This has been edited by *Justlovereadin*’ and will eventually be edited by Hiryo. Thank *Justlovereadin’* for his work on this one. For some reason I have a lot of trouble keeping things clear in my head when it comes to FT and what has gone before in this fic, I have no idea why, but he helps hugely to keep things going smoothly and to make certain I don’t change FT stuff when I don’t mean to LOL.

**Chapter 22: Punching Royalty**

Once Cana was dressed in her new disguise, the foursome of young sexy women took to the Legions again. This time, Cana was in the lead, with Wendy 2.0 behind her, and Juvia with Ranma. Ranma had Juvia tied up in front of him this time, loosely, and so that she could be somewhat comfortable but still in a position where it would look from afar that she was most certainly a prisoner.

Cana decided that she needed to follow Ranma’s example and requested that they land quickly, and their positions switched so that Wendy was tied down in front of her rather than behind, a furious blush on her face underneath her new helmet. The fact that she muttered something about “not wanting to deal with temptations pressing into her so much,” made the other three women laugh, even Ranma knowing precisely what that was.

As they went, Ranma and Juvia engaged one another in a conversation on what could possibly free their friends. Ranma was convinced that they would have to force whoever had created the device to undo what had occurred to the mages of Fairy Tail and anyone else who had magic within them in Magnolia, along with all of the diverse items of magical power that had also been swept up in the anima assault. Juvia, on the other hand, believed that the solution was inherent in the anima itself rather than its creation. “If it is magical in nature, then it stands to reason that magic in some form could unmake it, perhaps shape magic, or division magic. Or perhaps even just an infusion of new magic once the crystallization process has been finished would shatter the Crystal and free our friends.”

“While it might be worth a try if we’re getting desperate, I don’t think it is something I’d want to try otherwise,” Ranma replied dryly. “After all, given all of the things that are making up that anima, who’s to tell what would happen if you accidentally released it in such a manner. The people within might have become fused together, or each person fused with a different object. That wouldn’t be good at all.”

“Juvia did not think of that. And now that you have pointed that out, Juvia wishes you had not either.” Indeed, now that it had been pointed out to her, Juvia a bit green around the gills from what Ranma could see from this angle, anyway.

“Right, so we keep with the plan for now,” Ranma said with a nod. “I make trouble, disrupt the Parade, maybe even capture the King, while you all look for the scientist who created the anima in the first place, the one that Wendy 2.0 mentioned,” she went on gesturing over her shoulder towards the other two on their own Legion.

“Yes, Edo-Wendy… What does Ranma think of her? She has not exactly been secretive or subtle in her attempts to flirt with you. Juvia has to wonder if you are liking the attention, and just playing at not seeming to. You are a man after all, and even a woman like myself can tell that all Edo-Wendy is an extremely attractive example of my gender,” Juvia replied, the kind that any man would like to have shown an interest in him. Are you just playing hard to get or is there some other reason you are not reacting overmuch to her attentions?”

Ranma winced. “Well, okay, there is a part of me that likes the attention she’s paying me, I’m enough of a guy to admit that. However, I think she’s coming on a little too strongly for my tastes. I mean I don’t dislike it, and I actually like her as a person, but you have to remember that Edo-Wendy is still Edo-Wendy! She is the older alternate version of my little sister, and that’s not exactly something I can forget.”

“So why not just tell her you’re not interested?” Juvia asked seriously.

“Could I do that without causing her hard feelings? Or just force her to change her method of attack?” Ranma asked cocking an eyebrow in question and looking down at where Juvia was tied across her saddle. The fact that this brought her rump and backside to his attention was is not lost on Ranma, but she ignored the view below her with all of the willpower s/he had developed over the years. “I’ve never been good at telling girls no anyway, they always take it so personally.”

“… Juvia has not thought about it like that, but I suppose that women do take rejection much more poorly than men. At least in most instances,” Juvia said thoughtfully. “Not that Juvia has had much experience and relationships of course.”

“What?” Ranma asked looking down at her again in shock only to look up quickly, not really wanting to look at her rear when she was talking about relationships with the girl. “What do you mean you haven’t had much experience relationships, you’re gorgeous! Don’t tell me that men aren’t beating down the Guild door when you are in Phantom Lord? Or did the reputation of that Guild count against you there? That I could actually believe.”

Juvia blushed brightly at that, the honest compliment coming from out of nowhere quite shocking her for a moment. She replied gamely, however, “Well, yes and no. Yes, being in Phantom Lord dissuaded many outsiders from attempting to woo Juvia, but that would not have mattered to people within the Guild. Yet for much of my time with them, I was known as being very standoffish, as well as being the rain woman. Before I met Anna and became friends with her, my magic would frequently cause rainfall wherever I remained for a time, which depressed me in turn: the very definition of a vicious cycle. So I have not been in any relationship, nor even on many dates.”

“You and Erza both,” Ranma mused. “Her whole attitude and general bearing seem to have turned off the boys, big time. Bisca wasn’t like that, and I know Jenny’s had a few boyfriends along the way. Maybe if you’re interested in getting back on the dating scene now that you’re more in control of your emotions and no longer a part of Phantom Lord, you could ask one of them for advice. Don’t ask me for any though. I’m still kind of feeling my way when it comes to the emotional side of relationships. I know better how not to cause hurt feelings, and how to express myself more these days, but that seems to be only a tiny bit of what goes into any real relationship.”

“Juvia has often heard it said that boys are after their ideal woman, although what that might be varies wildly from one man to another. Is Ranma searching out for his ideal woman then, is that why you are two-timing so much?” Juvia asked, the last bit coming out far more tartly, as she reached best she could with one hand to smack Ranma’s foot where it dangled to the side of her.

“Not really, at least not consciously,” Ranma asked, tugging at her loose hair thoughtfully, and reflecting that doing so didn’t really give as much pleasure as it would with her normal pigtail. “And I’m not two-timing anyone. Erza, Bisca and Jenny all knew about one another when each of them got involved with me. Although to be honest, Jenny doesn’t know that I’ve gone beyond flirting with Erza and Bisca. I haven’t seen her since we had that mission in Seven, and I got together with both of those girls after that, and then, heh, broke off with Bisca when I returned. But I’ll tell her I’m still dating Erza next we see each other and I might mention the fact that Bisca and I did date for a bit, before she decided it wasn’t for her.”

When Juvia made an interrogative noise, the redhead explained that Bisca had decided they needed to break up after having headed home to the Guild. Nearly a month and a half before Ranma, Erza and the others had arrived after their own personal mission into Joya. He told her that Bisca and Alzack, who Juvia had only met briefly, had been dancing around one another for years before Ranma had come into the picture, whereupon Alzack’s waffling had helped to convince Bisca to try to see if there could be something with Ranma. But then Alzack had stepped up his game enough to capture her interest while Ranma was off with Erza and the others. “That, and I think that Bisca was more bothered by the whole sharing experience when we were traveling together than she had anticipated.”

“That makes sense,” Juvia said, grateful that Ranma could not see her blush at the moment. Her treacherous mind was popping up image after image from the number of ways Bisca, the rather attractive cowgirl, and Erza, the penultimate knight in her armor, could be put together along with Ranma.

After only a few seconds through an exertion of will, Juvia was able to force her mind back onto the original topic. “But you did not answer Juvia’s original question really, what are you after in a girl? Not relationship-wise, Juvia thinks she has a decent handle on that: you don’t want to be tied down, you want to be able to keep doing your missions no matter how mysteriously those missions come to you,” she said dryly. “No, Juvia is more interested in what you are looking for in a woman?”

Ranma laughed shaking her head. “Well, there’s a sort of typical testosterone-fueled male Ranma, and then there’s real Ranma. I suppose TFM Ranma has the typical ideas, you know beauty and suchlike, what I find physically attractive in women. I don’t suppose you care much about that?” When Juvia didn’t reply quickly enough he went on instantly. “And then there’s the real Ranma, the one who’s learned to be able to look past the physical form. Who, in fact, knows that beauty’s only skin-deep, and that whole line about roses and thorns on top of that.”

“Indeed, TFM Ranma needs no further explanation, Juvia supposes, but is there no girl Ranma then?” Juvia teased.

“That’s not a consideration in this,” Ranma said laughing again before becoming a little more serious. “I’ve gone through a few adventures where weird magic’s made my mind turn into that of a girl, but it’s never lasted, and even then, it never changed my, y’know sexual preference. Nowadays, the only difference it makes, beyond making me more aware of womanly issues, is a change in my taste buds. Although, there is the point that whatever girl I get involved with, she does need to know that my female body isn’t going away.”

Now was Juvia’s turn to nod, except that she remembered at the last instant that Ranma would barely be able to make out the movement and replied, “Juvia understands that too. Although, she doesn’t seem to think that it is much of an issue. Else Erza, Bisca, Jenny, and whoever else has become attracted to you wouldn’t have in the first place.”

As she listed those names off, Juvia felt herself becoming a little depressed. She was interested in Ranma, not in a fiery all steam ahead kind of way, but she did find him fascinating, interesting to talk to, and immensely attractive. *But am I willing to throw my hat in a ring that was already so crowded? Would I be willing to share, or like Bisca, would the reality of that become too much for me?* Juvia had no way of knowing yet, and so hadn’t decided yet to go beyond mild flirtations and teasing as she had done in the bath house late the night before. “So, what is real Ranma after when it comes to women?”

“They have to be willing to listen, they have to be willing to wait until I explain, before jumping to conclusions. They also have to realize that while giving me a smack upside the head if they think I’m stupid or acting stupidly, is fine, attacking me physically for something outside of my control, or because they just want to blame someone for something that’s just happened isn’t,” Ranma began instantly. “I’ve had some experience with that kind of person before, and I really don’t want to get involved with anyone like that again.”

When Juvia made another acknowledging noise, barely heard over the wind of their flight, Ranma went on slowly, thinking it through. Jenny had helped Ranma figure out what ‘he’ was looking for relationship wise, but Ranma hadn’t talked about what Ranma thought was attractive or interesting in girls before. “Well, I suppose being strong is attractive, like, a lot. I like girls who are able to stand up for themselves. I don’t want to have to keep on running after them when they get in over their heads or something, although there are different kinds of strength, I suppose. An open viewpoint, a willingness to take me for who I am without trying to change me, at least not without me returning the favor, would be important too. I honestly don’t care about, you know, if a girl can cook or anything like that. But as long as she’s got a somewhat gentle attitude towards me, can look after herself in a fight, and is willing to put as much into the relationship as I am, that about covers it.”

“That is an interesting list,” Juvia said diplomatically, while she was smiling, unseen by Ranma or anyone else. Going from that list, Juvia knew she scored rather highly, and became a little more certain that she did indeed want to throw her name into the ring here. The only continuing issues she wasn’t certain about Ranma’s female form and sharing with someone else. The sharing with someone else, she knew, she wouldn’t be able to figure out if she liked or could at least live with until they were actually trying it.

The girl thing was a little easier. Juvia already knew that she found Ranma attractive in either form, having taken her own share of stolen glances while they were fitting Ranma into her disguise. Jumping from that to doing something about it was a small matter.

“It shows you would be taking any relationship seriously, that you are not interested in playing around or one-night stands. That you are not interested in what a woman has to do for you, or has to have in terms of looks speaks well of you too. Your unwillingness to change could even be seen as a positive, since you implied that you would take any girl you got into a relationship with as she came, not trying to change her so long as she did the same to you. I believe that is actually a normal reason for couples to break up, although more on the guy side than on the woman’s side.”

Ranma shrugged. “I think a lot of people enter relationships with this ideal image of their partner in their head, and if it gets to the point where the relationship becomes serious, they start to sort of try to chop off bits and pieces of the other person that doesn’t fit into that image, while attempting to fill out the rest as well. I’ve always thought that was ridiculous myself.”

Whatever Juvia might have said in way of agreement with that statement would never be uttered, as Cana took that moment to sidle her Legion up towards the one Ranma and Julio were flying on. “What’s that up there? Can you make it out Ranma?” she asked, gesturing up into the sky high above them, where they were already quite high over the land below.

Ranma turned her head in that direction and could see a group of around eight or so flying creatures high above them, the glare of the sun making it almost impossible to pick them out. As he watched however, the dots became several flying forms, the size of which, along with the distinctive wings, making Ranma frowned slightly. “I think those are Exceed,” he said, “although where they are going I can’t say."

It quickly turned out that the Exceed were in fact coming straight down towards Ranma and the other girls. They quickly resolved themselves into slightly larger than normal Exceed, if Carla and Happy were in fact normal-sized for that race. They wore suits of plate armor, complete with open faced helmets, shields, and what looked like short stabbing lances, although both the edge and the middle section of those lances glimmered with magical light. The cat in the lead was half as large again compared to the rest, but as he came closer, Ranma could see that all of that added height was actually from his head, which was massive for his small frame.

When that Exceed came close enough to shout, “Hold, Knightwalker,” he also came close enough for Ranma to make out his features, which made Ranma nearly fall out of her saddle in shock.

Then she clamped one hand over her mouth in order to stifle an almost manic giggle as she thought*, Oh my God, Ichiya’s double in this world is an Exceed! How is that even possible?* For the cat in front of her could be nothing but Ichiya’s alter self. His face, despite being covered by orange fur and topped with cat ears, was almost exactly the same as the now dead mage from Blue Pegasus, with the addition of Exceed whiskers and ears.

Cana had pulled up her own legion on orders from Edo-Wendy, who quickly whispered that a lot of the humans venerated the Exceed and it would be highly unusual to ignore orders like that from him. Indeed, even running into them like this was highly unusual. Juvia and Ranma on the other hand had kept going for a few minutes before they realized that their friends had stopped.

Now Ranma wheeled, turning her Legion around to stare up at the Exceed hovered above the two Legions, looking at her, and ignoring Cana on her legion. Some were seemingly confused by the lack of automatic obedience from ‘Erza’. Others, including the leader, were wary of it for the same reason.

“What is it?” Ranma asked, crossing her arms over her chest. “Can’t you see I’m busy?”

“Your lack of manners is noted, Erza Knightwalker,” said the Exceed in the lead, raising his lance dangerously in a token of warning. “We will inform the Queen of it. But we are under her orders even now, men! You have prisoners, might we ask where they came from?”

Ranma scowled, putting a hand on Juvia’s back. “They are both from the illegal guild Fairy Tail. I captured them recently in a battle with that despicable Guild.”

“Your perfume tells me you lie as does their own scents,” the Exceed retorted, thrusting his lance into the air and then leveling it at Ranma. “The one on your saddle, I can smell the magic within her, it is a watery scent, like the shore of an unknown ocean. That marks her as being from Earth Land, no one from this world has been born with magic within them like that. You will surrender her to us.”

“No,” Ranma shot back, getting angry now, and releasing her feet from the stirrups of the saddle in preparation for action. “I don’t take orders from you, I take orders from my King and His Majesty will want to know about mages from another world helping Fairy Tail. That takes precedence over whatever orders you were given by your own Queen.”

For a moment the Exceed in the patrol seemed to gape at Erza’s blunt response, while Edo-Wendy muttered, “Oh, God! Now she’s done it,” under her breath, while Cana just looked on, confused as to why this was such a big issue. Sure, she heard that the Exceed were venerated by many, but did that really cross over into obeying there commands like this one seemed to assume?

But then the Exceed burst into action, their leader thrusting out his lance towards Ranma. “Our orders matter more to us than your continued existence, Erza Knightwalker. Surrender your prisoner, or else. Someone who came over from Earth Land has magically assaulted our Queen with his or her very presence and must be made to answer for it. Men!”

Before the Exceed finished speaking, Ranma had pulled her legs up onto the saddle, then kicked up off of the legion’s back, flinging herself forward. One hand smashed aside the lead Exceeds lance, using that as momentum to flip herself up and around into a kick that lashed out in either direction, smashing into two more Exceed and hurling them away. She then grabbed the lead Exceed by the back of his head, and hurled him backwards towards another one, even as she kicked off of the point of another Exceed’s lance, pushing herself back away towards her legion.

The point of the spear went off, shooting some kind of thunderous force into Ranma’s foot, but that only added to the impetus of her jump, not doing any real damage. She landed there and grabbed up one of the spears and she had taken from the base they had assaulted.

At the same time, Cana also whipped out a fire spear, and the two of them took the remaining Exceed under fire from both sides, and that was pretty much the end of the fight. The shock of the sudden violence seemed to have taken the Exceed by surprise, so much so, they didn’t recover in time to fight back. The last one went down from a fireball to his backside singed his wings and caused him to cry out, canceling the magic and falling to the ground below.

Thankfully for the Exceeds well-being, the fight hadn’t taken place that far above ground, and all of them were wearing armor, which took much of the impact of their landing. Ranma also reflected that their small bodies probably helped. *The smaller you are, the better you can take falls like that, I suppose.*

As the two legions moved to land beside the downed Exceed, Ranma shouted, “What the heck was that about, Wendy?”

“You’re an idiot!” Wendy 2.0 shouted back, shaking her head. “Those were Exceed, and even those humans who don’t revere them as messengers of God certainly wouldn’t raise a hand against him like that! It would be seen as being incredibly bad luck, and… it also should have been kind of pointless.”

“Frick, this is ridiculous,” Ranma muttered, “Cana, can you release her from those bindings? I’m not going to have a serious talk with her backside like this!” As Cana did so, Ranma and Juvia went around to the unconscious Exceed and tied them all up in a clump each limb tied to that of a fellow Exceed.

Once a laughing Cana had done so with a hoot, Edo-Wendy pushed her hair out from her face, staring around her in shock at the unconscious forms of the Exceed. “The, the Exceed, they should have been much tougher than this, much more dangerous. They can use magic for real after all, whereas humans can’t. This is, I mean, is it just because you are so strong, or … have they always been so weak?”

“They were kind of weak I think. Sure didn’t seem up to facing a real fight anyway. None of them used their mobility very well. Nor did any of them, even the first guy, seem to be very well trained or experienced with those lances of theirs,” Ranma said authoritatively. “Carla could have taken the whole lot of them after only a month of training with me.”

“But they are supposed to be so deadly, so powerful and strong thanks to their magic,” Wendy protested weakly, unable to reconcile the belief of a lifetime and the stories of her parents to the reality of the unconscious group of Exceed in front of her. “Their queen, she is supposed to be able to foretell the future, maybe even change it to suit her whim. And with magic and their ability to fly, they are supposed to be unstoppable in battle.”

“Hmmm, perhaps then their strength was exaggerated purposefully?” Juvia mused from where she too had been released from the demeaning and somewhat painful position of being slung like a dead deer over the legions saddles “The Exceed, they are only known to inhabit a single island?”

“A single floating island, one among many rocks that their magical power keeps in the air near the Royal City,” Edo-Wendy insisted, not seeing where Juvia was going.

“True, but that still speaks of a small population in comparison to humans, correct?” Juvia asked. “If so, it stands to reason that the Exceed know they could not fight the army.”

“A bluff,” Ranma mused. “Yeah, that makes sense, especially if this King Faust’s predecessors were as rapacious in their search for magic as he is. After all, if they can reach through dimensions and turn mages from another world into magical power, who’s to stop them from doing it closer to home?”

“Huh…” Cana thought, scratching at her black hair, which had begun to itch occasionally. *Oh crap, I hope I’m not allergic to the gunk Ranma made me wash my hair with. That would surely suck!* “So you’re saying it’s all a bluff? Okay, that makes some sense from all we know, though I have to point out, we’re only dealing with a small sample base here. Maybe these guys were the runts of the litter, and Exceed like Panther Lily would be more normal among them?”

“Juvia freely admits it is all speculation, but it can also led into the reason for young Exceed eggs to be sent through to our world to Dragon Slayers, like Carla’s vague memories about a mission suggest.” When everyone looked at her, the water mage went on. “I ask again, if the Exceed are all weak, and this Faust is as militaristic as you all say, would he allow the Exceed to live in peace?”

“Hell no!” Edo-Wendy said, crossing her arms in an X in front of her for emphasis. “If Faust had even a hint that the Exceed were really weak despite their magic he’d turn them all into magic batteries the moment he could.”

“In that case, a Queen who has the power of foresight might wish to get as many of their people away as possible, and further to send them to individuals who would be able to protect them against anything that could threaten them, hence the Dragon Slayers. Although, why they would not then assign a few Exceed eggs to you remains a mystery, Ranma-san” Juvia didn’t know that Carla had initially been found by Laxus, and had logically assumed she and Wendy (little version) were a pair like Natsu and Happy were.

Ranma shuddered at the idea of dealing with an Exceed before Carla helped her through her Neko-Ken induced fears but she nodded. “That makes some sense, maybe, but if they can get people through, why then wouldn’t they just leave entirely? And how the heck could they aim like that through the anima anyway? Heck why did this group attack us?”

“For the second, Juvia has no answer. But for the first… Juvia means no offense, but Ranma is a wanderer, so would not understand the love of country, of home,” Juvia said with a shrug. “Perhaps the Queen could not convince her people to transplant themselves wholesale.”

“And for the other, why were they attacked?” Ranma asked.

“If Ranma wanted all the answers, Ranma should have found an oracle, much like this Queen is professed to be, rather than Juvia,” Juvia growled, and Ranma backed off holding up his hand as if indicating a point in a sparring match.

With that, the four humans once more bordered their legions and were away, even as Juvia and Edo-Wendy were tied up once more. As they continued to get back aboard their Legions and tie in the ‘prisoners’ Ranma shook his head. “But jeez, those little dudes were weak as all get out. I mean seriously. Carla could wipe the floor with all of them.”

Behind them, the Ichiya look-alike stirred, staring after them. He had a thicker skull than most of his race, and had stayed conscious since Ranma’s initial assault. Playing dead, Nichiya, had hoped to learn about their plans, but hadn’t heard anything much except their opinion on his race. That was rather humiliating, yet he could not deny their points after having his weakness rubbed in his face like this. His wing was among the best, but those two humans had used magic to wipe them out.

*Still, once I am free, the Queen can be told of this. And if she so wishes still, we can then bring our full might to bear on Knightwalker and her associates. Whatever her reasoning, I will obey of course because she is our queen, although, this business of eggs being sent through to the other world disturbs me, men.* With that in mind, Nichiya stood up intending to race off and tell his queen what had happened. But when he tried to stand up, he found himself sprawling on the ground, pulling the rest of his fellows, who he had been tied to, over and off the previous pile, burying him under them. “Men!”

**OOOOOOO**

Carla blinked, looking around in confusion as she helped Seilah out of the large crate she and Wendy had stowed themselves in. “Why do I suddenly feel like preening?”

“I don’t know, why?” Seilah asked as she hefted a groaning Wendy up out of the crate.

The three of them, as well as Lucy, Lucy Ashley, and Natsu (Earth Land version) had all snuck aboard the train to the Royal City together. Edo-Natsu had arranged it, getting them into the stock area and then even helping them empty out and hide the material – grain bags – but after that had not come with them even after Lucy Ashley decided to come along so as to, in her words, “Prove to the scary fucking demon bitch that not all of Fairy Tail is happy to just keep running away.” “I’ll help you all save your fucking friends, and then you’ll have to admit that we at Fairy Tail are not weak, or cowards like you called us!”

Seilah had merely nodded her head, then, when Edo-Natsu had raced off in his vehicle, simply looked at Edo-Lucy until she groaned, muttered and looked away. After that, Carla and Happy, the smallest and thus the sneakiest of the group, had bolted the top of the crates down before hiding until they were placed on the train.

The train itself was a massive thing, in every dimension. It had large, almost crude wheels and the engine looked like something cobbled together by several Steampunk enthusiasts, a triangle prow leading up into a row of smokestacks, with several dozen smaller brass and copper tubes leading back into the triangle then along the length of the rest of the engine chassis. The lacrima powering it were set into carefully coordinated segments along the interior of the triangle. The train still ran despite the magic crisis because this engine was even more energy efficient than Natsu’s racecar. It was only used to start the process of steam and it’s recycling through the train engine. The tracks, and thus the width of the train, were about twice as wide as any at home.

This train was one of the primary means for raw goods to be sent into the Royal City. Besides being the center of government, the Royal City was a major provider of finished goods of all sorts.

A few minutes after the group had arrived, the crates were loaded into one of the cargo containers by a large crane, although the watching Exceed had a moment of worry when the crate containing Natsu stopped in midair. Its operator leaned out of the side, shouting down at a few other workers, asking, “Hey, did anyone else hear something just then? Like someone groaning maybe?”

“Nope that was just your stomach Raud. Now get on with it, and then you can go back home and getting something to eat from your lovely wife.” For some reason that caused a round of laughter among the workers, but Raud at least kept moving the crates, and the sound of Natsu’s moaning didn’t reach anyone again.

Now, in the darkness of one of the train’s cargo haulers, the two Exceed quickly moved to help the others out of their crates with some limited success. The two Lucys both hopped out of their crates readily enough, but the Dragon Slayers were, of course, unmanned by being in a moving vehicle. Wendy was making little whimpering noises while Seilah helped her out of the crate, but Natsu was unable to get himself out, and so the others just left him there, propping his head up with a bag of grain and letting him remain inside the crate.

‘Ugh, why, why am I going through this torture? I could have stayed with Anna and Lisanna?” Natsu groaned, getting the words out with difficulty and much fits and starts to cover his mouth as he did. “I could have, have helped my mates push the rest of those, those weird house of mirrors versions of our friends to help us more.”

“Wasn’t it Anna that convinced you, you’d do better trying to help the rest of your guild?” Edo-Lucy asked.

“It was, and he knows it. Anna told you that she wanted to spend some time with her original siblings, tell them about how she’s been and everything. If you were there, the fact you, her and Lisanna are in a relationship would dominate the discussion. This way, they can only bug her about that a little bit before concentrating on everything else,” Lucy said, nodding firmly, although she was not nearly as certain about that as she sounded. *After all, it’s not like I ever tried to introduce Cana to my dad. Oh god, that would’ve caused so much freaking drama!*

“Ugh!!” Natsu groaned, trying to sit up to look at them seriously before grabbing at his mouth with both hands and falling back onto his makeshift pillow in his crate. When he recovered himself he continued, his voice a pained mumble. “I know, that’s why I should’ve stayed! I… won’t her siblings try to convince her to stay? I know I shouldn’t be worried since she wouldn’t leave me, but I’m kind of still worried that it’ll make her sad, or they might actually try to fight us to keep her. Maybe think we brainwashed her or something.”

Others might have been concerned about causing a rift between family members, or the long-term emotional ramifications of a confrontation like that on both sides, but not Natsu. All he cared about was that his mates stayed with him, were alive, happy and unharmed. That and getting stronger by challenging other strong people so he could protect them and his other friends better. Everything else he couldn’t care less about, if he even thought about them at all.

 Lucy shook her head. “Anna’s got Lisanna there to back her up Natsu. Besides, even setting your relationship aside Anna’s made a life in Earth Land with our Fairy Tail. Heck, she’s the second best known female mage in the guild, even better known than Erza thanks to her modeling career,” she giggled a little as she saw Natsu’s face contort even further at that. Obviously, the Fire Dragon Slayer had a bit of an issue with that aspect of Anna’s life. “The point is, even without your relationship tying her further to Earth Land, Anna won’t just go back to living with her siblings after living on her own like that.”

 Natsu’s look shifted into one of confusion. “…But all the Strausses do live together…”

“You know what I mean,” Lucy shot back with an eye roll.

“I don’t know what he’s worried about. Anna won’t up and leave him, that’s just stupid. Not, not like my Onii-chan with the older version of me. Ugh, so wieeeerd. But did you see her boobies? I wonder if I’ll look like that when I’m her age, and when I’ll start to grow.” Though she was handling the rigors of being on a moving vehicle better than Natsu, Wendy was still not happy about it, and that showed in her being far blunter and more prone to letting out her inner thoughts more than normal.

There was an awkward pause, then Seilah shrugged. “I suspect so Wendy, and perhaps in another, two, years? I understand fifteen or so is when girls normally start to blossom among humans. Since I was born fully formed, I certainly cannot tell you when it began for me.”

The two Lucy’s united for once, hastened to assure the little girl this was the case.

Wendy took in their words of reassurance from where she had been propped up between two crates and then asked, “Well, that’s good. But I’m still worried about Older Me being with my Onii-chan.”

“Well it ain’t like she’s alone or nothing. Big Tits Mardene might be a bit of a flirt and way too into good looking strong guys, but she won’t go beyond a certain level… not with witnesses around anyway,” Lucy Ashley finished, a sweatdrop appearing on her face as she thought about Wendy and how at one point she’d gained a reputation as a man-eater. “Besides shouldn’t your Juvia and Cana be able to keep her from going too far?”

“Have you met my Cana?” Lucy asked, with a wan little laugh as she shook her head. “And I don’t know enough about Juvia to suppose whatever she will do.”

Shuddering a little at how her alternate had called the Earth Land Cana ‘her’ Cana, Edo-Lucy shook her head, and moved over to the side the side of the cargo container which had a broken slate, where they could look out as the train went along, even dragging a few crates over to sit on. “So tell me about yourself,” she asked, looking over at her alternate, while Seilah stayed beside Wendy, pulling out a book for to read with the little girl. “I’m just interested to see how alike we really are you know?”

“Well, I suppose I should say that I was born into a high class family, which I don’t think you were, no offense,” Lucy added hastily, “it’s just that you don’t give off that kind of vibe.”

“Shows what you know!” Edo-Lucy shot back with a grin, putting her hands behind her head and propping her feet up between the two girls. “All have you know that I was born into one of the richest trading companies on this world!”

“No way, so was I! My company, the heart trading company, had a near monopoly on trading in certain segments of Edolas, and even into our next-door neighbors, Seven and Bosco. What did yours do?”

“We actually traded overseas with a lot of the other countries out there. My nearest memory was being raised for a few years aboard ship! We traded with Minstrelco, Caelum, even Alcatraz! Although we didn’t trade with Peregrine, or Mortis, but then again no one trades with Mortis, and Peregrine is about as independent of any other nation as a nation can be.”

“You know, that actually reminds me, that we don’t know anything about the geography of this place. I mean yeah, you have forests and deserts and such like, but from what we’ve seen, the geography of your Edolas is a lot different from ours,” Lucy said.

“Well first you have to realize, that those nations I just mentioned, are the only nations in the world. At least as far as we know, there could be other nations on the other side of the main continent, but we don’t know about them. “Alcatraz is easily the largest, it controls most of the continent and has the most access to magic. Luckily for everyone else, it’s mostly more of a conglomeration of different clans and states, with the only of very minimalized overarching government. Or else it could probably overrun all the other nations one after the other.”

Even Lucy had heard about the attempt from Alcatraz to try to invade Ishgar, and she shook her head. “That’s about as different as it gets from our world.”

“Oh, none of the five are very friendly to one another, all of them blamed the other for the magic crisis, but none of us are in open war, although there were a few years that might have happened. And there was a brief series of skirmishes with Minstrelco,” Edo-Lucy replied. Then she shook her head. “But enough about that, tell me,” she said, becoming more serious, “what’s your relationship with your family? Mine isn’t…it hasn’t been the best since my mom died.”

“I would say much the same,” Lucy replied with a sigh. “My mother died when I was very young, leaving my father and I alone, and I was mostly raised by our servants before I met my first celestial spirit, Capricorn. After that, he sort of took over my training and everything. As to my father, once my mom died, he started to get this idea in his head of using me as a pawn to enlarge the family business. Once Capricorn came along, he served as a sort of wall between us, although, that didn’t stop my father from trying to control me, or even put a price on my head.” Needless to say, given all the trouble that had come from that with Phantom Lord, Lucy had yet to forgive her father for that bit of stupidity.

 Edo-Lucy whistled in surprise. “My old man wasn’t that bad. Oh, he was just as controlling, and had very distinct views of how I should act, what I should do with my life, and so forth, but I suppose my mom also kind of shielded me from a lot of his attempts to control me. My mom didn’t die until I was in my preteens, and she sort of helped me to rebel. My mom was a pirate you see, they married in order to weld her pirate fleet into the trade the Ashley Trading Company’s security division. So she just helped me act like she did when she was younger, take no bull ship, and always put yourself in charge if you can. Which of course made me utterly unmarriable in the circles that my father wanted me to marry into. What did you do?”

“Oh I ran away from home,” Lucy replied with a shrug. “By that point, I had three golden key spirits, and had been training to look after myself and to fight both with my celestial spirits and on my own for years. It wasn’t exactly a hardship at that point, not in terms of my own abilities anyway. It was still hard to leave my father behind though, to realize there would never be any reconciliation between us.”

From there the conversation segued into less interesting topics. Carla, who turned away from the girls to move over to Seilah and Wendy. Astonishingly to Carla, who still harbored her own misgivings about the devil woman, she was reading quietly to Wendy, letting Wendy rest against her breasts, looking for all the world as if she was quite happy with the arrangement.

Seeing the cat woman look at her, Seilah grumbled a little. “She asked for it, and when she laid out on to my waist like this, I couldn’t say no.” *I think I might be going soft, and I’m not certain how I think feel about it,* Seilah thought. *On the one hand I should be appalled, but on the other hand, Wendy does smell nice and seeing her smile is also fun.*

*And,* another portion of her thought mine said *if things don’t work out between me and Ranma, knowing what Wendy will look like in the future, perhaps I should stake my claim now*. As an immortal devil, Seilah had no problem with such a concept. And she had thought that the older Wendy while not nearly as interesting to talk to as the younger, was rather attractive. *Although even with that, I am still thinking of stealing her and alternate Cana away.*

Carla nodded in reluctant understanding. “Wendy is very hard to say no to, even I have to admit that. I’ll leave you to it I think. In fact I-” she broke off, looking around as she realized someone was missing, her eyes going almost comically wide. “Where is Happy? Where did that idiot tomcat run off to?”

 “I saw him heading that way,” Wendy said, pointing towards the front of the train, where their cart met up with another one, then several dozen more before getting to the passenger compartments. In the other direction simply several dozen more cargo containers. “Of no! Why did he run off!” Carla moaned.

 “Because he is easily bored?” Lucy replied seriously. “Do you want us to help you find him?”

 “No, I will find him Carla growled. And he’s gotten into trouble or been seen by anyone, I’m going to give that tomcat more than just a piece of my mind!”

 It took Carla about 10 minutes to catch up with Happy, by which time he had traversed five more cargo containers between them and the front of the train. And just as she came upon him, he leaped down from a crate, into a central walking area, just as the door on the far side of the cargo container, letting in a lot of guards.

With no time to waste, Carla barreled into Happy, slapping a hand over his mouth, while wrapping her other arm around his throat in a choke that she had learned from Ranma, and raced on, while he flailed around, dumping them both between two crates, hidden in the shadows. Once she had him down, she whispered angrily “If you don’t want me to hurt you, I suggest you shut up! We can’t be seen you idiot!”

 “Did you see something just then,” whispered one of the guards to the other. “Some kind of white streak?”

 “I don’t know, but who cares? It’s not like were transporting anything valuable or anything, just bulk goods for the Royal city. Unless someone wanted to go through one hell of a party, or had a hankering for a lot of cheap metal and iron, we’re good,” the other guard replied, his voice sounding far older than the first one. “You’ll come to learn in time that enthusiasm is all well and good, but we’re not getting paid to poke at shadows, were paid to look menacing and not do much else.”

“We should still look into it,” the first guard said grumpily. “This is my first job! And I don’t want to mess it up.”

While the older man muttered something about not wanting to waste time, the first guard trooped in the direction the white streak had first come from, then moved over to where it had ended. He didn’t find anything however, thanks to the two Exceed being able to scurry away between crates into small spaces where no human could possibly have fit.

“See, just a waste of time. Now come on kid, let’s get back to the passenger compartments. There’s always some drunken idiot who started the party early that we need to threaten into staying quiet. No one’s ever going to steal the stuff on these trains, none of it is important enough,” the second patrolmen said authoritatively, turning and moving back the way they had come.

Once the two guards were gone, Carla pushed Happy out of their hiding place growling angrily at him. “What are you up to you stupid blue-furred idiot! Are you trying to get us caught?”

“I wasn’t doing anything,” Happy replied, pouting at the white-haired human cat girl. Halfway to the town where they had snuck onto the train Carla had transformed into her human form and had only reverted into her real body when they entered the train. But then she had transformed back the moment the train started moving. Happy didn’t like the fact she seemed to enjoy being in that form so much, and he didn’t particularly like the way she had just manhandled him. “I was bored so I went exploring.”

“When you know that were trying to sneak into enemy territory? I know you’re bored, but that’s no excuse to almost give the game away entirely!” Carla nearly shouted, then sighed. “Now come on, let’s get back to the others.”

As they walked, Happy asked something that had been on his mind since they had gotten to this world and Carla had first spoken of her few memories from within the egg. So, um, d, do you think really really we were sent into Earth Land to, um, somehow do something bad to the Dragon Slayers?”

“I do not know. As I said, I remember flashes that indicate some kind of mission,” Carla replied. “It would depend utterly on what kind of government the Exceed have, or perhaps what kind of people they are. But if they expected us to do something violent to the Dragon Slayers, they had a **very** overinflated opinion of an Exceed’s combat abilities in relations to a Dragon Slayer’s. Even Wendy, the youngest of the Dragon Slayers, could have beaten us both with relative ease when I first met her.” *And even now, too, though I at least have become far tougher than I was then.*

“But what if it wasn’t anything like that?” Happy asked frowning shaking his head. “What if they had another reason entirely, one we don’t even know about.”

“I’ll believe it when I see it,” Carla replied shaking her head. “I don’t want to make any assumptions before we have more data. But if you prepare for the worst case, anything better is a relief.”

Happy nodded, then looked at her askance asking the other question that had been bugging him. “Why are you still like that? You’re the one that said we should use our Exceed bodies to sneak around, and you nearly got stuck between those two crates a moment ago because you’re too large.”

“Because I **love** my human form!” Carla said, practically beaming at him. “It’s taller, stronger, with better hands, there’s a greater variety of dresses available for someone my size, and I’ve been told by a few people, that I’m actually quite the looker like this,” she said with a laugh, and a wicked grin. “Not that I would ever act on that, but it might be nice eventually.”

“Wait, what?!” Happy said in shock, “Do you mean to say, that is, would you stay like that all the time? Are you, are you interested in human men?!”

“Not many of them, I have very high standards, and I certainly don’t go for just anyone,” Carla replied. “But perhaps someday, if I meet the right human, and I’ve gotten to the point where I can stay like this form all the time… perhaps.” *It certainly would beat all heck out of the pickings among the Exceed I’ve met so far.*

“What!?” Happy shouted, looking as if his entire worldview had been crushed. “You would stay like that all the time?”

“If I could. I’m getting better at it too,” Carla said promptly. “Every time I transform, I’m staying in this form for a little longer.”

Happy sighed, thinking the implications of this through. That meant, that either he would have to try to convince Carla of the fact that their Exceed forms were so much better than human form, which he thought should be self-evident. *We’re quieter, faster, could fly and eat all the fish we want without gaining a pound! But if I can’t do that, then maybe I need to figure out how to transform myself.* Happy pictured himself transformed, into a body like a male version of Carla’s, and shuddered. *Maybe, maybe I’ll look different though.*

**OOOOOOO**

Shagotte frowned, staring out over the distance from the topmost tower of her castle, crossing her arms over her chest as she thought, while behind her two maids held up a large parasol over her head and their own. While she had somewhat recovered after most of a day and a night of just resting her eyes, not talking or seeing anyone, she still had a rather large headache, and an irritable attitude, both of which were exacerbated by the sunlight.

Nonetheless, she and her advisors, or watchers as the case may be, had been getting a few reports from the Royal City. The Exceed always had a few patrols around the city, high up over the large city and hidden under illusion spells that made them appear like clouds. And the picture they were painting was not very good. The king had somehow procured a new source of magic, a gigantic one. This fed Shagotte’s worries about the king of the human realm over which Extalia hovered, Edolas.

King Faust thought himself very clever, and to a certain extent he was, but Shagotte had long concentrated her ability to see the future on him and knew he was in some way connected to the disaster that had been among her first visions. In other words, he was a clear and present threat to her people. “We will have to be prepared for violent moves on the king’s part. The humans are always so mad to get their hands on magic, now that the bare trickle they had access to has become a glut, who knows how they might react.”

“Even with their legions, they would be a scant threat to Extalia. Besides, King Faust is superstitious in the extreme. Your Majesty’s visions of the future have allowed us to feed that paranoia up to this point while aiding him in many ways against enemies both foreign and domestic. I believe that he lacks the willpower to turn on us now,” scoffed one of her advisors.

“I am also concerned with that one patrol that has not returned, the one which Captain Nichiya led out to the northwest. Captain Nichiya is one of our best fighters, and to have him and his patrol be late like this, perhaps we were right to be concerned about people coming over from Earth Land,” worried Advisor 2.

Despite her head no longer threatening to split down the middle, the queen had decided not to try to remember their names. It wasn’t as if they were separate entities after all.

“Agreed, but I doubt we need to worry more about whatever happened to Nichiya than we do about Faust. I want the Royal City under overwatch by at least two companies of our guard from now on until we know exactly how Faust is distributing his newfound magical wealth. Hunting down and brutally murdering the rat bas…” the queen paused and controlled herself. “Hunting down the individual from Earth Land whose presence has made my visions so impossible to use cannot be our priority any longer. As much as it would give me personal satisfaction to have that being executed in as painful a manner as possible, we need to be aware of any threat to our species. So along with an enhanced overwatch I want…”

**OOOOOOO**

Elsewhere, another Exceed was also dealing with dark thoughts, though his were much more immediate than the queen’s. Panther Lily had not returned to the capital city yet, wanting to follow up on trying to track the Fairy Tail guild, only to find something he would never have thought he would ever see. “What… in the world… is this…”

Below him, four legionnaires carried between them a makeshift gurney, on which lay the mangled and thankfully unconscious form of Knightwalker. “We, we found her hidden in the forest General, just, just tied up to a tree and, and left there, hidden but, it was like they only marginally cared if she was found.”

Knightwalker had been quite obviously beaten to within an inch of her life, and, as Panther Lily flew around her, he realized with a sort of sick horror - and a small spark of relief - that someone had crippled Knightwalker’s hands very deliberately. Horror at the idea of someone so strong is being so reduced. Relief as even as a fellow general and even something of a friendly acquaintance, Erza had scared him sometimes with her cruelty and ruthless manner, her sheer enjoyment in killing.

But that was beside the point, merely the start of the horror as his men reported on finding the sight of the battle between Knightwalker, her battalion, and whoever had done this to her. Someone had practically wiped Erza and her troops out and walked away, either taking their own dead and wounded away or just not taking any losses in the first place. Either implication wasn’t good.

But Panther Lily had something else to concern himself with right now. With a gasp of astonishment, he pulled his legion up and away from the ones carrying Knightwalker. “Split the command up! Half of you will take Knightwalker first to the nearest town with a doctor, stay there until she is fit to travel. The rest of you with me, we need to get to the base I sent that imposter to, **now**!”

**OOOOOOO**

Alas, for Faust and his court Panther Lily was making the mistake of thinking small. In his haste to correct his personal mistake, Panther Lily neglected to think that whoever had impersonated Knightwalker might have bigger plans than just invading a single small outpost. This gave Ranma and the girls a few more hours to play with when they reached the capital, which they did about three hours after leaving the band of Exceed behind.

The royal city was a sprawling complex of various architectural styles, from the air easily looking about three times larger than any city Ranma had seen in Earth Land, maybe more. It had several different walls built inside it in circles, and from the top it looked almost like the movie version of Minas Tirith, which Ranma had seen once, complete with a central castle that looked like a single, huge tower. One wall looked Asian to Ranma’s eyes, the outer wall European, and the last, the wall separating the spire-like castle from the rest of the city, looked almost Roman.

And flying above the city were several dozen flying rocks of various sizes, the sizes growing the higher they went into the air. When questioned about them, Wendy 2.0 said, “They had been there for centuries, remnants, it was said of something the Exceed had done once. Now, no one knew the reality, but common belief was that they were kept up there by Exceed magic, a sign that they still had that magic when the rest of the world was losing it. This caused some resentment of course, but more awe and fear.”

 Also above the city were several squadrons of Legions flying patrol. More than one came close then veered off, its rider waving their lances in salute. Ranma, back in his Knightwalker persona – now with extra anger from two very different sources– simply snarled and waved them off, heading down to land, ignoring the fact a few more legions had been about to launch from the same small inner courtyard, forcing their riders to aboard their flights and get out of her and Cana’s way.

 Before the legion even stopped moving, ‘Erza’ was off her mount and grabbing at Juvia, pulling her free of her bindings on the legion and sending her stumbling to her knees. “Move Delerand!” Delerand was the last name of Edo-Juvia, according to Edo-Wendy. And of course, Cana, as a guard, could not call Juvia by her first name.

 Several other guards saw the prisoners being pushed by one of their fellows and Knightwalker, and rushed forward but halted at a glare from the redhead. “You,” she growled, pointing at one of them. “I was told by Panther Lily that the king was planning a parade. When is it, and do I have time to speak to him before it begins?”

 “U, uhm yes, milady!” the guardsman replied, swiftly coming to attention. “Um, the parade is set for this afternoon, so you should have time to meet with his majesty. Um do you want me to send a runner requesting such a meeting? He, um, the king and lord Sugarboy did say you were to meet with them in the cabinet hall as soon as you got back?”

 Ranma paused, very obviously looking up at the sun and estimating the time before nodding. “Yes, that makes sense, I don’t need a shower but I would rather like a rest.” Turning, she addressed Cana in her guardswoman guise. “Officer Alberona, you are in charge of getting these two down to the cells. I want them behind bars soon as possible and guarded until we are ready to ask them some very pointed questions. They are not to be harmed until we are ready for them, can’t let these two bitches build up their courage from small beatings after all. Once that is done, you may consider yourself at leave.”

 “Yes, General Knightwalker!” Cana replied, actually throwing a decent salute Ranma’s way. She instantly gathered a few of the soldiers around her and between them, they escorted Juvia and Edo-Wendy away from the landing area and deep into the castle, with one of the palace guard leading the way.

 The castle itself was just as large for its type as the city, with long corridors, covered balconies, and wide stairwells connecting the various levels. Ten minutes walking hadn’t caused the group of guards and prisoners to start going down yet. As they passed through one long, wide corridor, the group passed a young-seeming girl maybe three or four years younger than Cana and the others of her age group, built like a sprinter wearing an odd outfit that looked like a mix between a jester’s and someone who liked to jog. She looked at them for a while then shuddered and moved away.

 *Now either that’s because she knows what’s in store for us, or their propaganda against Fairy Tail, as the last magic guild, is really good. I wonder which it is?* Cana thought idly as she pushed and prodded Juvia and Edo-Wendy along with the other guards.

 Five floors later, they stopped going downward and walked out into what was obviously a prison. A few cells later, Cana was chaining up the two girls, one to either side of the cell. “Heh, I doubt either of you are ever going to see the light of day again, but hey, at least hanging here you’re not being tortured right?”

 “Hah! No, that’ll happen when General Knightwalker comes to take you away personally. Wait for it, she’s got a distinctive gate to her you know. Just keep listening, wondering which distant footfall will signal the coming pain!” said one of the palace guard, laughing along with his fellows at his course, evil joke.

 Cana laughed with them, but used their merriment to slip the key to the girl’s chains in Edo-Wendy’s cleavage, replacing it on the chain with her own key to her apartment in Fairy Hills. The blue-haired woman’s eyebrow began to twitch furiously at that, and she scowled, at Cana, who winked back at her. “Well, no one’s going to search there you know?”

 “What about perverts?” Edo-Wendy growled. “You know, like you!?”

 With another wink, Cana turned away and moved out of the cell. “So, how many guards are there and how many women among them? General Knightwalker was serious about not letting them fall down the stairs or what have you. But she’ll also want as many of us on duty as we can get despite the parade.”

 This caused many of the guards around her to look away, since that kind of thing was not only known to happen to female prisoners. Indeed, many of the guards saw it as a perk of being on duty in the prison at all. But with another, female guardswoman right there, that wasn’t going to happen this time. Her dropping Knightwalker’s name, another woman, who had ordered they not be molested, made certain no one was going to bother them.

 Cana saw their crestfallen faces and she smirked, deliberately misinterpreting it. “Come on guys, don’t be like that. How about this: if any of you can out drink me, we can have our own little roleplay of ‘naughty prisoner and the noble guard’.”

 That cheered the guards right up, and two of the youngest raced off to raid the palace kitchens for some booze. After all, it wasn’t as if the prisoners were going anywhere.

**OOOOOOO**

Elsewhere in the castle, ‘Knightwalker’ had been led by the young woman Lily to a small, but very well appointed council room. There was a single central table with two long sides and one short one leading to a tall throne-like chair, although the chair itself was a little too simple to be called a real throne. In it sat an older man, with a long flowing robe of light purple lined with white fur. Even here among his closest advisors he wore a large crown, which said something about his personality to Ranma’s eyes. Under that he had long, lank hair to match his beard, coal black eyes deep-set in his craggy face.

To one side of the king sat the other two generals, or so Ranma supposed as she was lead to a chair next to one of them. He was a middle-aged man who had a pompadour hairstyle and smirking, arrogant face with a cleft chin. That, and the way he wore pink plate armor from the waist up but also a pair of black briefs below made Ranma break out into laughter despite being undercover at the moment. Across from her sat a much younger boy, one with a face that was designed to look almost playful, but which was serious at the moment, with black and white hair. He nodded at her but didn’t seem to be any more friendly towards ‘Knightwalker’ than her other tablemate.

Both of them bore weapons even here, and the one she sat next to looked at her in surprise as she sat down. “Ohoho, are you feeling mellow today for some reason dear Erza? Or did you drop off Ten Commandments to be repowered already?”

“Please, Sugarboy. You know how she is with that spear of hers. No, she probably left it lodged point first in some lawbreaker and then forgot about it in the excitement of chasing down his or her fellows,” quipped the other man.

“Your Majesty,” Ranma began, bowing from the waist as a man would, thinking that would be in keeping with Knightwalker’s personality and ignoring the one who spoke up. “I apologize for my absence from the Royal City, but you did charge me with the hunt for those Fairy fools who still defy your laws. However, as I was doing so, I ran into unknown opposition.”

 Even as she spoke, Ranma was analyzing what she could of Sugarboy as he was sitting there, remembering he was the one that had supposedly killed Laxus in this world. *Huh, he honestly doesn’t look like much to me… No way would he be able to fight Laxus or me. But… well that leaves the whole rock* *paper scissors thing. That his combat style and more likely his weapon, completely countered Edo-Laxus’s own. That could be it, but I still have to wonder.*

 “So, you’re saying a group of three of these Dragon Slayers used magic you had never seen before and were able to hold off your assault on Fairy Tail until they could teleport the guild away?” the King said slowly, but his eyes were flashing with anger. A lot of anger, way more than a leader just being told about a setback on dealing with a minor problem should have caused.

 In the next instant, the king slammed a fist down on the table. “Where did they come from!?” he roared. “Why didn’t you capture them!? A dead magic user is worthless to me, Knightwalker!”

 “I couldn’t fight to capture them your majesty, I’m sorry, but they were simply too strong for that. The three of them fought me to a standstill and cost me my Ten Commandments, with two of them living to escape into the woods! If that doesn’t tell you how strong they are, nothing else will,” Ranma replied tartly, folding her arms and almost but not quite glaring back at the king, still thinking that was in character for the woman.

 The king paused, then slowly nodded. “Yes, that makes sense I suppose. But if they were so strong and were using magic too…” he trailed off then looked at each of them seriously. “Your men are after them?”

“Yes, Your majesty. And they were badly wounded. I captured two of the accompanying Fairy Tail members as well. They can be forced to tell us where they came from.”

 “Good… in that case, Fairy Tail might well cease being a concern, even with these new ‘Dragon Slayers’, no matter where they came from,” The King grumbled. “I want that mystery solved as soon as possible.”

 “I want a new weapon before I rejoin the hunt,” Ranma said bluntly to the king’s proclamation, keeping in character while also trying to fish for information. “Do you think the latest anima will enable that? And how large is it? I was told we were holding a parade because of its acquisition, and you sound confident my liege but…”

 “Hah!” the king’s attitude changed yet again to one of magnanimous humor. “My dear, this anima was the largest we’ve been able to create by far! Byro’s ability to now aim the anima cannon to large-scale concentrations of magical potential served us very well indeed. It will be able to power the nation for years if we are careful.”

 “Indeed, the new anima is amazing and the parade is designed to emphasize that,” the dual-colored man said. “It will truly be a grand one, giving hope to everyone in the nation that their need for magic will soon be met.”

 “And if we are not careful or are attacked by one of the other nations?” Ranma asked, having learned of the existence of other nations from his discussions with Wendy 2.0.

 “Hah, none of them would dare to attack us, and if so, we would still have a new source of magic close to hand.” The king smiled grimly as ‘Erza’ cocked her head to one side in confusion. “The Exceed my dear. The anima cannon can be used on targets within this dimension as well as they could Earth Land, indeed, we have come up with an entire plan to bring those things down to Earth. We call it Code EDT.”

 He waited, but to his confusion, ‘Erza’ didn’t reply and he leaned forward over the table to stare at her. “What, not going to protest such a move, General Knightwalker? You and Panther Lily are friends are you not? He surely would object to the totality of my vision, if he but knew it.”

His eyes widened, and almost became bloodshot as he went on in an ever-rising tone. “When it becomes time, the Exceed will be punished for their hubris! No more shall they lord over humanity, flying above us without seeing how we struggle beneath them, rubbing their ability to use magic in our collective faces! No more shall their queen look down upon me, no more shall those weak flying **cats** dare to believe they are humanity’s equal!”

 He slowed down, and looked at his generals, meeting the eyes of each one as he almost glared at them. Sugarboy just smiled and nodded, while the other man gulped, but met his king’s gaze and bowed his head in submission. That left Erza, and the king’s eyes narrowed as he looked at her calm, cold face. “Well? I ask again, Knightwalker, do you have any objections?”

 “…No, your majesty. I might have before the events of today, but I do not any longer, despite my being somewhat friendly towards Panther Lily. But I think after what happened on the way back to the Royal City I cannot help but admit that the Exceed have become a clear and present danger to Edolas,” ‘Erza’ replied.

 *Might as well muddle the waters further,* Ranma thought. *If I can get the king jumping at shadows even more than he already is, we might have an easier time of finding this Byro guy and making him change our friends back.*

 With that in mind, Ranma explained how she, ‘Officer Alberona’ and their prisoners had been attacked on the way back to the Royal City by a group of Exceed, who demanded she hand her prisoners over. “Something about wanting to capture the Dragon Slayers for their own reasons and needing more information about them. That was about all I could get out of them before negotiations broke down,” she finished dryly, eliciting a laugh from both her fellow generals.

 The king’s response did not meet Ranma’s expectations though. Instead of roaring and raging, he simply gripped the armrests of his chair then breathed out deeply several times. “Very well. We will need to hasten preparations for Code EDT then, and be prepared for further treachery from that quarter.”

 *I will need to make certain that work on the transfiguration cannons is finished. And… I think I will also prepare the Dorma Anim,* the king thought angrily. Byro wasn’t the only scientist working on things for the king, nor the anima cannon the only project he had going on.

 The transfiguration Cannon was designed to be a type of gun, which could capture magically infused beings in the same field generated by the anima cannon transforming the target into an anima, the size matching the magical power the creature contained. They would be perfect for Legion riders to use against the Exceed. It was simply an extension of Byro’s design, miniaturized.

 The Dorma Anim was another matter entirely. It was an ancient weapon his grandfather had discovered buried underneath the ruins of the former capital of Edo-land, an empire that had spanned the whole Peninsula and deep into the continent. It was a giant creation that could crush whole armies, made to resemble a creature out of myth: the dragon, which had never actually existed in this dimension. Like the two kings before him Faust had shifted magical energy into it in small lots, barely enough for a single town let alone a city’s needs. But it had slowly added up over the years, and Faust knew he could finish powering it from the current anima without too much bother, although that wasn’t the only means that he had at his disposal to do so.

 With that thought he stood up abruptly, forcing the three generals to scramble to their feet. “Prepare for the parade. It will be the greatest triumph in centuries and I want you, my generals, to look the part. Let the Exceed question wait for now. We will deal with them after we have reassured our citizens that magic continues to be in the hands of their king.”

 After the king left, the three generals looked at one another and then went their own ways. It was obvious to Ranma, as she walked off, that the three generals were not friends, barely even colleagues if that. *I wonder if that’s a deliberate move on the king’s part or just because of their personalities?*

 *As for the king… he’s got a kind of charisma I guess, sort of makes me think of a horrific mix of Makarov and Toma mixed into one then stretched into a normal sized body. That, and he’s about as nuts as a bag o’ almonds. God those mood swings were horrifying! And when was the last time he bathed, he smelled of madness too for magic’s sake!*

 Moving through the castle rather aimlessly for a time, Ranma was wondering how to find his way to Edo-Erza’s quarters here in the palace when he noticed something moving through the shadows of a covered walkway two floors down on the other side of a courtyard from where she was walking. *What the heck…*

Moving to a narrow alcove where no one could observe her, Ranma pulled the Quiet Thief technique around herself and leaped out the window, landing in the courtyard and moving towards where she had seen the shadow, sniffing a few times, then scowling. *What the hell is he doing here?! How in the hell did he even get here anyway!?*

 Still with the Umi-Sen-Ken around her, Ranma followed the scent deeper into the castle then out and around to one of its small office-like outbuildings. They were practically deserted, no one in sight and a lot of dust building up in the corners of the small, thin corridors. On the second floor of the seemingly abandoned building she found the man she was hunting about to scale back down the outside of the castle’s outer wall.

But before the caped and hood man could complete this task, Ranma was on him, grabbing him around one arm and pulling him back. The man tried to keep his feet, but Ranma was behind him, locking a hold around his neck and one shoulder, slamming the man’s blue-haired head back against the wall behind them several times, lightly, not enough to hurt just enough to make certain the man understood he was at her mercy.

When his struggles stopped, Ranma snarled into his ear. “You have precisely five minutes to convince me you aren’t on the mad king’s side Jellal before I pop your fucking head off your shoulders. So start talking!”

**OOOOOOO**

Gajeel smiled thinly to himself as he walked out of the clothing store into the back alley behind it and then turned right, before turning a left several minutes later into a smaller back alley. There he found the clothing he was told he’d find, and with a last look around him, began to pull it over his current clothing, shaking his head and chuckling at the cool guy’s plans.

Thanks to his alternate, Gajeel had been able to get into the Royal City with an ease that was astonishing. He’d first snuck in by imitating a service worker, someone who moved around the city to help repair rooftops and suchlike. There was always a demand for such menial workers, and no one had looked twice at him.

“It’s the kind of cover that only works well for one person,” Edo-Gajeel had explained, “but it is also one that can be reused without any effort on anyone’s part. After that, you have three people you need to contact. One of them will get the word back out of the city and to Fairy Tail and me that you are in place when you hand him a purple card, which will be sent on to us. There’s nothing on it, the card is the message. If Fairy Tail wants to try and make a ruckus, that will be enough to tell them they’ll have someone on the inside, and how they could be snuck into the city in turn by the color of the card, a different color for a different route. But I wouldn’t hold your breath on that.”

Gajeel grunted understanding, having heard all about the trials that this version of Fairy Tail had faced, and how many people they had lost. A Fairy Tail without Makarov or Laxus to lead it and the others without making trouble in one form or another hardly seemed like Fairy Tail at all but he didn’t say that aloud. And who knew, maybe they would surprise him.

“The next person you’ll need to meet will be my information broker within the city. Don’t ask him anything, just walk into his bar and tell him you’re there to make a delivery for Mr. Redknows. He’ll ask you to spell it, and you will need to spell it by REDKNOWS, like that.”

“GEHEHEHE,” Gajeel laughed. “Like, the nose knows?”

“Exactly,” his alternate laughing in turn in the same manner. Then he became serious. “The information packet he gives you will be in shorthand. I’ll give you the cypher now, memorize and erase it before you head into the city. With that information, you will know how many guards are on duty at the palace, what the plans are the King is planning for the parade and hopefully the route the parade is supposed to follow within the city. What you do with that information will be up to you. I would suggest something flashy. Those kinds of things make the best headlines.”

“And the third person?”

“The third person will give you a set of clothing that will allow you to move around the city freely, as well as a set of the latest Royal City permits, identification cards and some money. With that kit, you’ll be able to move in the city, free as a bird.”

With his new clothing on, Gajeel moved out from the small alleyways of what he would term the middle-class area of the city, out into one of the city’s main thoroughfares, looking down at his notes, then around. He oriented himself with a map he bought at a nearby store, although he made certain not to be seen looking at the map often, as he thought that a local person wouldn’t need to do so to make his way around.

*Seems like an interesting life, creating a spy network like that. Just to get information in and out of as one city, he’s got such an elaborate setup,* he chuckled to himself. *That makes him a pretty cool guy I suppose, but that stands to reason.*

From that thoroughfare, Gajeel had made his way deeper into the city as he thought about how meticulous in planning his alternate had been when he created this information underground railroad. Soon he started to notice the buildings around him were bigger, richer, he paused at a corner to think.

*I better scope out the area, wind my way around the parade route randomly, I don’t want to give the game away if someone’s on the lookout for someone such as me. And then, when I find the perfect spot to ambush, I’ll go into hiding and figure out exactly how to do it. Even I can’t fight an entire army without magic after all. Although it might be fun to try.* His chuckles at that thought made several people look that way and he shook himself before calming down and moving on quickly.

**OOOOOOO**

 “Who, who are you? You’re not Knightwalker, she would have no way of knowing that name," the blue-haired man choked out, his hands tapping a staccato on the redhead’s arm where it went around his neck. “Gaaah, and you won’t get any answers by choking me to death!”

 Ranma cursed, then slowly eased her choke-hold on the man, pulling back away from him. “I’m Ranma, the man who fought you in Magnolia. This form is a… a magical disguise that makes me only look like Knightwalker right now.”

Rubbing at his sore throat and shoulder, the blue-haired man looked at Ranma in confusion and some distinct wariness. “What the heck are you doing here…and… posing as Knightwalker, what happened to the original then?”

Ranma thumped a hard index finger into the blue-haired man’s chest, causing him to step back two steps and bump into the wall he’d just been held against, rubbing at his chest now as the redhead glared at him.

“She’s not here right now, and is in no shape to pick up a spoon, let alone anything else. But **I’m** asking the questions here, not you! You tell me what the hell you are doing here? What the hell is your connection to this realm, how did you get through the anima tunnel or whatever it’s called? And make it believable! Part of me thinks you were doing some kind of scouting for those damn attacks.” In fact, if Ranma hadn’t seen the man actually sneaking around, making certain he wasn’t seen by anyone in the palace, she would already have acted on that thought violently.

For a moment the blue-haired man struggled with himself, and one hand reached for some kind of pouch at his waist, before Ranma held up a finger in front of his face wagging it, very deliberately stopping it right in front of his eyes in succession. “I wouldn’t,” she warned. “I am not in a forgiving mood right now, so don’t make any sudden moves.”

The blue-haired man slowly nodded, raising his hands away from the pouch. “First of all, you have to understand that I am not the Jellal you know. I went by the name Mystogan in Earth Land, so let us use that for now to avoid confusion.”

“Fine, but I already know that,” Ranma said interrupting him rudely. “It’s obvious that you’re this world’s version of Jellal, just like Anna’s the alternate version of Lisanna. Get on with your explanation, time’s a’ wasting and my fists are itching.”

“Very well. What you might not know, is that how alike an alternate individual is from one world to another varies wildly. In that other world, my alternate was born a young nobody. Here, I was born the prince of the realm. I had been exiled from the capital with my mother when she spoke out against the Anima concept, but what people don’t know is that we were also attacked by enemies of the state after we were exiled enemies from this world’s version of Caelum. They wanted to capture us to force my father to come to peaceful terms with their nation. The talks on that point fell through, and my mother was murdered, and myself left for dead.”

“I was saved however,” Mystogan went on, moving over to stare out the open doorway in either direction, before coming back. Continuing to speak in a low tone. “I was saved by an Exceed, but his people were not willing to take me in, and they exiled him for taking me in, so he went to work for my father as a general, while I was kept in exile for my own good. During my convalescence, I found out about the Anima project, and I realized, that it was wrong. It was wrong for us to steal magic like that, to take from others to prey upon the innocent like that. With that, I decided to travel to Earth Land, to do what I could to foil my father’s madness.”

“And you thought you alone could have done enough to stop this, some kind of one man crusade?” Ranma snorted shaking her head, sending her red hair cascading in a way that caught Mystogan’s attention for a brief moment, before he looked away. “That is Fucking bullshit.”

The contempt in Ranma’s tone caused Mystogan to look back at her in shock, his eyes widened blinking. Before he stammered, “I, I was doing what I thought was right!”

“No you weren’t, or at least you weren’t doing just that. If you were, if you wanted to really stop that anima thing from happening and that was your **main** goal, you would have involved more people,” she snorted again. “Even the most idiotic moron could tell ya a single person couldn’t cover enough area to really stop the anima from happening, not unless you had knowledge of where it would be, and you didn’t, did you?”

Mystogan scowled back at her, but at the glare from those currently brown eyes – thanks to a pair of colored contacts - he was compelled to answer. “I was able to figure out a pattern to the attacks a few times, get ahead of them block it, and so forth, but then the pattern would change, and I would start all over again. And then of course, they began to actually be able to target the cannon, although that actually made my job easier, since they targeted at large concentrations of magic. And the largest concentration of magic in Fiore, the country I was in at the time, was Magnolia, with the capital city, and the Magic Council tied for a very distant second.”

Ranma blinked at that, frowning in thought. “We’re going to come back to that little tidbit later,” she said after a second. While interesting, that mystery wasn’t really important right now. “But you just made my point for me. Alone you would not have been able to do enough to stop the anima from happening! No, you were trying to assuage your own guilt by going it alone. ‘Oh woe is me, only I can do this, I must atone for my father’s mistakes’. Emo bullshit.”

At each word, Mystogan flinched looking away, until he was almost showing his back to Ranma, speaking to the open window again. “What do you know!? You don’t have to live with the guilt of what your father is doing out of his own greed and desire for power!”

“Nope, my old man specialized in small time crimes, child abuse and making my life a living hell by forcing me to take responsibility for his actions in his own quest for a comfortable life. But no child is to blame for their parent’s faults, you can only do what you can from now on,” Ranma sighed shaking her head. “Whatever, fine, say I believe that you’re on the side of the angels, and honestly, I kind of do now.”

*No self-respecting villain would be able to keep up the emo act so long. On the other hand, wasn’t he young when he thought up this idea? That might explain it, although how the hell he grew up and still believed that he alone was making a difference to the anima issue I don’t know.*

Setting that aside, Ranma asked, “So, what are you doing here?”

Mystogan turned back to the redhead, sighing, “I was trying to figure out a way to reverse the anima process, sneaking down occasionally to Dr. Byro’s labs, to steal his notes. Unfortunately, it hasn’t been very helpful just yet. But, if push came to shove I was willing to, to consider moving directly against the king.”

“Really?” Ranma asked sardonically, crossing her arms under her chest and looking at him thoughtfully. “You’d kill your own old man?”

“I wouldn’t have to,” Mystogan said hurriedly, shaking his head. “You see, I am still the Prince! My father hasn’t remarried, so there is no one else to take over, and even if I was in exile before my disappearance, so long as I can prove that I am the Prince, and a simple blood test will do that if my tattoos – which were given to me by my mother -don’t, I would take over if anything happened to the king. So I could simply kidnap him, hide him away somewhere. And with that, I could not only order the scientist to come up with a way to reverse the anima process, I could end the policy entirely, stop this one-sided war we’ve been waging on the innocent people of Earth Land!”

“Now again I call bullshit,” Ranma retorted shaking her head. When Mystogan scowled at her, and was about to fire back that he had the willpower to do this, she held up a hand, counting off two points on her fingers, “I’m not questioning your willpower, or your willingness to do this I’m questioning both your ability, and whether or not you actually believe that shit you’re selling. Are you telling me that you would put the welfare and well-being of people from another dimension over your own nation? It would make you a piss poor prince. One who would probably be deposed very quickly.”

“I realize the Army needs the magic and might be unhappy with my policy of cutting down on the magic but then…” Mystogan began before Ranma cut him off again.

“How long have you been in this world for?” she asked.

When Mystogan reluctantly replied that he’d only been back in this world for a day, and never been able to get back on his own before this, Ranma nodded. “That explains it then. Look, I’ve been talking to a few of the locals here for the better part of a day and a half, and while they’re all Fairy Tail members, they’ve still given me a decent idea of how much this world depends on magic, and how bad it has become since the magic in this world to decreased to a point that humans can’t use it. Did you know that at least 12 towns and villages became unlivable in the past year in Edolas and that in most other countries it’s even worse?”

“Wendy 2.0 told me about that, she said they’d tried to help a few of the villages survive, but without magic to till their fields, the soil was just too hard for them to work with the manpower they had. In another, the swamps simply overcame the magic keeping them at bay, slowly consuming the town.”

“Wendy 2.0?” Mystogan asked, somewhat amused by the name even as he listened intently to what Ranma was saying.

“My name for the alternate of my little sister,” Ranma said with a shrug. “She looks like an older version of Wendy by about 14 years, and two times the weight, with most of it…” Ranma cut herself off, blushing slightly. “Right never mind that.”

“No go on,” Mystogan said now with a grin, crossing his arms as he stared at the redhead in front of him. “I’m interested now.”

Ranma gave him the finger, before moving back to the original topic without another word on that issue. “The fact is your nation isn’t set up to not use magic. The people need it, in particular in transportation and on the industrial side of things. The trains, the cars, a lot of businesses all depend on magic, it isn’t just for the rich and the Army, although it’s become thus since it’s gotten scarcer. Magic is a major part of the society. Try to remove it and you’d deal with a shit ton of social problems, and enemies.”

Mystogan frowned at that, and Ranma nodded knowing that he was taking it in. Then she moved in for the kill. “Besides, what about other countries? Would you be able to face them without magic and if so how?”

Ranma felt she could probably help there, it wouldn’t be the first time he/she had described revolver style or equivalent guns to someone after all. But she didn’t know anything about industrialization, what fueled it outside of perhaps waterpower: waterwheels, steam engines and that kind of thing. But even there, he only knew about them in the vaguest terms, the equivalent of using water to power a mill, rather than using coal to power a locomotive. He could describe the process, but not enough to help someone build a steam or coal engine.

“You think I would need to wean them off magic slowly,” Mystogan said thoughtfully. But to do that I would still need an external source of magic.” He looked at Ranma sharply, “Why are you telling all this? You should be trying to talk me into helping you for your friends, not try to talk me out of moving against the king.”

Mystogan was right. Ranma wasn’t simply trying to talk Mystogan out of just kidnapping the King like that for his own good, or the fact that such a move would probably not even work and would get in the way of her own plans although she did think that.

“Do you know how to reverse the anima process?” Ranma asked bluntly.

Mystogan slowly shook his head, surprised at the change of topic. “As you’ve just pointed out, there’s only so much I could even know after being back here for only a day, and I haven’t found anything about reversing the process among the notes I’ve stolen from the doctor.”

“Then stealing away the King and hiding him somewhere wouldn’t do me any favors. So instead, you leave that part to me. You help my friends when it comes time to kidnap this doctor guy, the one who came up with the anima. If anyone knows how to reverse the process it’ll be him,” Ranma practically ordered.

“Fine, I understand that, but you didn’t answer my previous question. Why were you trying to talk me out of this?”

“Because I don’t want to have to come back here and do all this shit again, when someone’s removed you from power and restarted the anima bullshit,” Ranma said darkly. “If I have to come back to this dimension and deal with another power-mad bastard attempting to take my friends and turn them into magical batteries, I’m going to be most irritated. You wouldn’t like me when I’m irritated.” *Although with my period right around the corner ya might see it anyway.*

Mystogan nodded slowly, trying to hide a shudder. The fact the woman in front of him had been strong enough without access to her magic to defeat Knightwalker – or at least that was what she had implied - was terrifying, so he was more than willing to go along with her plans at the moment, even though he wasn’t certain he agreed with all her points. “That makes sense I suppose. Very well, you have a deal.”

**OOOOOOO**

Juvia and Edo-Wendy looked up, as there came the sound of a single pair of approaching feet. The looked at one another, then Juvia shook her head. “Juvia estimates it’s too early,” she whispered, “the parade should not have begun yet.”

With that in mind, Edo-Wendy did not reach down into her cleavage for the key, which she reflected would be embarrassing as hell when she had to do it, after all, she’d have to literally motorboat herself to get it out. *I’m going to get you back for this Cana*, she thought, not for the first time since she had been locked up against the wall. *You will pay for making me humiliate myself like this!*

Soon enough Ranma stood in front of the jailhouse, still in his Erza Knightwalker disguise. The redhead smiled thinly at them, her hands laced behind her back, as she stared at them coldly. “You will be relieved to note, that my desire to interrogate you directly after my arrival has been overruled. It has been decided to wait until after the parade to do so. However, I wouldn’t want you to think that you are getting all your own way. I have been informed that the King’s own personal torture is going to take part in our little discussions. You might have heard of him before, a certain blue haired gentleman, known to cover his face but also to have a certain tattoo upon it. It is most distinctive.”

The two girls looked at one another, then back to Ranma, who twitched her head towards the end of the corridor, where there were no doubt guards within hearing range even though she did speak in low tones. “I will leave you to his tender mercies when the time comes.”

Without another word, she turned and stalked away, leaving Edo-Wendy and Juvia to stare at one another. “I wonder what that was about?” Edo-Wendy asked.

“Juvia doesn’t know, although the description he gave…” she frowned thinking. “Perhaps we have found an un-looked for ally?” Edo-Wendy stared at her waiting for further explanation, but Juvia shook her head and refused to be drawn on it further with without knowing if there were any guards nearby. The two of them settled down again to wait it out, wondering what all was going on, and how this complicated matters, or perhaps could help their mission.

**OOOOOOO**

Ranma sat astride a legion at the head of a dozen others, as they marched down one of the Royal City’s largest thoroughfares, amidst the cheering and shouting crowd of all walks of society. Young, old, rich or poor, all of the people of the city had flooded out onto the streets to cheer the king and his new source of magic. All of the people were throwing flowers in the air, or small bottles of incense that burst in midair to create clouds of some kind of alchemical solution in purple, which was the color of royalty here in Edolas. It all combined to deaden Ranma’s sense of smell to next to nothing and it was all she could do to keep from sneezing every time one of those purple clouds got too close to her.

It would’ve been a major patriotic moment, even Ranma might’ve been moved by it if she didn’t know that this whole amazing output of national enthusiasm was being bought on the lives and magic of his friends in Fairy Tail. When she thought of them, of Bisca, Laxus, Elfman, Mirajane, Gray and most particularly Erza being trapped in that Crystal, having their magic and lives drained to power the magic of this nation, it made Ranma’s blood boil.

Yet even through her rising anger and the shouts of the people all around her Ranma was taking in the lay of the land, and it was almost immediately apparent to the Water Dragon Slayer that the thoughts she had formed, while talking to Wendy 2.0 about how life was in this dimension, had been correct.

As large as the city was, as well thought out maintained and clean as it was there was still hundreds of tiny clues that all was not well with the world. The industrial sectors, giant ironworks and two small blacksmiths Ranma noticed along their route were shut down. Here and there were signs of shops being closed due to no magic being available to work the food preparation, or the cloth making or a number of other things. Scattered throughout the crowd were groups of people all dressed the same or with the same logo somewhere on their person, evincing a guild or union of some kind. They were shouting and cheering themselves hoarse, their eyes never leaving the giant anima crystal behind the King, which was riding on a giant float right behind the King at the front of the parade, with the three generals behind it.

Every time the guards put on displays of magic, using their newly repowered weapons to create water in the air, fire or lightning, the crowds cheering redoubled. But always there were these pockets of people just staring at the anima, as if their very lives depended upon what they could get out of it. It was incredibly disturbing, and yet, Ranma’s thought he could understand their desperation. It was like watching drowning men offered a lifeline, or perhaps starving people being offered a chance to work for their food again, which was possibly just shy of the mark. *I suppose back in my old dimension you’d get the same response if you… well maybe removed electricity.*

This went on for a bare hour, as the parade wound its way through the city, ending up in a massive thoroughfare. It looked almost like something Ranma had seen once in a picture of Russia or perhaps France during the rapier and musket era: a huge courtyard in front of the palace, with one side of the thoroughfare being blocked off from the palace by a wide white painted wall, and equally large golden gates, with six roads leading into it, all of them lined with smaller mansions of the rich and wealthy. Yet even here, it wasn’t just the rich and wealthy that were lining the streets, shouting “glory to the king,” and flinging small flowers into the air. A lot of the people from the rest of the city had followed the parade here and were gleefully shouting their throats raw along with the rich and noble.

In the center of that square, was set up a dais, to which the Kings palanquin was born, and then set down on top of. The giant anima was set down as well behind him, as the guards fanned out to create rows and the three generals sat down in chairs provided them on a smaller stage to one side of the Kings. They were joined there by a few of his other advisers and four noblemen from important families.

One or two of them looked at the redhead, but as Knightwalker glared at them, they looked away quickly, causing her other two generals to chuckle at her. “So strict all the time,” Sugarboy said, shaking his head. “You’ve never been able to play the system my dear.”

Thinking about what his Erza would say to someone like this guy calling her my dear, Ranma’s response to this was easy enough to figure out. “Sugarboy, what did I tell you I would do to you the last time you called me that?” she said, cracking her knuckles explosively as she stared at her fellow general.

He paled dramatically, holding up his hands and peace, before all of their attention was grabbed by the King. He had just stood up, cracking his staff down on the floor of the stage, staring out around him as the people slowly became quiet staring at him and the giant anima behind him.

“It was in my grandfather’s time when we, the people of this world, slowly started to realize that the magic was disappearing. My father was the first king to start a conservation program, for which he was vilified not only by the Kings and queens of other nations, but by the people of this very land. Yet we have persevered. While other nations took several years to get to the same destination we started conserving immediately, coming up with better ways to use the magic we had, always looking for ways to enhance the longevity of the lacrima that is the lifeblood of any nation.”

Of course this process was not without conflict. We were forced to deal with internal threats, ranging from the so-called wizard guilds, which had long monopolized non-industrial magic for so long, using their greater abilities to create magical items and manipulate lacrima to create a market for themselves. Then came foreign enemies attempting to conquer us in that same time frame and where were the guilds? When called upon to defend this nation, it was not the guilds who turned the tide, but the Royal Army!”

Ranma’s eyes narrowed. She hadn’t heard of that. But judging by the crowd’s reaction that had really happened or the king and his court were very good at propaganda. *Still, it fits. If the guilds here didn’t specialize in combat like Fairy Tail back at home does, or even like Lamia Scale, and the guilds of Pergrande, most of them would’ve been practically useless in a war. But the people would have looked to them for magical aid and they wouldn’t have been able to meet it. The King sure as hell wasn’t right to create a pogrom against them, but if that was the case, it’s a little more believable that he got so much public support for it.*

“But we survived! Edolas is still here, and we are strong! We won that war, and we have survived the slow dissipation of magic, until now! Until we have discovered this, a new source of magic! Through my auspices through our sweat and tears, we have discovered the means through which we bring magic back to life. Through my auspices, through my will, I give you the anima!” he shouted, gesturing towards the giant crystal.

He waited as the crowd cheered, cheered themselves hoarse, shouting, almost screaming in delight. Then as it began to fade, he turned back to them, one hand still raised to point at the anima. And now my people, my good citizens of the Royal city, you will be the first to benefit from this, to benefit from magic returning to the land! Because before your very eyes, we will start to convert this anima into lacrima to distribute to our most worthy vassals and to those industries which most require it.”

A roll of guards moved out from the gates of the castle as they were opened, creating a lane through the crowd, which again were cheering themselves hoarse, as other guards pushed a large contraption of some kind with hoses pipes and other stuff, towards the anima as the King continued to shout. “Witness the largess of your king, witness his power, and remember, it is King Faust who brings you magic!”

Through the last few few seconds of speech Ranma’s eyes had widened as she realized what was going about to happen, and what it could mean for the people trapped within the anima*. There are people in there, people who could die, whose life could be simply sapped away from them if I let this happen!*

She looked around, staring out over the crowd, then to the king, the generals, the guards and everything else. *Well, this wasn’t exactly the moment I would’ve chosen, but if I’m going to raise some hell, I suppose I couldn’t think of any better moment. And I’ve always wanted to see what it felt like to be public enemy number one, if for however short a time it will last.*

With that, Ranma hopped to her feet, and then leaped forward, crossing the distance between where she and the other generals have been sitting to write behind the King. Even as he turned to sensing someone behind him, Sugarboy and the other general reacted faster than Ranma would’ve thought they could, Ranma landed, and her hand flashed out, grabbing the King by the back of the neck, just around the spine. “That’s far enough!” she shouted at the top of her lungs. “If that device comes one foot closer to the anima, I’m going to snap his neck like a twig! And that goes double for the two of you! Take one step towards me and the King dies.”

“Knightwalker, what are you doing?!” Hughes shouted, while the king tried to turn his head in Ranma’s grip to glare at her.

“The names not Knightwalker,” Ranma replied with a laugh. “I told you about the Dragon Slayers oh King, I just didn’t tell you that instead of beating them, Knightwalker was the one who lost. “My name’s Ranma, and I’m not going to let you kill my friends when they’re in that thing!”

**OOOOOOO**

At the same time that the parade was going on, the train carrying Natsu and the others were hiding in was arriving. Once more, all of them were hidden among the smaller crates in the cargo containers, with the two Exceed outside, waiting for the loading crew to be done with them, which they did quite quickly, before rushing off, angrily muttering to one another. “We should have gotten overtime for that! All the good spots will be taken by now.”

“Shut up! At least we have access to the roof here, that’ll give us one of the best views you could ask for. Unless of course we waste time with you jawing here!”

“I wonder what that was about,” Carla murmured, as she and Happy pushed out from where they had been hiding, with the female Exceed quickly transforming back into her human form, sighing with relief and patting down her long, platinum blonde hair. That was one aspect that she hadn’t mentioned to Happy earlier that day, which she rather enjoyed about having a human body: her hair.

She led the way over, first to where Wendy and Seilah were hiding, opening their shared crate once more and letting the two of them out, while Happy had hurriedly moved over to Natsu’s, tapping on the top of it calling out, “Natsu, we’re here.”

The instant those words left his partner’s mouth, Natsu burst out of the wooden crate, his fists smashing up through the top of it and shattering it as he stood up, shouting, “I’m alive!”

Everyone around him flinched, and Wendy whimpered as the shout hit her ears, since she had just hopped out of her own crate to the floor right beside the other Dragon Slayer with Seilah right behind her. But his fellows were not the only ones who heard Natsu’s shout, several guards moving through the unloading area heard him, and soon their own shouts rose to answer it, moving in their direction.

“What the hell was that!?”

“It came from over there! Is someone trying to smuggle themselves in?”

“You would have to be a dumbass to get all this way and then shout, but whatever, I suppose we have to check on it anyway,” drawled a third voice. Despite its contempt for the very idea the owner of that voice was coming towards them, sounding closer with each word.

“I agree with that last human, you are a fool Natsu,” Seilah said coldly, moving ahead of him pushing him back with one hand before she strode forward, hiding where the smaller pathway they were on ran into a larger one leading away through the various cargo containers. She waited until the noises of the approaching humans were on her, then stepped out, staring all around her as she intoned, “Macro: Knock Yourselves Out.”

She did this three more times before all of the guards who had heard Natsu’s shout were dealt with. Wendy had leaped up onto the cargo containers, staring around her and directing Seilah towards the guards with silent gesture, while making sure that they got them all using both her eyes and her sense of hearing, even though her ears were still ringing from Natsu’s shout. *How does he not make himself to deaf shouting like that?* After the fourth group was dealt with, she moved over to where Seilah was now standing and gave the demon woman a nod. “That was the last group.”

“Aww man,” Natsu whined, moving out from where he had been forced to hide by the two Lucy’s and Carla. “I wanted to get involved with that. Why do you to have to have all the fun?”

“Have you forgotten they were trying to sneak in, not blast our way in?” Lucy asked, shaking her head. “I thought you understood this was a ninja type mission, you were all raring to go about it before.”

“Ooh yeah, um oops?” Natsu said sheepishly, scratching at his hair as Wendy and Seilah joined them. “Still, after a few hours on a train, is it my fault that I really want to punch something right now?”

“It would’ve been your fault if we were caught, and unable to continue our mission to try to sneak into the palace, to figure out a way to transform your friends back from the anima!” Seilah intoned staring at him coldly. While she did not care for much of the guild, she had become friendly with Erza well enough and did not want their rivalry to be so abruptly interrupted. Then she snapped, “Macro: Be Silent Until I Allow You To Speak.”

Lucy Ashley winced, as Natsu immediately tried to shout, but nothing came out, his mouth flopping open several times before he closed glaring at Seilah. “Okay, that was a little cruel, although I suppose of it keeps him quiet so that we can sneak around, then it makes some sense.”

“It’s fitting,” Wendy said, pulling at one of her ears and glaring up at the taller Dragon Slayer as she remembered her earlier pain. “Honestly Natsu, are you the Fire Dragon Slayer, or the Shouting Dragon Slayer?” Normally she wouldn’t have condoned such a thing, but Natsu’s shout had honestly hurt and she wanted to get Erza, Bisca, Levy and all her other new friends freed, as well as find her Onii-chan. She really honestly wasn’t too worried about Ranma’s well-being, he just wasn’t with them right now and she admitted to being a little worried about going into a possible fight without him around.

With Natsu silenced and fuming about it at the back of the group, Seilah took the lead, moving through the large warehouse connected to the train station, exiting out a side entrance and into an alley that was marked with numerous cigarette butts, several chairs and other things, indicating it was where people could go on their brakes. As they did, all of them pulled up their hoods to hide their faces, before moving out into the city proper.

At first the city seems to be empty, although they could hear the sounds of cheering and roaring crowds in the distance. But as they moved towards the distant tower of the castle, they started to run into more people, who were all pushing their way in the same direction. “Come on, we have to hurry up, or will miss the King’s presentation of the anima!” shouted one mother to her young child, who was quite overweight and unable to keep up with the rest of a group of other people who looked vaguely related to one another.

The mages exchanged glances with one another, then looked over at Lucy Ashley, who winced, but nodded her head, and gestured the rest of them to follow her through a serious of twisting alleyways that took them at an oblique angle away from the palace at first, then back towards it, almost as if they were trying to circle it but not quite. Even so, they could still hear the cheering of the crowd, saw people occasionally rushing towards what must be the front of the castle, and then screams started. At first, the screams were a distant thing, but it quickly passed through, as word-of-mouth began to carry the tail.

“Erza Knightwalker just took the King hostage!” shouted one person up on a rooftop as they began to see the castle’ outer wall ahead of them.

They all stopped in confusion at that, staring up at the man, and Lucy Ashley took it upon herself to shout up at him, joining several other people who had done much the same. “What do you mean, she’s one of the generals isn’t she? Why would Knightwalker take the King hostage, did he refuse her access to the magic or something?”

“I don’t know, but she’s saying something to him, and all of the rest of the army and the generals are all staring at her, a lot of them are waving weapons at her and trying to threaten her, but she’s got the King by the back of his neck! It could be a coup or something?” shouted another man from on high, trying not just to answer Lucy Ashley, but also everyone else within hearing range.

Natsu began to vibrate in place, grinning wildly and Wendy too smiled even as Carla shook her head. “Of course, why doesn’t it surprise me that Ranma would take such a direct kind of action?”

Edo-Lucy looked over at Lucy, then gestured around towards where the sounds of shouting were still coming. They were now accompanied by the sound of combat, as someone apparently tried to get Ranma to release the King. “He’s still alive! Wow, I would never have predicted that.”

“Ranma-nii is very good at imitating people. Further if this Erza Knightwalker looks like our Erza, then he could easily imitate her since he did the same thing months ago. And after that, yes, he’d go for the biggest fish around, the King in this case. Wendy said authoritatively. “Let’s go, I think that we don’t have to worry about sneaking into the palace anymore, not if we can help Ranma take the King.”

Natsu nodded happily, then grabbed at Seilah’s arm as she made to follow Wendy as the little girl leaped up into the air, grabbing onto the side of the building and scaling it like it was a jungle gym. He pointed at his mouth, almost glaring at her, and Seilah ide. “Very well. Macro: You May Speak Once More.”

With that, the entire group, even Lucy and Edo-Lucy raced in the direction of the crowd, with Lucy pulling out her keys, and preparing to fight, the whip she had gotten from her time in the celestial spirit realm in one hand, her keys flaring out one between each finger as she prepared herself to conjure more than one at a time. But ahead of them all was Wendy, leaping from rooftop to rooftop like a true master of the aerial style of Anything Goes, her hair streaming behind her as she grinned brightly, weaving between people and other obstacles easily, as she moved towards where her Onii-chan was causing trouble in the way only he could.

**OOOOOOO**

As the parade had moved into full swing, Cana chuckled, stretching her shoulders and neck above her head, looking around at the barracks room full of drunken soldiers, all of them unconscious and drooling where they lay. “Sorry boys, but you lose. Better luck next time.”

Whistling cheerfully, she drained the last of her ale and set it down, before pulling off the helmet that had been part of her guard uniform, then moved over to the keys, pulling them off the rack and leaving quickly, before moving down the corridor. She found Wendy and Juvia had freed themselves and were waiting for her by the entrance to the cell. She smirked at them and opened the door, saluting as she did. “One easy escape for two not exactly prisoners accomplished. Now, let’s go find this Dr. Byro.”

Three girls quickly gathered up what weapons they could from the unconscious guards in the barracks, which was a plethora of daggers, swords, and even a few halberds, all of them with small magical properties, sharper edges, flame attacks, and lightning assaults being the majority, with two of them being water blades, which created a cutting edge of water around them. Those were some of the daggers that Edo-Wendy quickly grabbed, smiling brightly at them and cooing excitedly over the enchantments.

The other two simply grabbed whatever weapon they could, not exactly being choosy. But it was when they left the prison complex, behind that they started to run into trouble. Juvia looked over at Cana expectantly, and she looked to Edo-Wendy, who looked back at him blankly. “What?”

“What do you mean what? Where do we go from here?” Cana said, gesturing all around them down the corridor in either direction, then up indicating the rest of the large spire-like castle. “You can’t expect us to simply search randomly around this place, we would be at it for weeks.”

“How the heck am I supposed to know where to go!?” Edo-Wendy shot back irritably. “I might have spotted this Dr. Byro when I was working at a governmental retreat to spy on him and a few other scientists but that’s a long cry from knowing my way around the Royal Castle itself!”

“So you mean we snuck in here, made this entire plan to get captured and then get free, and everything is going so well, but now that it’s come to it we don’t know where to go,” Cana drawled, sounding almost amused, but her glare was anything but.

Edo-Wendy shrugged. “Honestly, I never even expected us to get this far. I suppose we could just grab a random servant or maid, then pump them for information.”

“You won’t have to do that,” said a male voice from nearby.

All three of them turned, raising their weapons as Juvia took the lead, one hand slowly forming into a watery fist. In her other hand, the blue-haired water mage held out a short sword, which sparkled with electricity.

A man stepped out of the shadows of a nearby doorway, bowing his head lightly to them all. He wore a long tattered black cape, over a somewhat tall looking frame, with gray leggings and gray and black wrappings around his arms and hands. In his hand he held a large crooked staff, and he had four more such on his back. On his head, he wore both a bit bandanna covering his hair, and the mass covering the bottom of his face.

Yet despite not being able to see the face beneath that, Juvia knew him. “You… So, Ranma told the truth!? You are our ally now? Juvia finds that hard to believe after you were there when the anima attack hit Magnolia… But if Ranma has given you his trust, then Juvia will do so for now.”

“Who’s he?” Cana and Edo-Wendy asked as one, before glancing at one another and saying “Jinx! Oh, now don’t you start that!”

 While Juvia facepalmed, Mystogan smiled, but he didn’t look away from the water mage’s judging gaze. “My name is Mystogan ladies and Juvia, while you have every right to be leery of me, I promise I had nothing to do with the anima. In fact, I was trying to stop it. I already convinced your friend Ranma, but I’m afraid that convincing you would probably take too long. I’m here to help you find Dr. Byro and force him to help us reverse the anima process.”

“Oh, and what gender was Ranma originally? Juvia also wishes to know how that conversation occurred,” Juvia shot back.

“He, that is she, well at the time, Ranma said he was a man. As to how that conversation occurred, Ranma saw me sneaking around the castle, then crept up on me and got me into a headlock, before battering my head against the wall to make it very clear, that she, that is he, whatever, was in the driver’s seat of this conversation,” Mystogan said dryly. “That was almost but not quite the most humiliating moment I’ve gone through recently.”

Juvia nodded, rising up from her crouch and sliding her lightning sword back into its scabbard, removing her thumb from the activating Crystal in its pommel. “So, where do we go from here?”

Sighing in relief, Mystogan took up his staff, and gestured the others to follow him, moving away down the corridor towards their destination. He informed them where the servants stairwell was located, which they could use to head into the castle, to the area where the anima cannon was kept. Doctor Byro’s living quarters, laboratory and practically everything else associated with him was in that same area.

As they went, Cana leaned over towards Juvia whispering seriously, “So, that’s the guy who you and Ranma saw skulking around in Magnolia? You sure we can trust him?”

“Ranma seems to think so. Juvia will give him the benefit of the doubt for now… and keep a secret or two handy just in case,” Juvia replied.

Despite their reluctance to trust him fully, the three girls followed Mystogan without complaint, since he at least seems to know where he was going. They looked around warily all the same and were prepared when they ran into a group of guardsmen patrolling about seven floors up from where they began. The guards turned the corner and saw them, raising their blades and shouting intruders, but could barely get that word out before two women had streaked past the startled Mystogan, with Cana hurling her sharpened playing cards ahead of her, while grabbing up a staff from over one shoulder, going to one knee and firing out a fireball into the incoming guards.

In contrast Edo-Wendy and Juvia closed with the guards quickly, with Edo-Wendy using the water coated daggers to slice into the guards, sending them flying backwards in a welter of blood while Juvia used her cudgel indiscriminately, using her free hand to block or absorb the few blows that came her way so startled were the guards. Within seconds the last was down, falling to an axe kick from Juvia that smashed into the side of his head where he was trying to rise from being knocked onto his side, laying him out. They turned to Mystogan, and gestured him on. “Come on, we have to move before that shout brings more of them,” Juvia said.

Shaking his head, Mystogan led them on. They cut backwards, then twisted around into a service hallway, then up a flight of stairs that was so thin they had to go single file, but which brought them out two floors above where they had run into those guards. There they came out into a wider hallway, and were forced once more to use the more public stairwell.

Here it was Mystogan’s turn to prove his worth. He pulled out one of the other wands from his back. “I am quite glad I was able to take some time to grab a few more of my staffs from where I hid them. Illusion Magic: All Encompassing Serenity,” he intoned, stamping the end of the staff, a thing of crystal and copper rather than wood, on the floor.

A wave of yellow and white magic enveloped them all in a bubble, which then went opaque, covering them in a sphere of energy. When it dissipated, the three ladies looked down to see their bodies covered by what looked like a thin shine, like a veneer or the outer edge of a bubble.

“With this we won’t be seen or heard, but we need to hurry. I have absolutely no idea how long this spell will last and…” Mystogan broke off, staring at the crystal in the center of the wand, which was a slightly different white than the others. “I, hmm… maybe two charges? I’ve never tried to cover other people with this spell before, and obviously the wand can’t be charged in Edolas.”

Wordlessly Cana and Juvia turned, racing off to the distant stairway leading up to the next floor. Wendy and Mystogan hurried after them.

That spell lasted them three floors, but thankfully there they could once more take a servant’s stairwell up. Once more this allowed them to go a few levels before cutting off, forcing them back out into the open. “Each separate area of the palace has its own servants, and there’s a certain hierarchy involved. If you work in one set of floors you don’t go higher, and you lord it over those below.”

“Good to know people are the same everywhere,” Cana said to Mystogan’s explanation, realizing that without him they would not only have been lost but way too far away from the lab to get there through the guards between them and their target. *I guess Ranma was right to trust him then.* “But how many charges of that staff do you have left?”

“The only way to find out is to use it until it gives out,” Mystogan replied philosophically.

It turned out that the Illusion Magic staff lasted only one more charge for all four of them. Illusion magic was incredibly energy-intensive, and the more you spread it around, the faster it failed. After that, they had to go slowly, with Cana, still dressed as a guard, in the lead to warn of dangers, with Mystogan directing them forward, mainly to the servant’s entrances.

“How do you know your way around so well?” Cana asked while they hid in what was obviously a noble’s bedroom, as they waited for a patrol to go past. They’d had to fight two more patrols, but they’d been able to do so without an alarm being raised thanks to Mystogan, but they couldn’t rely on that if there were any alternative.

“While I arrived back here at around the same time you all did, but I arrived practically on top of the Royal City. I’ve been casing the castle ever since, stopping only to have a few meals here or there. Thankfully, only a few of the servants recognized me after so long and I bribed them to not say anything about my movements. Heh, I actually convinced most of them. My father had banished me because he couldn’t bear to look at my face as it reminded him of his dead wife. On top of that, I convinced most of them I was actually sneaking around here to have a tryst with Knightwalker of all people. Servants eat up romantic drivel like that.”

All three girls paused, and then looked at Mystogan quizzically. “Did you tell that to Ranma?” Juvia asked.

“No and believe me I am more than glad I didn’t,” Mystogan said with a chuckle, waving them on. “Come on, we need to get moving. But from now on, we can’t use violence to force our way through.”

They had gone up perhaps forty stories when they started to hear the distant rumble of explosions, and Juvia winced. “Juvia thinks that Ranma has launched her attacks with Ranma’s typical subtlety.”

“Don’t knock it, this might make things easier for us,” Cana quipped.

She was sort of proven correct a moment later as a group of guards raced down the corridor ahead of them. Even with the sound of their passage warning them though, they were in a long hallway at the time with no rooms around them. It was either race back to the stairwell and try not to get caught in the floor below or have Mystogan use his magic.

With barely a second to spare Mystogan raced ahead of the three women, another staff in his hand. This one was made of wood like most staffs, and had a strange, but compelling swirling pattern in blue carved all along its length. He waved it in a specific pattern above his head, then gestured ahead of him and caught the guards coming toward them in a wide blue sphere as he intoned, “Hypnosis Magic: Fog Of The Mind.” He waited a second then intoned, “Ignore our presence and move on.”

In a daze, the guards did so and later would not remember crossing that floor at all from one stairwell to another. Unfortunately, this drained another of Mystogan’s staffs.

But that was the last hurdle before they reached the level with the labs and their target on it. The four of them came out of a service corridor, then made their way to the central hallway leading into the science area without any issue, but there they once more stopped as they heard the patter of feet coming up behind them. “Damn it, should I just take them out?” Cana muttered, gesturing at her disguise.

“No, this close to the laboratory, we can’t risk anything that warns Dr. Byro something’s wrong. He’s one of few who have free access to all the magic they want, I don’t think we want to make that fight any harder than it already will be,” Mystogan said, wincing. He only had three staffs left, and one of those cast an omnidirectional sleep spell. Useful, but only when he didn’t have allies to worry about.

Looking around, Juvia grabbed Mystogan by the shoulder and twisting around, pulling him into a doorway, and shutting it behind them as Wendy and Cana piled in with them. It was very crowded inside the broom closet, and Mystogan blushed as all three girls pressed into him. Cana however made him flinch as she whispered, “Don’t get any ideas about wandering hands Mr., none of us would appreciate it, and all of us would find different yet so painful ways to make you aware of our displeasure.”

Very carefully Mystogan moved his hands, so that the palms were pressed into his own chest, then lift them up past his face and into the air. “Is that safe enough?” he asked semi-seriously.

Edo-Wendy smiled, nodding at him. “A gentleman is always appreciated.”

“So is silence,” Juvia said, shaking her head as she leaned against the doorway putting her ear against it, listening to what was going on outside. *Since when did Juvia become the voice of reason* she thought to herself shaking her head slightly.

Outside, the pitter-patter of feet at the doorway, and a young feminine voice shouted out Dr. Byro, Dr. Byro! Come quick! Someone is attempting to well we don’t know what she’s attempting, but she’s taken the King hostage, and she’s shouting at us to bring you to her.

There was a moment of silence, and the door then creaked open loudly, as an aged voice said, “What?”

The four of them listened as the girl tried to explain how Ranma in his Knightwalker disguise had taken the King hostage and was now demanding that the anima process be reversed on his friends. She did so in near hysteric terms, but she seemed able to get the bare facts across.

The doctor listened intently, then shook his head. “Madness! What is Knightwalker doing! Is this because she was told about code EDT?”

“Um, what?” the female voice asked.

“Nothing, you didn’t hear that name from me Lily. But surely Sugarboy and Hughes should be able to handle the madness of one of their own? Why are you bothering me about this?”

“Oh, um… well, I guess they could at that.” The girl’s voice was so sheepish that Juvia and Edo-Wendy grinned at one another from where they were pressed against one another and Mystogan. “Er, I just thought you should be told.”

“Hmmf, well I suppose I should go along and make certain those idiots don’t somehow muck it up,” Byro muttered. “Very well, let me gather my potions…”

“Potions?” Cana whispered. Being the tallest woman there, she was standing behind Mystogan, pressed into his back. She could see the flush of his ears, which was a lot of fun but she had more things that are important on her mind. “Do you know what that’s about?”

“No idea. I, well, while I’m a native to this world, I’ve not been back in this world for longer than you have. There’s a lot I still don’t know. Still, we should be able to ambush them as they come through the corridor here.”

“Not as easily as you might think considering getting out of this closet is going to be irritating, but fine, let’s do this already,” the lush replied.

Moments later they heard the sound of the girl racing past them, shouting about how she’s going ahead of the “Slow-poke Dr. Byro!”

“Erg, one of these days Coco, heh, we’ll see how fast you are tied to a bed,” the doctor muttered, his voice barely reaching the group in the broom closest but causing every face therein to harden.

“Right, on three, and after that comment girls don’t worry about hitting below the belt,” Juvia said, being the one closest to the door. “One, two, three!”

With that she slammed her shoulder back into the doorway, causing it to slam open, before Juvia rushed out, instantly targeting the short, elderly man with the pockmarked face who had been hobbling down the corridor. Behind her came the other four, with Mystogan taking the first shot of the fight, raising his large staff and pointing it at Byro, as he intoned, “Air Staff: Magic Bubble!” This spell would enclose the target in a globe of air that would then be filled with sleeping gas. Putting his enemies to sleep was one of Mystogan’s favorite tactics.

The old man however proved both very quick to react and rather spry for someone so ancient looking. He instantly pulled out a vial of something and popped the cork the liquid within being flung out as he waved it with a shout of, “Storm Liquid!” A tiny flare of magic occurred as he said that in the rim of the bottle and the liquid shifted into dozens of short lived, small-scale cyclones, which caught both Juvia and Edo-Wendy. The two of them were tossed into the surrounding walls and away down the corridor with twin cries of shock and pain.

He then ducked under Mystogan’s own air-based attack. Launching another vial from his belt, cackling, “I don’t know who you are, but my flame liquid will burn you terrorists to ash all the same!”

Cana ducked as the liquid ignited, causing several dozen fireballs to appear and flash out in different directions, rolling forward under a few that would have hit her. Mystogan twisted around, using his staff to capture several of the fireballs that would have hit him in magical bubbles, dissipating them quickly. Cana quickly stabbed upwards with her purloined sword and as a spell built on its tip she shouted, “how about fighting fire with fire asshole!”

From the point of her sword, a fireball flew out to smash into Byro who had imbibed something from his belt a bare second before. He cried out in pain and was sent across the corridor to slam into the outer wall, but he rolled with it, looking little worse for wear. “Hah, Immunity potion! It allows me to ignore all magic based attacks for a given time.”

“Then perhaps we need to just bitch-slap your ass the old fashioned way,” Cana growled, closing the distance. Byro attempted to grab at another vial on his belt, but she was on him faster than he expected. A punch to the face shattered his jaw and sent him flying several feet sideways. He rolled as he landed, but it was obvious he was hurting.

“Air Staff: Magic Bubble!” Mystogan intoned, cursing inside his head, while another part of his brain was surprised by the sheer physical strength that Cana had just shown, and wondered as Ranma had shown him before, how she was so strong.

Despite that, the rest of his mind was on his own circumstances, which were not very good. While his Air Magic staff had a lot of charges remaining, it was unfortunately the only staff he had any longer. He’d used his one other Air Magic staff to save himself when he appeared in midair in this world, as well as another Illusion type staff to cover his approach to the Royal City. Ranma had shattered one and disarmed him of three more during their short fight before the anima had struck Fiore. And then of course he’d been forced to use several more in their trek through the royal citadel.

This left Mystogan with two staffs beyond his Air Staff. One was the Omnidirectional Sleep spell staff. Then there was the Gravity Pentagram staff, which allowed him to create runes, which would increase the gravity around them, how much corresponding to the magic the staff invested into each rune. But that one was only useful if he had time to set up, and was, once more, not exactly friendly to his allies. Unless I can get a Rune on him… that would work.

Thought becoming action, Mystogan raced behind the dozen large bubbles which he had shot toward Byro. But even as he did they were dodged by the old man after he had quickly grabbed up another vial from his belt. “Speedy potion!” the old man shouted as he started to bounce around the corridor heading towards where Juvia and Edo-Wendy had been flung by his earlier attack. “You’ll never catch me now, and I will return with soldiers enough to bury you all! You will never survive this effrontery on the dignity of his Majesty or me!”

Even as Cana and Mystogan raced after him, Byro’s prediction was correct, with his new potion he was leaving them behind. And he might well have gotten away, if not for the fact that despite being hurled down the corridor, Juvia and Edo-Wendy were both still very much alive. “Drip, drip, water magic special attack, desperate puddle,” Juvia intoned, her hand having shifted into her water form, wincing in pain as the water of her hand shifted into a puddle along the corridor’s floor. She was able to do this on top of shifting portions of her body into water form, but it felt as if she was scraping bits of her skin off, the feeling would go away once she reformed her hand into its normal solid form, but right now, the pain was pretty terrible.

Behind her, Edo-Wendy crouched, her twin daggers out in either direction, the lacrima inside their pommel’s glowing as she began to max out the energy within. She nodded at Juvia, who nodded back, staring down the corridor at the incoming old man.

He saw them to, and cackled, putting on even more speed as he started to race from the floor onto the wall and then even the ceiling. “As if you could stop me with a mere puddle! Gravity means nothing to me when I am traveling at this speed!”

“That’s what we wanted!” Edo-Wendy shouted, leaping into the air as hard and fast as her legs could push her. That wasn’t very much, only about three feet into the air, but it was enough to put her at the half way up the corridor side, and she twisted around, thrusting her daggers out to either side of her as she did so in broad strokes, sending the magic of the daggers, which had heretofore been simply covered with fast flowing water, out in waves from them. This created two water attacks, which flashed forward from her towards the incoming Byro with all the speed and vicious cutting power that the water around the dagger would have had normally.

Byro cursed, and then flipped himself down onto the ground, racing forward underneath the water attack, coming into contact with the water puddle that he now thought was simply a ruse to make him be in the air for that other attack, unable to Dodge. “But they still underestimate the power of my potions, I was fast enough to evade it.” That was the last thought he had before he spotted the other blue haired girl stab a sword down into the floor, and into the puddle that had built up on the floor.

“Electric Shock!” Juvia shouted, even as she wondered why she and other mages always felt the need to come up with names for these kinds of attacks, even if they were using weapons rather than their own magical powers*. Juvia wonders if perhaps it is simply ego on our part, or something inherent in magic itself, which forces the words upon us.*

Even as she thought that, Juvia had turned away, as the built up energy in her sword cascaded into the water of her puddle, and from that into the body of Byro. His forward momentum kept him moving through the puddle, being electrocuted every time his feet touched screaming all the while.

The now charred and spasming form of the doctor skidded along past the puddle to slam into the far wall, and Juvia pushed herself to her feet, quickly moving over to him, putting the blade of her sword at his throat just in case he still had some fight in him. Even without magic, the swords edge was perfectly serviceable.

Edo-Wendy moved to kneel beside the older man, touching his throat, and opening his eyelids. “He’s just unconscious,” she said with a sigh of relief. “I was worried for a minute there we might’ve overdone it.”

“Personally, I’m glad he was concentrating on just getting away from us, rather than trying to fight us,” Mystogan said coming up behind them with Cana. “Can you imagine what kind of damage he could have done with those vials of his if he did?”

“Juvia would rather not thank you, rather Juvia would just like to divest him of them, they could come in handy later. And for certain, they are better in our hands than his,” Juvia replied tartly, as she began to undo the belt buckle that held the majority of the vials that Byro had yet to use in this fight. Each vial seems to be a one-shot weapon, but that didn’t mean they were any less dangerous. She held up one of them, staring at the top of it, noting that it had a symbol of a fireball on it, before moving onto the next one, which had some kind of tentacled creature upon it.

Shuddering at that, she stood back up, and gestured Mystogan forward, “Your turn.” He looked at her quizzically, and she looked at back at him in honest confusion. “He still needs to be searched, after all. And you don’t expect young ladies like us to do such a thing to an elderly man like him do you?”

Sighing, Mystogan obeyed, searching the old man thoroughly and finding several more vials, small ampoules of various liquids, and an emergency magical talisman of some kind, which he pocketed quickly. “Right I’m done. Now let’s move on to the anima device itself.”

Cana nodded, then very deliberately took some of the fabric they were using to tie Byro up, stuffing it into his mouth and hefting him over her shoulder, as if she was lifting one of her beloved kegs of ale. “Which way from here?”

Mystogan turned and led the way back down the corridor towards the double doors that Byro had initially come out from. On the other side, they found the anima room, with all three girls shaking their heads and saying aloud “good grief, so tacky!”

“Perhaps, but it was made to look grand and overwhelming, Mystogan said shaking his head. I don’t agree with it, but it was.”

The double doors had brought them into the room, and several scientists and guards had turned in the direction as the door opened. The guards raced forward shouting “intruders alarm,” but the three women, after Cana set down Byro anyway, raced forward to meet them.

Edo-Wendy was now using backup sword instead of her preferred daggers or tonfas, and Juvia was still using the sword she’d had, minus its magic. But Cana both still had more of her throwing cards, and her own magical staff, which sent small fireballs towards several of the guards, while Mystogan did the same, the two of them keeping back from the other two, launching their attacks over their heads. Mystogan was also making certain that any guards that moved towards any kind of panel or anything that could possibly be an alarm system was taken out quickly.

Soon enough, most of the guards were down, along with the few scientists who had attempted to join them, and many who had simply tried to escape through the double doors, being caught in the action. With Edo-Wendy now grabbing up a glaive, instead of a sword to guard the door, the other three moved deeper into the anima room, knocking out and capturing everyone within as efficiently as possible.

Once that was done, Mystogan moved over to help Edo-Wendy barricade the door, as the other two went around, tying the prisoners up, before moving them into the central area, which had held the crystal as it had formed during the original anima process, far away from any controls or anything else they could use to cause mischief. Once the area was perfectly secure, Cana grabbed up Byro, and walked with him up the flight of stairs overlooking the central pit dumping him there on top of the dais. “Right” she said, looking down at the others, before kneeling down next to the old man preparing to slap him awake. “Let’s wake this guy up, and get some answers.”

**OOOOOOO**

Turning this way and that, Ranma hefted the king into the air shaking him as if he was a sack of wheat as he stared at the other two generals, Hughes and Sugarboy. As he did, he noticed several more companies of palace guard racing out to join their fellows, while several troopers had flown away on their legions in every direction. *But there’s nothing I can do about that now, just have to play the hand I was dealt.*

“None of that now, you would want to anything to happen to your king here would you?” She then turned in the opposite directions shouting down at the people who are still pushing the device that would transform the anima Crystal into usable lacrima. “And what did I say about moving that thing an inch closer? Do you honestly think I won’t snap his neck!?”

“If you snap his Majesty’s neck, you lose your hostage,” Hughes said calmly, even as he moved away from Sugarboy, leaping off of the dias they were sitting on, and moving in one direction as Sugarboy did the same in the other, his sword in hand like Hughes was holding his wand. “Soon after that, you’ll lose your life to, you can’t escape us here. You’re holding the King is your only playing card, the only thing you can do to stop us from taking you down!”

For his part Sugarboy was frowning, feeling something a little too much like fear going through him. While he had made his name fighting Laxus, who had been reckoned strong at the time, Sugarboy knew for a fact that Erza Knightwalker was stronger than he was. While he was more durable that she was, Erza’s ability to use the Ten Commandments so adroitly made her far more adaptable in combat than Sugarboy, and she was many times faster than he was too. She was also vicious, brutal and unrelenting. To hear this imposter speak so boldly about having overcome her was disturbing.

Even worse was her possession of the king, of course. With the king as a hostage, neither Sugarboy nor Hughes would be able to use any of their more destructive abilities directly on this Ranma woman. *Unless, unless I can get my sword into the dais beneath them, then my Rosa Espada’s properties will mess with her footing just enough perhaps for Hughes to close, get the king out of there, and then we can double-team him while the rest of the Army moves in. I don’t care how strong she is, there is no chance she would be able to fight all of these men, Hughes and myself at the same time!*

“And what will you lot do without a king?” Ranma quipped, shaking her head and shaking the King in her hands too. “What do you think about that, Faustie, would you be willing to exchange your life for mine? Or will you do what any self-serving monarch would do and order your troops back?”

In the traitors hands, Faust was trembling in both anger and fear at the moment. It had been many, many years since he had dealt with a physical threat to his life like this and even longer since he had felt so helpless, so fragile. The way Erza was simply holding him in the air like this, as if he weighed nothing, and was twisting him around this way and that was disturbing in the extreme. Mixed in with that fear and growing heat was anger. A lot of anger at this betrayal. He had heard Erza claims that she wasn’t Erza, but the words hadn’t registered in Faust’s head, which had boiled over instantly as she had picked him up, a furious rage building within him at this betrayal.

Yet even so, he knew that his primary loyalty had to be to his own life, so he had no real choice. “Everyone stands down!” he ordered. “So long as she holds me captive we will have to hear this madwoman out. So long as I am alive, there exists the opportunity to free me, and my person must be kept sacrosanct for the good of the kingdom.”

Rolling his eyes at the king’s attempt to puff himself up, Ranma glared down at Sugarboy, then Hughes before he twisted around to stare at the group of people pushing forward around the machinery. “You heard him. Back off.”

The group the pushing the machinery forward began to pull it away, and Ranma breathed an internal sigh of relief. “Right, now that that’s taken care of, we can get to my list of demands.” When the king made to speak, Ranma shook him like a rag doll. “None of that, wait until I tell you my demands before you start mouthing off. First of all, I want my friends in that anima released! You lot captured the entire Fairy Tail guild in there, and I want them out!”

The King and every other official their blinked, then the Sugarboy said, “If that is what you are after, you are in for a disappointment my dear. The animafication process is irreversible. We couldn’t reverse it even if we wanted to.”

“I don’t believe you,” Ranma said bluntly, shaking the king again. “Do I have to remind you again who’s the one that has a hostage here? That’s my demand, my price for your king’s life and freedom. I want my friends out of there alive and unharmed, and all of us returned to Earth Land.” Ranma was tempted to demand a promise that they no longer use the anima cannon, but given his discussion with Jellal earlier that day, he knew that was an impossibility. This whole society needed magic and would have to keep using it until something better came along.

The king began to cackle madly in his grip, shaking his head even as the people in the crowd began to look at one another, wondering about what the redhead had just said. Did the Kings anima really come from somehow transforming the life of mages into magical power? Many of them were uncertain how to think about that, while very few were just horrified at the very idea.

Then the king stopped laughing and started to taunt. “Are you insane!? Why in the world would I order Byro or anyone else to think of a way to reverse the anima process! That is the last thing we would want. The instant they become lacrima, they become my property! They become my power! And we would never allow it to escape our grip! If that is what you have come here for, then your mission was doomed from the start!”

Snarling angrily, Ranma turned the king around in her grip, to glare at him face-to-face. The power of that glare should have caused the king to fall silent in fear, but he was too far gone in his madness at the moment to feel such any longer. “In vain, I tell you! You have done this in vain! You will die for this effrontery on my person, and your friends will die, and in so doing fuel the lifeblood of my nation and my power! HAHAHAHAHAHAGH!!”

Ranma slapped him hard across the face with her free hand and shouted at him, “Well if this Byro created the anima weapon in the first place, he should be able to figure out some way to reverse it. Until he does, you are my prisoner and….”

At that point he was interrupted by Sugarboy hurling himself forward, pulling out a sword that had a very detailed rose as its protective guard. “Rosa Espada, Liquification!” he shouted, as he stabbed his sword into the side of the wooden stage beneath Ranma’s feet.

The wood of the stage instantly began to take on the properties of a liquid, bending and twisting this way and that under the weight of the king and Ranma. A normal person would have been completely upended, possibly even engulfed in the wood, but Ranma was a master of anything goes, and kept her footing for a brief moment before pushing off of the shifting wood underneath her into the air. She landed nearby, twisting the King around to once more use as a shield against Hughes, who had attempted to close, her grip on the back of the King’s neck tightening.

The young seeming general pulled to a stop with a scowl on his normally calm, almost smug, features, whacking his wand into his offhand as he stared at Ranma in anger. “Amazing! She’s truly amazing in how mobile she is, but this is most definitely a problem.”

Sugarboy twisted around the transformed stage as it melted into a wooden puddle on the floor of the courtyard, as the people began to shout and scream now, pushing their way out and away from the disturbance in ever-increasing numbers. He pulled out a second sword, this one more of a short stabbing dagger than a sword really, but it’s design matched his sword entirely too well, and he held it in the classic sword and dagger grip, the sword pressed out and away from the body, the dagger held in a defensive position crosswise as he stared at the redhead.

“Don’t worry Hughes,” he said calmly. “We’re in a stalemate for now, but time is on our side not hers. Wait for an opening, she’ll be sure to give us one soon.”

Ranma would have retorted to that somehow but whatever she might have said was lost as she sensed something above her, coming down through the air towards her. She leaped away, then twisted around to face Hughes and whatever had just slammed into where she had just been standing, only to see Panther Lily crouched there, his massive blade having just slammed into the ground where Ranma had previously been standing.

At the same time, Hughes took his chance lashing out and forward with his wand, sending a blast of energy into Ranma’s forearm. “Control Magic: Magic String!” For just a moment, there appeared a large band of tape between him and his target and Hughes shouted, “Release the King!”

Unlike the other generals, Hughes was solely a defensive general. He controlled several floors of the castle, which he had turned into a giant amusement park, within which he could control everything, from the rides to the attractions, including the mascot characters of the amusement park. It seemed quite a silly waste of energy, but it was also a very decent and deceptive defense, hiding its fangs beneath that very silliness, and had also been fantastic to both showcase magic, and bring in revenue for the King from various rich nobles, who paid for the privilege.

But away from his place of power, Hughes had to rely on Control Magic, a magic that was of very limited utility away from his domicile in terms of direct damage considering that it could be overcome by individuals who had a strong enough will. And the Control Magic’s medium, thick bands of tape were visible in the air, letting them be dodged. Despite that, he had created an entire combat style around momentarily taking control of his enemies, as well as the environment around him, which he did now, whipping his hand away from Ranma and down into the ground as the king was released. “Control Magic: Escape Golem!” From underneath the King, the cobblestones of the courtyard reformed into a small conveyance that looks like a roller coaster cart almost. “Get the king away from here!”

Cursing, Ranma lunged after the king, but found her way barred by Sugarboy, who thrust forward with his sword, then whirled around into another attack with his sword before thrusting out with his dagger, all of which Ranma dodged. The man was fast and skilled too, but alone he would not be much of an issue for Ranma. But even as he was fighting him, the rest of the Army now charged in, including Panther Lily with a giant sword as tall as he was and as broad as his upper arm. Hughes was now using his magic liberally on the ground, shouting “Control Magic: Attack Golem!”

One of those golems appeared directly underneath Ranma, forcing her to leap away, but Panther Lily charged her in midair, forcing Ranma to flip over him to dodge the blow from his sword. She hit out as she passed, sending Panther Lily down into the ground, but then Sugarboy was on him, rising up from having somehow used his sword to first make the ground act like water, then splashing it up towards Ranma in a wave, which carried him up with it. Ranma still dodged his initial attack, but then the dagger in Sugarboy’s other hand clipped the side of her bare leg. It didn’t penetrate, but even so, it made the redhead’s entire leg suddenly lock up, so that what should have been a push off of the shifting ground underneath them was completely nullified, causing him to fall backwards.

“You are mine now!” Sugarboy shouted, thrusting down with his sword.

But Ranma dodged, lashing out with a kick from his still locked up leg, slamming Sugarboy backwards. As she did so, Ranma felt her leg finally beginning to respond again, and then rolled away and up into the air, grabbing at a nearby rooftop and flipping herself up onto it, peering around and trying to spot the King.

Then Panther Lily was in her face, forcing Ranma away again. “You’re not getting away imposter!”

“You’re really annoying you know that!” Ranma shouted back, now taking the blow on one hand, returning a punch into Panther Lily’s chest that hurled the giant Exceed away with a cry of pain to slam into and through a building on the opposite side of the large courtyard. Even as she did, Panther Lily’s Buster Sword had released an explosion into Ranma’s other arm, sending her backwards too, wincing in pain. That had actually gotten through his durability slightly, she wrung out his hand in some amazement that it had.

Twelve legions dove on the redhead them, and Ranma was busy for a few seconds just dodging around. Even as she did so Ranma was trying to figure out where the King had gone, but not seeing him anymore. “Dammit!”

“I regret to inform you, that your ability to control events here has now faded utterly.” With that Sugarboy lunged forward from barely a foot behind the woman, only to watch in amazement as his target was still able to dodge. But this time, his dagger came up in an arc, aiming towards Ranma’s back. Even so she still dodged it, the blade nicking her leather bustier instead of the skin he had been aiming for.

The result of this was something that neither of them nor any of the other combatants could’ve foreseen. The dagger that Sugarboy used was called ‘Rosa Segunda’, and its properties was such that it could temporarily harden anything that would normally be soft, such as the human body, its muscles and legs, or cloth, which would then shatter as the target moved. After all, fabric wasn’t exactly strong and if hardened would act as if it had been dipped in liquid nitrogen and eventually shatter.

In this case, it had only touched the rubber strap that was one aspect of the three things holding Ranma’s bust, causing it to break under the strain. With it gone, the other two went quickly, and the makeshift corset that Juvia had created to hide Ranma’s bust burst, one of the buttons flying out and nearly taking a man behind her in the eye as he frantically dodged.

For a moment combat halted as all the men around Ranma stared, and she frantically pulled out her last emergency shirt from her weapon space, pulling it over her head and down, which did nothing to hide the size of her chest even as it did hide the details.

Hughes just had to know. “Amazing! Um, so so would Erza have a chest like that underneath hers?”

“Nope,” Ranma said shaking her head as she finished pulling down her shirt. “And believe me, trying to make my chest look like Knightwalker’s was tough as hell!”

“Amazing again, but that’s so harsh for her!” Then the stasis was broken, and battle resumed.

Almost immediately Ranma, realizing that the King was now out of her reach, began to lose her temper and with that, her self-control. Ranma always held back, it was a mental block from his training as a martial artist before coming to Fiore he had never gotten over. But now, with the king gone and his ongoing concern for his trapped friends, some of her self-control slipped. *I’m not going to kill them all or anything, but these goose-stepping assholes are gonna feel it in the morning!*

The first to realize this was a young soldier, whose name was Clive. He had been basically bullied into joining the army by his mates and up to now he had actually not regretted the decision as he joined in with several others thrusting his sword toward the interloper. It was only when he realized that he was airborne and flying up and away from the city that he realized that something was wrong, so quickly had Ranma grabbed his sword and flung it, and Clive, into the air. As he began to fall, he thought, *That’s it, if I survive this, I’m never giving in to peer pressure again!* When he noticed more than a dozen other troopers in the air around him, that thought solidified, then was replaced by another thought, which was seemingly universal judging from the shouts of his fellows. “MOMMYY!!!”

 Ranma glared around her at the suddenly extremely frightened soldiers. Then she disappeared, and was in among them, smashing people into the air, hurling them left and right, then stomping down hard. She didn’t bother using ki blasts or anything except once, pure strength and speed would do for these idiots.

 “Keep your distance,” Hughes shouted, sounding a little panicked now as Ranma revealed how much she had been holding back. “Try to slow her down and then bombarDDD!” he yelped as Ranma was in his face, smashing a blow into his chest that sent Hughes through a building. He groaned in agony, a few ribs broken, but all the generals were more durable than most humans would be, and he pushed himself to his wobbly knees, shouting out orders even as he stayed well away from the melee now.

Ranma roared, grabbing two soldiers and smashed their heads together so hard she heard a crunching sound, and scowled, shaking her head and calming down slightly. That didn’t mean she stopped tossing soldiers around though. Instead she started to aim them when she did, and soon nearly every window around the courtyard had at least two soldiers draping them. Those men though were actually lucky in comparison to the one hit by shrapnel as she exploded the ground underneath them, crushed limbs with her grip, or simply stomped them into mud, only using ki attacks every now and then as she concentrated on breaking the army’s spirit just as much as not killing them all.

Yet to her dismay more troops arrived from the castle, and, with both generals now staying the hell away from her, they started to get organized. The most expendable fighters, those with magical weapons that didn’t have many charges left, charged him, trying to pin Ranma down. At the same time the others launched attacks at Ranma, area effect spells that didn’t care who was in the area. Several times in the next few minutes Ranma found herself in the position of protecting the soldiers around him, racing into magical attacks before they could explode/expand.

And even that was not enough to break the morale of the soldiers. For awhile Ranma was right, most of these soldiers were simply following orders and were somewhat blameless for their king’s actions, they were fanatically loyal to their country, and Ranma was an invader.

With that in mind, Ranma began to move into a spiral. *A proper Hiryuu Shouten Ha would take them all and toss them everywhere around, and if I widen the spiral enough they might even survive the experience.*

At that point, Natsu, Wendy and the others arrived piling into the fight from one side. “Ranma-nii!” Wendy shouted, as she bounded from head to head towards Ranma, waving her hand frantically whenever she had it chance when she wasn’t punching out at someone.

Watching Wendy move towards her, Ranma felt a surge of pride as a teacher, nodding her head and canceling her spiral through the battlefield as she grinned. “Damn, what a magnificent master of the aerial style she’ll make when she’s older! Don’t you think so?” she asked, as she looked down into the face of the soldier she had been using as amount, flipping off of his head and kicking out at two others while dodging a blow from Sugarboy the same time rolling through the air and lashing out with a kick that caught Sugarboy in the side of his thigh, upending him to the ground, where he was nearly trampled by his fellow soldiers, messing up his pompadour and his pretty pink armor.

“Oh yeah! This is what I’m talking about, finally enemies I can punch!” Natsu shouted as he barreled into the troopers between him and the giant anima. The mages had waited until they were in a position to attack that group in particular, although once they launched their attack Wendy had promptly ignored their plans, moving towards Ranma through the crowd of soldiers.

Seilah too was nowhere to be seen at the moment, having moved to intercept another two battalions worth of troopers coming in over the northern sector of the city on their legions, the first of many such troops to respond to the threat to the king.

“Macro: Knock Yourselves Out,” Seilah intoned as she flew ahead of a large company of flying troopers on their legions. Both man and animal obeyed, and fell to the ground far below in droves.

But on the ground marching towards the city at a double were other companies, and Seilah swooped down on them, one after another. “Macro: Knock Yourselves Out,” worked its curse once more and more men fell unconscious by their own hands.

“Spread out!” shouted a voice barely discernable in the distance. “Her powers have to have some limits! See if you can cover your ears or something!” At that command, more troopers she could see marching in small companies began to break up further.

“Tsk,” Seilah tsked, scowling. “Why couldn’t our side of this conflict have a monopoly on intelligence?” With that, she swooped down on another group of soldiers watching as her Macro curse only worked on half of them.

Looking closer, she could see that the survivors had plugged up the sides of their helmets with loam. “Oh well, there’s always the old fashioned way,” she mused as she grabbed at one such helmet and crumpled it, and the head beneath, in her hand. Still, stopping these reinforcements effectively took Seilah out of the main fight for now.

Panther Lily saw this as he pushed himself out of the store he had most recently been smashed through, grunting and rubbing at his chest armor, which had been dented by the imposters kick, which had sent him flying that time. *Damn, I think that time she broke a rib.*

Nursing his wound Panther Lily looked around, deciding where to throw his weight in in order to turn the tide of the battle, and was about to rush forward to engage the newcomers, when a laugh interrupted him. “GEHEHEH, let the Fire Dragon Slayer spend his energy taking out the small fry. I prefer to hunt big game and you look to be the biggest game out here.”

Turning towards the sound of the voice Panther Lily in saw a man dressed in black with a wicked grin on his face to go with metal studs embedded into his face, a face that looked vaguely familiar to him, as if he had seen the likeness of it before but not quite. “So how about it cat, are you going to play, or run away like a little pussy?”

With a roar, Panther Lily pulled his Buster Sword out from the rubble next to him and twirled it around, lashing out in a blow that should have bisected the other man. Instead, that worthy turned, and punched out with a full body punch, slamming his fist into the incoming sword. While without magic there was a limit to how durable the Iron Dragon Slayer could make himself, his body was naturally even more durable than Natsu’s against attacks, although not up to Ranma’s now. He grimaced as pain coursed through his knuckles, down into his wrist and arm even as the Buster Sword caused an explosion, hurling him sideways. But at the same time, the impact had caused a crack to appear in the Buster Sword.

Gajeel rolled with the explosion, coming up coughing but grinning wildly, his hands out to either side before he slammed his fists together in front of his chest with another laugh. “GEHEHEH, I wonder how many shots you’re overcompensating sword can take before it breaks. And then how many times you can take a hit before you break too.”

Panther Lily roared a challenge, racing forward with his Buster Sword held high. “And I wonder how many explosions you can take before I put you in the ground!”

Soon enough the two of them were trading blows, with Panther Lily first using the Buster Sword before it, as Gajeel had predicted, shattered. That left the two of them punching one another hammer and tongs, neither one of them moving in the position they had taken across from one another, neither trying to dodge, just hammering into one another. Soon, Panther Lily’s laugh rose to join Gajeel’s. This was the way battles should be, strength versus strength and both of them lost themselves in the contest even as the rest of the battlefield began to shift dramatically.

Getting close to her sister, Ranma bounced off of another soldier’s head with enough force to send him flying off the rooftop they were currently fighting on, then wrapped Wendy in a hug, feeling her arms go around her shoulders while Ranma kissed Wendy on the cheek lightly. “Having fun, Imouto?” she asked before flinging her around and into the face of three guardsmen.

She kicked and lashed out with her fists, knocking all three of them flying, before landing on the head of a fourth, thumping a blow down into his head to send him to his knees before leaping away as another man dove at her previous position with a lance outstretched, slamming bodily into the man. “I don’t think so! This is much more your kind of fun than mine Onii-chan. Although I will admit that jumping around like this is always fun, as are their expressions when they can’t hit you.”

“I know right! We’ll make a master of Anything Goes out of you yet,” Ranma said with a laugh, even as she dodged a blow from Sugarboy. Of all of the enemies nearby, he was the only one with nearly enough speed and technique to be even slightly a threat, and he was used to fighting in a crowd like this, using his soldiers to cover these hit and run attacks.

Ranma though simply dodged him while causing chaos as she could, all her earlier ire cooled now that Wendy was there. With his little sister around, Ranma was no longer willing to even be as brutal as he had been before let alone more so, and was thus basically making time, hoping that Juvia and her team came through with Byro now while Ranma and her allies bogged down the vast majority of the army in any position to respond to anything currently in the Royal City. Ranma also feared that if he killed or neutralized Sugarboy – he couldn’t even find Hughes at the moment – the army would retreat entirely into the castle, catching Juvia and the others before Ranma could wipe out enough of them.

Wendy didn’t know everything that was going on in Ranma’s head or in this battle, and pointed over to the giant crystal, which had not been moved since the battle began. Natsu and the two Lucy’s were doing an excellent job of disrupting any attempts to get near it, with Lucy doing the most damage thanks to her Celestial Spirits, and, Ranma was interested to note, a very good tactical sense, using two or even three of them at a time along with her own abilities to completely flummox the forces attempting to regain control of the anima. She was also shouting at Natsu all the time, ordering him about how and when to use the two staffs that Anna had given him when they had first arrived in this weird world.

“Ranma-nii, what about that? Did you discover how to transform our friends back?” Wendy asked.

“I wish I could say I did imouto,” Ranma said, ducking under another blow from Sugarboy by bending her body backwards at an angle that would’ve broken the spine of most non-martial artists, flipping herself onto her hands for a moment and then kicking out like a mule, hurling Sugarboy away through the air with a cry of pain. She was then forced to roll to the side as someone tried to bring down a magical axe on his head, but the redhead kicked up off of the ground again, landing on the man’s out thrust hands, and then punched the larger than average man in the face, flipping away into another group of soldiers.

As she landed among them, Ranma continued her conversation with Wendy, not even raising her voice, knowing that she would be able to make her words out even over the tumult of the battle. “I was able to take the King hostage, which while the timing wasn’t exactly right, was part of my plan going forward. But he said there wasn’t any way to reverse the process. In fact, he got all maniacal about it, as if the very idea was unthinkable. Weird that, but he is insane.”

Ranma said that last word almost blithely, but she was dead serious. Faust was crazy, a mix between the kind of madman that would go ‘mad you call me, but I will show you all’ while laughing maniacally, and a Bond villain like that guy with the underwater fortress in her opinion. “Still, I hope that Byro, the scientist who apparently came up with the anima cannon will be able to reverse the process. All we’re doing right now is buying time for him to be captured and then forced to do that very thing by Juvia, Cana and your alter.”

“Just so long as were not fighting for the fun of it,” Wendy replied mock sternly. “If we were doing that, I’d probably just leave you here.”

“Someone’s a little snippy today,” Ranma quipped back.

“Don’t act like you wouldn’t like that,” Wendy returned, giggling even as she dodged under and through a series of lancers attempting to blast at her with vari-colored fire magic. “More importantly, did anything happen between you and my alternate? She didn’t keep on flirting with you did she?” the little girl asked worriedly.

“Well, she kind of did, but don’t worry, I didn’t, you know respond or anything, even when she did it in the bath, urgh, um you didn’t hear that!” Ranma said, clapping a hand over her mouth while she rolled through the air, dodging through several lightning and fire attacks, and then using the impetus of a wind attack to change her direction. This didn’t mean that she stopped blushing, both from her near mistake there and the memory of Wendy 2.0’s body when she bared it all in the bathhouse.

“Ewww!!!” Wendy squealed, looking as if she was sick while dancing through a group of soldiers staying away from that one dagger and sword user that her Onii-chan seemed to be taunting. “Ranma-nii that is so gross!”

“God dammit will you stop having a freaking conversation like you’re sitting around at home!” shouted more than one of the soldiers. “We’re trying to kill you here!”

“Then maybe you should do a better job of it,” Ranma laughed back. “Honestly, where is this nation getting soldiers today. Half of you couldn’t hit the broadside of a barn, and don’t get me started on your tactics!”

Elsewhere in the fight, Lucy Ashley looked over as she heard a massed roar of wrath and anger rising from the large group of soldiers around Ranma and Wendy whistling appreciatively. “It has to be some kind of art form, how well he can piss people off I mean, right?”

“I think so,” Natsu said with a grunt, punching out one soldier, then kneeing another one hard in the gut, even as he grabbed the man sword out of his unresisting hand, and overpowered the magic within it tremendously as he flung his hand out, lashing out with the fire of it into another group of soldiers causing them to scream and fall backwards into their fellows. “At least, I think he’s said that it’s an actual martial arts technique: to get his opponents mad and make them attack in a rage, making mistakes. It even worked on me once or twice.”

“More like every time,” Lucy replied for him, directing Capricorn forward from where she was standing at the back of the large float, which had been carrying the Anima Crystal throughout the parade. On the other side of the float from Natsu next to where Lucy Ashley was standing, Taurus smashed his way through soldier after soldier, using the wheel of one of the other floats as a shield against any magical attacks coming his way, with Lucy Ashley directing him towards them when she spotted them. The Edo version of his mistress was good at doing that, and was also extremely good with the staff she held, which sent out small to large jolts of electricity upon impact, a more energy-efficient variant of the lightning type weaponry that many of the soldiers carried.

Beside Lucy herself up on the cart, Sagittarius moved around the Crystal, taking shots at any soldier or group of soldiers that looked as if they were trying to work together, but with the two generals being involved in the fight around the other two Dragon Slayers, and Ranma doing all he could to negate their abilities with magic, it was a question of which would give out first, the Army’s ability to hurl bodies at the defenders, or Lucy out of magic to power her celestial spirits. Empowering three of her celestial spirits at the time was hard, but she could keep it up for at least two hours before she started to feel exhaustion, so long as none of them took a lot of damage and force her to send them home.

Or at least, that was what she thought. But after being smashed off of the roof, where Ranma and Wendy had begun to literally make fun of all of the troopers’ attempts to corral them, Hughes had taken a step back and viewed the battle as a whole from his position in an alleyway before deciding where he wanted to get involved again. This had absolutely nothing to do with the fact that he was nursing a broken rib from that one strike, and was honestly fearful of getting within hand-to-hand range of the redheaded imposter again, no sir.

Now he slowly moved through the crowd of soldiers, staying hidden until he was close enough to target the group around the anima with his magic. Then he slapped his wand down in three places, on the ground of the courtyard, then connected the three with a swishing flick of his wand as he shouted, “Control Magic: Giant Golem!”

The ground underneath them began to tremble violently, as a large golem appeared, growing out of the ground even as Hughes directed it. One punch caught Lucy Ashley, hurling her to one side, before that hand was chopped into by an enraged Taurus shouting, “How dare you, even if she isn’t my mistress, Lucy’s boobs are sacred!”

He was so busy raging, that several of the guards were actually able to tag him with their own magical attacks, doing enough damage to force him back to the Celestial Realm with a long drawn out cry of “MOOoo!~”

The rest of the golem finished rising up between Natsu and the Anima Crystal, cutting him off from it as soldiers raced in from the other side. One of them got into the driver’s position on the float holding the crystal and began to back it away, heading back towards the castle.

The sudden movement caused Lucy to nearly be shaken off the thing. A second later she was holding on for dear life, with Sagittarius right behind side her, his hooves actually having no help whatsoever in attempting to hold on, despite the fact that they were able to use a bow with relative ease. Both of them were helpless, unable to stop the soldiers from getting away with the Anima Crystal, while Ranma and Wendy were well on the other side of the courtyard.

“Oh no you don’t,” Natsu roared, grabbing up another sword from a fallen soldier and turning around, overpowering it with the force of his desire to use it as he raged, “Fire Dragons Artificial Flame Sword!”

The magical sword had been at about two thirds of its stored power, but now it burned all of that power out in one huge attack. A fireball the size of the golem smashing into it, shattering the stone and going onwards to impact the float and a portion of the Crystal. The float skidded dumping the crystal out on that side and flinging Lucy and Sagittarius out next to it even as the portion hit by Natsu’s attack began to glow.

Pushing herself out of the rubble, Lucy shouted out “Natsu you idiot, watch that kind of thing, you could have fried me and Sagittarius you…” her tirade halted, as she came face to face with a glowing portion of the Anima Crystal and backed away rapidly. Grabbing at Sagittarius she pulled the spirit of along with her shouting out is it supposed to glow like that!

Even Hughes, who had been staring at the destroyed golem, which had been the largest creature he could create with his control magic, blinked, staring at the segment of the Anima Crystal that had been hit by Natsu’s attack. “That doesn’t look like the way the Crystal is when it’s transformed into lacrima,” he mused, frowning thoughtfully. I wonder what the heck is going on there.”

Even Ranma, Sugarboy and Wendy stopped fighting for a few moments, the two Dragon Slayers perched on a Legion’s back and the head of one of the troopers respectively as they turned in the direction of the anima. But whatever any of them had thought was going to occur did not match the reality, as the glowing portion of the crystal slowly sloughed off of the rest to plop onto the ground still glowing while it separated into two mounds, one only about a seventh of the size of the other. Once that was done, the two mounds began to shrink.

Ranma was the first to realize something was going on, as those globs started to form into human shapes, and he grinned wildly. “Oh hell, it can’t have been that simple can it!?”

By this point even Panther Lily and Gajeel had stopped fighting. Gajeel was holding onto one arm of Panther Lily, while Panther Lily was sitting on top of the Dragon Slayer, that arm raised to try to pommel him, while also pushing down the Iron Dragon Slayer’s arm with his other hand. Both of them had turned in the direction of the two glowing globs now, and both of their eyes were wide, even Panther Lily, an Exceed never having seen anything like this before. “What is happening?!”

Everyone got their answer as the globs finished congealing, having shrunk now into two human shapes. Then there was a sound like a bell almost, along with the shattering of a glass container, and both blobs disappeared in blinding flashes of light. As people all across the square and even beyond rubbed at their eyes, trying to dissipate the flashes that had caused, they were greeted not by the sight of two piles of glass or shattered crystal or whatever they might’ve expected.

Instead, there stood two members of Fairy Tail the Earth Land version. And it was not just any two people, it was Erza Belserion and Gray Fullbuster.

Both of them looked confused for a moment, staring around them, very obviously wondering how the hell they had gotten there. But both of them were also very experienced mages, and extremely combat oriented ones too. Seeing their friends attacking and being attacked in turn, by what looks like a giant army, they both very visibly decided that any questions could wait until after they had joined the fight.

Erza roared out “Requip: Heaven’s Wheel!” There was another far smaller blinding flash this time, as her night things werr quickly replaced by her Heaven’s Wheel armor, including the twelve blades that floated around her, which she directed in every direction as she shouted “Dance my blades. Circle Swords!” Each sword attacked of its own volition almost, as she strode towards Ranma, determined to get some answers from him, smashing aside any individual that dared get in her way.

“I don’t know what’s going on here, but if you pick the fight with Lucy and that flame brain over there, you pick the fight with Fairy Tail! And I’m not going to let that pass! Ice-Make: Triple Barreled Cannon!” Slamming the fist of his flesh hand into his artificial hand, Gray frowned a little at how unresponsive his artificial hand was. But he could still feel the magic build, and as he pulled his fist away, there appeared around it three interconnected cannons, as if his artificial arm had been replaced by the large weapon. Gray grinned, clapping his other hand onto the back of the guns where the barrels merged twisting around and sending out blasts of ice like so many grenades into the surrounding soldiers.

Laughing wildly as a weight that she hadn’t consciously felt was there disappeared from her shoulders at the sight of Erza striding towards her through the battlefield, Ranma leapt high and shouted out, “Natsu, grab up every weapon you can, drain those suckers and boil that freaking crystal! Get our friends out of there! The rest of you protect him!”

He turned to Wendy and nodding in the direction of the Crystal. “Come on Wendy, let’s move.”

The two of them moved towards Erza, who had instantly begun to fall back towards the crystal, divining both Ranma’s purpose and what he was saying at the same time, her eyes flashing in anger, as she now started to attack the troopers in earnest, understanding some of what had occurred here if not the how. The two Dragon Slayers met up with her, and Erza actually blushed slightly as she found Ranma’s arms around her in mid battle, the shorter redhead leaning up to kiss her just under the ear, before she flipped around Erza, and continued on her way grinning back at her.

That had been so totally inappropriate in public that it wasn’t even funny, let alone the fact it was the first time Ranma had initiated a kiss with her in public regardless of his current body. “Ranma what is going on!?”

“A lot, a lot of stuff I can’t tell you about right now, we’re busy. But, long story short, all of Fairy Tail was changed into magical power in the form of that crystal over there, these idiots work for a king who is trying to change it into lacrima so it could be used to power their society, and we just figured out that magic, or at least fire magic possibly imbued with some of Natsu’s own energy, was able to reverse the process and release you and Gray.”

“You’re going to have to unpack that for me later but I suppose the cliff notes version does indeed tell me all I need to know!” With that, Erza turned away, and began to attack the crowd of enemies around them even more viciously, while another battalion, which Seilah hadn’t been able to intercept, arrived throwing its own troops down into the battlefield.

A moment later Ranma landed next to Lucy, helping her up from where she had fallen from a nearby attack from someone who had hurled a lightning bolt from of weapon. “There’s a guy named Sugarboy around here, watch out for him, he’s able to somehow change hard stuff to soft, and something that’s soft to hard. Gray, with your ice powers, I think that means you’re able to match him even better than I am. Erza, I think you’d probably be best served to stay away from him. There is another one named Hughes, he uses some kind of control magic, which is able to change and then control both the ground and people, although people can throw off his control after a few seconds. He’s a sneaky asshole too, who seems to be a bit of a brain. Be aware of them. Natsu, just keep flaming!”

“Oh yeah!” Natsu shouted as he grabbed a sword from someone else, one that he had noticed was another flame weapon.

He turned in the direction of the Anima Crystal, and both Hughes and Sugarboy, who had been startled to see someone who could only be the alter of Erza Knightwalker – and one who had initially shown a body that was far better than their own version-, shouted as one. “Stop him!”

**OOOOOOO**

In the excitement of Natsu’s accidental discovery, Ranma had completely forgotten the fact the king had escaped. He had been driven into the castle’s outer grounds by Hughes wheeled creation. Once there, he had ignored everything around him and rushed off not to the main spire of his palace, but to a secret small subway station set into the side of the castle’s gardens, which were themselves set to one side of the large main spire. He ignored everyone else’s attempts to get his attention as he raced on, mumbling under his breath “how dare she, how dare she! That Erza, or whoever she was, she will pay, they will all pay! Her and the Exceed, it is time to sweep the board clean, wipe out the Exceed yes, wipe out those who would look down upon humanity, upon **me**. I’ll crush that Dragon Slayer! They will all know true fear when they see the Dorma Anim.”

The subway tunnel had been created to connect the palace secretly with the equally secret military installation where Faust’s father had moved the Dorma Anim creation. Now it took Faust there within minutes of his entering the small subway tram. He exited out on the other side, to the face of four guardsmen, who quickly came to attention, but he ignored them rushing on into a large open, which, while not having any of the majesty of the anima room, was even larger.

At its center was the Dorma Anim. It looked for all the world like a sleeping dragon out of ancient fairy tales, with two wings, four clawed feet, and a long, sinuous neck. The wings were currently curled around the rest of the body like a protective egg, but its head was still visible, poking out from between them.

A scientist was there, a tall saturnine looking man, with a long thin face, and a mustache that curled up and around several times on either side of his head, looking like twin question marks. “My gracious Majesty, what in the world is going on? We have lost all contact with Byro, and the anima room, further, I thought we were supposed to take an installment of energy from the latest anima, today, as we did yesterday. It has not arrived.”

“We face a threat Dr. Shorner, one that is already taken our most powerful general, and which is even now fighting our Army, and, from what I saw laughing about it. We must counter this threat with an even greater power! An overwhelming power, one under my control, we will never be betrayed again! The mad King shouted, before gaining control of himself and going on in a calmer tone. Are you still connected to the palace?”

That connection was supposed to take a small amount of power at certain intervals to add to the energy already within the ancient weapon. But it could be overpowered, with the Kings blood to activate the override, all of the magical energies within the castle and indeed throughout the capital city could be drained away thanks to the large magical array that had been installed underneath it by his father. He had faced severe internal chaos thanks to his policy of conserving magic, but his son had never removed that array, so it was still there, still able to siphon magic throughout the capital city. It would even siphon power from the anima Crystal where it was sitting in the courtyard, although not as much and certainly not as efficiently as the actual magical siphon device could.

Dr. Shorner paused, staring at the King in shock, before nodding his head very firmly. “I understand your Majesty, but I will need a bit of your blood to activate that array. After that,” he paused then shrugged, “after that your Majesty, I honestly have no idea how long it will take the Dorma Anim to become fully charged, or even charged enough to move under its own power.”

“That is fine, we are safe here, and regardless of how little that imposter seems to think of our Army and Knightwalker’s fellow generals, I think we can trust them to at least slow her down.”

Dr. Shorner led the king over to a large blood red lacrima set into an elaborate array of runes on the ground in front of the Dorma Anim’s head. There the king sliced into his palm with a small dagger without hesitation, setting his bloody palm into the stone and activating the array. The blood Crystal glowed, then pulsed along with Faust’s heart. He found himself unable to pull it away for several minutes until the pulses began to settle down, each pulse sending bursts of light down into the runes, then around the room.

Those pulses slowly started to disappear, to be replaced by golden light filtering in from 14 distinct points around the room’s circumference. Slowly filling in the runic array back the other way towards the Dorma Anim resides at the center of the room. The king watched in fascination, as did the scientists and other workers around, as that magical power started to bleed into the ancient weapon, and the lights around the city started to go out, starting from the exterior.

**OOOOOOO**

Several guards looked at their weapons quizzically as the crystals on their pommel’s went from gold, blue or red to a dull gray, then up at the lights over the gateway into the Royal city as that to went out. These men had stayed on duty here, despite the fact that practically every other guard in the city, including all of those who had not been on duty to help keep the civilians from getting underfoot during the parade, had rushed towards the courtyard when Ranma had taken the King captive. They were not in other words individuals gifted with either intelligence or ambition, but even they could notice something weird was going on. What the heck?

Another guard was also looking at his weapon, but hearing something in the distance, looked up, quickly shouted, “Incoming!” Just as a giant four-wheeled truck zoomed over the horizon, followed by several dozen more. After that was a small dune buggy, racing towards the outer gate of the Royal City with no visible thought of stopping when it reached them.

This was proven correct an instant later as Natsu Dragion slammed his car through the front gate of the Royal city and into the streets beyond, racing through the area that the Dorma Anim was currently draining, noticing his car was slowing down as he did, but able to outpace the effect without actually noticing it was there. A few of the other trucks that contained the rest of the alternate version of Fairy Tail did slow down dramatically in that area, and more than one of them looked at their weapons quizzically as the lacrima on them started to drain, without even being used in combat, but the speed of all of their conveyances was such that they were past the initial area of draining before it began to truly affect them.

**OOOOOOO**

Shagotte stared at the guard in front of her, a feeling of fear rising within her at the odd news he bore. *Now would be a very good time to have my powers of vision back,* she thought with some anger at the human whose very presence had caused her ability to see the future to become so broken and disjointed. “You say you can see the magic flow now?”

“Yes your highness,” rumbled the large guard.

While not the size of Panther Lily, the families who contributed to her special Castle Guard had developed a sort of half-human transformation, making them larger and far more powerful looking than most Exceed. They weren’t any faster of course, and they actually lost a bit of their ability to fly for extended periods, but they still retained the traditional Exceed ability to use, and even to see magic being used.

“My patrol and I were flying over the Edolas Royal City as you had ordered, and we saw it. There is an old runic construct at work throughout the city, draining the magic from within and directing that magic to a point nearby. And your majesty, that is… that is a lot of magic,” the royal guardsman went on in more detail, his deep voice ending on a worried note with the last few words. “I, I think it’s even more magic than which we Exceed could use as a whole race.”

“Is it more than which we used to create the floating island spell?” Advisor 2 asked quickly before Shagotte could get a word out.

He was speaking of the spell Shagotte’s great, great grandfather had devised to separate Extalia from Edolas centuries ago. The spell had taken the magical power of every living Exceed, and had killed dozens of the elderly through the strain, including her great, great grandfather. Yet their sacrifice had created the floating islands of rock that were the home of her people now via a permanent spell that renewed itself constantly without the need for an internal magic source. It was the greatest, most powerful example the Exceed had ever accomplished.

But now the royal guard nodded. “Sir Mejeer I don’t know, but judging from what I was told… perhaps. I can only say that the amount of power frightens me.”

*Oh, that’s his name. Right.* Shagotte put that thought to the side for a moment to concentrate on the here and now. “And if it frightens a royal guard, we would be fools to ignore it.”

She closed her eyes, meditating for a few seconds, waving to silence anyone among her court who tried to speak for a few minutes, then she reopened her eyes and said firmly, “I think that regardless of our policy of neutrality, we need to pick a side in this conflict. These attackers, these Earth Land mages and their local allies are an unknown factor, but they have not, to my knowledge started any conflict with us. Further, judging from a report of another one of our scouts, they have two of our lost children with them. That speaks well of their character.”

Shagotte paused as one of her secondary advisors snorted, looking as if he wanted to spit. The scout who had observed the two Exceed among the attacking group of mages had also told them that one of those Exceed seemed to have perfected the same human-form that Panther Lily had prior to his exile. That marked her out as a heretic to too many Exceed.

Looking around at her advisors, Shagotte let her face harden, as she held their gazes one after another, willing her point across. Even without her visions, Shagotte still could get an impression of the future, and the future if Faust won was very, very dark to look at. “While on the other hand, we have long feared Faust’s ambition and madness. This magic that Guardsman Crishka has told us about,” *hah, see, brain, I can remember names,* “it has to be something Faust or his father put in place. And the sheer power of it marks it out as a danger to everyone around him who has angered the mad king. That includes us Exceed, as he has always resented our magic. Whatever we can do, we must do to offset this threat.”

The four older Exceed which made up her court- including her two advisors whose names Shagotte really needed to try to remember at some point, looked at one another. “Your majesty, I have to disagree. The Edolas King is surely more concerned with the threat to his capital and to the anima that is the center of his power than to attack us here. Further, if this thing he is attempting with the magic works, he will be in an even stronger position. We cannot act against him. Instead, we could help him, remove the emergency that is causing him to go to such lengths.”

“NO!” shouted another advisor. “We should do nothing against either. Prepare our guards for action yes, perhaps move in if a large force of humans moves in our direction. But we should not act precipitously.”

The argument went back and forth for a time, but not one of her court was in favor of Shagotte’s proposal. She tried to speak up to convince them, but with her mind still dealing with the remnants of her migraine, and with her advisors normal attitude of ignoring her words as those of a sentimental young woman rather than a monarch, she could not convince them. Eventually it was decided they would do nothing, but watch and prepare for trouble. It was the ‘most sensible’ plan, which Shagotte translated to the one with the least danger. That didn’t mean she agreed with it though.

“Very well my advisors, we will, as always, bow to your wishes. Indeed, we do so, so often we have to wonder which among us is the ruler?” Shagotte nearly snarled, her teeth grinding together. The courtiers all flinched away from her sudden anger and she stood up from her throne, sweeping down the dais, or as much as she could sweep given the huge overdone dress she had to wear as her royal regalia. She moved through the courtroom to the doors leading to her chamber, where she stopped, looking over her shoulder. “And when, not if, counselors, but **when** this comes back to bite our race on the rear, we will all know precisely who to blame for it.”

**OOOOOOO**

The battle in the city had spiraled out of the courtyard where it had begun. The initial arrival of the troopers from the castle had been augmented by several more battalions of legions from the south and north of the city. Seilah could only be in one place at a time, and her Macro curse did indeed have a limit of how far it could spread. This had eventually forced Seilah to retreat becoming somewhat overwhelmed by the number of flying enemies trying to get past her, forcing Seilah backwards into the city.

She blinked when she saw Erza Belserion there and furthermore using magic, then saw Gray to one side, battling someone else one on one, pushing him away from the rest of the fighters. The man he was fighting had a rather chiseled chin, to go with exceedingly pretty features, a sword with the image of rose on its guard, and a dagger with the image of another rose in a similar position on it. The two of them were going at it with the stranger using his sword to defend himself against the ice magic of Gray, while trying to close in, using his dagger offensively. Seilah saw the opponent his dagger flashing out to somehow slice into Gray’s arm, causing it to stiffen, spasming into a straight line. But Gray twisted away and used his free hand to create an ice lion, which lunged at the man, being turned into a liquid that flowed around his enemy at the last moment.

If she had been more cognizant of Gray Fullbuster’s Ice-Make magic, she would have been surprised to see him able to use the type of magic used by his rival Lyon, which was another branch of Ice Make magic, but which concentrated on one hand to create short term animal constructs with brute force application of magic rather than more solid mechanical ones with less magic. As it was, she didn’t and decided to ignore that ongoing battle in favor of both gaining altitude to take in the whole battlefield and to find Ranma.

From there she spotted another group barreling through the city to the maelstrom of combat. While hundreds of civilians were trying to get away, this group was forcing their way into the battlefield, using trucks and a few other magical vehicles as mobile strong points. As she watched, the alternate versions of the Fairy Tail members began to spill out from each of these constructs, slamming into a group of soldiers that had been racing through the city to help against Ranma and the others.

She swooped low, and could hear Jet and Droy shouting out about how they were the strongest in Fairy Tail as they attacked with magical mace and boot, then saw Edo-Natsu drive his off-road dune buggy through a few of the enemy troopers, twisting and turning his car this way and that through the streets of the city in such a way that he smashed into several other clusters of troopers but missed an equal number of civilians. In this manner, they were nearly halfway through the city at this point, and gaining momentum as they broke through the section of the city where the civilians had begun to retreat to and away from the groups of guards that had been on duty near the outer walls before attempting to come to the aid of the King.

She raised an eyebrow micrometrically somewhat impressed by his skill, before turning her attention on a few of the others observing quietly for a moment. Because of that, she was the first to realize there was something odd going on. She saw the lights start to flicker off behind the group from Fairy Tail then saw the phenomenon spread deeper into the city towards the central area where the battle was still growing. Though she didn’t feel anything, she saw the weapons on both sides of the conflict below starts to fade. It was as if the magic within them all was being sucked away, and she frowned, then twisted around and headed back towards the courtyard.

Ranma was still there, directing Natsu to use any weapon with a fire enchantment on it that he could find to attack the anima. They had attempted to use other types of weapons, but only Natsu’s use of fire weapons seemed to do anything. Ranma had not found any weapons with water enchantments on them, and there didn’t seem to be any air-type weapons. And no, lightning was not the same thing, Wendy had tried one such and nothing had happened. Further, Lucy and the others had attempted the same thing, only to see no reaction. For some reason, Natsu was able to empower the fire magic weapons with his ‘color’ so to speak, and it was that color that allowed the magic to destroy the anima spell.

By this point, several more members of the original Fairy Tail had just been free, but it was slow going. It took a full charge from a fire-enchanted weapon wielded by the Fire Dragon Slayer to do anything. Other types didn’t seem to work in his hand, and Ranma wondered if Natsu was somehow still imbuing the fire from the weapon with a bit of his own Dragon Slayer magic somehow, or if not his magic, then a bit of his being somehow into the magical fire.

Regardless, it took a full charge form the weapons of their enemies in order to free some of the Fairy Tail mages, and it seemed to be random who popped out. The first to be freed after Gray and Erza had been seven mages whose names Ranma hadn’t bothered to learn yet, weaker mages that were little better than Lucy Ashley in a fight.

After that had come Evergreen. Like Erza and Gray, she hadn’t needed to be told any of the specifics in order to realize what was going on. She had instantly taken to the air where she had begun to use her Fairy Glitter magic to creating a no-go zone in the air around the anima. She hadn’t begun to use her secondary magic, Gorgon’s Eyes, though. When Ranma had gotten close enough to ask why, she confessed to feeling extremely weak magically. She was unwilling to chance using it on the sheer number of people around them but had promised to try if pressed.

The next mages to pop out of the anima were Max and Macao, and both of them were next to useless, their magic drained almost enough to put them in comas. The next after that was Bisca and Alzack, equally drained, but thanks to Guns Magic not needing much in the way of energy. They were still fighting hard, teaming up with Sagittarius to provide long-range cover. Bisca had even provided an extra gun for Macao, who proved to be an okay shot with her pistol.

Still, them being drained like that was a bad precedent, and while Erza was now out and once more among the living, Ranma and practically everyone but Natsu, Gray and Gajeel were worried about the moment where they’d find the body of a friend appearing rather than a living Fairy Tail mage, no matter how badly weakened.

Worse, their efforts to free their friends had caused a reaction among their enemies. While Sugarboy was now fully involved in a private duel with Gray – instigated by Ranma so he could keep his attention on the battle as a whole – and Panther Lily was occupied with the surprise arrival of Gajeel, Hughes was still around. He had fallen back, and was basically hiding now, moving from one hiding place to another but relaying orders to the troops, the sheer number of which was starting to get through Ranma’s allies. He had noticed what they were doing and had ordered any trooper who used a fire-enchanted weapon to fall back, away from the Anima. And with the number of other scents and the enemies all around them, even Ranma couldn’t figure out where he was.

“Damn it Natsu, don’t just grab up a random fire weapon and use it, it needs to have a full charge! If you’re going to do that, wait until you have at least four or five fire weapons, then use them all at once!” Ranma roared, as Natsu used a fire-enchanted dagger only to have nothing happen to the anima.

“Fine, then that’s what I’ll do!” Natsu shouted back, before turning in a random direction as he saw a few troopers pulling back through the rest of their fellows. “You! Hahaha, I see you running off! Your weapons are mine!” he laughed manically, rushing after them and smashing through more than an even dozen other troopers. They still slowed him down enough for more of their fellows to fall back further and soon, Natsu was surrounded his friends unable to get to him, but still fighting strong.

From where she was using her aerial style to move over the battlefield with an ease even a legion wouldn’t be able to match, Ranma saw this and had just made his way over to her fellow Dragon Slayer when Seilah arrived. “Macro: Everyone On The Side Of The King Should Freeze In Place!”

While her magic couldn’t carry beyond the reach of her voice, and with these troopers not warned about her powers, they were unable to combat against her curse. This easily turned the tide of battle around Ranma and Natsu, who instantly burst out of the cordon around him, charging forward with a loud cackle to slam into the group of troopers he’d been chasing. He grabbed up seven fire-enchanted weapons from their still frozen, and now unconscious, bodies, racing off with them in his arms back to the anima as Bisca and the others

Ranma however found herself too preoccupied to notice all this as Seilah moved into her personal space, pressing her chest against the redhead’s. Before Ranma could do more than squawk at this violation of her personal space, Seilah had leaned in kissing her. It was brief, but very deep, as she had instantly thrust her tongue into Ranma’s throat, and their tongues dueled for a moment. Then she pulled back and smiled licking her lips as Ranma gaped at her. “Mmm cherry, lovely.”

“Erk,” Ranma mumbled, stumbling back as most people around them gaped, even the enemy soldiers staring.

Lucy shook her head somewhat shocked at the display, as well as wondering where the hell the demon girl had come from. “What the heck? So… Ranma’s involved with Erza, possibly Jenny, and now Seilah too? Is he a playboy?”

“Heh, shouldn’t that be playgirl, now?” Lucy Ashley shot back, wiping at a trail of blood on her face from a cut just above her eye.

From nearby Bisca sighed internally, seeing this as confirmation that she had been right to leave Ranma. While Seilah had somewhat grown on her, she wouldn’t have been willing to split time with Ranma with her and Erza both. And seeing the two women kiss had made it very clear she would have had to get used to that idea or fend Seilah’s interest in Ranma off. *It’s kind of obvious Ranma doesn’t have it in him to ward her off himself… huh, does he just not know how to say no to that kind of thing? From women anyway? Weird.*

Luckily for everyone involved, Erza’s reaction to this would remain unknown just yet. She had just spotted someone matching the description of the last general, the one called Hughes, who Ranma had mentioned to her entering a building with several other soldiers. She had instantly gone after them and missed the kiss entirely.

Actually, Ranma was mildly freaked out at the moment. Seilah’s interest in him right now, after she’d spent some of her time over the last day or so thinking about girls and relationships, was the last thing she wanted to deal with.

Beyond that… “This is **sooo** not the time Seilah!” she hissed, gesturing around her as the stasis Seilah’s action had started ended, and the battle resumed. With that she punched out, shattering the blade of a glaive trailing lightning around its edge. Then she leaped into the air landing on the shoulder of another guardsman, smashing his helmet so hard it crumpled like tinfoil along with the head beneath before she leaped away.

Soon he was once more embroiled in the battle, even as Seilah trailed him, smacking aside two guards and taking to the air to hover over the redhead, smiling appreciatively as she watched Ranma leap and bounce around below her, momentarily forgetting the problem she had seen coming. She always preferred Ranma in his female form. Oh, she knew she somewhat liked Ranma’s male body, but she was far more used to being sexually attracted to a woman, thanks to her ‘relationship’ such as it had been, with Kyoka.

Then out of the corner of her eye, she saw the first of the Edo-Fairies arriving, and that made her remember the odd phenomenon she had seen but moments before. “We have a problem,” she said, ignoring for a moment both the fact she had kissed Ranma just now, and her reaction to it.

“Um it sure doesn’t look like it from here,” Ranma quipped, stopping on the head of a dismounted Legion rider to stare at the oncoming guild. She saw this world’s Bisca and Alzack stumble as they saw themselves, while Anna and Lisanna raced ahead, shouting for Natsu. Behind them Edo-Elfman and Edo-Mirajane chased after the younger twins, with the rest of the guild, even Natsu Dragion, spreading out and attacking the back of the army all around Ranma and her allies. “Now if only we could find that Hughes asshole, this fight’d be in the bag.”

In retrospect, Ranma knew she really should have known better. She seriously, seriously should have known better.

Elsewhere in the battle, Bisca listened intently as Lucy explained a bit more about the world they were currently in. “So you’re saying that this is some kind of alternate dimension, and there are different versions of us here? They honestly don’t look all that difference to me?”

Chancing a glance sideways to Alzack, Lucy shrugged a little. “Well, how different they are seems to vary wildly, I mean for me and Lucy Ashley over there, it’s more a difference in how we rebelled, and how that rebellion changed our personalities anything else. Whereas, well Wendy and her alternate seem to be the biggest difference so far. Although may be Natsu and his alternate is a close second, considering, well you know how he is with moving vehicles? That is his alternate over there in the dune buggy thing.”

Bisca looked in that direction, and saw someone who did indeed look like Natsu at the wheels of at moving vehicle! One he was using to smash into various groups of soldiers, avoiding hitting his own people with an adroit nest that she could barely believe possible in a four-wheeled vehicle in the crowd. Although the crowd was beginning to thin, as finally the troopers began to simply start running away. “Yeah,” she muttered, “I can see that.”

“Your two alternates, well I don’t know much, but it looks as if as shy and slow to start as your relationship with Alzack was, here it was the exact opposite, they are seriously lovey-dovey,” Lucy smiled shrugging her shoulders. “It’s a little much honestly, from what I was able to see in terms of PDA anyway.”

That caused the green haired girl to flush, but also to smile. If her alternate could be happy with Alzack, that was a good sign for her.

Both women though looked to the side from their personal conversation as Natsu finally arrived at the Anima Crystal. It took him a few seconds to figure out how to hold all the weapons he had grinned gathered, but he finally stuck the hilts of two swords in his mouth, held a staff in one hand, and somehow, neither girl was certain now, held the two hilts of the other two swords he taken in his other hand. With a manic gleam in his eyes, he held the heck his hands up to either side of his body, then as he pushed his will into the weapons, roared something, although what it was completely unintelligible thanks to the heretofore mentioned to sword hilts in his mouth.

Later, he would tell everyone he had shouted, “Fire Dragon Slayers Ultimate Assisted Attack: Overpowered Five Claws.” At the time, it sounded more like “Fssre Drgsn Slyrs Ulghmat Assshhted Tack, Orggrpred Frve Cla!”

Regardless, the effect was profound. The five fire weapons magic combined into one, a massive conflagration of fire that greatly resembled Natsu’s usual fire Dragon’s roar only perhaps a bit larger than normal if only a bit. The fire washed over the Crystal in a wave, larger than any he had previously been able to put out, and a far larger than average chunk of the Crystal sloughed off and plopped to the stone of the courtyard.

Even as the battle continued, more people looked in that direction, all save Ranma and Seilah, who was attempting to tell Ranma about the effect that she had witnessed earlier. Slowly, as they watched that giant piece of the crystal started to reform not into many different mages, or even just to mages, no, it congealed into one human -shaped form, which shattered with the bright flare and shattering glass sound that everyone had begun to get used to when this occurred.

When the light faded, Gildarts stood there, heaving his shoulders back and shaking his head angrily, staring all around him, as he cracked his knuckles one after another. His sheer presence was such that dozens of nearby soldiers wailed, staring up at the large man in shock and fear, while Natsu dropped his weapons and whooped for joy. “I don’t know what’s going on here, the middle-aged man intoned, taking in the scene for a moment, and ignoring the fact that most of the people from Fairy Tail seems to have dressed for some kind of costume party rather than in their normal clothing. But if you decide to attack the children of Fairy Tail, you better believe that you’re going to have trouble with me!”

With that, he waved a hand, and several dozen troopers, as well as the buildings directly behind them disappeared, transformed into so many thousand cube shapes, which he hurled into the air with another gesture from his hand. Then he was striding forward’s, tapping out at groups, transforming them as he strode towards Natsu shouting, “What’s the situation Natsu!”

But it wasn’t Natsu who answered.

If they had had time to notice it among the chaos of the battle, all of the Earth Land mages would have been surprised to see that alternate Cana had come with the rest of the Fairy Tail guild. After all, she was easily the least likely among them to be at all combative. But just because she wasn’t combative didn’t mean she couldn’t actually fight. Her parasol had enlarged into a giant hammer, which although it was still somewhat lightweight, smashed different groups of side as she forged her way towards Lucy, and Lucy Ashley, with Edo-Gray and Edo-Juvia behind her.

While the rest of the Guild had simply stared in shock and rising joy, she had dropped her parasol, tears coming to her eyes as she saw Gildarts. Then as his magic it activated, she had shaken herself awake, and now was bounding forward, no longer fighting the soldiers around her, simply dodging through them, as fast as her dress could let her go as she raised her tear streaked face to the sky. “Father! Father!”

Gildarts heard this, and stopped his trek towards Natsu, turning to her in shock, his eyes widening. “Father, what?”

Before he could really internalize what was going on, Edo-Cana had thumped into him, her arms around his chest as she sobbed wildly, all her normal decorum gone for the moment as she ignored everything around them to hug him to her as tightly as she could, so tightly that it would’ve heard of normal man’s ribs, or perhaps if they weren’t magically strength enhanced, snapped them to. Even in this world, Cana was a lot stronger than she looked if not for the same reason as the Earth Land version.

Nearby Lucy Ashley was crying too, thrusting her fist into the air. “Damn! You all didn’t tell us your Gildarts was still alive!”

“Er, it never honestly came up,” Lucy replied, shaking her head and staring at Edo-Cana and Gildarts in shock. “Are they really related!?”

“Yep, Cana is one of the few who were actually born into the Guild. Gildarts and Cornelia were among the ones who founded the Guild, although she died in childbirth. He acted like a father to most of us frankly, but of course he was closest with Cana his own daughter,” Lucy Ashley said. She punched out hard, catching a running soldier in the back of the head and sending him sprawling, grabbing up his weapon and using it on another one, shocking him into a charred unconscious crisp. “I used to get so jealous of their relationship too! But even I think this is kind of damn sweet!”

Nearby, Ranma had also noticed Gildarts arrival and rejoiced, knowing that with his rival’s appearance, any chance of the locals winning had gone straight out the window. Yet at the same time, he also noticed the effect Seilah had been telling him about arriving at the edge of the courtyard. And he had also noticed how all of the mages, even the most powerful ones like Erza and Gildarts, were weaker than they should have been. Then implied something, and Ranma knew that he couldn’t let that affect hit the Crystal.

Even as the weapons of the soldiers around him started to fail, Ranma raced through them, smashing them aside to reach Gildarts shouting, “I hate to interrupt Gildarts, but I need your help.”

Gildarts turned a bewildered look on Ranma, having only just realized whose daughter Cana had to be, pulling his arms away from her, and slowly pushing her away to look at Ranma trusting that the young Ranger had a good reason to interrupt them. “What do you need?”

“We need to get that Crystal out of here, it contains the rest of your Guild, as well as anything and everyone else in Magnolia who had any kind of magic in them. There’s some kind of draining affect going on, and if it hits that, it’ll drain the life right out of them, along with their magic! We need to get it out of the city.”

Wendy appeared from the other end of the fight, having become embroiled in a match against a more organized group of soldiers all of whom had been using air and lightning magic. That had been an attempt by Hughes to try to capture the young girl, who he saw as a weak link in the mages, but it hadn’t worked so well, thanks to Carla and happy.

The two of them had been separated from the group at the beginning of the fight, Carla having seen something in the sky that drew her attention, but they had come back in time to help Wendy out of her temporary jam. Now she and the two Exceed arrived by Ranma and the others. “And once it’s safely out of the city, you’ll need someone to go along with it to guard it,” she said.

Nodding, Gildarts asked no further questions, and he and Ranma moved over to the giant Crystal, getting on either side of it. An instant later, they lifted it into the air grunting at the massive strain, the damn thing was **heavy**.

Nearby the draining affect started to hit the other mages. Bisca and Alzack nearly collapsed, going to her knees, Erza, elsewhere in the fight also felt it. Having just finished off the elusive Hughes after his attempt to capture Wendy she felt the magic in her armor begin to fade as her magical reserves were drained down to nearly nothing. Gray gasped, collapsing almost, allowing Sugarboy to press the advantage, but Gray grabbed his sword with his normal hand, pushing all of his remaining magic into that hand even as the blades edge cut into his hand, overcoming the magic of Sugarboy’s sword at last, causing it to shatter. The general barely had an instant to gape at his now ruined weapon, before Gray’s other hand came up, and with a grunt of effort, he transformed two of his fingers into a blade, stabbing it into the other man’s chest.

Even Gildarts felt it, nearly slumping, but pushing through with an effort of will as he roared, pushing out all his remaining magic as he lifted the crystal with Ranma. It was **heavy**, even for the two of them, it weighed more than half a million tons, the crystal being so dense it weighed more per pound than any kind of normal substance could have. It was almost like lifting several battleships combined, and both of them had to pour out magic and ki respectively to lift it, let alone move it. Worse, even now Ranma wasn’t quite as strong in her female body in terms of raw physical strength as she was in her original body. Ranma had to push out more than two thirds of her of ki to do it, but they still managed to lift it and then heaved it roaring into the sky, tossing it as far in one direction as they possibly could.

Instantly, Wendy, Seilah and the two Exceed raced after it, with Seilah carrying Wendy in her arms as the little girl shouted back “We’ll watch it for you, come and find us when you can!”

Gildarts instantly slumped onto his side, gasping as he stared up at where the Crystal is going, grinning over at Ranma lifting one hand to fist bump the redhead as she walked over to him. “I think we did it, at least I didn’t see any change to the Crystal did you?”

Pushing her growing tiredness aside Ranma frowned, scratching at her neck, her hands automatically moving to redo her hair into her habitual pigtail now that she had time. “I don’t know, but we can hope.” She looked around, smiling grimly as she took in the devastation all around her. Most of the soldiers had fled when the weapons began to fail, but there were still a dozen pockets or so of resistance, with soldiers and Fairy Tail guild members fighting it out even without magic, contests that seemed to be going more the soldiers’ way then she wanted to see.

But she saw Erza pushing her way through the rubble of one building, glaring all around her, and grabbing at the nearest soldier, headbutting him ferociously before tossing him away like a weed and then charging forward to engage another group in hand-to-hand, seemingly uncaring of the fact that she had transformed back into what she had been wearing when she had been caught in the anima weapon, a simple pair of red and white pajamas, the top of which was so tight it was very obvious she didn’t wear a bra underneath.

That sight made Ranma’s smile turn real and she nodded firmly. “Well, while this was supposed to be a bit of a surgical strike…” she had to wait then as both Gildarts and everyone within hearing started to laugh raucously at that, before going on. “It looks as if we sort of started a revolution here, so I think we need to expand on that. Let’s start gathering prisoners, and then head into the castle over there, hopefully will find Juvia and her team pair with a prisoner who can help us release the rest of our friends.”

At that point, he was interrupted by a bright flare in the distance, barely visible through the skyline of the city, but it was bright, as bright as the sun coming up, but it wasn’t the sun, it was in the wrong direction for that and it was far too focused. At the same time a thrum started to make itself known, coming through their boots as much is through the air, causing everyone within the city even those civilians who had tried to hide themselves away from the ongoing conflict, could feel. As Ranma turned in that direction, the light coalesced, and started to pulse.

Instinctively Ranma knew what was happening and blessing his fortune that she hadn’t been tossing out ki attacks and thus still had enough to work with in this fight, Ranma slammed her fists together and began to gather her life force, racing in that direction. “Get down!” he roared at the top of his lungs as his key began to flare in an answering corona of blue and white light.

Gildarts too knew what was happening, and grabbed at Edo-Cana, who had made her way over to him, and the two Lucy’s, turning to shield them with his body. Seeing this reaction from the redhead and the powerful mage, everyone else took cover where they could, Fairy Tail mage, guild member and soldier alike, even the soldiers realizing what was happening, and wanting no part of it, wherever it was coming from.

Ranma scaled up the tallest building he could in the direction of the corona, a mansion of some kind, thin and tall to almost look like a square spire, a pale imitation of the Kings Castle. He reached the top just in time, as whatever was behind this new threat finally released the energy it had gathered. A beam of orange, yellow and red energies flared out from outside the city, smashing into and through the city in a straight line towards the courtyard where Ranma and his friends had gathered.

The attack was wide, about the size of a city block in width, as well as height, and Ranma grimaced, pushing even more power into her own hands, then thrust them forward together as she shouted, “Moko Ryu Hoko (fierce Dragon’s howl)!” Not having enough time to think up a new name for this attack. He simply poured out his life energy like it was sand in the hourglass, pumping out as much power as he could into his own attack, which swiftly coalesced into an equally large counterattack of blue and white energy, flashing out into the incoming attack.

Behind him, Natsu had followed the other Dragon Slayer, quickly joined by a Gajeel, whose fight with Panther Lily had been going on nearby, even the large Exceed, knowing that this was a danger to all of them and breaking off their personal fight to join the two mages and climbing up after Ranma. They all stared, as the two attacks warred with one another, blue and white against red and orange, pushing this way, then that, with Ranma howling in fury as she continued to pump more of her energy into it, refusing to back down, refusing to give in, refusing to let that attack continue towards her friends.

Ki was, when you got right down to it, life energy. Pure, manifest energy of life built up in the human body as the owner of that body pushed it past its normal, logical physical limits. And while Ranma was tired, he was not anywhere near his own limits just yet.

And, unfortunately for Faust, the Dorma Anima was not at full power. At it’s current power level it couldn’t overcome Ranma’s return assault and it’s attack cut off, allowing Ranma’s attack to barrel forward, slamming into it and causing it to tumble away from the city although doing no more damage than that.

Ranma could barely catch a glimpse of it through the glare of her own attack, but saw a giant silver scaled Dragon like thing, and cut off her attack, growling angrily. “How much do you want to bet that thing is some kind of super-secret weapon of the King?” she asked no one in particular.

She was surprised to actually get a response, as three voices said as one, “No bet.” She turned, nearly jumping in shock at seeing Natsu and the others there.

Panther Lily looked at her, then to the two Dragon Slayers, then out into the distance, where the silver thing was getting to its feet. From this far away, it was difficult to make out any details but it was huge, standing at about 30 feet tall at the withers with a long, powerfully built body, gleaming in the sun like metal, red eyes, four legs, and a wide mouth filled with teeth. All together it looked quite sinister, almost evil. Panther Lily could barely suppress a shiver of atavistic fear at the sight. But the three Dragon Slayers were simply glaring at it angrily, and Ranma snarled, “Tell Gildarts and the others to push into the castle, and keep capturing the soldiers and everything else. I’ll handle that thing.”

“Oh hell no!” Natsu snarled back, cracking his neck explosively. “You are not going to have this fight all to yourself Ranma!”

“Gehehe, while I hate to agree with the flame brain, he’s right. That thing looks like a Dragon, and we are after all Dragon Slayers! We have to be in on this.”

Ranma growled, but didn’t try to dissuade them further. She knew that Natsu was almost as stubborn as she was, and figured that might well be a Dragon Slayer trait. “Fine, but don’t expect me to guard your scaly asses! If you find yourselves too week for this fight without magic, I expect you to retreat like sensible people, rather than force me to try to protect you.”

Natsu didn’t even bother replying to that, instead turning and racing towards the edge of the roof as leaping off to the next one towards the giant black creature. “As if we’d let you!”

“Gehehe!” Gajeel laughed, racing after the fire Dragon Slayer.

Rolling her eyes and hoping this wasn’t going to go pear shaped as she feared, Ranma raced after them, quickly catching up to them then passing the two men. She barely noticed Panther Lily gaping at them in astonishment, shaking his head at the sheer courage the three of them are showing in the face of that silver monstrosity.

The Dragon creature had reached the edge of the zone of the city it had destroyed in its attack, its claws clinking over the last untouched ground left in the attacks wake. Inside it, Faust, ensconced in its chest, watched the sensors that were sending information to him from the Dragon’s senses, which were practically human in scope. The power of the Dragon was intoxicating, and he laughed wildly as he marched through the ruins he had created. “Yes, yes! This, this is the ultimate expression of magic, destruction, power, power at my command. I am King! Look upon me and tremble!”

He saw Ranma and the two men coming towards him, and laughed, the Dorma Anim crouching and flinging its arms out slightly to either side, ready to receive them even as he powered up another attack in its mouth. “And so the lambs come to the slaughter themselves! Good, good, good, that will save me the time of hunting you down. You, impostor will face the King’s displeasure for your effrontery on my person! You will die, and then I will crush all my enemies with this Dorma Anim, all of them! They will know my power!”

“Shut up, and fight!” Ranma roared, flaring out ki from her feet as if he she was trying to use the water Dragon’s Boosted Step attack racing forward like a cork popped out of a bottle in a corkscrew motion to heighten the impact as she slammed bodily into the Dorma Anim thing’s jaw. The Dorma Anim things jaws clamped shut, the attack within dissipating harmlessly, even as the Dorma Anim thing staggered sideways. Ranma grabbed onto a metallic scale ridge there, flipping himself upwards, to land on the snout, raising a fist and slamming it down with punishing force as the sound of multiple sound barriers bring broken one after another was heard, as Ranma pushed his body passed the normal Amaguriken speed.

The Dragon staggered, feeling its head being thrust down by the continued punches, but trying to fight back against it, its neck and back muscles straining, as it tried to shake Ranma loose. Then Natsu and Gajeel were there, grabbing at the thing’s legs. While they still didn’t have their magic as Ranma had pointed out, they did still have much of the strength that there Dragon Slayer magic gave and without even looking at one another they heaved as one.

This unfortunately didn’t do anything beyond making the Dorma Anim stumble. The next instant Gajeel found himself kicked away like a football as Natsu roared in agony, plucked up from the air in one of the construct’s hands.

As the Dorma Anim had moved, Ranma had flipped himself often away from the Dorma Anim’s head as it tried to bite at him. Now he landed on one shoulder, slamming his fists one after another in a continuous assault, the sound of multiple sound barriers breaking once more filling the air, as the shockwaves of his attack jerked the Dorma Anim to the side, making Faust lose interest in Natsu dropping him to the ground. The fire Dragon slayer growled angrily, wincing as he’d felt the power behind that grip, and looking around as he tried to find some way to hurt it.

Then Ranma had to leap away, barely dodging the Dorma Anim’s tail, which whipped up and out like a scorpion stinger, following him for a moment in midair. It caught him, but Ranma used the momentum of that attack to actually roll up and over it, lashing out with a ki blast at the last into the Dorma Anim’s knee as he passed over it. This finally caused some real damage as several of the armor plates that were made to look like dragon scales dented under the attack, and the Dorma Anim staggered once more.

“GRAAAHhhh!” Natsu roared, charging forward as fast as he could go, holding a large pointed piece of iron from elsewhere, possibly a steeple. He rammed it into the back of the knee of the construct, hoping to do some damage.

He didn’t. The piece of iron first bent then shattered at the impact. But the impact at least did something when paired with Ranma’s attacks, causing it to lose its footing. The Dorma Anim staggered to one knee whereupon Natsu instantly leaped up, grabbing at one of the things arms, then pulled himself up further climbing the thing like it was the side of a building, intent on punching it in the face.

Coming back into the fight, Gajeel concentrated on fighting the other leg of the thing, actually biting into the side of it. Despite not having his magic, he could still eat metal, something he had learned earlier in his fight with Panther Lily when he took a bite out of the Buster Sword.

Yet while he had been able to eat the Buster Sword, the Dorma Anim’s armor completely defeated his ability. He hung on like grim death, but he just couldn’t get his teeth sunk into the metal below his lips.

“This affront to my dignity will not be born you animal!” Faust shouted, noticing this attack above the others for some reason. With that thought, Faust twisted the controls of the Dragon, and hopped backwards, shaking his entire body and forcing Gajeel to let go. While Gajeel was in midair Faust lashed out with a kick, which caught Gajeel as he backed away, knocking him away once more as if the Iron Dragon Slayer was a football rather than a human to slam into and through two buildings.

The Iron Dragon Slayer groaned, pushing himself off out of the rubble with some difficulty, staring up at the faces of a family who had taken refuge in her house when the battles began. He nodded politely to them, saying, “Excuse me, just passing through” before pushing himself out of the rubble that had once been the side of their house, racing back towards the fight. “Right, that didn’t work.”

Landing from his previous effort, Faust used the Dragon’s tail lashing out towards Natsu, who had crawled up to its chest and was now beating on it with both hands, the Dorma Anim’s arms occupied with blocking Ranma’s continued attacks.

The fire Dragon Slayer got his hands up, and actually caught the edge of the sharp sword-like edge of the tail, holding onto it as the tail whipped this way and that through the air. The edge of it cut into his palms and the Fire Dragon roared again in pain but clamped down on it with his jaws. Again, it didn’t to any damage, and even if he had his magic it’s doubtful that Natsu could have actually hurt the Dorma Anim. But something about biting him seemed to set Faust off, and he snarled in wordless rage as the tail waved back and forth.

But this concentration on the two Dragon Slayers cost Faust, because it allowed Ranma to also target the same point he had hit before. A blast of ki slammed into the same metal scales, which had been previously dented. This attack overcame them in a small area, bursting into the interior of the mechanical creation, causing a bit of internal damage and warning lights to flare in Faust’s vision. Still, nowhere near as much as Ranma had hoped.

Landing, Ranma concentrated, pushing his ki out into his hands to create the ki claws of the Neko-Ken. He normally wouldn’t do this, since even though he was over his fear of cats thanks to Carla, he didn’t actually like the Neko-Ken techniques very much and had replaced most of them in his repertoire with water Dragon Slayer attacks anyway. But it was clear that brute strength and even brute strength assisted with speed wouldn’t be able to crack the armor of this thing. But it was susceptible to ki attacks, which forced Ranma to change his game plan. So armed he charged forward, raking at the thing’s side with his claws, denting and sometimes even creating slashes there, causing further warning lights to appear in the cockpit.

“What are you doing, what are you doing?! Stop that, I am the King, how dare you injure my magnificent Dorma Anim! Do not think I will let you live after this!” Faust roared, finally flinging Natsu off of its tail, then whipping it around to bisect Ranma.

Or that had been the plan. But Ranma merely grunted as the tail caught him in the side, blasting him off of his feet and away. Rolling with it he landed on his feet, his hands outstretched to either side as he crouched, glaring up at the Dorma Anim as he charged forward’s. The Dorma Anim crouched to receive him, his hands flashing out, and Ranma dodged around, the king trying to use all of its limbs and tail to try to tag Ranma once more, as he dodged, trying to close.

Each time he did, he would lash out and a new wound would open on the Dorma Anim. None of them were telling in and of themselves and the Dorma Anim seemed almost to be able to heal slightly from much of the damage Ranma was causing, at least externally.

Before Ranma could change tactics again however, Faust did the same thing. “You will all die! Take this, Dragon Rider Exploding Missiles!” Panels began to open around the back of the Dorma Anim and dozens of missiles fired out. They were simple cylinders of metal, but they homed in on Gajeel, Natsu and Ranma, exploding on impact. None of them were able to dodge all of the missiles that came at them in that moment.

Gajeel grunted in pain but rolled with each blow in turn, while Natsu was blasted off his feet feeling as if he was being burned for the first time in his life, his side and chest in particular taking a nasty burn, though his durability stopped it from being worse. Ranma simply took the explosions, pushing through the fiery fireballs that they had caused to close once more on the Dorma Anim, leaping up into its face and getting a good claw attack into one of its eyes, blinding it as the eye itself exploded.

She was however caught in midair by a slash from one of its forearms, which slammed her aside to crash with punishing force into the rubble nearby. Ranma however rolled with it, then slammed her hands together and blasted out a Moko Takabisha at the same already wounded knee he had previously targeted. That knee gave out now entirely, its internal workings just vaporized by Ranma’s last attack.

“How are you doing this? How!? The Dorma Anim is supposed to be invincible, how are you hurting it?!”

“Ha!” bellowed Natsu shakily as he climbed up that wounded leg, and actually stuck his hand inside, reaching up to tear at further internals, doing as much damage as he could in the only way he could. “We’re Dragon Slayers, and this Dorma Anim contraption is a pale copy of the real thing!”

“Gehehe, you challenged the wrong people today, oh King,” Gajeel snarked, as he raced through the rubble, getting underneath the Dragon, leaping up onto its chest, and pummeling it.

 Their time in the sun ended almost instantly however as the Dorma Anim shook them off, then leaped into the air. While its lack of full batteries did not let the Dorma Anim transform into its Dragon Knight Mode, which was a more human, form, it still had access to all of its attacks and Faust activated a new one now. “Dragon Rider’s Spreader Cannon!”

 Thousands of small attacks, about the size of a normal Moko Takabisha, lashed out from the dragon, slamming down into the three Dragon Slayers and the area around them. Each of these attacks hit like a hammer that had been dropped from twelve stories up. If they, like the earlier missiles, could home in on them, that might have been enough to win the fight right then and there, or at least knock Natsu and Gajeel out of it.

 As it was, even Natsu was able to push to his knees, however groggily. But by this point both him and Gajeel were seriously in a lot of pain, covered with bruises and burns. Ranma, on the other hand, simply lashed out with her own attack, another high-powered Moko Ryu Hoko, which slagged one of the Dorma Anim’s foot, causing it to stumble. “How!?” Faust bellowed, while he watched the Dorma Anim begin to heal what damage it could.

 “Shut up and die!” Ranma roared, as she closed. “If I have to kill you by inches that’s fine by me!”

**OOOOOOO**

Back in the courtyard, with Edo-Cana still clinging to his side, Gildarts had organized the Fairy Tail Guild and the Fairy Tail mages into groups to go around collecting prisoners, as well as retrieving bodies. There weren’t many of those, since the Fairy Tail Guild and mages both shared the belief in not fighting to the death most of the time, and even in his earlier anger, Ranma hadn’t been going out of his way to kill any of the soldiers he hit, as always believing that soldiers like this were simply more victims than anything else. It wasn’t their fault they were in his way, after all, most of them didn’t choose to be there unlike bandits or various other criminal scum. Indeed, more soldiers had died by being trampled under their fellows than had died by enemy action.

As they were doing this, civilians began to come out from the houses and other buildings where they had hidden themselves, staring in shock as they saw their mighty vaunted Army in tatters, being rounded up and tied up by outlaw elements that most of them had never really believed was a threat. But even as they were wondering how to respond to this, a few of them even wondering if they should attack these terrorists in turn, the damage that the Kings assault on the town had created began to make the rounds among them.

With it came the knowledge that it had indeed been the king who had done that, a few of them had even heard his speech when he and Ranma first squared off, and the King had instantly lost any loyalty the citizenry had felt towards him. Such was the dangers of a megalomaniac, once your mania was known, you started to lose the support of the people.

They were still wondering what to do beyond helping their fellows out of the rubble, when Juvia and her group arrived from the castle, carrying their own prisoner. Cana stopped and stared at her Edo-version hugging Gildarts side, her eyes wide. “Oh no, really?! Ugh, I’m soooo not ready for this!”

Not noticing her personal drama the others continued forward, with Mystogan in the lead. He immediately leapt up onto a pile of rubber, pulling off his mask and beginning to shout out orders, not just to the Fairy Tail Guild, but also to the people around them. Well what are you all waiting for, there are people trapped in that rubble, possibly injured! Let’s get organized and get them out of there!”

“Who is that?” Lucy Ashley asked looking around, but no one nearby could answer her. Only the older members of Fairy Tail thought that the young man beginning to shout orders at the populace looked familiar.

However, there were many more among the populace who recognized him, the blue hair, and the tribal tattoo that he had been given by his mother being very distinctive. “It’s the Prince, the Prince is here!” shouted more than one voice, while others asked, “Where has he been all this time?”

Slamming his staff into the ground, Mystogan activated another spell on it, in order to allow his voice to carry as far as it possibly could. “My people, I have been in self-imposed exile, unwilling to associate myself with my father’s madness. Madness you ask, and I reply look over there! He shouted pointing in the direction of the long corridor of glassed rubble that the Dorma Anim’s initial attack had caused. Look around you, he went on gesturing towards Gildarts and the rest of the mages, who were looking on, then around at the soldiers, many of whom had begun to revive after having been knocked unconscious early on in the fighting. “Look what his madness has wrought! He used his position to create the anima device well enough, but to then use it to attack another dimension, to bring the attention of that dimensions defenders here on us! That is madness, madness and warmongering of the worst sort! And now this city has reaped that whirlwind, that insanity as my father has finally gone completely around the bend, ignoring the first rule of royalty, that we have a duty to our people!”

He gestured again towards the damage Faust had created. “How many, how many of your fellow citizens lay dead underneath these shattered ruins, discarded, their lives snuffed out by the man who should have protected them? How many would my father have sacrificed in his goals!? Will you join with me now, will you join with me and help me pick up the pieces here, find our fellows within that rubble, and all around us, and then repair the damage done not just to this city but also to our nation as a whole? I cannot do it alone, I need your help. Please, my fellow citizens of this great nation, help me!”

There was no rousing response, no cheering, or shouts of affirmation. The people were too shell-shocked, to torn and distraught by the events of the day to say nothing of the soldiers, who had just been defeated by a group less than a hundredth of their own number. Yet even so, Mystogan did gather a following, as more and more citizens moved in his direction, men and women waiting to be told what to do, and even the nearest soldiers bowed their heads towards their Prince, one of them an officer saying, “Command us… My liege.”

When he heard that, Mystogan knew, that he had won. *Well, so long as Ranma and those other two with him are able to finish off that evil creation of my father’s anyway.* Yet despite that, still looking at the damage the Dragon had caused, for some reason Mystogan wasn’t worried about the outcome of that battle at all.

Gildarts looked from the young man to the crowd, then back again, as he spotted Erza staring at Mystogan, her arms folded, and a twitch beginning to show on her face. He watched as she very visibly exerted her self-control and turned away, moving over to Lucy, and grabbing her shoulder leaning over to whisper into the shorter girls year furiously. Whatever frantic response she was given seemed to appease the redhead, and she let go of the blonde girl’s shoulder, turning aside to stare once more at Mystogan, before turning away deliberately, moving over to join some of the citizens who were frantically excavating at a specific house. Two of them are shouting the names of other people, and she wordlessly began to lend her strength to their efforts, followed by a few of the other Fairy Tail mages, who instinctively followed her example.

Breathing a sigh of relief at that, Gildarts turned to his alter’s daughter, then looked over to Cana, who was staring at the two of them in shock, and he attempted a wan a smile in her direction, then looked around him. Well, you heard the man, let’s get back to work. There will be time enough for explanations and… Talks later.”

Cana hesitated, but nodded, and after making certain that the chains around Byro were tight enough, hung him up on a nearby collapsed lamppost, moving to help Virgo and Loke where they along with Lucy Ashley were excavating another area of the rubble, where Loke had heard someone moving around underneath. Soon, practically everyone began to set to with a will, moving through the rubble, trying to find it anyone alive underneath, freeing some of the soldiers who espoused that they would follow the princes commands, adding their numbers to the growing rescue effort.

So busy were they that no one noticed Juvia moving towards the sounds of ongoing battle, a determined expression on her face.

**OOOOOOO**

Ranma was beginning to get frustrated. With every attack she lashed out with, Ranma could feel her ki reserves decrease slightly. Her efforts to toss the Anima Crystal away had really drained her, and then she had been forced to block that first, initial attack. She was in no danger of running out, but she also wasn’t doing enough damage to the dragon thing with her Neko-Ken claws, forcing her to pour out heavier attacks like they were going out of style. Yes, one of its legs was now useless, and it couldn’t really move from that spot now, and one of its eyes was gone. The best attack she’d launched was to the thing’s back, destroying the missile launchers there. But its main weapon was still operating, occasionally sending out attacks. These came in the large blast and thousand-needle variety and both were proving dangerous.

It was still going strong despite those damages, and the hundreds of other slashes that Ranma’s Neko-Ken claws had created in its armor. She simply couldn’t penetrate that armor enough to do any damage without standing still and that was a recipe for disaster. And the one time she had tried to use Kijin Raishu Dan, to his astonishment the Demon-God Multiple Strike attack hadn’t done anything to the black armor of the dragon. Was almost as if whoever had created it, had known about such attacks, which was startling in the extreme to think about, but Ranma couldn’t dwell on it right now.

And as he had feared, after the first splash type attack Ranma had been forced to protect the other two Dragon Slayers, who were now very much the worse for wear. Gajeel was the first one to feel the battle’s pace, having been in a drawn out fight with Panther Lily earlier. But Natsu was on his heels, having taken more damage in this fight than the other Dragon Slayer. They were still moving around, still trying to useful, but really, they were getting in Ranma’s way than anything else.

A case in point occurred as Ranma was thinking about trying to get behind the Dorma Anim again, maybe launch there another attack into the ruined missile launchers and hope the damage started to penetrate into the rest of the thing. But instead of doing that, he broke off his attack and leaped into the way of a slashing attack from the one of the Anima’s forearms taking the blow for Natsu, and being smashed over the fire Dragon Slayer’s head, to roll through the rubble, cursing under her breath.

Natsu in turn was able to get underneath that, but the other forearm’s claws came down smashing him flat underneath it, and actually allowing the Dorma Anim to twist around, bringing its tail up and around in an arc to catch Gajeel where he had been attempting to onto its back, as Ranma had been hoping do.

The Iron Dragon Slayer found himself smashed once more through the air, his chest aflame with pain as more ribs went and it was too much for him. He was unconscious before he hit the ground, bouncing listlessly up and off it before rolling to a stop, half buried in the rubble, his body more a lump of blisters and burns than anything resembling a normal human body.

Instantly Faust took advantage of this lull in his enemy’s’ attacks, gathering magic once more into the Dorma Anim’s mouth and launching an attack at Ranma where the redhead had landed. Ranma desperately gathered her own energy, and slammed out an attack faster than Faust could, catching the artificial dragon’s attack just as it left its own mouth.

*Fuck, well since it’s come to this anyway!* Ranma had avoided going strength to strength in terms of attacks before this, fearing the Dorma Anim could eventually overcome her if she was so free with her own energy, and not having seen enough of a return for such before this. But now that she had caught the Dorma Anim’s Roar in its own mouth, Ranma pushed and pushed **hard**. With a snarl on her lips, the redhead pumped more ki into her attack than she had before.

As the Dorma Anim was sent skidding backward from the impact of the two energy attacks Faust stared in shock as warning lights started to go off, warning of a massive overflow of magic in the main cannon, so much so that the thing was in danger of overheating. Desperately Faust cut off his attack and dodged, but the damage was already done. The Dorma Anim was able to twitch to one side just enough not to lose its head, but the explosion of ki still destroyed the main cannon and blew out half of the Dorma Anim’s mouth and that side of its head. “NO!!”

The Dorma Anim staggered, and Faust desperately launched an energy attack from its tail. “Dragon Rider Explosion!” The tail left a purple wake behind it and the ground thus touched exploded carrying Natsu, who had been left behind as the Anim had been pushed backwards. The Fire Dragon Slayer screamed, and, at last, it was too much for him. He simply lay there, twitching and steaming as his body gave out.

Ranma however was unable to pay him much attention or press his advantage. Overcoming the Dorma Anim’s magic had cost her, and she too staggered, barely staying on her feet. *Now I am really beginning to feel it,* she thought to herself, shaking her head. *Still, I wonder if I…*

“Ranma!” Juvia’s voice reached him, and she looked over broken out of her thoughts, appalled to see the water magic user there hurrying through the rubble towards Ranma as fast as she could go.

“Juvia what the hell are you doing here, girl!?” Ranma barked, lashing out with a new kind of attack she had just thought up, using ki to imitate the kind of drilling attack she had used occasionally, concentrating the same amount of power she’d just used in a far smaller circumference.

The attack punched through the Dorma Anim’s neck, but the artificial dragon had twisted to the side, so it took the Dorma Anim in the side of the neck rather than straight down the middle. It still punched straight through though, and there was a gout of fire as something inside blew up, causing the outer metal to warp at that point. The neck was no longer able to move as well as it had a moment ago, but the Dorma Anim’s main weapon was still working, and Faust fired back smashing Ranma full bore before he could get away.

To the king’s dismay he once more discovered the same thing that numerous soldiers and Erza Knightwalker had discovered: since Ranma’s training against his inner draconic self, while Ranma still preferred to not get hit, his/her durability was well beyond even that of even Gajeel, who had the most physical durability of any of the Dragon Slayers for some reason. Ranma tanked it, roaring aloud as the energy beam plucked her off of the ground and hurled her backwards, but rolling as the attack cut out, coming to her feet without having taken much damage. Her hair was singed, as was her shirt, and her skin looked like she had been in the sun for far too long, but that was all.

“What are you made of, imposter!?” Faust shouted, his voice sounding both tinny because of the damage done to the Dorma Anim’s loudspeakers by this point, and utterly frightened by this point. This might have been the first time he had tagged Ranma with his main gun, but he had hit Ranma numerous times, mostly with his tail since even Ranma had trouble tracking it’s movements, but still the redhead had been hit numerous times, and every time had bounced back. Now the redhead had cost him his primary weapon, and the Dorma Anim was so badly wounded he could barely move its head around at all,

Even if Faust hadn’t been able to, say, spit them on a claw or tail, every attack unable to break skin but even just translating to blunt trauma the other Dragon Slayers had all succumbed to his attacks. True, the one with pink hair had somehow pushed through injuries that should have killed him many times over, but even so, he was down now.

But Ranma just kept getting up! It was as if only the momentum of his attacks bothered the redhead, and that only a little. Even with the Dorma Anim’s ability to repair it’s armor to a certain degree, Faust now knew that he was slowly losing this fight, and that would soon become inevitable Faust could figure out how to put Ranma down for the count.

“I told you my names Ranma, you freaking psycho!” Ranma roared back. She was about to charge forward again, but Juvia stopped him.

The Water mage had quickly covered the intervening distance between Ranma’s former position and his new one as Ranma and Faust had traded barbs, and now stood somewhat hidden from Faust by a standing wall, the only wall of a large building the remained standing after the fight to this point. But she had reached out and grabbed at Ranma’s arm as the other woman had made to move past her. “Wait!”

“Juvia what…” Ranma paused then, leaping towards her and grabbing Juvia up in her arm, racing around the Dorma Anim, forcing the thing to try to twist around to face her. With one arm and the neck no longer able to twist, this was next to impossible, and Ranma could hear Faust’s frantic cries as he tried to not let Ranma get behind him again. “What is it?” she asked, looking down at Juvia.

She held up a hand in front of his face, and then as Ranma watched the hand shifted into water.

“Juvia has had an idea. If Natsu was able to somehow inject some of his magical essence into weapons of fire, then perhaps Juvia would be able to do the same, and thereby somehow reawaken the magic within you. Juvia knows you have drunk water since coming to this world and it has not woken up your magic but given that you are having trouble getting through that thing’s armor with just your physical abilities, it is still worth a try!”

The water mage waited until Ranma nodded and then moved her hand to hover in front of Ranma’s mouth until the redhead opened her mouth. Then, blushing hotly she pushed her hand over Ranma’s mouth, three watery fingers entering the redhead’s mouth, one finger at a time. She shivered as she felt the redhead’s tongue first caressing the outer shell of water then plunging into them, biting back a moan as she felt as if her fingers were being licked inside and out for a second, before Ranma started to… drink in the water of her hand.

For a moment nothing happened, and Juvia was afraid that her idea had failed miserably, and all she had accomplished was to make a fool of herself. Then Ranma felt something inside her twitch, and suddenly she was inhaling the water of Juvia’s hand like he would normally do when trying to empower his Water Dragon Magic… which woke up. Her magical reserves were near to nonexistent, but it was still there, and the magic within Juvia’s water got through where the magic of this world hadn’t. Even the water of the few water element weapons hadn’t been able to do that. It wasn’t much power of course, and Ranma backed way, closing her mouth quickly, worried about taking more of Juvia’s water form into her body, even as she felt the magic once more coursing through her own body.

The redhead smiled warmly at Juvia. “Thanks Juvia, but I have to go and finish this. I’ll see you in a minute.” With that Ranma sat her down behind another piece of rubble and raced on, grinning evilly.

As Faust finished twisting around, Ranma waited, wanting the asshole to see his defeat coming. Then he roared, gathering his magic and his ki in his feet even as he felt his skin hardening, scales appearing here and there, as his body reacted to its magic once more flowing through it. Within a second she roared out, “Soryu no Takameru Ho (Water Dragon's Boosted Step)!” This boosted him towards the Dorma Anim even faster than his earlier attempt to do the same thing with just his ki, **far** faster.

Thanks to having turned in Ranma’s direction the king was still able to get its arms up to once again protect the Dorma Anim’s body, to block or redirect Ranma’s sudden assault. It didn’t really help.

“Metsuryu Ogi: Soryu Tsuukan no Kiba (Dragon Slayer's Secret Art: Water Dragon’s Piercing Fang)!” Ranma thundered, shooting out the water ahead of her via an upraised arm right before impact, creating a short-lived drill of insanely fast-moving water directly before impact as Ranma pushed out his ki into his body, hardening it still more than it already had been. The water did its work, drilling through the arm and letting Ranma’s ki protected body through, as if someone had fired two cannon rounds, one penetrator, one dum-dum round.

The Dorma Anim’s arms both exploded at the point of impact, half of each falling to the ground as Ranma continued forward barreling into and through the Dorma Anim’s chest, embedding herself deep into its innards. So deep Ranma’s arm smashed directly into the cockpit, where she began to rip the cockpit open with ki assisted strength, her whole body outlined now in her ki as she began to just let it flow, uncaring of the cost now she saw victory within reach.

“Wh, what are you!?” Faust screamed, staring as Ranma burst through, tearing a hole large enough to thrust her upper body through into the cockpit. “Do, don’t touch me, I, I am the king!”

“I told you!” Ranma snarled, fangs fit to put Ryoga’s to shame showing as she growled, her face covered with blue scales, her blue eyes deeper, darker than ever before even as their shape had changed to something like a reptile’s. “I’m Ranma Oceana, the Water Dragon Slayer! And you sure as fuck aren’t any king of mine!”

She reached a hand forward, grabbing at Faust even as he shrieked and tried to claw his way out of the back of his seat, grabbing the king by his shirt and hauling him out of the cockpit of the Dorma Anim, uncaring of the cuts and scratched the king received by being dragged through the shattered mechanism. She hurled the king out to land by Natsu who was, astonishingly, now awake even if he wasn’t able to move, his body still looking like a new age painting in blacks reds and blues.

With that done, Ranma’s fist clenched and more of her ki gathered there into more claws. She started to just slash at everything around her in the cockpit, destroying as much of the innards of the thing as she could, only stopping as something burst, and fire and smoke started to fill the cockpit. A second later she leaped out, right before something behind her exploded, causing a chain reaction within the Dorma Anim. An instant later, the entire thing exploded, sending shattered scales, bits and pieces of machinery in every direction.

Ranma smirked to herself as she watched the conflagration, while Natsu started to laugh wildly, his laughter coming out in fits and starts. The redhead moved in his direction, locking eyes for a moment with the king.

Gone was Faust’s arrogance, his mad belief in his own power and position. All that was left was an old man, his pride broken, his greatest weapon gone, his greatest nightmare walking towards him before a backdrop of fire and fury, the image of a roaring dragon almost visible in the long shadow the redhead cast, made worse by the scales slowly disappearing form her skin. He squealed and backed away from the Water Dragon Slayer, only stopped from fleeing entirely by a weak outstretched hand of Natsu's, grabbing at his robe, tugging him to a stop.

Ranma paused to nod over at Juvia, who nodded back, blushing once more, if not for the same reason as before, rather the thought that his scene was just damned hot. Then Ranma reached Natsu, and heaved him up onto his shoulder, carrying him off like a sack of wheat as Juvia took possession of their prisoner. Then Ranma started to move over to where he could see Gajeel, half-buried in rubble, his legs twitching as she started in that direction.

Even as she did so though, Ranma wondered what was going to happen from now on. The fight was over. Now they had to free their remaining friends, while dealing with the cleanup. And then, hopefully, find a way to go home.

**End Chapter**

As you can see, I kind of turned everything about this arc onto its head in many small and large ways. One of the most important ways was to get rid of the deus ex machina that was the magical pills that alternate Jellal seemingly pulled out of his rear. There was no reason for their existence given, other than it giving Earth Land mages back their power. So why would someone develop this? How would someone develop this? It did not pass my sanity/reality roll as it were. So it went by the wayside. Despite that of course, the Dragon Slayers at the very least still had their durability and their strength. And the mages within the anima still had their magic, once released anyway. And here we also see Ranma, who noticed how people could be released by the anima mid battle and how that would shift priorities.

As for Faust and the alternate method I used to empower the Dorma Anim, I feel that a paranoid King who was facing internal enemies would have created such an array within his capital city so as to remove the magic those enemies could call upon. And so we had our final climactic battle of this arc.

The next chapter will deal with the aftermath, the Exceed will be given quite the stern talking to, as well as a measure of comeuppance for their egotistical and self-serving policies as Carla gets to shout people to her heart’s content, and Cana realizes she no longer can choose when to approach her father, while back home in Earth Land, trouble is brewing that for once, will have absolutely nothing to do with Ranma and Fairy Tail, thankfully.

Anyways, I hope you all enjoyed this chapter, despite the trouble I had in getting it out.