

I don't draw.

Here is the next chapter of Making Waves, guys! It doesn't quite cover as much as I wanted. I wanted to have a few more romance/future heavy talks among the characters, maybe a bit of teasing from Mirajane in the Erza scene and show the events in Alvarez as Acnologia attacks the country. But I couldn't do that in the time I had. Case in point, I only was able to send bits of the chapter out to Hiryo and Justlovereadin' daily rather than let them have a day or more to go over it.

And now they have both gotten the full versions back to me!! Thank both of them guys, it is crazy to get a 23,000 chapter back in so short a time, even if it isn't a full grammar/small mistake review. Hiryo helped a lot with the various attack names, which I can't get right to save my life, and pointed out a few Ranma-type mistakes as well as several spelling and Grammar errors Grammarly missed. Justlovereadin' has also seen it, and pointed out a few small mistakes and several large ones, including how my attacks at certain points needed much better descriptions and I needed to be clearer in terms of some of what the characters were doing.

Now, I hope you enjoy this finally finalized chapter. Tomon has not gotten back to me with the Stallion chapter, but I will go through Hiryo's version tomorrow regardless, and will be posting the new version here, and over on fanfic.

### **Chapter 38: Dragons of War**

Ranma, Jenny and Juvia stared at Natsu and Gajeel, with the two girls actually moving in tandem, their heads cocked to one side, a cloud of question marks almost visible surrounding them. Ranma simply crossed his arms, his fingers tapping on his upper arm, as he very visibly demanded an explanation from one of the several large bombshells. To wit: That the pair of them and Wendy were from the past and that their parents were not as dead as they thought. "Well, I'm waiting for that explanation, boys."

Natsu and Gajeel looked at one another, and then the pink-haired youth began. "Well, it's like this..."

#### **Flashback:**

Grumbling, Natsu rubbed the back of his head, glaring up at Kurnugi. "You didn't have to hit me like that!"

"You're right. Striking you upside the head was a complete voluntary action on my part. What part about, you need to meditate on your inner fire, was vague? If you would-be Dragon Slayer's wish to become stronger, wish to take in more of your Dragon Slayer powers, then you must learn more about the mental and spiritual side of things," Kurnugi retorted, holding one of

his swords in his hand, having just used the flat of the blade to hit Natsu from behind, where he was stalking around the two would-be Dragon Slayers. He called them would-be, because it wasn't like they had done so yet, and when he had first used the term earlier, it certainly worked to motivate them.

"Flamebrain shut up and stare into that little fire of yours! You're bringing our side down," Gajeel grumbled. The noise of Natsu's shout of pain had broken his own concentration.

In front of the two Dragon Slayers, Kurnugi had placed something to help them concentrate. In front of Natsu, he set a candle, its tip glowing a vibrant dancing yellow and orange, although where the simple candle came from was anyone's guess. It looked like a birthday cake candle but was about as long as Natsu's forearm and just as thick. In front of Gajeel, he had placed a series of different types of metal. He had taken them from various blacksmiths across the city, dealing with the strange creatures within with an ease that none of the others could have managed.

*Then again, Kurnugi's lived here in Ven'auel for decades. Everything around here probably knows not to mess with him, Gajeel reflected. And those critters, what did he call them again? They didn't seem all that aggressive.*

"You want to say that to my face metal mouth?" Natsu shouted, about to stand up before the flat of Kurnugi's weapon came down on top of his head. He yelped, sitting back down abruptly.

His hands rose, moving up to rub his head, while Happy, who was happily reading a book on fish dishes with lots of images nearby, shook his head. "Natsu, you really need to work on watching what you speak."

"Pot meet kettle, guess what? You're both made of iron," Gajeel muttered.

"Concentrate! Believe me, you will both be gratified... and surprised... by what you find if you work on it hard enough." Kurnugi smirked a bit at that as if possessing a secret that amused him.

Natsu didn't like that but didn't say anything, lest he get another crack to the back of the head. *Damn it, he hits as hard with the flat of that blade, as Ranma does with his palm, when he does the same thing to me,* Natsu whined mentally as he settled down again.

"Stare into the flame Natsu, think of what the fire is, think of you, of where your magic comes from. Think of reaching out to it with your mind as if you were cupping a flame. Then think of sinking into the flame, of closing that hand and letting your consciousness flow into the flame," Kurnugi began before switching over to Gajeel, using pretty much the same type of terminology for him as he did for Natsu, just changing the medium.

He did this several times, switching between the two, his voice becoming a drone once more, causing Gajeel's eyes to narrow into slits as he fought to both obey and stay awake, his heart rate slowing. Natsu was much the same, but to Kurnugi's surprise, he didn't lose the battle once more.

Natsu began to feel something, an inner heat, a fire deep inside him, pulsing in time with his heartbeat. One moment, the flames were banking, then rising higher, then down, then up, matching his slowing heartbeat. An undulating wave of fire began to take over Natsu's mind as he stared at that little flame as if it held all the secrets of the world.

The heat was the first thing that hit Natsu, telling him that something had changed. He blinked, staring away from the fire, only to find himself very much elsewhere. "What the heck?!"

Where before he and Gajeel had been sitting in one of the better-kept corners of the library on the floor, now, Natsu found himself floating above a realm of fire and flame. Not just fire exactly, but a volcano. Pulsing out fire, magma and heat, so much heat! It was as if the very ground was turning red from the heat, from the flames. High above, the sun beat down, itself a bowl of never-ending fire. Nowhere could there be discerned any kind of green, any kind of surcease from the heat or the flames.

Natsu gawked for several moments, staring around in every direction. "What, where am I?! I remember feeling that pulsing within me and reaching out for and..." It was then that Natsu realized he was flying without his little buddy clinging to his back. The next second, that happy state of affairs ended. "GAHH!!!"

He barely had time to look down at himself and realize with a spurt of happiness that he had all his limbs and bits before he was plummeting downward. "What the hell is going on here? Fire Dragon's Afterburner!"

Flame erupted from his feet, slowing his fall, barely a few feet above the ground, before Natsu slammed into the ground near one of the magma pits, skidding into it a second later. This would've normally been a death sentence for most mages even fire users. Natsu simply shouted, hissed at the heat and quickly pulled himself out of the magma. Once on solid ground, Natsu shook his entire body as if he were a dog trying to get rid of water, sending globs of magma everywhere, before he rolled on the ground, getting still more of the lava off him. None of which stuck or had burned into him, instead acting like thick mud.

Natsu was the Fire Dragon Slayer, and his training over the past few years had brought his powers in that realm to an entirely new level. He hadn't yet tested himself against magma, but he wasn't surprised to find that he was pretty much immune to it.

What did surprise him, and should honestly have told him there was something weird going on, was the fact his clothing survived too. That should never have happened, but all his

clothing survived, not just his scarf. Since the scarf was made of Igneel's scales, there was no chance any heat would bother it. But Natsu's clothing, despite having been made here in the Blasted Lands, certainly did not partake in his immunity to heat.

As he did so, Natsu looked around, grumbling and reaching up to tug at the scarf that Igneel had given him, an action he usually reserved for when he was at his most confused. "Where the heck am I? And how do I get back to Ven'auel? And hell... how did I even get here?"

This caused a rumble of laughter from nearby, and a voice, a voice from his past, a voice that he knew almost as well as he knew his own or Happy's, came to Natsu. "Go, brat? Without even greeting me? I'm hurt. Then again, I have no idea how you even arrived here in the first place, so maybe that's fair enough, Natsu."

It was all that Natsu could do to keep himself standing at that point as his legs began to feel like mush. Instead, he slowly turned to where the voice had come from and saw him. "Dad!"

Resting half in and half out of an even larger pool of magma nearby was Igneel, King of the Fire Dragons. He was huge, not as big as Acnologia, but still huge. The half of his body that could be seen looked a little bit wider than the old Fairy Tail headquarters, and his head reared high above Natsu, staring down with a sardonic look on his scaled face, wide lips pulled back from teeth to reveal a smirk. Across his massive fore shoulders, his belly and neck were scars, and there was even one on the side of his face, where the scales were much pinker than the rest of his reddish hide. From the back of his head grew four horns, almost like a crown sitting on top of his head while finlike protrusions stuck out from the sides of his cheeks, and from underneath the magma, his wings flapped, pushing out from underneath to flap lazily a few times, spreading molten bits of lava everywhere.

Whereas anyone else would have looked at the face with terror, Natsu didn't, simply drinking in the sight of his old man. For a few seconds. Then, as Igneel opened his mouth to say something again, Natsu charged forward, shouting out, "You asshole! Is this where you've been hiding all this time! Inside me!? You better be prepared to pay me some back rent, ass!"

Igneel bellowed a laugh, but that laugh ended abruptly as Natsu crossed the intervening distance between them, Natsu's fist lashing out into a punch that caught Igneel on the nose, causing his head to be flung sideways. "OUCH! You brat! How dare you attack your own father?!"

"How dare you leave me like you did! You have this pounding coming, old man!" Natsu shouted, using his Afterburner technique to flip himself through the air and follow Igneel for a moment, wanting to smash into him again. He dodged a strike from a paw bigger than his whole body, kicking out hard against the limb as it passed him by, before ending his Afterburner abruptly, falling down to the earth, dodging another strike from Igneel's head this time, before using his Afterburner again to launch himself upwards. "Fire Dragon Slayer's Ascending Claw!"

That rattled Igneel a bit, and he snarled, headbutting Natsu before he could get away, hurling him backward several leagues. By the time Natsu got his feet under him, Igneel had reared up out of his bed or bath, whatever it was Natsu didn't know. The next second, he launched himself towards Natsu far faster than something the size of multiple houses should ever be able to move.

Natsu had fought Ranma thousands of times by this point and was ready for fast. He dodged under his father's snapping jaws, landing a punch on the jaw before needing to roll backward and away from a slash from one of Igneel's forepaws. Coming out of the roll, he bounced up and over a second strike from Igneel, lashing out with another fire attack, which did next to nothing. It pushed Igneel back a few inches, but that was all.

In the next instant, one of Igneel's hind legs kicked out, catching Natsu. He was slammed down into the ground so hard he created a crater, and before he could right himself or get away, Igneel shifted his hips sideways and sat on him. The next thing Natsu saw before he was further embedded into the ground was Igneel's rear end coming towards him.

"Oh, don't do it you...GAAHHH! This is child abuse!" Natsu shrieked. As the dragon's rump descended, he tried to twist around, trying to bring his teeth to bear against Igneel's extremely well-scaled rear end but to no avail.

Chuckling, Igneel sat there for a time, shifting his hindquarters in such a way as to grind his rear down into Natsu further. Just because his body had now been so thoroughly embedded into the stone beneath Igneel that Natsu probably didn't feel this was beside the point. As any good father knew, psychological trauma was key in raising a good, obedient son. "Ready to give up, brat?"

"NO!" Natsu shouted from below, his voice muffled by Igneel's bulk. Although Igneel had good enough hearing to not only hear him but also hear the faint tremor in Natsu's voice. As if, he was a bit close to breaking down and crying. "No, I'm not! I'll get out of here. Just you wait and see! I'll still, I'll still beat you down for leaving me alone for so long! For somehow hiding inside me!"

Igneel snickered, feeling Natsu trying to push up against Igneel's unmovable rear, only to blink as he felt something else, a strange, unknown sensation. "What are you doing under there, brat?"

"Fire Dragon Slayer's Tickling Flame!" This was a trick that Natsu had come up with after having fallen into one of the Wild Magic Zones. In it, Natsu had nearly died, but not because it was honestly dangerous or changed him in some way. Instead of doing anything to him, the Wild Magic Zone simply hit him with the equivalent of some kind of tickling spell, so powerful that it had almost caused Natsu to rupture himself. The spell had taken the form of a flame, and it was only after eating all of it and adapting to it that the tickling flame had stopped.

It took a bit for Natsu to use, and he could only use it through his hands, hence the shifting around, but it worked a treat. With a whoop that almost sounded like a yelp coming from his cavernous chest, Igneel stumbled forward, and Natsu burst out from the him-sized indent in the ground he had made. "Freedom! And if you try to sit on me again, old man, I'm going to use that spell on your asshole! See how you like feeling the prickle-prickle-tickle in there!"

"Since when did you become so evil, Natsu!? I didn't raise you to be cruel," Igneel gasped, twisting around as slowly as he could contrive to where he could see his son. The sight of Natsu wiping away at his eyes with the back of his hand told Igneel that had been a good move, even if it was so hot here that any tears that Natsu might have shed turned to vapor almost the instant they formed.

"I don't remember you raising me much at all after a certain point! And on the subject of assholes and shit, do you have any idea how long it took me to realize what bathrooms were?" Natsu shouted. "Or that I shouldn't mark my territory by biting things? Or that sniffing other people was rude?" Natsu paused, remembering how a particular little girl with blue hair had kicked his rear for that one. "Okay, so I still have problems with that last one but the point stands!"

"Of course, you shouldn't mark your territory by biting. You'd hurt your teeth. You're only human, after all. Humans mark their territory by licking things," Igneel said, nodding his head sagely.

"...You had no idea how to raise a kid, did you?" Natsu mumbled. "That explains so much."

"Oh, like you were ever eager to learn anything but how to punch things! You're lucky I was able to beat how to read into your head, let alone anything else," Igneel huffed.

The father and son pair looked at one another, and then Natsu grinned, shaking his head and moving forward. This time, not to attack, but rather to fling his arms around one of Igneel's paws, hugging it tightly. "Dammit, old man, I've missed you! Where the hell, why the hell, I have so many damn questions!"

"Most of them, unfortunately, have only one answer. Acnologia. He was hunting us, hunting me, you and the other dragons who had decided to take on Dragon Slayers. I like to think that he feared one alliance between Dragon Slayers and dragons could do against the original Dragon Slayer. But really, he probably just wanted to eat our magic, just as he had done to hundreds of dragons before. You've fought him now, brat. I felt that. But realize that for all of his strength and skill against human opponents, that is but a reflection of his power and ability against a dragon-sized one. When dragon fights dragon, tactics and tricks do not matter nearly as much as raw power. And in that, Acnologia has no equal."

“Hold on! Acnologia hasn’t been seen for hundreds of years! That big fucker can’t exactly hide his presence. There’d be news of it from Sin to Alvarez!” Natsu protested, showing that, for all his battering ram personality, he had learned to think about things other than hitting them over the past year. “Where did this happen, and how the heck did I get from there to where Master Makarov found me?”

“HAH! You’re bang on, Natsu, well done. But you see, you, me, and the rest of the real Dragon Slayers, we’re from the past.” Igneel watched with a wide toothy grin as Natsu stumbled, nearly flopping onto his ass if not for grabbing one of Igneel’s claws to stay upright.

“Wh, what the hell!?” Natsu gasped.

“That’s right, Natsu. You, your friend Gajeel and Wendy are from a few of the human tribes that settled in the peninsula before the collapse of the city-states and the coming of the northern dragons.” Igneel ignored his son’s protests about using the term friend for Gajeel, going on to explain more, “We found you, each of us in different ways. I found you in the wreckage of a laboratory belonging to Zeref. He had been experimenting on you and a couple other people there. I don’t know why.”

Igneel had quickly decided not to tell Natsu that he was Zeref’s brother. Igneel had felt the immortal dark mage’s power disappearing somehow on Tenrou Island and figured with Zeref dead or no longer on this plane of existence, there was no need to put that on Natsu.

“Fucking Zeref. But... but how...”

“How did we travel to the future? Through a massive creation of that self-same mage. The portal, powered by several different Celestial Spirits, sent five of us through to the future.”

“Wait! **Five**? Does that include Ranma, too!?” Natsu exclaimed.

“... That would be four, brat. And no. Your friend, the Ocean Dragon Slayer, is an anomaly. That old hermit, Typhon simply survived for the next few hundred years on his own, hiding deep below the ocean’s surface. I can only imagine Acnologia was leery of taking on a water user that far below the surface. Or, maybe he just thought Typhon wasn’t worth the effort to kill. Who can tell with that mad creature?”

“Okay, but that means there are two Dragon Slayers we don’t know about.” For a second, Natsu looked more stunned at that than the fact he was from the past. “But back to, er, coming forward or whatever you want to call it.”

“We knew that we couldn’t survive against Acnologia. He was still actively hunting all dragons and any humans who learned from us at the time. There was also a growing hatred against all dragons. So we decided to try and travel into the future, hoping that you all would be able to find allies.”

Natsu both growled and grimaced at that memory, nodding his head. "Okay, I get why you had to hide. But why did you take me with you to... Wherever I am now? We can't really be inside me, can we?"

"Draconic souls are very malleable things. We are indeed inside your body. I put my own soul inside of yours but not just to hide. You've been told several times that you, Gajeel and Wendy don't need to worry about transforming into dragons, right? No matter how close to the line you push, no matter how much Dragon Slayer magic you use, your body won't change unless you let it, right?"

"Yeah, Porlyusica and Gramps both said that... wait..."

"Exactly, brat!" Igneel guffawed. We, me and the others who came forward in time, we were exhausted, unable to do anything on our own. So we imbued you all with a bit of our own souls in order to stop the Dragon Seed within you from growing."

That was a gross oversimplification, of course. The truth was all five of the dragons who had decided to try and let their Dragon Slayers escape Acnologia's eyes had fought against Acnologia before then but had been beaten, much of their magic drained by the magic-eating monster whose element of Magic allowed him to eat any Magic, no matter what type. Moreover, they hadn't powered the device. That had been left to Zeref... who Igneel had actually been somewhat friendly. At that time, he hadn't been the dark mage he became later, but again, Igneel decided to keep that to himself.

*As well as the fact that the Celestial Spirits who empowered the gate were controlled by Anna Heartfilia... who has to be that Lucy girl's ancestor? No way, two families can have the same blonde hair, blue eyes and big mammaries as that clan.*

As Igneel had lost himself in his own thoughts for a second, Natsu thought about what he was being told, and suddenly, a vision came to him of himself getting pregnant for some reason at that point, and he gagged a little. The next second, his father's heavy paw swatted him, sending Natsu flying sideways, rolling through the rocky, magma-strewn terrain around them. "Like that young idiot! You're not going to birth a Dragon! You've got two girlfriends. How do you not know how the birds and the bees work!?"

"But you're talking about transformation magic! How was I supposed to know!?" Natsu shouted.

"Now you're just being stupid because you want to be stupid," Igneel grumbled, lowering his head down onto his forearms with a long, drawn-out sigh. "Whatever did I do to find a son like you?"

"I don't know, but it must've been something great," Natsu quipped, snickering a little. Then he sobered, nodding his head. "But I understand what you really mean. You, Gajeel's

Metalhead, and Wendy's Grandeeneey decided to kill two birds with one stone, right? Not only hide yourselves away but use that hiding place to bolster us. But doesn't that mean th, that there's no way out?"

"Metalhead? I like that. He was certainly hardheaded enough for the term," Igneel guffawed before nodding slowly. "As to your question, yes and no. Metalhead \*snort\* myself and the queen of the air perhaps, eventually, to absorb enough Ethernano through you all to recover from our exertions and create physical bodies for ourselves once more. But that will take decades longer soaking in the background Ethernano, even wherever the hell you've been the last year or so."

Setting aside the strangeness of Igneel suddenly exploding out of him like a weird animal called a chest-burster Ranma had mentioned in a joke, Natsu shook his head. "Seriously, what is it with her? Every Dragon we've talked to treats Grandeeneey like she's some kind of idol or something."

"The only kind of idol I know of, is the ones some weird humans occasionally worship. She was simply popular, that's all. Exceptionally so," Igneel said with a shrug. *No need to tell the brat about how I once tried to mate with her only to get this scar on my shoulder for my trouble.*

"And as to your original question..." Igneel paused, then once more lowered his head down onto his forepaws from where he had smacked Natsu around a moment ago. "And before you think about some weird scheme to feed me more Ethernano, remember, brat, my spirit is keeping the Dragon Seed inside you at bay. You need to become strong enough in willpower to do that yourself before I can leave. And I know that turning into a dragon doesn't sound horrible, Natsu, but it is!"

He glared at Natsu, who had made to open his mouth to protest, and only after Natsu looked away did he go on. "How humans and dragons feel or deal with emotions are very different. Very few dragons have ever had the entire gamut of emotions that humans take for granted. Further, what emotions we do have can often run too hot or too cold. Humans transformed into a dragon will not be able to control themselves. They will slip into a mindless state, one where every good emotion has been banished from them."

"... Okay, not going that way! I can't say I'm exactly happy about the fact that, you know, you had to hide out in here, and I lost my dad for over ten years now, but at least I don't have to deal with that," Natsu grumbled then scowled. "But wait, what about Ranma? He's another Dragon Slayer, and he for sure doesn't have any portion of his grandfather's soul and him like you did me. How has he stopped himself from turning into a Dragon?"

"What, you think I have all the answers, Natsu? I've got no clue. You might, if you actually remembered what he has told you in the past, though," Igneel taunted.

“... Something about fighting his inner self or something... Some kind of cave or...,” Natsu paused, scratching at his chin thoughtfully, before shrugging. “Ehh, I suppose it doesn’t matter much.”

Igneel sweatdropped at that. *I wish I could say that that was unusual with him, but it really isn’t. My son has the attention span of a fly for anything that isn’t about punching people. And maybe mating.* “Why am I not surprised?”

“I don’t know, why aren’t you? It’s not like I can know what is going on in that big empty head of yours,” Natsu joked.

Within a second, Igneel had him pinned under one hand and was grinding the palm of his forepaw into Natsu, growling out, “You really need to learn how to respect your elders! I’m surprised that pint sized fellow that you liked so much hasn’t done that already.”

“I give, I give!” Natsu shouted, feeling his bones, despite all of the training he had done up to this point, starting to grind against one another, his body slowly being compressed under Igneel’s foot.

*And if that isn’t the most annoying thing I’ve ever run into! After so long training, after all of the foes I’ve faced, my old man is still so much stronger than me!* The thought brought a smile to his face, followed by a scowl in quick succession. It was both a goal to continue toward and a sign that he had not come nearly as far as he had hoped.

In actuality, if they had met in the physical world, Igneel probably wouldn’t have been able to bat around Natsu nearly as easily. However, here, in the realm of the soul, Natsu had no idea how to bring his true strength to bear.

After a second, Igneel raised his hand away from Natsu, his tail whipping around to gather him up, pulling him into a hug against Igneel’s side. “Yet despite that mouth on you, I’ve missed you, Natsu. I’m always here with you, I’ve been able to see a lot of your life, but not all of it, and watching that kind of thing is a far cry from being able to help or reach out and swat your head when I think you’re being stupid.”

For a few seconds, father and son stared at one another, then, as steam began to appear around and under Natsu’s eyes, Igneel looked away, letting his son compose himself before turning back. “If I can come and see you like this, I’ll come every day!”

“Don’t strain yourself! Doing that kind of thing will probably actually take a lot of energy. And besides, I like the silence in here after years of raising you,” Igneel scoffed, then smirked, leaning his snout down to butt into Natsu’s chest. “And by the way, am I right in what I felt? That you were able to score not just two girls, but twins? Way to go!”

Natsu stared at him in shock and then a little worried. Igneel only saw the shock, and he laughed. "Even dragons have a thing for twins. That was well done! Or should I say, you did them well?"

"Perverted old man!" Natsu shouted back, raising a hand to smack at Igneel's nose.

Guffawing loud enough to shake the volcano, Igneel reared back, then flung Natsu away with his tail. "Well, with this whole emotional reunion nonsense out of the way, let's get down to the real reason why you're here! To get stronger."

Natsu grinned even as he righted himself, smashing his fists together, an aura of fire suddenly erupting all around him. He would much rather punch someone, than talk about his two girlfriends he had left behind, to come on this training journey with his old man. That way lay madness of one sort or another. "Oh, hell yeah! I'm all fired up! What are you going to teach me now, pops?"

"Quite a lot! Let us start with simple combat, how to use your Dragon Slayer magic not just to create flame but also to reinforce your body to an even greater degree than you already are. Fire Dragon's armor, Flame Scales! And then, we'll talk about a few more attacks! A few ways to bring more magic out, make your existing attacks stronger!"

"Hell, yes!" Natsu shouted, charging forward. Igneel let him come, bracing himself, his wings flared, his talons digging into the ground as he roared. After all, between the two of them, there was only one way to learn and that was through fighting.

**OOOOOOO**

Upon reaching a true meditative state, Gajeel was presented with a somewhat similar experience to what Natsu faced. For one thing, he appeared in this new realm in midair for some reason. And for another, the entire area around him screamed out of his element. In this case, metal.

There was no sun here. Instead, the horizon in every direction was dominated by gears of such massive magnitude they looked almost like continents, shifting and moving against one another, causing sparks like flashes of yellow light. On the ground, other gears stuck out like strange vegetation, accompanied by girders, a pool of molten slag coming down from a mountain, its sides decorated not with rocks or trees but with differing sizes of metallic poles, the few rocks made of gleaming iron rather than stone.

It was a fascinating landscape, if incredibly weird at the same time. But after only a few moments cursory look around, Gajeel had no eye for whatever was around them, instead staring at the one object in this weird realm that could look back. The giant metallic dragon currently crouched in a large basin-like structure carved out of the side of the mountain facing them.

Slightly smaller in length and wing-width than Igneel, Metalicana's body was covered in silver and iron scales like Igneel's was red or light tan ones, although, unlike Igneel's scales, Metalicana's looked almost like they were a kind of shell rather than scale, armored like a knight would wear rather than something that could move or breath with the wearer. In the places where Igneel had smaller scales, Metalicana's looked like chain mail almost. The only thing that looked like it was part of a flesh-and-bone person were his feathers, which were black but attached to wings that looked as if they could not move at all.

Whereas Igneel's head resembled that of a lizard, Metalicana's head was almost too square to think it could have existed in nature, with a lower jaw attached almost like a hinge. His eyes were not yellow but black, small with no pupils and black sclera. As Kurnugi had reminded Gajeel, around his eyes were small black markings like a woman's makeup. His tail had a massive metal tip like a large spear, making it a much more threatening weapon than Igneel's, and he also had spikes going down his back.

Entirely unlike Natsu and Igneel, neither Gajeel nor Metalicana seemed in a rush to break the silence, simply staring at one another as if daring the other to speak first. Instead, they stood, staring at one another. Eventually, it was Gajeel who broke, not having nearly as much patience as a dragon. "Well, old man, are you going to say something? Kurnugi tells me you are into humans, sneaking around among them as a human form and getting piercings? Tell me, did you ever grow out of the emo phase?"

"Look who's talking! Dressed all in black, with feathers studs, trying to sing and play the guitar? You couldn't be more emo if your very life depended on it! And don't get me started about how bad your singing voice is. That's enough to literally wake the dead sometimes, way worse than that evil look in your eyes you always have."

"At least I had some play, whereas you apparently didn't! Kurnugi's told me a lot of stories about you when you two were younger and how none of the female dragons would give you the time of day!" Gajeel shot back.

"You little tool!" Metalicana shouted, shaking his head angrily, the movement causing a screech like metal on metal for a second, though neither Gajeel nor Metalicana noticed. "You know what, I think I'm done listening to your voice. It's almost as grating as your singing one. Let's just move on to something that you're actually acceptable at, fighting."

"Fine by me!" Gajeel shouted, charging forwards.

Afterward, the two of them would talk. Neither of them was very good with emotions, with saying what needed to be said or saying what the other person needed to hear. However, right now, there were more important things to concentrate on anyway, and using that as an excuse was fine by both father and son.

**End Flashback**

“... You’re saying that this Dragon Seed, which is a term I’ve heard before admittedly, is being fought back or somehow kept from growing stronger in your bodies because you have significant portions of your parents’ souls in you?” Ranma said, staring deadpan at the two Dragon Slayers, then Kurnugi. He then looked over at his girlfriends, both of whom shrugged their shoulders, just as stunned as he was.

He then shook his head slowly from side to side. “Fine, whatever. It’s magic. Why do I even try to think that it could have any kind of rhyme or reason.”

Natsu and Gajeel both laughed in their own ways at that, while Kurnugi simply smirked arrogantly. “Dragon Slayer magic isn’t just the strongest magic out there because of its destructive potential but because it represents how powerful dragons are, how adaptable we are. We **are** magic, from the tips of our tails to the glint on our fangs. Is it any wonder that some of us were apparently able to discover a way to create small pocket dimensions within our Dragon Slayers like this to keep the Dragon Seed at bay?”

“Yes, yes it is. Still... I don’t suppose either of you would be able to teach Wendy this trick? She would probably cry enough to let us create a small inland ocean, but I would wager that Wendy would also be ecstatic to be able to talk to her mother. Even after learning that she’s always carried Grandeeney within her like this.”

Kurnugi nodded instantly at that, looking almost a little whimsical for a moment, while both of the Dragon Slayers nodded at Ranma’s question. They would both cheerfully help Wendy to achieve the same spiritual clarity as they had, although neither would put it that way. Regardless, Wendy was simply too likable and nice to not help in this manner if they could.

“Well, fine. So the two of you are going to be a lot stronger now. Good. I hope that means that neither of you is going to object to your roles in this fight then.” Ranma abruptly turned the conversation to more important matters.

“That depends on what those roles are,” Natsu answered cautiously.

“First, you’re going to act like bait. And then, you’re going to go with Kurnugi over there and deal the final blow to Motherglare and whatever reserves she might have that she doesn’t send against the rest of us.”

“You’re going to have to unpack that a bit, Ranma,” Gajeel said, frowning.

Ranma and Juvia looked at one another, then grinned as they explained the plan that he had come up with. The lake that they had discovered to the north of the mine that Motherglare had taken over was simply too good to pass up. “I think that a three-pronged campaign is going to be...” he paused, as Natsu seemed to nod excitedly, narrowing his eyes before going on.

The plan was relatively simple, although as Ranma had feared looking at Natsu, it went in one ear and out the other for the Fire Dragon Slayer. First, Kurnugi would lead an assault straight north toward where Motherglare was. This assault would be destructive enough to force Motherglare to send a few of her larger 'children' after them. At that point, the three would retreat as if afraid to fight the larger creatures. Meanwhile, Ranma and Juvia would set up within and around the pond to the north. Jenny would split off from the two Dragon Slayers at that point and would use one of her most powerful Mecha Take Over forms to launch an attack on Motherglare's mine, then lead her forces straight north.

Since that pond was somewhat within the realm that the dragon creatures patrolled, it and Jenny's attack would instantly grab Motherglare's attention. The mad egg-laying dragon was insanely paranoid about her own safety, and seeing foreign creatures capable of doing her harm so near her lair would send her into a frenzy, forcing Motherglare to send a lot of her force against them there. Juvia and Ranma would grind them down using the pond to empower their magic further. Jenny would stay in reserve with the two water mages, while Kurnugi, Natsu and Gajeel would turn around. At that point, they would either annihilate whatever force was still coming after them or simply go straight to the attack on Motherglare's weakened position.

There were several problems, of course. First, there was the problem that the group of initial attackers would be overwhelmed. It would take them a while to get through each successive layer of draconid defense around Motherglare, and that might wear them down. Second, as the group of explorers had learned, it would take Juvia and Ranma a while to get into position thanks to how much area they had to cover.

Distance also caused a second problem in that the group lacked any real ability to communicate over any distance. The distances involved meant that Ranma and Juvia would have no way of telling the others that they were ready, and Natsu and his group would have no way of telling them that they had already attacked and were pulling back in turn.

That, however, Kurnugi surprisingly had a solution for. "I know where there is a cache of magical radios within the Ven'ael. Whether or not they actually work you all can determine far better than I, who never used the things before." The tall sword wielder then pointed out over the distance. Just starting over the horizon, Ranma and the others could see another large group of draconids. "For now, I think this is an optimal opportunity for all of you to get some more training in."

Kurnugi then very deliberately hopped over towards a nearby rooftop, landing there, where he apparently had brought out a lounge chair at some point while Ranma and his lovers were gone. There, he laid out, pulled out a set of sunglasses of all things, set them on his face and waved a hand airily. "Well, get to it."

Ranma stared after the man, deciding that Dragon or not, Kurnugi was going to get pranks one of these days before a loud whoop interrupted his thoughts as Natsu hopped off the wall, charging toward the incoming draconids. "I bet I kill more than any of you!"

"You're on flame-tard!" Gajeel shouted, already powering a spell of some kind.

Ranma shook his head and turned to look at his two girlfriends. "You know, if you had told me even as long as a year ago that I would be the sane, non-combat junkie among the group, I probably would have hurt myself laughing. Now? Now, I'm in the weird position of being the reasonable one. I don't want to be the reasonable one!"

"Poor baby," Jenny mock cooed, patting his head. "Do you want Auntie Jenny to make it all better?"

"Never call yourself Auntie Jenny again. That'll be a start," Ranma drawled, smacking her hand away before grabbing it before she could pull it back and pulling it to his mouth, kissing the fingers, his eyes implying precisely why such a term would be highly inappropriate.

Beside them, Juvia chuckled. "Juvia thinks that Juvia and Jenny have no desire to prove ourselves as much as you three do. This is obvious, as most men seem to think it fun to shout 'rear smash', whereas we womenfolk prefer more gentle pursuits. Indeed, come to think of it, Erza is perhaps the only woman who has as much delight in combat as you menfolk. So Juvia suggests that Juvia and Jenny leave the Dragon Slayers to their sweaty fun..."

That caused Ranma, who had been scowling a little in melancholy at the mention of Erza, to gag and Jenny to cackle, understanding the innuendo there while Juvia went on blithely. "While we more refined sorts look for these radios that Kurnugi mentioned."

"Yeah, I know I ain't gonna win that argument." With a sigh, Ranma hopped forward off the wall, landing lightly below and racing after the other Dragon Slayers. While he might have objected a moment ago to the idea of being so eager for a fight, that didn't imply he wasn't eager, just not as eager as Natsu and Gajeel. *And if they think that getting a head start will help them beat my kill count, they have another thing coming!*

Jenny watched them go for a moment, and then turned to look over at Kurnugi, picking Juvia up and floating the pair of them over with a brief use of her Mecha Take Over magic and the old air glider type. "So, where were those radios again?"

OOOOOOO

As Juvia was mentioning Erza, Erza was currently cursing Ranma, certain acts the two of them had done together, something that eluded her at present was that in this area, it took two to tango by definition and the fact that she still couldn't fit into any of her armor. Not even a simple breastplate.

“Honestly!” she complained to a captive audience in the form of her little baby, Enma, and the Guns Mage, Bisca. The Greenette was looking at her with a sweatdrop forming on the side of her head. “After a lot of work, my waist is back to normal, my overall weight is acceptable. Even my thighs and hips are back to normal. But look! Look at these things!”

Bisca did indeed look at ‘these things’ as Erza cupped her breasts one under each hand and shook them, scowling angrily, completely ignorant of nearly every man within the guild hall at present staring at her. Some of them had actual blood dripping from their noses at the amazing bounce of Erza’s large chest. *God damn, girl! She’s younger than me and already was chestier before this. Now? If there was ever any doubt as to who was the chestiest among the Fairy Tail girls, those are well and truly in the past. Lisanna and Anna might also have grown more than a bit, but they didn’t have as much of a head start as Erza did.*

Erza’s breasts were at least a size larger than they had been before, yet retained the near gravity-defying perkiness that Erza and Mirajane always had in common. *The dirty bitches. Seriously, is there something about being an S-class mage that somehow gives you the magic to make your tits so spectacular? I know I’ve got a good pair too but I bet after having a kid they’ll sag just as much as the next girl’s. Not like those lethal weapons.*

“Of all the places, my chest is the only place that has ignored all of my efforts to get back down to my normal size,” Erza continued, waving her arms to either side of her in annoyance in a manner that was completely unlike her normal controlled body language. “Arm exercises, chest exercises, stomach exercises, I’ve tried them all, but noooo, all the stupid things want to do is make milk!”

She waved a finger at Enma. The baby was on the table between the two women, trying to sit upright and failing. He seemed to enjoy the challenge, if his happy noises were anything to go by and didn’t seem to care at all for how hard the wooden surface underneath him was. “I swear, you will be weaned off mother’s milk and onto bottles as soon as humanly possible.”

The baby chortled, clapping his hands together, then resolutely putting them back down on the top of the table, trying to push himself upright again with a little ‘goooo’ of effort that caused Bisca’s heart to strain in her chest. *If ever I thought I wasn’t going to go the parent route, this little tyke and the absolute darlings that Lisanna and Anna created definitely put, paid to that. I know it’ll wreck my body and my chest in particular but it will be worth it.*

“What’s the point of babies, honestly?” Erza grumbled, resting a finger on Enma’s forehead for a second, ignoring the numerous side eyes this statement evoked. Or just not noticing. With Erza, it was hard to tell. “Up all night, crapping, eating, crapping, eat, crap, crap, then eat! And whenever he is actually awake and has energy, he always attempts to crawl away or attempt to eat some of my swords or my armor. He doesn’t even have teeth. Why is he trying to mouth everything!?”

Her hand swiftly moved as Enma almost rolled off the side of the table. Holding Enma up to her face, she looked at him through narrowed eyes, holding him almost dangerously but not quite badly enough to cause any of the nearby girls to intervene. "And if you do your business on my bed again just as I turn away to grab a diaper for you... Well, I don't know what I'll do, but you won't like it!"

Enma simply babbled back at her, waving his chubby arms, one of them trying to reach forward to grab at her hair or her finger. Erza wasn't certain which. She then set him down very firmly in the center of the table, watching him closely for any sign of attempting to kill himself again, before letting him sit upright there. She watched as he fell onto his side, babbled, and began to shift this way and that, almost but not quite crawling across the surface of the table.

*More like scooting across, really,* Bisca cooed, smiling as she reached forward to run a finger down the baby's cheek.

"The worst part is, I am bored out of my mind," Erza growled, closing her eyes for a moment, and bringing up a hand to her face to knead her nose, before shaking her head and looking over at Bisca. "I wanted to go out on a job, just a simple one, to check up on Laxus. He took that invitation from Gildarts of all people. Who knows what those two reprobates could get up to together."

Erza switched her gaze over to another table where Makarov sat drinking a health drink of some kind made by Mirajane at Porlyusica's request. It was apparently supposed to help his heart and stomach. "Surely you understand that, Master Makarov? He left you back in charge of the Guild when he did, after all!"

"You know our guild policy on that, Erza. No taking jobs until your child is at least able to chew solid foods," Makarov said wryly, shaking his head, before making a face at Enma, who had turned to look in his direction as his mother had. "I would also say able to walk on his own, but seeing how well your little one there is able to crawl ready, that might not be as much of an impediment."

"Would it count if I was able to find him his own set of indentures?" Erza asked, and Makarov and the others who heard her sweatdropped, not certain if the redhead was serious or not.

Looking between where her siblings sat with their own babies and Erza, Mirajane had the sudden urge to cackle aloud in triumph. She didn't, though, considering A, it wasn't her triumph she would be celebrating, and B, it wasn't an area where she and Erza had ever thought to **ever** compete in. But there was no getting about the fact that Erza was very much not one of nature's natural mothers. Whereas Lisanna and Anna very much were.

The two twins were sitting next to one another, leaning their heads lightly against one another as their babies gabled from their mother's laps at one another. Natalie and Nate were

always around one another, just as their mothers were. If one mother wasn't awake, the other was. If one wasn't feeling up to nursing, the other was. Having two mothers so willing to work together to mother their children worked wonders. Neither younger girl was bothered by anything the babies did, delighting in changing their diapers and tickling them, playing with the two babies or cuddling with them when they slept. They told Mira that feeling those little bodies against theirs was somehow incredibly soothing, and Mira could understand that.

Certainly, she had never felt anything as soft as the cheek of her little nephew when she first held Nate. It was almost enough to give her ideas, ideas that she could see percolating in Bisca's head stronger with every passing day. Yet there was no prospective beau on the horizon for Mira to become the other half of that equation, and frankly, she liked it that way.

Leaning sideways, she nudged Cana. "How much would you be willing to wager it will be another few weeks at best before some of the other girls decide to take over mothering Enma for a bit? It looks as if Erza's about three or four more sleepless nights away from tearing her hair out."

"No bet. I don't think she'd allow it. Erza might be perhaps the most horrible mother in the universe, but look at her now. She refuses to let the little guy alone, no matter how much you might complain about it. Now, if some of us volunteered to take diaper duty off her hands? Or maybe have a sleepover or two that might ease her burden a bit," Cana replied. "Erza might have all the nurturing skills of a mother bear, but she's got all the protective instincts of one too."

Mira thought about it, then nodded, the two girls smiling at one another, with Mira's just a little bit wider than Cana's, considering how, for once, there was no booze next to Cana. *Hah! This time of day Cana would be onto her second barrel. Not anymore. Well... not around here or back in the dormitory either.*

This was not voluntary in the strictest sense. Cana would never go the way of her Edo-duplicate, turning her back entirely on drink. But it only took Nate to the smell when she sat down next to the twins at one point to convince Cana that there would be a better time and place for drinking than when around three babies. *And both my sisters stating what they would do to her if either of their kids got sick from smelling her booze had nothing to do with that decision, I'm sure.*

"Wendy and the others are due back from their latest mission soon. I'd wager that she will jump at the chance to be big sister Wendy again," Mira said aloud.

Listening in on this from where he sat across from Erza, Makarov smiled. *That is the way it should be. Within the Guild, everyone is family. And everyone will be there to share a member's burden. No matter how small and cute that burden might be,* he thought, making a face at Enma, who cheerfully shook a small fist at him. *Now, if only your father and the others*

*who went on that crazy train jet during the others could get back here. Then, this family would be fully complete once more, ready for whatever might come!*

**OOOOOOO**

The communication devices that Kurnugi knew of did not look like any kind of radio or walkie-talkie any of them had ever seen before. Instead, they looked like backpack-sized disproportionate starfish creatures and felt almost like shells to the touch along the back, while their fronts were very soft, giving a bit as Happy and the others held them. According to Kurnugi, they were worn high up the back between the shoulder blades, and tiny little feelers would extrude from the topmost star point. These would enter the ears and move to where one would hover right in front of the wearer's mouth if needed.

In other words, they looked very weird and very alive, and Ranma instantly refused to have anything to do with them unless he had to. "I hate the very idea of someone putting anything like that into my ear!" He said that night, shaking his head firmly. "Are you sure these things haven't been mutated by the background magic around here?"

"No, they were actually a product of another city-state. Much like the small cleaners that you see everywhere around the city, they were made to look... Cute," Kurnugi said, the last word coming out as if he was a matron trying to pick up a particularly odious object with a pair of tweezers. "But they worked so well that instead of just appealing to children, the various militaries also began to use them."

Kurnugi then smiled wryly. "That storehouse was actually a distribution point for various toy stores around the city. Hence why those in particular have the colors they do."

Considering that, the communication thing came in colors ranging from kill-me orange to smiley faces and paintings of long-forgotten shows that had already been easy enough to discern. Ranma actually approved of one of them. It was an image of someone who almost looked like a martial artist standing on top of a mountain, with other martial artists armed with swords and spears trying to climb up it. It looked like his kind of show.

Gajeel shrugged, reaching for one of them, which was painted matte black with a series of stars setting it, each of them having a small face of some ancient character or actress perhaps in it. He settled the creature on his shoulders, feeling it settle around his collarbone and neck, sticking almost like an octopus to his clothing. "That feels a little strange. Still, given how often I use headphones... Well, hopefully, this next bit won't feel too weird to me."

He tapped one of the star-like creature's limbs that was draped across his collarbone, which seemed to be the signal for several other feelers to sprout from the end of the upward-facing point, where it was right at where his hairline began. He shivered a little as the feelers. Two of them came around his right cheek, another his left. One of the ones on his right and the one on his left entered his ear, but not deep into it, which had been Ranma's concern. Instead,

it stopped there, and as Juvia and Happy - the two least concerned about the living object element of this thing - watched, the end of those feelers spread, almost like a puffball, filling the ear.

"Can you hear me?" Happy asked instantly, waving his hands at Gajeel. When he didn't reply, the small exceed snickered and said in a loud voice, "Your hair is stupid, and all of those studs you have in your face make it look like you lost a fight with a nail gun!"

Gajeel brought a chop down on top of the small exceed's head, sending him sprawling. "Just because I didn't react at first didn't mean I couldn't hear you, you big-mouthed ball of fur!" As Happy grumbled, Gajeel reached up to his ears, gently touching the outside of the strange puffball things now filling his ear lobes. "It feels a little itchy, but other than that, I can actually hear you guys perfectly well. Although, that might be because, you know, Dragon Slayer."

Everyone nodded, understanding the point, and Juvia looked over at Jenny, who still looked a little concerned about the creature thing. With a sigh, the bluenette moved over, picking up one of the other communications devices. The same thing happened to her as the others watched, and when Juvia did not respond to Happy's words, almost shouted into her ear from one side, it showed that it was indeed a Dragon Slayer thing to be able to hear through these devices.

But, when she removed one of them, the other one showed no move to retract itself to match its fellow. So you could have one in your ear and the other ear free.

"Well, now we need to see if they actually will work in terms of communication," Kurnugi said, clapping his hands. "This is going much better than I expected, honestly."

"What, you didn't think of these would work?" Natsu asked.

Kurnugi smiled blandly. "I wasn't certain if they were or were not being affected by the local magical field and I certainly wasn't going to volunteer to wear one. But since Juvia and Gajeel have already done so..."

"Great, we're guinea pigs then," Gajeel grumbled while Juvia's eyes narrowed, and she promised herself to put some of the local hot pepper equivalent into the next meal they made with Kurnugi. Over the days they had spent in the city, they had learned that Kurnugi did not like spicy foods and could not handle much of them at all. It seemed a fitting punishment.

Ranma seemed to be thinking along somewhat similar lines as he gestured towards the house that had become the trio of lover's main domicile and the communal kitchen in one. "Why don't Jenny and I start dinner, and Juvia, you and Gajeel can play around with the communication part of those creatures."

“They were actually called Comi-Stars,” Kurnugi supplied helpfully.

Ranma didn’t think the name was very catchy, but the others all seemed to like it, so he shrugged, and he and Juvia headed toward the kitchen.

As that was going on, Juvia and Gajeel spread out, first through the city, then Gajeel headed straight south. That area was a bit of a dead zone, with few in the way of predators that would bother a human-sized opponent. Stopping every twenty minutes to call back, he pushed out as far as he could go before Juvia called him back for the evening meal. At that point, he hadn’t gone far enough to disrupt the Comi-star’s ability to pick up Juvia’s voice, although that wasn’t all that far, really. Gajeel lacked any ability to speed up his mode of travel like Natsu had and could not run nearly as fast as Ranma could.

Over the meal, which was interrupted by Kurnugi shrieking in pain and rushing towards the nearest source of water, the group decided they would take a few days to figure out the range of the communications devices. The two groups needed to be able to communicate when they pushed into Motherglare’s territory, almost as much as Juvia and Ranma needed to go unseen until they were in position by the lake.

Ranma agreed to be able to cover far more territory than any of the others except for Natsu and Jenny. But all of Jenny’s Take Over forms included helmets, and while she could remove her helmets when she used a few of them, she couldn’t do so for all of them, in particular any of the ones that allowed her to fly.

Via womanly communication that was mostly glances, eyebrow movements, and small frowns, Jenny and Juvia apparently decided between them that Jenny would accompany Ranma on this again on her own. Since Juvia would get some alone time thanks to the plan they had come up with and needed to stay since none of the boys could cook, the two girls thought that was fair.

For his part, Ranma wasn’t certain that the two were equal. After all, he and Juvia would be pushing hard, and he doubted that Juvia would have any time or inclination when they bedded down for fun times. He and Jenny had also already had the better part of a week on their own. But he wasn’t going to interject after the girls had already decided on a solution.

He felt better that night when Jenny left him and Juvia alone for the night. Something both of them greatly enjoyed.

The next morning, while Gajeel and Natsu went to work again on a new group of draconids under Kurnugi’s watchful eye, Ranma and Jenny left the city, heading south as Gajeel had the day before. They would stop at noon and then in the evening to call back and see if they had covered as much distance as the Comi-Stars could reach.

It turned out that as long as the snails got a few hours a day in direct sunlight, they could reach quite a ways. When Jenny and Ranma stopped that evening, they were still well within range to hear Happy's shout of, "Water is stupid except that fish live there! Your hair is ugly, and so is your face!"

"Right. Remind me to shave you when I get back, Furball," Ranma grumbled. He had long since beaten away any kind of fear of the exceeds, but Happy certainly hadn't grown on him as a companion. Yes, he was a friend, but Ranma preferred it when he kept his mouth shut. "Can you hear us too?"

"Loud and clear," Happy stated, becoming serious. "Natsu and the others are wondering how far away you are right now?"

I would say we covered around... 300 miles or so?" Ranma shrugged. "Jenny and I pushed ourselves the entire day so I'm guessing between three hundred and four hundred at least. We haven't run into any predators, which makes for a nice change, even if we did have to go wide around several areas that were littered with Wild Magic Zones."

The WMZs in question had been small, only around the size of a fist, but very visible for some reason, almost shimmering in the air with red or gold highlights within. In a way, Ranma thought they almost looked like some strange farm field or something. But he wasn't about to get close to any of them, a bit of wisdom that Jenny had wholeheartedly agreed with. "Do you think we should keep going?"

Juvia and Kurnugi consulted for a few moments then Happy came back, stating that they probably should continue on for another day. That way, they would know for certain that they would be able to communicate with one another once the group split up, regardless of whatever distance they covered. Motherglare's territory was only around 800 miles or so across, after all.

Ranma nodded, then looked over back to where Juvia was cooking at the tent's kitchenette, gulping so audibly that Happy asked, "What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong, Happy. I was just drinking something, and it went down the wrong tube," Ranma hastily stated. The sight of Jenny in nothing but an apron would never fail to get him riled, yet that wasn't a conversation he wanted to have with Happy or any of the others. "In that case, I think Jenny and I will hit the hay now. Talk to you again tomorrow, guys."

Happy's shout of "Have fun!" and the giggle that accompanied it showed Ranma that his attempt to lie hadn't worked. But when Jenny looked over her shoulder at him, her wild mane of blonde hair falling down her naked back, a certain look in her eye, Ranma could not bring himself to care one little bit.

The two of them traveled for another day and a half straightaway from the city, running into trouble several times along that route as they started to run into predators that didn't have a problem with attacking something the size of two humans. There weren't any real fights that they speak of, though, not for the two of them. Halfway through the third day, they finally could not hear Happy or Juvia's response to their midday query and turned back to Ven'auel, mission accomplished. Even if Ranma still wasn't happy with the sensation of the little feeler things going into his ears.

On the day after their return to the city, the adventurers began to put the plan into action. Instead of waiting for the draconids to come close, Kurnugi joined Gajeel and Natsu in destroying that day's allotment of low-level draconids. Then they pushed on, heading straight north, with Jenny flying above them in her hang glider form for now. Being one of the least magical intensive forms, that would allow her to keep up with the others and act as an eye in the sky along with Happy, while also conserving her energy for the fights to come.

Meanwhile, Juvia and Ranma skirted the same way he and Jenny had gone before, out east and then north. The two of them would pretty much traverse the same ground almost the entire way, keeping hidden, living off the land sparingly and keeping well out of sight of all the draconids. When it came time to set up their little water fortress, as Juvia had started calling it, they wanted it to be a complete surprise.

**OOOOOOO**

Jenny and the group with her pushed forward throughout that day, destroying every group of draconids they came across until night fell. Then, Gajeel and Kurnugi set up what amounted to several different camps, each of them surrounded by spikes of iron ore swords that would shoot automatically toward anyone who came close. How a Dragon Slayer was able to use that kind of magic, create magical traps well away from his body, Jenny didn't know, but he did.

These decoys worked a treat that night. Several hundred draconids of various ages or types attacked during the night, destroying the outposts one after another. While Kurnugi, Natsu, Gajeel, Happy, and Jenny slept elsewhere, within hearing range of the battles, but relying on hiding away for the night rather than forging up. But all of them knew that the next day and going forward they would face harsher resistance as they went further north.

That proved to be the case around midday. The group spent most of that morning destroying all of the draconids that came at them, patrols of the smaller variety led by one or two of, the larger sorts, but none in enough large numbers to threaten them. At midday, though, they began to see the two even larger varieties that Ranma and Jenny had seen during their scouting mission.

Among hordes of the type that had been acting as commanders before this came the type whose wings looked different than their brethren, what Ranma had called more metallic looking,

something that Natsu and Gajeel agreed with. With them was one of the other types Jenny and Ranma had seen. This type was the one with longer arms that moved on all fours when on the ground, their tails twice as long as their bodies. This type was far larger than the other varieties and Jenny knew they could fly too, though at first, she didn't see any doing that.

Only as Gajeel, Natsu and Kurnugi finished off another patrol did she see the real threat. Flying higher in the air than Happy, she saw that the draconids had begun to gather to form a real threat, and this one was in the air and on the ground just out of sight over the horizon from those traveling below.

"Happy! Call it in. We have eighty flying draconids, all of them of one of the larger varieties, along with another hundred or so on the ground. None of the proto dragons, though." Jenny shouted before flying back the way they had come, landing for a brief moment in an open area. She still hadn't figured out a way to change directly from one Take Over form to another and would very much rather not experiment with doing so midair. *Not unless I have someone else able to catch me if the feeling of freefall is too much for me to overcome anyway. Erza would probably be the best bet there. Ranma can jump with style, but he can't fly, not really.*

She settled on the ground, canceling her initial Take Over form as she stumbled, grumbling a little at how landing in the hang glider form was always troublesome. Then she breathed in a few times before clapping her hands together, shouting out, "Take Over: Mecha Soul: Grey Killer!"

Within seconds, she had transformed into a... well, frankly, when she first saw a reflection of this new form of hers, she thought it looked like the flying version of her MS cycle. It wasn't a mech of any kind. Rather, it was a simple plane. A jet fighter, Ranma called it. Specifically, he likened it to one from his world, calling this form "A weird-looking F-18, with outsized engines and wider wings for some reason."

Whatever the case, this form gave Jenny something that few of her flying forms did: large numbers of mid-to-large scale lock-on weaponry. Specifically, missiles, both regular size and smaller varieties, that she could fire in bushels or singles. *Landing is going to be annoying, but the added firepower and the range are going to be very helpful.*

Unlike her true mecha-type Take Over forms, this plane type of Take Over needed a runway to actually land or take off. Hence, why Jenny had to backtrack to a wide, flat area. *And even then I nearly messed up with that one WMZ I had to dodge at the last second when I touched down.*

Shaking that off, Jenny coasted forward, the feeling of using her ventral for thrusters almost like using your toes to move around would to a human. Then, when she was facing the right direction, she 'kicked off' the feeling like she was a swimmer who had just kicked off the wall of the pool to rocket herself forward. Thrusters igniting, Jenny's jet form moved forward

rapidly, and then, when she felt she was moving fast enough, the wings shifted a bit, the feeling similar to how it felt to wave her hands lightly, and then she was up and in the air, zooming ever faster.

Back with the others, Kurnugi's swords flicked out, creating waves of magical energy. Small but incredibly long-ranged, the attacks zoomed forward, slicing into the first few of the flyers to reach the trio on the ground. Happy had joined them there and was now clinging to Natsu, who had refused to use one of the communication devices precisely because doing so would have taken up space where Happy normally resided in a fight.

Now, Happy used his Aero in conjunction with Natsu's Afterburner to zoom around the battleground, not taking off into the air but moving faster than any of the draconids could, hitting the approaching draconids on the ground several times in quick succession with Fire Dragon Slayer's Claws and his breath attack before pulling back towards the others.

In contrast, Gajeel simply waited, his arms shifting to large dragon arms as he crouched down. "Gihihi! Iron Dragon Slayer's Dragon Arms!"

Under Kurnugi's tutelage and having gone back into his mental space several times since achieving it the first time to talk to Metalicana, Gajeel had taken his transformation skills even further. Although this was the first time he would need to actually use them in a fight.

The draconids closed in a wave, coming towards the group on the ground from both the ground and the air from every direction but right behind them. And as they did, one of the larger types on the ground, the type with metallic wings, paused.

Kurnugi watched with narrowed eyes as they paused, embedding all four of their limbs several inches into the rocky ground beneath them. Then, their wings flicked, and several large metallic discs were launched toward the two Dragon Slayers and the one transformed dragon.

They were moving incredibly fast, not quite fast enough to break the sound barrier, but close. Yet even so, all three of their targets were ready.

Kurnugi sliced every one of them that was coming towards him into small chunks, the bits and pieces scattering all around him, a sneer of contempt on his face. Natsu whooped, smacking them out of the air easily, while Gajeel did the same bar one. With an inquisitive look on his face, he brought the metallic-looking disc up to his mouth, chomping down.

Instantly, he spat it out in disgust. His face, which had started to grow iron scales a moment ago, shifted back into a more human appearance for a moment as he gagged. "Damn, that tasted like rotten meat! It didn't even crunch properly!"

To the other two it had, but neither commented. Instead, Natsu looked over at Kurnugi, waggling his eyebrows conspiratorially even as he smacked another disc out of the air. "Are you going to go full dragon now? I wanna see what you look like in dragon form."

"I'm not going to shapeshift just for your amusement. I quite like having opposable thumbs, thank you," Kurnugi snickered, shaking his head. *That, and when I told them that I like human food, I was kind of underplaying things a bit. In my dragon form, I barely have any taste buds at all, let alone the full gamut that I have in my human form.*

That was the last time they were able to talk to one another before the first of the larger draconids on the ground reached them. Gajeel dodged to one side, his overlarge claw smashing into the side of the creature, sending the four-story-long creature stumbling. Then Gajeel was leaping up into its face, bringing his other paw around in a slash that almost tore the draconid's head off of its shoulders.

Natsu yelped a second later as another draconid came around that one, lunging faster than it should have been able to move at that size, bringing his teeth down to where Natsu had been a second ago. A hasty kick sent the creature's neck in a different direction as Natsu flipped through the air before bringing down his hands in a magical attack. "Dragon Slayer's a double hammer blow!"

The flaming hammer strike took the creature in the back, slamming it down into the ground as if the fire were a physical object. Unfortunately, it couldn't set the creature alight, simply burning away a large number of its scales.

Then Natsu was dodging still more discs thrown by the long-range draconids, as still more of them began to fire at range with their breath attacks, laser beams flashing towards the trio from all around them. Above, the draconids also began to open fire, lances of power lashing down toward the three intruders.

Kurnugi dealt with many, his sword hand flicking out in every direction, bolts of his own cutting energy slicing into and dissipating the energy blasts of the draconids. After a few seconds, Gajeel also turned his attention towards the air assault, breathing in deeply and using his own breath attack to deadly effect, killing several of the draconids in the air.

A second later though, there was a sound of a boom, then several more smaller booms, as something broke the sound barrier above them. Not the draconids, but something that hammered into the ranks of the flying draconids. A dozen of them exploded one after another, and then two more fell towards the earth, their forms riddled by smaller explosions as something gray and almost unseen flew above the draconids.

"What is that?" Kurnugi wondered, staring through the cloud of massive dragon-like bodies toward the source of the destruction raining on them.

"It's got to be Jenny! I can't make out the form she's taken from here, but unless any of you think that any of the local predators have suddenly decided to try their luck against these draconids?" Gajeel asked, ducking under a blow from one of the draconids that had closed, kicking its leg out from under it and dodging around to one side as still more opened fire from range, riddling their companion without a care in the world.

Natsu laughed at that, then charged forwards. He thrust one hand forward, almost like a sumo wrestler he had seen once, hand and forearm glowing white with the heat of the aura of fire around them while Natsu shouted out a new technique he'd learned from his father over the past few days. "Fire Dragon Slayer's Flame Scale!"

Several laser bolts from the draconids zoomed toward him, but he deflected them all with his glowing white hand, grinning in delight. "It works!"

With that, he charged into the group of disc-throwing draconids, who instantly began to turn their attention to him. Soon, Gajeel too was separated from Kurnugi, not that this mattered to either of them or Natsu. They were right where they wanted to be, in the midst of the fighting, with still more draconids coming their way.

High in the sky, Jenny had a very easy way of dealing with her own target-rich environment. The Grey Killer form allowed her to fly far higher into the sky than any of the draconids that were so far engaged and fire at a range none could match. She could fly so high that the air around her actually began to turn a little blue, putting her well above the draconids and still fire down at them, immune to their return fire.

Indeed, up here, she was in more danger from WMZs and had to continually slow down or shift around them. Thankfully, like the others, Jenny had gotten very, very good at spotting such.

Grimacing, she flew in a circle for a second well above the fighting along a route that she had already marked out as clear of WMZs, concentrating. For a second, she felt a slightly greater draw on her magic, almost as much as taking this form originally rather than the slow, tiny drip that this form needed for its engines. But then it was over, and her wings were heavily laden with missiles once more.

With a feral grin, Jenny twisted around, her nose facing down towards the enemy, as several reticules, like those mounted on sniper rifles, appeared in her mind for a second. She waited until each of them glowed green, then fired, rockets streaking away from her undercarriage and wings down into the carnage below.

The invaders didn't have it all their own way. The three on the ground did occasionally get hit by claw, fist or laser attack. But staying within sight of one another and thus able to watch one another's back, none of them were overwhelmed. They did, however, start to get a bit tired as the day went on.

So did Jenny. The Grey Killer form wasn't nearly as energy-intensive as some of her other forms, and she had done everything she could over the past year to enlarge her magical reserves. But still, fighting in this form for an entire day, needing to replenish her source of missiles throughout that day, that was a tall order.

As evening broke over the horizon, so too did the clouds around her. Rain began to fall, and in the Blasted Lands, there was always a... Fraught time. Still, she was able to pull back, getting all the way away from the fight before the lower visibility forced her to fly through a WMZ.

Suddenly, her entire body felt as if it had been struck by lightning. Jenny kept on flying even as she lost control of some of her mechanical form's functions. One of the landing wheels popped out the feeling almost like a cramp in her foot, while her arms began to spasm, the little flaps on her wings twitching this way and that.

For several minutes, it was all Jenny could do to control her flight, then she through the worst of it and was able to see where she had put down earlier that day. She did so again, although once more, thanks to the WMZ, this landing was not one she was proud of. As her momentum began to bleed off, Jenny canceled her Mecha Take Over form, stumbling forward for several more feet before falling to her knees, gasping.

"Freaking WMZs!" With a growl, she pushed herself to her feet, turning towards where the sounds of combat could still be heard. Moments later, Jenny was in her low-intensity Bubblegum form, zooming across the intervening distance.

The others were looking a little more battered than Jenny would've liked to see when she arrived. Well, Gajeel and Natsu were looking a little battered, particularly Natsu. Gajeel was fully covered now in iron scales, one hand still in a fully transformed dragon shape, the other having transfigured not into a dragon's paw but a giant's spear, giving him further range against their enemies in close combat.

In contrast, Natsu looked as if he had taken a few of the laser blasts to his chest and leg. Some of his hair was also missing, and there were several long slash marks across his chest that had bled freely. But he was still in the fight, and as Jenny approached, she saw him actually bodily lift up one of the smaller draconids, using it as a flail against one of the larger one's head as it thrust down to try and bite him. The body of the smaller draconid cracked audibly in several places as the neck and head of the larger creature was sent sideways, and before he could come back into the attack, Natsu was underneath it, slamming a punch into his chest so hard that the creature, who would've stood four stories tall if on his hind legs, was lifted off of the ground, then blasted away by the fire dragons claw.

"I think it's time to break off for the night, guys!" Jenny shouted as she came close. *Dammit, if only those Comi-Stars had proven to actually be nonliving creatures, then I could've*

*had them on my person when I changed into my various Take Over forms. But no, nothing can be easy, especially here in the Blasted Lands!*

“Agreed,” Kurnugi stated laconically. Of all of them, he alone looked as if he had not taken a single hit, although he did look a little tired to Jenny’s eyes. “Natsu, Gajeel, ready?”

Both Dragon slayers nodded, and Happy hopped off, flinging himself to his stomach on the ground at Natsu’s feet while Jenny tossed Natsu another one of the Comi-Stars. Even as they continued to fight, Natsu put the Comi-Star on his back where he, like Kurnugi and Gajeel had a second before, tapped the controls. Within seconds, his ears were covered as well.

Seeing his partner was ready, Happy giggled and pulled out a small gun from his pouch. This was a special creation he, Gajeel and Ranma had made over the year they had spent in the Blasted Lands to give Happy a way to help out in fights if need be. It had taken some experimentation, but they had basically created flash bangs and smelly gas, using ingredients and a few magical concoctions from components found near their home in the giant robot.

“Ready? One... two... three!”

When Happy counted to three, Kurnugi and the two Dragon Slayers leaped upward as far as they could push themselves, up and away from their current opponents, clapping their hands over their noses as Happy fired several special projectiles into the air forward. Rama had likened them to riot control grenades, and they were worked along similar lines. Within seconds of firing, they exploded, releasing noxious fumes and massively loud bangs. Fumes strong enough and smelly enough to cause all three men’s eyes to water even as their ears rang.

For the first time in the fight, the draconids let out cries of distress, closing their eyes or dropping to the ground to try to bury their noses into the ground. Even the ones in the air faltered, pulling away as the smoke cloud spread.

Zooming forward, Jenny grabbed Happy off of the ground, slinging him onto her back, then twisted around and followed the Dragon Slayers away as Kurnugi did the same. Behind them, the noxious smog began to billow in every direction, hurrying them along and soon completely covering the original battlefield.

With a thought, Jenny summoned up a small compass in her HUD and began to skirt west and north. “Follow me! Kurnugi, do your thing to create a few fortresses again somewhere nearby, I think I found a perfect place for us all to actually get some rest tonight.”

“Indeed. We pushed much further into Motherglare’s territory in two days than I anticipated. But we still have time to go before we reach an area where she will send her true proto dragons after us,” Kurnugi stated laconically as he turned aside to perform that duty.

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Not faced with outright battles, Jenny and Juvia had skirted wide of Motherglare's territory before coming back in pretty much following the same route that he and Jenny had done before. It was a little more fraught because Juvia didn't have a chameleon form like Jenny did, but she could instantly turn herself into water and hide as a puddle at need, although her speed was nowhere near as fast as Jenny's. Thus, it took them nearly eight days to cover the same distance that he and Jenny had covered in three.

And Rama had been wrong. Perhaps it was because of the days that Ranma had been gone with Jenny on their previous scouting mission, coupled with the time spent figuring out how far the Comi-Stars could reach. Or perhaps it was simply her own ardent nature. Whatever the case, that one night back in Ven'ael was not enough. Ranma was quite surprised when Juvia almost literally jumped him as soon as the pair of them entered the tent. Surprised but not exactly resisting.

By the time the pair were within sight of the pond, the others had contacted them several times asking for a sitrep. Thankfully, the decoy forts had seemingly worked very well, and they had been able to break contact every night. But the constant fighting was beginning to wear on Jenny's reserves and the others physically, even Kurnugi.

With all the patrols around, Juvia was forced into water form once more, while Ranma used his silent thief technique once again. Their progress slowed even further at that point, but it was steady. Juvia could move across the land somewhat like a moving stream. This drew no attention from the draconids. Regardless of size, none of the draconids was intelligent enough to wonder why a stream was moving on its own without any source or anything else.

Juvia's water form soon slipped into the water of the lake, and Ranma knelt there, pushing his hand into the water. He felt her own hand grasp his, then a sensation like a butterfly kisses all over his hand, causing Ranma to shudder and almost lose control of his silent thief technique. Then a mouth appeared among some reeds at the edge of the lake, hidden from the draconids as best Juvia could contrive while also being close enough to speak to Ranma in a whisper. "Find someplace to hide and call it in, my love. It will not take me long to take control of the water here, and we have kept our friends and Jenny waiting long enough."

"I'll do that, my water nymph," Ranma joked back, using a cutesy nickname he'd come up with at one point to tease her with. The joke was on him, though. Juvia quite liked the term, while Ranma felt it was way too embarrassing to use very often.

Moments later, he was crawling underneath a series of rocks, the area underneath hidden from the patrolling draconids. There, he reluctantly pulled one of the Comi-Stars out of his Requip Space. They had tested doing so back in Ven'ael, where the creatures had shown they could survive being stored like that.

Placing it on his back was a bit of a trial given how little space he had to work with at the moment, but soon, it was there, and the tendrils extended, one going into each ear, while a third moved to hover in front of his mouth expanding into a tiny cup just ahead of his lips. "Natsu, Gajeel? Whoever else is out there listening, Juvia and I are in position."

"About time! We had to pull back early this morning. Motherglare sent out her proto dragons after us already," Jenny's much more loved voice reported. "Only twelve of them, and Kurnugi's dealing with the last of them now, but we are retreating away from them straight east."

That had been a few anxious minutes, as the proto dragons turned out to have several different long-range attacks that they hadn't yet seen. Instead of hurling discs like the dragons with the most metallic wings could, the proto dragons tossed the equivalent of living missiles, small things that almost looked like miniature gliders to Jenny but which could actually hone in on their targets to a certain degree. Their breath weapons were also far more powerful and longer ranged. They were agile and even more durable than the other draconids.

Between them, Natsu and Gajeel had downed four, while Kurnugi had dealt with five, but that still left three closing with them, along with at least a hundred smaller types. "Happy, do your thing!"

With that, once more, the group with Jenny was supposed to break off, and within moments, Jenny reported that, her voice a low gasp. "Give me a few hours to get some food in me and recover, and then I'll be up in the air to do my part for the next stage. Will you and Juvia be ready by then?"

"You better believe it. We'll be sure to drag all of these draconids right down on top of us. Then Kurnugi, Natsu and Gajeel can come in from behind, polish off whatever other defenses Motherglare might still have around her and we can finish this!"

That sounded good to Jenny, and with words to that effect, she quickly signed off, eager to get some food in her. The days leading up to the proto dragons coming their way had not been any more fun than the days before for her. Kurnugi and the two Dragon Slayers were still in fine fettle. Both boys had shown multiple times before this that they could heal from anything below a truly debilitating wound overnight, thanks mainly to their Dragon Slayer magic. But Jenny was made of softer, more easily exhausted and hurt stuff. And the proto dragons had been able to fly high enough to try to kill her moments before.

*And now, we wait...* Ranma mused, scooting back out of his little hidey-hole.

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Four hours later, Jenny was once more in the air, high, high above where the forces of Motherglare normally flew. Amusingly, to her anyway, the large proto dragon's seemed

somewhat lazy. They didn't fly very often, and spent most of their time on the ground either lazing about or walking everywhere instead.

That wasn't to say that they couldn't fly. Earlier that day, she had learned to her cost they could fly almost as high as her Grey Killer form. Thankfully though, none of them were doing so now, not around where she currently was anyway. Jenny had been forced to fly well out of her way to the west to get around one proto dragon leading a large group of smaller draconid types in the direction of the last clash they had with Natsu and the others. But now here she was, high, high above the territory where Motherglare resided, staring down at the area above the mine where she hid.

Currently, Jenny was in her Deathscythe form, and on her shoulder was a massive rifle, a true behemoth, larger than the Mecha Soul's body itself. Moreover, Jenny knew from a very bitter experience that firing the damn thing was almost as impressive as its size. *Before I came to the Blasted Lands, I couldn't even fire it at all. Heck, I could barely equip it, conjuring it into work with my Deathscythe form tripled the amount of energy it took to use. Now, I can at least get one shot off before needing to rest.*

This was a part of the plan that she had come up with on her own, and had not shared with Ranma or the others. They would just worry. In a way they were right too, but for the plan to really work, they needed to drag out as much of Motherglare's defenders, the twenty plus numbers of proto dragons still on the ground below, so that Natsu and Gajeel could take their chance. She just didn't think that destroying all the patrols around the lake would do that, not even with the attacks that she and the others had been launching the past eight days. She all too clearly remembered the frenzied paranoia in Motherglare's voice when she and Ranma had come close enough to hear it. That was someone who had been driven insane by pain, fear and paranoia. Such people would not allow their defenses to fall just because enemies had appeared from where they shouldn't. Not unless they got an even bigger nudge.

*Mind you, I probably won't be worth much to Ranma and Juvia when we meet up, but... Well, they had that lake to play with anyway.*

With a final internal shrug, Jenny mentally reconfigured her HUD, to have a single glowing reticle, linking it to her massive gun. "Now, let's get this party started..." she murmured aloud, unheard by any as a thrum began to build up from the gun, spreading in every direction.

Far, far below Jenny, Motherglare was once more talking to herself. Her mind almost but not quite entirely broken from her run in with Acnologia, this was something that she did often. If she was not birthing new draconids, eating or sleeping, she was mumbling. Sometimes, two of those things happened at the same time, with only mumbling or eating and sleeping being impossible to mix.

"Numbers, numbers! Thousands, I've lost thousands! Other Dragon Slayers, others, working with Kurnugi! Working with him! Why?" Motherglare muttered, cautiously poking her

head out of the mines that were her home currently. She looked around at the proto dragons, scowling in anger.

“Numbers, numbers. Ten of my proto dragons, ten of my true children, my eldest, dead! Kurnugi and these three with him, why? Where did they come from? Always retreating, always hurting my forces, always retreating. Time, time, costing time to raise from first stage to the other stages.”

She shook her head from side to side, then headed back inside, pulling a crystal from the wall, munching on it spitting out words as she did, muddled though they became. “Retreat, strike, retreat, costing me, costing me! Was able to envelop them before, still getting away. That smell stuff, too harsh, too strong, too bright and loud! If it was but one, my children could deal with them, but not attacking all senses at once. Need to watch, need to figure out what happens. Cannot let them simply keep on picking my children apart! Cannot waste my true children, only legions of the lesser. Soon, soon, yes! Kurnugi will die, city will be mine, power, strength, spreading out still further! Acnologia, weapon to fight him, weapon to kill, never close to me again! Never!”

Not that far north of Motherglare’s position, Happy had just radioed that Jenny had left them and was moving towards Ranma and Juvia’s position, not realizing the change to the plan that Jenny had added. That was the signal for the two of them to start, and Ranma did so in typical Ranma fashion.

Appearing beside one of the larger draconids on patrol around the lake, he landed on top of its back, fist raised and slamming down before the mid-tier draconid could even register the additional weight. The creature fell, the back of his head blasted apart by the blow, sending bits of scale and viscera everywhere. Then Ranma was leaping back off the creature to land in among the patrol it had been leading of other mid-tier draconids. A tail was grabbed, and one found itself lifted up off of the ground and used as a flail to smash several others to the ground, before Ranma released his victim, and darted forward, hands glowing blue with life energy, grimacing slightly. *Fuckers are heavy, still. That was fun, but not something I will do again.*

Above, several of the aerial patrols turned in his direction, instantly opening their mouth and powering up their breath weapons. Nevertheless, before any of them could strike, a loud voice intoned from the lake, warbled, as if coming from a mouth that wasn’t made of flesh but water, yet powerful. “Water Slicer!”

From the lake came several dozen crescent shaped blasts of water, going so fast they created a thrumming noise through the air as they fired, cutting into the draconids like they were made of wood. Almost half of the draconids in the air within sight of the lake fell, and two more soon joined them from directly above the lake, as whips of water appeared, flowing up and smashing them out of the air, resembling nothing so much as the tentacles of an underwater monster.

Many of the other draconids in the area on the ground charged towards either the lake or Ranma. The ones attacking the lake for a moment seemed confused, firing into the air above the lake, as if something was there, not realizing that the water itself had become dangerous. Further Water Slicers dealt with many of them, while Ranma used his own Water Dragon Slayer powers to deal with several of the others, getting in close, smashing them to pieces, conserving both magic and ki as best he could.

He had no idea how long this fight would go and wanted to make certain he still had plenty in the tank when the real enemies showed up. Surprised and off balance, with Juvia picking off any that seemed to be readying its breath weapon, none of these creatures were a threat, even though many of them were in the stage that Ranma felt was probably just one below the true proto dragons.

Instantly becoming aware of her children dying in the distance, thanks to the slight mental connection that she had to all of her children, Motherglare roused herself from her musings and stomped back towards the entrance to the mine, sticking her head outside and looking north warily. "What is this, what is this? Water attacks? Where..."

For a moment, she was confused. Motherglare's memory for important details wasn't exactly the best over the past few years thanks to the mental trauma of facing Acnologia. However, she could vaguely remember that water attacks had been used a few weeks back around Ven'auel. That she hadn't seen any such magic since Kurnugi and his allies had pushed north against her forces. "There, there! Why? Sneaky, trying to sneak, found? Kill them!"

Although her words were rambling, they were still orders for all of her draconids and proto dragons. Instantly a few of the proto dragons flapped their wings, rising into the air as if to leave, but a shriek from Motherglare stopped them. She would not send any more for proto dragons out away from her.

No, instead, the order went out through the minor mental link between her and her creations. For hundreds of miles around her, patrols of mid and low tier draconids paused, then turned north towards where the attacks were coming from, instantly pressing in from all sides. They also just as quickly began to disappear to Motherglare's senses, but that was all right. Any magic user could be overwhelmed through sufficient numbers that was Motherglare's entire assemble. And she would not use her proto dragons, not after already having lost eleven of them to Kurnugi and the Dragon Slayer's with him. She had sent out twelve and lost all but one.

However, the speed with which whoever was out there was dealing with even mid-tier draconids annoyed her greatly. She wondered if perhaps somehow, Kurnugi had led his own group up to the lake to link up with whoever was there. Some of the attacks that she was sensing vaguely through her connection to the mid-tier draconids dying currently seemed to imply that there was more than just water magic going on.

Feeling that and wondering if this was a sign, she could finally crush Kurnugi and those with him, Motherglare dithered for a moment, until the choice was taken out of her hands. Frowning, she looked around her in confusion. Every proto dragon within sight of the mine did the same, shaking their heads from side to side, looking for the source of a loud humming noise.

High above them, Jenny breathed in deeply, feeling the drain on her magical reserves, then, staring through her HUD down to the ground, fired. A beam of ravening energy, much like many of the other laser or plasma-based weaponry she could use in various Take Over forms fired, but this one was somewhat different. First, it was much wider in width than most, enlarging to nearly the size of a human standing up the moment it exited the end of the rifle.

Second, the plasma within was heated to an even higher degree than normal, even higher than the laser sword she used in her original Gundam-like Take Over Soul, or the Deathscythe's cutting edge. The bolt was almost as large as the gun itself and accelerated just as fast as any of her other energy-based weapons and struck with all the force of a god's hammer coming down.

Motherglare had just a second to look up as Jenny fired, and she was in no way fast enough to dodge as the strike slammed into the back of her neck right where her neck met her head. The bolt of ravening energy wasn't enough to penetrate her scales though, it simply slammed her back down to the ground, searing a few of her scales away, but doing no real damage. However, this was the first time since she had retreated into the Blasted Lands that Motherglare had felt any kind of pain at all and she screamed. Perhaps because of the way the beam looked, or because of the pain, it was giving her severe flashbacks to her running in with Acnologia, and she screamed his name now. "Acnologia! Acnologia!"

In response to this attack on their creator, the proto dragons all around the mine flapped their wings instantly rising up into the air. Seeing that, Jenny allowed the cannon on her arm to dematerialize, breathing a heavy sigh of relief as she did, before turning her attention north towards where she remembered the lake being. She could feel the hit to her reserves using that gun had taken, and knew she was down to well below with her reserves had been when she first arrived in the Blasted Lands with the others. *That should still be enough to get me to the lake at least.*

Jenny zoomed in that direction, wanting to put some distance between herself of the proto dragons, but to no avail. They were faster and their beam weapons had much longer range. The blasts of blue-white energy began to crisscross the air around her, nearly bracketing Jenny in. The creatures had an innate understanding of the need to both track her through the air and work together that the younger or less evolved versions of the draconids lacked.

Down below, Motherglare was still screaming, rolling her head this way and that. In her fury, she burst out of the mine entirely for the first time in years, pacing around and glaring up at where Jenny was being chased by her true children. "Get it, get it! Kill them all!"

Gone from Motherglare's mind, such as it was, was any idea of holding back, of protecting her temporary nest or even herself. She had been hurt, and the one responsible for that injury and its allies needed to be crushed.

All of the proto dragons were already in the air chasing after Jenny, but at that command, they seemed to move even faster, racing after her as Jenny headed towards the lake.

Ranma and Juvia had been busy during this, but Ranma hadn't missed the sudden eruption of noise in the distance, or the flash of something going off just over the horizon. "What the heck was that?" he asked, while holding one draconid in a chokehold, and kicking out at two others. Flipping himself up and over, he snapped the neck of the draconid he had been previously choking before lashing out with Water Dragon Claws at two more, cutting deeply into their sides. A minor attack that didn't have much magic behind it, the mid-tier draconids were able to survive for a few brief seconds from the strike instead of being simply sliced to ribbons like the lowest tier draconids would have been.

There weren't very many of those low-tier draconids around, mostly the attackers were mid-tier draconids, up to and including the type, which Ranma considered the next step down from proto dragons. Two of them were currently raging in the water where Juvia was, a third having drowned already, while water hands and spears of water struck them from every direction. She had no concentration to spare to answer Ranma's question, until he zoomed over, bouncing up off one another mid-tier draconid's backs. Grabbed several discs from the metallic winged ones out of the air, hurling them into the sides of one of the long-tailed draconids, causing it to shriek and turn away, finally breaking out of the bonds around its head, which had been keeping its mouth closed.

Instantly a bolt of power lashed out, but towards Ranma, not towards the lake. That was good, Ranma reflected even as the beam struck him, grimacing at the hit send him tumbling. His durability training was such that the heat of the blast barely bothered him, let alone the impact. But while such hits to the lake didn't truly hurt her, they certainly pained her, and Ranma did not want to hear Juvia cry out in pain, as she had a few moments before. A, low powered, Water Dragon's Roar took that long tailed draconid out, and the other one was finished off quickly by Juvia, who then went back to sniping at several others in the air above them who were trying to line up shots again on her.

"Water Wall!" A solid sheet of water rose from the lake, then seemed to not quite freeze, but almost to solidify like the Water claws that Ranma routinely used, becoming a wall that stopped the incoming blasts of energy, absorbing them harmlessly. The next second that wall fell, and spears of water flashed out, killing two of the long-tailed draconids. Another draconid who had been moving around the edge of the lake to attack Ranma fell, its back legs both chopped off at the knee by another blast of water going so fast that when it struck, it sounded almost like a metal grinder at work.

Turning back to his own battle, Ranma was nearly headbutted by one draconid, while another tried to bite him from behind. Grabbing them each by their lower jaws, he slammed their heads together with such force that it caused a concussive wave in the air, and not incidentally pulped both heads, giving Ranma a brief second to look in the direction of where the mine was and where that giant blast of whatever had occurred. Doing so, he saw Jenny in the air in one of her mecha forms, the colors of it almost indiscernible for second due to the glare of the sun.

However, what he could also make out was lots of proto dragons following after her, blasting out their own breath attacks creating a web of blue-white light in the air between Jenny and them. It was like a wall of proto dragons had appeared over the horizon, covering everywhere Ranma could see from one end to the other and from the ground on up. "Well, here we go! Juvia, here comes the real targets."

"Joy," Juvia stated. She waited a brief second before adding, "Juvia hopes that Juvia's mastery of sarcasm came through in that single word, but Juvia just wants to make sure that you understand that Juvia was in fact being sarcastic."

"Yeah, I got that impression," Ranma snickered, before falling back in the face of several of the mid-tier draconids, until his feet could touch the water. "I'm going to use one of my mega attacks, then, when Juvia is out of the way, will use one of our unison rate attacks. I think we want to knock as many of those proto dragons out at range as we can."

Juvia's response was a small watery fist appearing in the form of a thumb up, before she went back to picking off several more of the mid-tier draconids. Thanks to the lake being here, neither of them would need to worry about running out of magic or water to manipulate. The lake was actually being fed by an underwater aquifer, so was being continually filled. It hadn't lost even a foot of its depth since the battle had begun for very long. Of course, the fact that this body of water was even larger than she had hoped for, was causing Juvia some issues in controlling it, but she'd had a year to develop this skill and was up to the task if barely. "Juvia will need to spend some time to recover after our Unison Raid, but that is still a good idea."

Ranma barely nodded in her direction, concentrating on his own attack. "Water Dragon's Piercing Tail Spin!"

This was, in form, the same kind of attack that Ranma had used against the orc-creating trees or several other times since. But it wasn't. Instead of covering so much area, the attack was smaller, made to grind through much stronger enemies. Something Ranma knew he would need against the proto dragons.

Jenny smiled in relief as Ranma's attack flashed below her, slamming into the five closest proto dragons to her. The disc of cutting water instantly proved that shrinking it and concentrating on the rate of spin within the water had worked both in terms of impact and cutting force.

Even so, it wasn't a clean kill. The two proto dragons on the outer edge of the strike actually were still able to survive, even though their wings on the side struck by Ranma's attack turned into so much slurry by the assault. Similarly, most of the scales along the right or left of their bodies were shredded along with much of their forearms and back legs.

Yet they tumbled to the ground still alive, still trying to push themselves to their feet and move forward, their breath attacks appearing in their mouth as they turned their attention towards Ranma. The three in the center, they were simply torn apart by Ranma's assault, scale, bones, internal organs all of it ground away by the spinning water.

Jenny instantly took advantage, twisting around and down, bringing her scythe into the side of one of the badly wounded proto dragons, ending its life but being forced to leave her scythe stuck there as one of the other proto dragons nearly nailed her with its breath attack. In fact, the beam came so close that it actually seared off the thrusters and one of her legs, causing Jenny to fall towards the ground for a moment before she could write herself off.

She still slammed into the ground with a lot of punishing force, but breathed in deeply, then shifted to her normal body for a few seconds. "Oh, boy, that is tough!"

Those few seconds were almost enough to cost Jenny her life, as one of the proto dragons slammed into the ground right in front of her, mouth shifting down to bite Jenny in half faster than most could track. But she rolled underneath it, then called upon her Bubblegum form, racing away underneath the creature until its tail caught her in the back, hurling her forward through the air.

Gasping, Ranma shook his head, then leaned down. Being careful to not get his face wet enough to force the change (Ranma just didn't want to deal with that right now) Ranma gulped in as much of the water as he could, the magic in the water refilling his reserves. That was by far the largest type of that attack Ranma had launched yet, and it was gratifying to see it had worked, even if it had only killed three out of the five targets. His eyes widened though as he saw Jenny cartwheeling helplessly through the air, heading towards where another proto dragon had just touched down. "Oh, hell no! Kijin Raishu Dan!" he howled, lashing out with the Yami-Sen-Ken.

Vorpals hit and sliced into that proto dragon and several others. The Yami-Sen-Ken had proven to be less than useful against Acnologia. The Dragon of the Apocalypse's scales had proven tough enough to dissipate the vortal blades, something that Ranma would've thought flatly impossible back in his old world.

The proto dragons were not that tough, although they were still surprisingly durable. The vortal blades cut into the dragons deeply, and in the case of the one about to snap Jenny out of the air, this proved fatal, cutting into the creature's neck. But the others struck survived, much to Ranma's chagrin.

Still, that was enough. Its head almost hanging off of the neck only halfway cut through, Jenny was able to right herself even as she slammed into the dragon's neck just below that cut, blood spewing out to cover her in a grotesque display. Ignoring that for a moment, Jenny kicked off the collapsing corpse, landed and resumed zooming towards the lake, feeling a massive dent on the back of her bubblegum armor. So bad was it that it felt like her spine, a few ribs were in the wrong place and it was really painful.

"Thanks for the assist Ranma!" she shouted as she ended her technique and dove into the water. She stayed underneath the water for a few seconds, rubbing her back and neck as best she could, groaning at the pain from the hit she had just taken before popping back up, moving to the side of the lake, planning to shift back into one of her other low scale mecha forms.

With their lover safe, Ranma and Juvia went through with their plan to use their Unison Raid right away. Juvia's watery form oushed out of the shallow water Ranma was standing in, one arm around his waist. Her other hand slid along his arm until their hands joined, clasping fingers as they thrust that hand out towards the incoming proto dragons. "Unison Fusion: Ocean's Wrath!"

From all around them, the water of the lake arose at their command, before flattening, forming into a disk around the size of a single finger across, spinning, whirling in place past that it looked almost as if the water had taken on the property of some other kind of element for a moment. Then, as the lake behind them began to fill up again, they launched it forward.

This attack flashed out from the duo's central position in nearly every direction bar directly behind them, stretching from beyond the leftmost horizon to the right of where they were both looking. It wasn't as compact or deadly as Ranma's previous assault, it couldn't be and cover that wide an area of effect. Yet even so, it struck with all the force of a tsunami concentrated down into that tiny area. A dozen proto dragons who were fast enough to brace themselves were simply balled off their feet. Those that didn't or were in the air lost limbs, arms, wings, or, if they were still facing towards the two lovers as the attack hit, heads.

The smaller draconids struck by the assault were simply cut in half, regardless of what type they were. Within an instant, the battle had changed.

As the attack faded, Juvia flopped back, falling down into the only slowly filling whole of the lake to splat into the water below. She was almost as drained for the moment as the lake was.

Still standing where he had been a moment before Ranma gasped, going to his knees for a second. Pushing himself upright with a groan, he then charged towards the proto dragons, who were stumbling to their feet or pushing towards them once more. The wounded didn't try to retreat, instead moving forward as best they could. But moving forward like this drew all the proto dragons' attention down on Ranma, which was precisely what he wanted.

Jenny followed Juvia down, splashing into the water next to her. She held onto Juvia, swimming for a few moments as Juvia regained control of herself, and began to turn back into water, her form disappearing from between Jenny's hands. A second later Jenny felt a hug wrap around her lower body, and a kiss in a place that was highly inappropriate at the moment.

"None of that girl!" she shouted, slapping the water in front of her with a hand, before feeling other hands all around her rear and thighs keeping her upright and out of the water as the water level continued to rise.

In the distance, they could hear Ranma continuing the fight, but right now, the two of them rested, waiting until the lake refilled to rejoin the battle.

**OOOOOOO**

Happy dove down towards Kurnugi, Natsu and Gajeel, where the three of them were having a hasty meal. Some small digger creature had popped out at the most inopportune moment for its life expectancy, and Gajeel had speared it through the skull, whereupon Natsu had cooked it on the bone. The smell of it was a little off-putting to Happy, but the two Dragon Slayers and Kurnugi seemed to quite like it.

"It worked! All the proto dragons in the air or up there turned towards the north, there was this flash of light in the distance, and I was able to get really well away from you guys for a bit, before I started to see other proto dragons nearby. They're not paying any attention to us or any other direction but the north and the lake now. And I could swear I heard some kind of other attack out there," the Exceed reported.

"I will go and back up your friends," Kurnugi said instantly pushing himself to his feet.

"I still don't get why you don't want to be involved in the fight against Motherglare. I mean come on, she's the source of a lot of the trouble you've been having right?" Natsu stated, also pushing to his feet.

"She is. And in the past, I would have cheerfully cut her in half. But... Who knows how many dragons still live? Acnologia was extremely thorough in his slaughter. While I might hate her and everything she does, Motherglare is still a dragon, still a member of my species. While I already have had a hand in her upcoming demise, I would prefer not to swing the actual killing blow."

Gajeel grunted as that made sense to him, although Natsu still looked a little confused for a few seconds before he too understood. He nodded soberly, and Kurnugi nodded back. "Do not think of this as some kind of glorious battle. Do not think of this as a battle against some great evil. Motherglare might have at one point been, what humans would call it evil, but currently, she is simply a mad dog. One that needs to be put down."

Not an hour later Gajeel and Natsu closed in with the mine. They were now alone, as Natsu had ordered Happy to stay well away from the mine. And as the two Dragon Slayer's closed with the stalking form of Motherglare, the pair of them understood what Kurnugi had said all too clearly.

"Acnologia, yes! They must be in league with Acnologia. All my proto dragons, so wounded, so many gone, in seconds! Strong, Dragon Slayers not that strong, Acnologia, must be in league with him, Kurnugi too! But no, battle is over there, battle is far away. Numbers!" Motherglare was ranting as she crouched on the ground, the bulbous protrusions on her back and sides growing and then popping out, hurling in every direction to crash into the ground. Upon hitting the ground, the eggs cracked and out came draconids. The lowest tier of the animals, but a lot of them. Nearly a hundred were birthed in a second, all of whom turned, charging north over the horizon to join the battle there. "Numbers! Numbers will tell the day! My elites, spreading out, coming at them from every direction, more numbers!"

"Holy hell, she really is as crazy as a cuckoo," Gajeel grunted, shaking his head as he and Natsu paused for a second.

Out in the open Motherglare showed herself to be an extremely large, dragon, her entire body is covered with thick scales which showed strange swirling patterns, save for her underbelly, which looked much softer in comparison. Her face had smaller, smoother scales on her face while she had even smaller scales on her snout. But her face was heavily scarred with numerous small cross marks and one eye missing. Similarly, on her back there looked to be several large puncture-type scars. One of her large wings, which was even larger than the rest of her body, showed similar ancient injuries, particularly on its tip. She was also missing claws on two of her legs, the others still having four in the front, and one in the back. Motherglare's long tail ended with a series of small spikes, flicking everywhere like a mace attached to a whip.

"Yeah, maybe. But she's still a dragon, and she's able to create those draconids like that. Kurnugi's right, it was only a matter of time before she got truly strong enough to take the city from him, and maybe even expand further. What did Ranma say about her plans? Push everything within the Blasted Lands out into Ishgar, follow-up with her draconids?"

"Yeah, use infinite numbers to take on Acnologia, wherever he might actually be hiding."

Both Dragon Slayer's didn't think that plan actually had a snowball's chance in hell of working, but it was plain that Motherglare was a threat and was insane. Frankly, listening to her ranting and raving, it felt truly like they were doing her a favor here. Especially with the wound to her eye, which looked really nasty, like someone had nearly torn off half of the side of her head.

The pair looked at one another, then spread out, coming at Motherglare from two different angles.

It was only at that point that she became aware of them.

She turned, twisting around in place, looming over them like a large hill, as big as Acnologia or perhaps just a little bit bigger as she whipped her head from side to side to keep both of them in their line of vision. "Dragon Slayers! You will both die! Die! Acnologia, no, Kurnugi, no! I will live, me!"

Shuddering a little at that, Gajeel shook his head slowly, raising his hands out to either side. "We'll see about that."

Natsu cracked his knuckles, grinning as fire erupted from his palms. "Let's get it on!"

With that, Natsu charged forwards. Motherglare did not move to charges toward him, instead, she reared her neck back, and in her mouth, magical energy began to coalesce. Natsu's eyes widened, but before Motherglare could finish her breath attack, Gajeel launched his own. "Iron Dragon Slayer's Roar!"

Although not nearly as powerful as he could make that attack, the blow struck Motherglare's wing tip, right where there was a large amount of scar tissue, standing out clearly against the background of her scales. She whirled around, causing the breath attack to miss Natsu, but it gouged a huge crevice in the ground as it raced towards where Gajeel was.

Then Natsu was charging forward, using his Afterburner to close the distance. He slammed into Motherglare bodily, his new Flame Scale Armor covering him from head to toe, as he pounded blow after blow into her side, causing her to shriek with pain even though the attack didn't actually do much damage. Twitching sideways, she raked at Natsu with one of her forepaws, smacking him down into the ground, then away with another blow.

Her breath attack lashed out again, and this time caught Gajeel, who hastily raised his hands and thrust them forward. "Iron Dragon Slayer's Scale Mail!" he shouted, his forearms and the rest of his body also covered in scale mail, his arms enlarging to half again his own size as the blast struck.

When the attack dissipated, between Motherglare and Gajeel's position there was a large furrow in the ground, caused by the explosive radius of the attack rather than any actual impact. Nevertheless, when the attack cleared, Gajeel stood there, his hands steaming a little, and with many a tiny scale slowly falling away or melting off him. But when his hands transformed back into normal, Gajeel grinned toothily. "Gehihi! It's going to take more than that to down this Iron Dragon!!"

"Iron? Iron? Metalicana! That bastard!" Motherglare roared, charging forwards. With one of her wings almost completely unusable, it was very apparent to both Dragon Slayers that she very much preferred to keep this fight to the ground. Which was more than fine by them.

Pushing up to his feet, Natsu snarled as he watched Gajeel answer the charge from Motherglare with one of his own, his hands enlarging again, this time to become cutting scythes like the claws of a dragon the same size as Motherglare.

For just a moment, Natsu wanted to charge too. Then he paused, collecting himself, slapping two hands together in front of him. He closed his eyes, breathing deeply, connecting to his magical core as he had learned to do under Kurnugi's guidance. Once more, scales began to appear all over him, but this time, not accompanied by a simple fiery aura, no, this aura was vastly different, more powerful, more concentrated. It was as if an unseen wind picked up all around him, as his hair started to turn almost white, his eyes red. "Dragon Force...", he growled.

This was one of the goals of the three Dragon Slayer's goals when they first entered the Blasted Lands. None of them had been able to achieve Dragon force like Wendy had. Ranma had been the closest at the time, and could now achieve it, although he rarely used the technique, preferring to rely on his own skills rather than a massive power up like this when it came to close quarter combat.

That, and he had a lot of trouble still concentrating on it. Unlike the other Dragon Slayers, whenever Ranma pushed himself too far, he had to fight with the Dragon Seed within him. He might have beaten the spirit of it down once in Belserion's cave, but that didn't mean the Dragon Seed obeyed his call. That had just dealt with the instincts and a lot of the emotional and mental changes that going through Dragonification forced on someone without a guardian spirit. Rather, he still had to fight both his ki to let the changes occur, and the Dragon Seed's physical changes on his body to stop it from going too far. Ranma felt he was close to achieving that perfect balance, but he hadn't quite yet.

But neither Gajeel nor Natsu had been able to achieve it prior to training with Kurnugi over the past few weeks and the talks he had had with Igneel had further helped push Natsu over that edge.

Feeling the threat incoming, Motherglare twisted around, dodging a slash from Gajeel that would've taken her in the side, smacking him aside for a second to concentrate on Natsu but too late. Natsu crossed the intervening distance and slammed into her with all the power of a runaway comet, smashing her back and into the mountain that contained the mine behind her. The entryway crumbled, as did most of the mountainside from the impact, and Motherglare screamed her fury, bringing her mouth down onto Natsu before he could dodge. He grabbed her mouth, grimacing at the strength of the massive Dragon, but keeping it from biting him, then wrenched sideways, slamming her head down into the ground.

Then Gajeel was there, stabbing downwards before Motherglare could dodge. His massive claws bit deep into her eyeball, pulping it and blinding her forever.

“GAYRYAALRRAAFGGHHH!!” Motherglare screamed in agony, her neck and head convulsing so hard that even Natsu was thrown clear. Gajeel was hurled several miles into the air by that move.

Two proto dragons who had been in the air winging their way north from the west had already turned in the direction of their beleaguered mother. They spotted Gajeel, and twin beams of energy lashed out from their mouths, catching the iron Dragon Slayer in the air. He howled in pain but was still in one piece as he plummeted back down to the ground.

For Natsu’s part, he was only hurled a few hundred feet in the air and rolled with it, bouncing through the air back to Motherglare, able to fly via Dragon Force almost as fast as he could with Afterburner and Happy to help. Somehow Motherglare heard him coming, and whipped her body around, bringing her tail into play for a second. Natsu hadn’t anticipated that, but he was fast enough to dodge under it, only to eat a kick from one of her back legs as she twirled around in place, rending the air with her claws, sweeping her tail everywhere.

At the same time, the nodules on her back had reformed, and now shot out once more, creating a further hundred draconids. Luckily, Motherglare couldn’t just create proto dragons, and the youngest draconids were only a minor threat to either dragon slayer.

Further north, though, the activity around Motherglare had an impact. Many of the proto dragons, both injured and not, pulled back, leaving their lesser brethren to press forward mindlessly as they twisted around, trying to head back the way they had come. But Kurnugi had arrived at the battlefield around the lake by this point, and from the air, he sent out single slashes down into the proto dragons, either crippling their wings and sending them to the ground or hitting them in the head or neck area.

By this point, the transformed dragon was perspiring quite badly, his endurance being pushed to its limits by the number of attacks he needed to launch at the creatures. However, none of them had any mind to attack him, Ranma and the others in turn. This turned the battle into a rout, as a recovered Juvia called upon the water of the lake once more and Ranma charged forwards, battering aside any of the younger set to close with the larger proto dragons.

Only four more proto dragons on top of the two that had already attacked Gajeel would be able to break contact. But even that would not be enough.

Thinking quickly, Natsu shouted, “Make some noise!” following this by slamming his feet down into the ground every time he touched down. This caused tremendous booming sounds to erupt whenever he shifted around Motherglare.

Dazedly, Gajeel got to his feet, staring up at the incoming proto dragons and the draconids charging towards him from every direction. Desperately he gathered his energy and tilted his head straight up, using a breath attack that would create an attack all around him, slaying the draconids and slowing the proto dragons down. “Iron Dragon Slayer's Death Rain!”

Twisting around in that direction, Motherglare opened her mouth, and a bright boil of magical power began to appear. But Natsu crossed the intervening distance again, hammering into her side once more with his Dragon Force. She screamed, twisting around even as she called upon her magic shouting out, "Diamond Form!"

Her scales, already monstrosly hard, hardened further, almost to the point where they did resemble diamonds. This protected her from the concussive force of Natsu's hits, and she whirled, bringing a claw down on top of him. He slammed it away with her hand, then leapt into the air, a punch landing on her jaw, only to discover that the diamond form covered her entire body, not just the area he had previously struck. The blow did nothing but send her head sideways a little, and she reared back very slightly, then lunged faster than he could dodge this time, biting down hard.

Now it was Natsu's turn to cry out in pain, Motherglare's bite threatening to bite him in half despite the durability Dragon Force gave him. His fists rained down in hammer blows on top of her nose again and again, then getting an idea, he grabbed at her nostrils, tugging hard in different directions.

While most dragons would cheerfully kill anyone who called them simple animals, it was a known fact that the noses of most animals were incredibly sensitive, including the human sort. Already dealing with the raw agony of her ruined eye, completely blind and panicking on top of being insane to begin the battle, Motherglare couldn't help it. She reared back, spitting Natsu away towards Gajeel who had just finished off one of the proto-dragons as she twisted around, bringing one paw up to rub her nose in further pain.

Natsu hit the ground, and rolled, before hopping to his feet, smashing aside several draconids. Instead of concentrating on them though, he used his afterburner to flash backward, grabbing Gajeel and gaining distance. Gajeel's earlier attack had downed both the proto dragons, riddling their wings with holds, and the one still alive needed to charge forward or use their breath weapons to do anything. "We need to finish off Mother Glare!"

"Fine! There's a rock over there, it's too large for the draconids to get at us quick," Gajeel pointed, before nearly choking as Natsu changed direction instantly, the hand holding his shirt pulling the shirt so tight against his neck it threatened to break.

The next second, he hit the top of the rock as Natsu landed. As the Fire Dragon Slayer did, he brought his hands to either side of his mouth as he concentrated. Dragon Force faded from the rest of his body, all of the magic from his semi-transformation coalescing into his mouth. Gajeel pushed himself to his feet, and once more began to gather his own magic into his mouth similarly, hoping they could get their attack off before the proto dragon could track on them.

Across from them, Motherglare turned in his direction, opening her own mouth, energy quickly coalescing there. The draconids around them charged forward, trying to climb up the

rock, while the proto dragon that Gajeel had been fighting did the same, it's energy beam also building up quickly.

But too late.

"Fire Dragon Slayers Roar!"

"Iron Dragon Slayer's Roar!" came the twin cry.

There was nothing fancy about these attacks, nothing massively overpowered or structured as some of the other secret techniques the two Dragon Slayer's had created over the past year, let alone the past few days. This was simply a nearly raw magical blast, concentrated into their mouths and into one of their previously most powerful attacks against the equally powerful attack of Motherglare.

Bluish white energy contested against green, silver, red and orange for a few moments, before being overwhelmed. Even as Motherglare desperately poured more of her magical energy into the attack, the twin attacks from the Dragon Slayer's overwhelmed her own assault, slamming back into her head, shredding, tearing and burning all at once.

A second later, the proto-dragon's attack hit Gajeel, causing him to cry out in pain as he was flung sideways into Natsu. Both of them were hurled off the rock, slamming into a draconid below. Their dual weight bore the draconid to the ground and... nothing happened. The draconid spasmed but then fell still.

"...Gerrof!" Natsu mumbled.

Groaning in pain, Gajeel rolled to the side, groaning himself. He found himself staring into the slack face of a draconid, it's eyes black and lifeless. "Gah!"

Pushing himself backwards, Gajeel groaned again, his left arm, side and leg hurting something fierce from the beam of the proto dragon. Looking down, he saw his entire side was burnt and bruised, but it wasn't the worst injury he'd had. *The biggest area covered by a single wound lately, sure. Not the worst overall. And isn't that depressing.*

Looking around, he smirked. "Oy, flame head. We did it."

Natsu groaned a bit, then tried to push himself off of the draconid's body only to collapse onto his face, complete magical exhaustion hitting him like a freight train after his first true use of Dragon force and everything else they had done today and the previous days. Seeing this, Gajeel smirked slightly, rolling Natsu until he was pointed in the right direction. Seeing what Gajeel was talking about, Natsu grinned.

Motherglare was very, **very** dead. Her head, neck and a large segment of her shoulders were gone. Even better, with her dead, the draconids in sight had also all collapsed. Graning his neck, Gajeel could just see around the rock enough to see that the proto dragon had collapsed too. *I guess they really were just some kind of automaton. Kill the mother, and all the creations die.*

He snickered. "Well, that's handy. Even better, I suppose we can call ourselves true Dragon Slayer's now. Only, which of us really gets the credit for the kill? Gihihi, I say me, cause I'm still standing."

"Oh that's bullshit! I'm the one that did Dragon Force and did the most damage, Rusty! If you were standing any closer I'd bite your ankles off!" Natsu roared.

The two of them were still arguing that point by the time the last four proto dragons arrived, followed quickly by Ranma and the others who arrived just in time to save the pair of them, both utterly exhausted by the short immensely sharp battle with Motherglare. They continued to argue even as the four proto dragons died and the others joined them.

Hearing this, Ranma shook his head slowly. "We really have to work on your priorities fellas." He looked over at Kurnugi and then gestured south. "Well, are we done here? Or are you going to tell us that we have to hunt down the one draconid who has somehow survived it's 'mother's' demise, the designated heir or whatever and kill it so that her consciousness can't survive or something?"

"I don't know where you got that idea from, but no. We're done here. The draconids Motherglare created were only living to a certain extent. They had no souls of their own, and all of them regardless of where they are will have expired when Motherglare died. Let us return to Ven'ael and the task of you three training to become stronger. Because let me tell you, your fight against Motherglare might be impressive, but it is nothing in comparison to the fight against Acnologia."

That sobered both younger Dragon Slayers, and with weary nods, the group turned their feet towards the south, and their temporary home.

### **End Chapter**

So as you can see, this chapter doesn't end with the Alvarez Empire scene that I had hoped to put in. Sorry guys, but I lost most of Monday to finishing up *Magic*, and most of Tuesday to RL. This essentially was the work of three days, and I simply could not put in everything I wanted.

And I will remind you now that this is not the finished product. *Hiryo* will look at the full chapter, as will *Justlovereadin'* incorporate the changes or the problems they point out. But

generally speaking, no new scenes or anything of that nature will be added. Hope you have a nice weekend guys!