping around so that the spearhead lay on his shoulder. “Because I do not think so. What do you think?”

“I don’t think my lady!” the man sputtered shrilly.

“Good boy. Now get me my weapons!” she roared.

The man was back in record time, and Ranma moved around the desk where her food had just been delivered, taking a spear in turn and beginning to work out with them, before nodding brusquely at the man. “They’ll have to do. You may go.”

He skedaddled quickly, grateful that he escaped with his life after something of a disastrous start.

After working with each spear in turn, Ranma set them aside and went back to her meal. Once she was finished, she rang for an orderly and ordered that the three prisoners be brought to her. She grabbed up the lightning spear, and said thoughtfully, “And tell the guards to bring them to the baths here.”

She was quickly led to another building on the base, from which steam rose out of various windows. Ranma entered and found a large changing area right inside the door and waited there for a few minutes for her prisoners. She smirked at them all and gestured them in. “Let’s get you three pigs clean, shall we? And then…” she hefted a lightning spear in her hand, “Well, if you don’t answer my questions, we might have some fun…”

All three girls stared at the redhead, and Edo-Wendy actually trembled for a moment, Ranma’s acting was so good, but then Ranma winked at her and she subsided, breathing a hidden sigh of relief. Ranma then turned to the guards and ordered them out, but told the orderly officer, the logistics man to him. When the guards were gone, Ranma set the spear aside and gestured the girls towards the baths. “Hop in if ya want.”

Cana grinned. “Don’t have to tell me twice, Red.” With that she moved into the water, then paused. “What about the dye in my hair?”

“It won’t matter, the stuff I used is kinda like tar, you’d have to clean your hair for hours before it started to come out,” Ranma said waving that away only to blush as Wendy had instantly started to strip, tossing away her clothing.

Wendy 2.0 had a body type that Ranma hadn’t seen before. While not as young as the other girls in his life she shared the good health they did, but she was also much softer looking. Her hips were wider than any of them, her thighs were somewhat plump if still strong looking. Her rear was a bit larger, but not overly so, and she didn’t have much muscles to her stomach or sides, though her arms had to have some muscle given her training with her tonfas, which the girl had mentioned a time or two. And her breasts, while amazing in their size, did sag noticeably. They looked soft and inviting, with her nipples being tiny pink buds that winked at Ranma before the redhead twisted away, shaking her head to clear it of the image.

Juvia too blushed while Wendy let loose a little sexy giggle, moving away from Ranma until she felt she would be obscured by the steam. Cana was somewhere in the middle. She stripped off but left her bra and panties in place until she had a towel around her, shimmying out of them underneath the towel.

This caused her to give a very sexy little wiggle in the way she had to move under the towel, but for some reason, Ranma found her eyes drawn to the silhouette of Juvia through the steam. Wendy 2.0’s obvious charms were nice, but she was coming on a bit too strong, and the mystery of what Juvia might look like somehow drew her attention.

Shaking her head, Ranma turned away from the girls, cocking her head to one side as she listened for the sound of walking feet outside. When the redhead heard that noise, Ranma started to growl out in a loud tone, “I want their names damn it! Where did they come from?” The girls looked at her then Ranma winked at Cana, who nodded, and shot back, “I don’t know where they went, I don’t, wait don’t use the spear again, I really don’t know!”

Erza let loose a loud harrumph, and Ranma turned to the door. “Who’s there?”

“Milady, you asked to speak with me?” The camp’s castellan asked through the door.

“Yes, I was informed by Panther Lily that that the king has ordered a parade in honor of our new Anima. Do we know when it is to be held?”

“Tomorrow at high noon my lady, we were told that all four of the generals would be in attendance, and a raffle has gone around to decide which of us here will be free to go as well.”

Ranma nodded thoughtfully while looking around at the others, particularly where Edo-Wendy was now in the bath, leaning against the side of it and looking back up at Ranma, who had not joined them. “Is there anything else known about the parade, anything about formal attire or the King’s chosen color for the day?” Edo-Wendy asked in a low tone, which Ranma repeated through the door.

“No, my lady, no news of that nature has reached us here.” The man seems to pause then brightened up. Oh, but all of the weapons of the second and fourth legions are to be recharged and ready for review during the parade one at the beginning then the other at the end.”

At that Edo-Wendy, though flush with the heat of the bath, still managed to pale visibly, and Ranma looked at her quizzically, before the girl whispered “Ask, him more about that! Ask him if some of the Anima has already been used.”

Ranma’s eyes widened as the implications of that sunk in, but she kept control, as she asked, “Oh, does that mean that some of the Anima has already been used? And why those two legions and not mine?! Admittedly, I would’ve had to pull them back from hunting down those fairies, but still we could certainly have used more magic in the battle earlier today.”

The guard very wisely did not comment on her grumbling, and simply replied to her question. “Ahem, yes my lady, some of the Anima was already broken off and turned into magical power, in the form of more than 300 lacrima of all types. This Anima is the greatest windfall we’ve ever seen. There’re rumors that it could power the whole country for years, and the capital itself for decades.”

*Powered through the magic and possibly the death of my friends in Fairy Tail*, Ranma thought, her fists clenching and unclenching. Juvia was suddenly there, taking her arm in both of hers, stopping Ranma from expressing that anger in a more physical manner. The girl was wearing a towel, but her arms were free, and the soft, wet skin against Ranma’s own, caused Ranma’s anger to subside replaced by other emotions. Juvia saw it in her face and moved away quickly, flushing and gesturing for Ranma to answer the man on the other side of the bathhouse’s door.

“I see, that’s excellent news. Is there anything else I need to know about this parade you think?” When the guard answered in the negative, Ranma ordered imperiously, “Good, then be on your way.” Even as she said so Ranma was turning to the trio of girls, her voice still raised if at slightly less volume. “Fine, if you won’t answer my questions, I can at least have some fun! Now which of you bitches was the one who thought that she could make fun of my figure again? Oh yes, it was you, black hair!”

“What, no it wasn’t!” Cana said quickly, her own voice loud as she tried to get in on the act. “That was Juvia over there! Put the thunder spear down! Please!”

Juvia took up the tale. “It was not! Please, no more electrocutions!”

“Well if you don’t want to be electrified then how about I warm that water up for you, huh!?” As she was speaking Ranma held up a hand to the others gesturing them to shout and protest, waiting until the man was out of his own hearing range before nodding to them. “All right, we...what are you doing?” she paused as Juvia had just taken her hand and was pulling her forward towards the bath.

“Juvia wants to continue her bath. If Ranma does not wish to watch, Ranma can turn her back, but Ranma also needs a bath,” Juvia replied, a small flush on her face but determination in her eyes. *Wendy the older is not the only one who likes to flirt with Ranma*, she reflected with an inner giggle.

Edo-Wendy grinned and nodded, while Cana just nodded, no longer interested in bathing at the moment. She pulled herself out and sat on the outskirts of the large bath, sticking her legs in, but that was all. “The water’s nice anyway,” she said in a low tone, one hand wiping through her hair.

Ranma shook her head, but nodded, and slowly stripped off the down to her underwear, before grabbing a towel, putting it around her waist and then pulling the underwear off from underneath it as Cana had before, even the bra and everything else. Then she wrapped it around her stomach and got into the baths, ignoring for a moment the fact this left her breasts bare to the girl’s eyes. Sliding down into the water, Ranma sighed with relief, as ‘she’ became ‘he’. *Crud, I think I’m getting close to that time of the month again, and now I have to keep going with this whole deception thing. Better enjoy being a man while I can.*

He didn’t notice Juvia and Wendy giving him looks now, their gazes decidedly lusty despite the fact that both of them, like Cana, understood the news that they had just heard. But Ranma’s words brought them back to the here and now with an abrupt thump, as he opened his eyes and looked at them one eyebrow raised. “Well Wendy, what does that mean, that a piece of the Anima was broken off like that?” Ranma wanted confirmation on his earlier fears.

“I don’t know,” Wendy said shaking her head. “We know that it’s made out of the bodies of mages as well as their magic, but what happens to the mage inside when a piece is broken off like that, especially when the Anima is created by so many bodies all at once, I have no idea. It could just be that some of their magic has disappeared entirely for all time, or it could be that someone has died. I just don’t know Ranma, I’m sorry.”

Cana crossed her arms under her chest, scowling angrily at the far wall. “We need to get in there as fast as possible,” she said simply. “How do we do it?”

“That’s a damn good question,” Ranma said thoughtfully. He looked at the two of them, then Wendy 2.0. “Wendy, I’m afraid I’ll probably need to keep you with me, so you’re going to have to keep playing the part of a prisoner. Are personal slaves allowed?”

Wendy nodded then tried to lighten the mood by saying “Yes, private slaves like that are kind of normal among the nobility. They’re used as nurses, maids and of course sex slaves. And I even could wear one of those slave outfits of theirs. I’d bet we could find one here for me.”

Her attempt failed however and Ranma shook his head, looking over to the other two mages. “Cana, how good are your acting skills?”

“Extremely good,” Cana said very simply. “I used to take part in plays in Magnolia until they were outlawed by the mayor.”

Ranma’s eyebrows rose at that and Cana shook her head. “Erza, Natsu, and Gray all love to be part of plays and stuff, but they can’t act their way out of a bucket and all of them get extremely angry whenever someone pointed this out to them. It brought in the crowds, but it wasn’t really worth the price of repairing the theatre every time.”

Ranma barked a laugh at that, and shook his head, gesturing towards Juvia. “Juvia, what about you?”

“Would you be able to act do you think, or would it be better to have me shift ‘Cana’ here to my command from this base?” They all looked at him quizzically and Ranma rolled his eyes. “Come on keep up! We steal some of their clothing, and then after we’re out of sight, Cana changes into it, and rides the second Legion with Juvia behind her. Then when we get there, Juvia can change into a guard uniform too, and they’ll have free reign of the castle.”

“That sounds good, although Panther Lily would be able to give it the lie if we tried it,” Wendy warned.

“Then we try not to run into him,” Ranma said he easily, shrugging his shoulders. “No plan is perfect, but that should at least get us into the capital and then the castle, right?

“It could, and afterwards?” Wendy asked.

“Afterwards I wait until the most opportune moment to reveal that I’m not Evil-Erza and raise hell during the parade. At the same time, the three of you infiltrate the palace, find our friends and someone who can tell us more about this Anima thing. We’re dealing with way too many unknowns here, but there has to be some way of reversing the process or negating it or, or something!”

Ranma knew he was sounding desperate, but the lack of information was really cutting at him and was in fact the only reason why Ranma had replied in the affirmative to Panther Lily’s suggestion rather than barreling in guns blazing completely foregoing his idea of sneaking around for speed instead. But without knowing a solution to the problem, the real problem facing him was in terms of the Anima, not the army that would simply die if they got in his way, Ranma was willing to continue the slower espionage plan.

Edo-Wendy moved around for a moment in the pond, tapping her fingers thoughtfully against her lips and lowering herself deeper into the water letting it soak in her hair before standing up like some kind of mermaid emerging from the sea. She smirked lightly as Ranma’s thoughts were utterly derailed, even as the young man turned aside and he kept her own tone serious as she moved on. “I think that when we infiltrate the castle, we’ll need to look for someone called Dr. Byro, or something like that. I got a good description of the guy, but we’ve never been certain of his name.”

She described Dr. Byro odd looks to them, before warning, “If anyone outside of the four generals has access to a near unlimited amounts of magic and the brains to create something like the Anima extractor or whatever it’s called, it’ll be him. That might make him personally strong, and he’ll no doubt be guarded too.”

“That won’t stop me,” Cana said, cracking her knuckles explosively. “I’m getting my friends out of that thing by hook or by crook!”

“Count me in on that,” Ranma said with a growl.

At that point however, things began to go pear-shaped.

Several guardsmen had been patrolling outside of the bathhouse, several yards away from the bathhouse admittedly, but still, ostensibly guarding it and the general within while she questioned her prisoners. Or tortured them, the guards weren’t certain which.

One of these guards, was young, foolish and horny. It is amazing how often those three things go together and ruin the plans of other men and even the gods. Whistling, this young man turned away from his patrol route and moved towards one of the windows of the bathhouse.

His fellow guard whispered angrily, “What are you doing!?”

“Come on! You haven’t heard the rumors about how Knightwalker ‘tortures’ female prisoners? If they’ve got a bigger bust than her, she goes to town on them!”

“Maybe, maybe not, depends on the rumors you’re listening to.”

“Oh God, was I ever this young and stupid of another guard shaking his head. “Fine, but if you get yourself killed, don’t expect me to try to protect you from the Lady General’s righteous wrath. I’ll just be over here telling you I told you so as she skewers you or lights you one fire or whatever.”

The younger guard, waved his hand at that, filled with the invulnerability of youth. He then moved towards the smoke steamed window stealthily as possible, leaving behind his sword and scabbard and even his helmet, so that he could move more quietly.

But as he reached the bottom wall of the wall, he frowned, listening. There was a man’s voice coming from inside. He couldn’t make out the words over the sound of the steam, but it was definitely a man’s voice, way too deep to be any of the girls he’d seen earlier.

*What the hell! Is the base commandant in there with them? That’d be horrible and dirty, and I’d be so jealous, er and it’d be just wrong, but still, it doesn’t sound like him.* Now with simple curiosity overriding his hormones, the man’s moved carefully, and lifted his head up over the lip of the open vent, staring down through the steam trying to make out the forms within. The steam cleared after a few seconds, and after wiping at the perspiration on his face, the man stared into the baths.

He watched as a black-haired man stood up from the bath, then he glanced around at the others. He didn’t see Lady Knightwalker, although the side of the three women took his breath away for several seconds. On the other hand, there was no Knightwalker, a fact that forced his mind back on track. There was only this man who seemingly had the same hairstyle as Knightwalker had when he had seen her earlier. “What the hell?” he whispered.

That whisper was enough to cause the black-haired young man to turn his way with the speed of a striking snake and the man squawked, releasing his grip on the ledge to get away, before a hurled bucket slammed into his face, sending him flying. But such was Ranma’s haste that the bucket didn’t nail him directly, only after bouncing off of the top of the window, deadening much of its force.

The man therefore had just enough wherewithal to shout “Alarm, intruder! That wasn’t Knightwalker!”

At that shout one of the guards raced towards the back of house, while another raced away to raise the alarm.

Inside the bath Ranma leaped forward, reaching for his original clothing, which he had stuffed into his ki-space earlier that day, changing so swiftly that none of the girls could see anything bar a flash of his bare male ass, before he was leaping away towards the doors. “That’s torn it! You three get changed and come out as you’re able. I’ll leave the spears here for you. Cana, you head straight for the main building, sneak around until you think you can find the fat guy in charge and take him out just in case. Wendy, Juvia, make for the legion paddocks, get them out and moving! Is there any other way they can travel fast here?”

“No, the space isn’t connected to the trains, and they don’t have any magical cars here either. Those are still exceedingly rare,” Wendy said even as she pulled herself out of the waters, grabbing at her clothing without even bothering to dry herself off.

Cana and Juvia were just as quick, but Juvia stayed a moment, resting her hands on the water and trying desperately to push magic out of her body. But it didn’t work. All she could sense was a faint ripple in the waters, which she could’ve attributed to her moving through it in the first place. But when she concentrated on her body, she found transforming her arm to water to be much easier than before and nodded.  *That will have to do.*

“Good,” Ranma said grimly. “That means there’s no reason why I can’t get out some of my frustration on everyone here.

Cana winced, realizing as the other girls did that, this was why Ranma wasn’t even trying to play off the man’s words as a figment of his imagination. “Makes me almost feel sorry for them.”

“You do know there’s more than a hundred people here, right?” Wendy asked.

“You do know there was more than a hundred people in the Battalion Ranma crushed earlier, right?” Cana retorted to Edo-Wendy’s question in the same tone.

“You have a point,” Wendy muttered, shaking her head as she moved toward the door after Ranma. “Come on, I think the legion paddock is this way.”

With only a few of them believing the alarm was real once it was sounded, the troopers had barely begun to organize against this sudden threat before Ranma was out of the bathhouse and in the face of the first troopers to respond, fists flashing and legs hammering. Six men went flying, then he grabbed two of them from out of the air by their ankles, and began to use them as giant flails, his face grim and dark as he thought about what might be going on with the Anima, and the fact that a portion of it had been chipped off and used already.

Now, Ranma was not in a forgiving mood, but even so he was still in some control of himself. These were simple soldiers just doing their job, not policymakers, and he doubted even one of them had ever wondered about the people that these Anima things might have been made from. They didn’t deserve to die, but they did deserve to get the shit kicked out of them.

This, Ranma proceeded to do, including knocking buildings down, with simple blows of his hands, and tossing people so high they their screams started to disappear along with their bodies, becoming tiny dot in the air. And then he began to laugh, enjoying himself and getting out his frustrations.

The laugh was the final straw. The troopers would have faced death, dismemberment, even fell magic from their enemies. But facing a laughing, happy and smiling enemy who was doing the same thing while tossing them around like nine pins, shattering buildings, and generally speaking acting like he was utterly invulnerable to their own attacks, ignoring their magic swords and arrows and everything else, that was something else altogether. They watched as their explosive arrows barely caused their enemy to lose a step, how their swords, their edges magically enhanced, bounced off Ranma’s skin.

Even the best of them couldn’t face something like this and they proceeded to do what any army unit would’ve done in their place. They broke. They ran, and Ranma still was on them, smacking them down and hunting them down to buy two or one by one.

About ten minutes later, the fight was still ongoing as more of the base scrambled to attack the unstoppable man who had appeared in their midst. The three girls had gotten together at this point, after Cana had knocked out the base’s commanding officer. Now Edo-Wendy flew above the base, with two other legions following her commanded by Juvia and Cana. Both of them had been horseback riding writing with Bisca, and those lessons had served them well with the legions.

Staring down at the action from the air Edo-Wendy shook her head. “I’m feeling oddly superfluous, what about you two?”

“Almost,” Juvia said, gesturing down towards several soldiers who had gotten out and away from the basin were now running away down a dirt track towards what looked like a distant settlement of some kind. “That group still needs to be stopped.”

By the time they were finished with the runners, Ranma had finished with the rest of the base. Setting the legions down, they all stared as Ranma gathered each of the troopers and began to pile them up into a giant heap while also for some reason, tying their limbs together. “What are you doing?” Cana asked.

“Making certain that even after these idiots wake up, they won’t be any rush to do anything,” Ranma said with a chuckle.

“Wait, they’re all alive!” Wendy asked, shocked.

Ranma shrugged. “These were just troopers, simple pawns, not you know generals or anyone with a real grudge against you. And they weren’t fighting or hunting you or anyone else down at the time. They’re not worth killing.”

Edo-Wendy frowned at that, but slowly nodded. “I suppose I can understand that.”

The three girls moved to help Ranma, but Ranma asked Juvia to look for the base’s armory, and for Edo-Wendy to go to the Commandant’s quarters and look for anything written down that might be of interest to them. She didn’t find anything unfortunately, but she was able to grab the girls some food of their own, something Ranma had forgotten about.

In this fashion, they were ready to go within forty minutes, the base personnel all tied together by their own clothing in a giant pile in the middle of the base. It was kind of obvious to anyone passing by overhead or on foot, but Ranma felt that so long as they got into the actual capital, and he was able to drop the others off, she could give fuck all for whatever happened after that. *The girls can do the espionage thing, and I can go right to the top by finding the king and punching his lights out. Still, who knows, maybe I’ll get straight there under this disguise too.*

Which brought to mind that he was still in his male body and Ranma sighed groaning a little. “All right,” he said resignedly. “I’m going to go change into my female form. Let’s get this over with.”

The three girls laughed at that but moved after him, ready to help him get back into character. Fifteen minutes later, they were on their way once more.

**End Chapter**