

I can't draw.

Now, this has been edited by Hiryo and Justlovereadin'. His input had me rewriting the final fight big time, and I think it came out far better for it. He also reminded me of specific powers of some of the characters I hadn't considered, which Hiryo also did to a certain extent. Though in his case, Hiryo pointed out more spelling errors, name mistakes, attack mistakes and a few character specific things. Thank both of these guys for their help here, and Justlovereadin' for his service in general.

Chapter 42: Acnologia's End

When Blue Pegasus had decided to no longer take combat missions, the master of Blue Pegasus had decided to let other guilds book out Christina, the guild's emblematic flying ship, as transportation whenever they needed to send groups of mages abroad to other countries. Because of this, the King's Council had paid for the use of the ship to collect Warrod and Jura, the only two mages being sent to Alvarez who weren't from Fairy Tail.

Unfortunately, Ooba Babasaama, the guild master of Lamia Scale, was somewhat notorious for being obstreperous and hard to work with. This had become even worse after the mission to defeat the Oración Seis resulted in several deaths among the mages sent to deal with the Dark Guild, including Sherry, a member of her guild. While Jura himself had no problem with being sent on this particular mission, it was taking some time to convince his guild master. As well, as explain to Lyon that the Ice Make mage wasn't coming along... which, judging from the yelling, was equally as hard.

Christina sat on the lawn of Lamia Scale, the windows to its control canopy open as the two mages in charge of controlling it, Ren and Eve of the Trimens, sat and listened, shaking their heads. "Good grief, that old woman has a pair of lungs on her," Ren muttered, shaking his head.

Eve chuckled, but there was a bit of remembered pain in his voice as he spoke. "Can you blame her? This is probably the deadliest mission any mages have been sent on in a hundred years, including some of the Hundred-Year Quests. You know, the ones that ask mages to go into the Blasted Lands, explore old ruins, or wipe out one of the pirate kingdoms. The kings explicitly made no promise any of those being sent would come back. And after what happened with Master Ichiya and Sherry against the Oración Seis..."

Pirate kingdoms were actually a real thing. There were numerous small islands in the freezing northern waters above Ishgar and further out to sea than well away from both the peninsula and the Empire. They weren't very powerful kingdoms, obviously, but occasionally, one of them would make some trouble, particularly in Caelum. In turn, one or more merchant groups would offer exorbitant amounts of money to try to persuade a mage to take on the task of wiping them out.

Most of the time those missions went unheeded, hence the name given to them. Figuring out where the pirates were coming from was one thing, wiping them out another

and getting there a third issue. Very few mages or even groups of mages could do all three. Much like missions where mages were tasked to deal with ghosts in ancient, abandoned ruins, or worse, the Blasted Lands, there was just very little gain for a lot of problems.

“True, but it’s still, and I’m using quotes here, a ‘request’ from the entire King’s Council, backed with the primus of Fiore’s Mag Council. It would take a stronger man than me to want to ignore that kind of summons,” Ren stated, much of his normal attitude buried at present since it was just the two of them.

“Eh, I think Jura will eventually wear them down. Lyon, though, might force his way to come with us,” Eve lamented. “That’s a pity, as it will take away from any time we will be able to get with the lovely ladies of Fairy Tail before we have to leave for the empire.” He smiled then, the smile far more lascivious than any expression that should be on a young boy’s face. “Erza might be off the market, but there should be several other lovelies there. I also heard that the two diplomats from the Alvarez Empire are both gorgeous women.”

“Hmm... I wonder if either of them would want to drink with me, not that I care, of course,” Ren murmured, his tsundere act rearing its head before he suddenly frowned, twisting to the left to peer down at the ground around the Christina. “Did you see that?”

“What?”

“That bush over there, I thought it moved.”

Eve looked in the direction Ren was pointing, frowning a little. “I didn’t see anything.”

Ren kept his eyes on the bush for a few seconds and then glanced around before relaxing a bit. “Must’ve been the wind or something.”

“Had to. Besides, we’re in an allied guild’s literal backyard,” Eve snorted. “What is there to bother us here?”

Neither he nor his companion had good enough hearing to hear the footsteps of small, four individuals as they raced inside the flying ship. Soon, the four intruders were in the back of the vessel, where the magical engine room, a pair of onboard toilets, and the small commissary were located, each behind its own closed door. A quick conversation of pointing and head shaking followed, and eventually, the four intruders decided to hide in the engine room. This area was easily the best choice, and soon, they were hiding away, the door closing behind them.

As soon as they were certain that they hadn’t been observed getting in, one of them raised a fist, grinning cheerfully at his companions. “We did it!”

“Frosch thinks so too! We were acting like we were real ninjas, nin-nin.”

“I still don’t understand why we are hiding. The two of you and Jura have made our guild the strongest guild in the world. We should simply demand the chance to join this mission against Acnologia. After all, the two of you are real Dragon Slayers.”

The one he had called himself Frosch snickered, while the boy who had thrust his fist in the air laughed. "You didn't mention our master in there. You don't think she's strong? She'd spin you for that, you know."

The arrogant voice, who proved to be an exceed much like Carla and Happy, blanched a little, then hunkered down in his hiding place in lieu of answer, while his companion, the black-haired Shadow Dragon Slayer Rogue, simply shook his head and leaned back in his own hiding place looking over at his companion, Sting. "Are you sure that this is a good idea? I know that we were shot down when we demanded to join the mission, but..."

"But nothing! If they are bringing Wendy along, they surely have to bring us! Every Dragon Slayer helps when you're going up against a dragon, you know," Sting said virtuously. "Besides, you heard that messenger guy explaining. Not only will Wendy's mysterious big brother be there but so will Gajeel and Natsu! OH, and Laxus, too, I guess."

Had Laxus been there, he would not have been pleased with the almost blah way that his name was tacked on there, but unlike the other Dragon Slayers, Sting and Rogue had both met Laxus. Although his power was unquestionable, Laxus' general attitude and the way he treated them, as if they were nuisances, got under the skin of both younger boys.

The fact that Wendy also treated them like unwelcome irritants most of the time, but was polite about it, had not occurred to either of them, simply because of that politeness.

Frosch spoke up again, although this time, he sent a little worried. The exceed was a highly unusual-looking youngster. Younger than Happy and Carla, unlike his fellow exceed Lector, he did not dress well enough to offset that. Rather, he wore what looked like a strange, pink frog suit for some reason, making him look both younger and somewhat ridiculous. "They didn't mention Seilah being there, did they? That demon woman scares me."

Sting shivered a little as he imitated his companion's mode of speech for a second. "Sting thinks so, too. Still, for a chance to go on a mission, especially an important one like this with Wendy, I'll deal with being a little... worried about her companion."

Rogue frowned but nodded, both boys smiling at the thought of young Wendy. "Hmm... maybe they'll put us on the same team as Wendy. That would be amazing."

Suffice it to say, neither boy understood that their attention to Wendy was not only unwanted but also completely useless. Wendy had attempted to hint at such before and even once at the fact that she and Seilah were in a relationship but subtlety didn't get through to either youth.

They all fell silent as the conversation in the distance, which the two Dragon Slayers had still been able to hear despite the closed door, finally died down. A few moments later, Jura walked out of the guildhall along with the government representative. Beside him stood a young girl, she looked around ten or so, maybe twelve, and had dark pink hair done up in two short pigtails to either side of her head, and bright blue eyes.

“Who is that?” Eve murmured, eyes wide. “She’s quite a cute one. I might need to go and make her acquaintance.”

Ren hummed. “She looks vaguely familiar but I can’t say I recognize her. She isn’t in my strike range, though.”

“For work she wouldn’t be in mine, either, but for fun, oh yes,” Eve chortled as he got up, heading back into the ship and the landing ramp. By the time he got there, Jura, the government man and the unknown girl had reached the bottom of the ramp, and he bowed from the waist. “Sir Jura, welcome aboard. Might I ask for the name of your cute companion? I thought I knew all the powerful mages my own age in Fairy Tail.”

The girl blushed, hiding quickly behind Jura, her head barely coming up to his stomach. “EEEE! No thank you! I, I’m not strong, even with the power of Master Babasaama’s love.”

“Well if love is power then perhaps...” Eve began only for Jura to cough, interrupting him.

“*AHM*, yes, well, this is young Sherria Blendy. She is one of our young wards. We’ve only recently begun to get a handle on her powers, and while the sky is,” and here, Jura turned to wink down at the girl, who calmed down from her ‘meeting a cute boy’ nerves to smile up at him, “the absolute limit for her in the future, I am afraid that right now, she still has a lot of studying to do.”

He knelt down in front of her, ignoring Eve and the government official for a moment as the man passed him, entering the flying ship. “Now, be good while I’m gone, and don’t let Sting or Rogue pull you into any of their antics. I’ll be back within a week, and we can continue to train your powers then.” He smiled a bit. “Perhaps when I return, I can introduce you to Wendy. I think, Sting and Rogue’s interest in her notwithstanding, the two of you would get on amazingly well.”

“Th, that sounds nice. Having friends like that would be really nice,” Sherria answered somewhat wanly. While there were other boys like Sting around in Lamia Scale, chance had made it so that Sherria was the only girl her age being looked after by the guild at present. She looked around, her brows furrowed. “Where are those two, anyway? I would have thought at least Sting would have tried to convince you to bring him along.”

“He did, but the master spun him,” Jura answered dryly before going back to the previous topic, believing that was answer enough on that score. “I’m certain that Wendy will welcome the chance as well. The two of you may even be able to learn and grow together, Wendy has a magic far more similar to yours than even Master Babasaama, let alone my own.” With that, Jura patted the girl on the head. “Go on, now. Keep our Master company until I return. You know how she gets when she’s worried about someone, even me.”

Indeed, normally, being spun by the Master was a one-way ticket to having stomach trouble for the rest of the day. Unfortunately, Sting had been spun so often since joining the guild, he’d begun to develop an immunity to it. Babasaama’s histrionics at the King’s

Council's 'request' for Jura had given Sting enough time to recover and convince Lector, Rogue and Frosch to try and sneak aboard the Christina.

Sherria nodded, then hugged Jura around the waist tightly. She never liked seeing him leave for dangerous missions, and this one, from what she had overheard, sounded like one of the most dangerous missions ever. "Be safe, okay? I, I—"

She didn't need to finish, as Jura understood. He patted her on the head again, then gently started to push her back towards the guildhall. He then turned and joined the other two men already standing in the doorway of the flying ship. Looking at Eve, he explained calmly, with all the cold control of a father just waiting for a reason to go for his shotgun. "That is Sherria Blendy. Her older cousin, Sherry had been taking care of her after her parent's death from a young age. She is a kind, gentle girl who is deeply important to all of us here in Lamia Scale. I would be remiss in my duties as her senior to not warn you of certain consequences, if you wish to treat her as you do so many of your clients, Eve."

Flinching slightly, Eve nodded, reminded of his earlier conversation with Ren. Sherry had died in the battle against Oración Seis, which probably meant that Sherria had been looked after by the guild ever since. "Er, um, right. I, I'll just join Ren in the cockpit, shall I?"

Jura nodded, then followed after Eve towards the front. Taking a seat behind the cockpit area as he apologized to the government official for how long it had taken to convince his Master to let him go.

"Stubbornness and old age seem to go hand-in-hand," the Royal guardsman who had been sent to gather up the Lamia Scale Mage said, shaking his head dryly. "I suppose we should have expected that."

"I heard that! You just earned yourself a spinning the next time I see you, boy!" the voice of Master Ooba shouted, causing all four men supposed to be aboard the Christina to flinch, along with, although they didn't see it, the four youngsters in hiding. "Now, get your ship off my lawn!"

Ran hurriedly closed the canopies, while the Royal guardsman twisted around and hit the button to raise the ramp. Within moments, he and Jura were strapped in, and the Christina lifted off and away, causing the eyes of the two young Dragon Slayers to widen and hands to fly to mouths.

Both exceed went to work quickly, urging their charges to stay quiet and hidden, rubbing their backs and shoulders. Thankfully, the door to the engine room remained closed, and no one noticed their whimpers and groans over the noise of the flying ship in motion. Even so, as the ship flew towards its destination, the two Dragon Slayers began to question whether or not they had thought this all the way through.

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Oddly enough at that moment, a similar conversation was being had between Ranma, Natsu, Gajeel and the rest of the group that was being sent into Alvarez.

“Look, there’s no reason for me to take the Christina to Alvarez, I can swim there! Heck, after all the training I’ve been doing, I bet I could get there first no matter how fast the Christina will be able to fly there with your enchantments on it,” Ranma boasted, while also protesting the idea of getting on board anything moving as he followed Irene out into the palace gardens, the other Dragon Slayers around them. “Dragon Weed can only take us so far, and it’s a long ass trip! And who knows what’s been going on in the Empire anyway? By the time we get there, we might just have to head straight to the battlefield, and none of us will be able to do that if we arrive at the battlefield sick.”

“You won’t, according to the reports we’ve received,” Irene said, shaking her head her head with a chuckle. “And what about the rest of you? Get your thoughts out now.”

“I’d ask Ranma or Juvia to bring me with them,” Gajeel grumbled a bit. He didn’t have any way to travel faster than his own two feet even now. *Damn it, I should’ve thought about that when I was mastering my shape change -style attack. Getting wings of my own would be amazing, show that Flame Head I’m better than him.*

“Happy and I could fly,” Natsu volunteered. “We’d probably get there tired, but my endurance’ll let me bounce back”

“There’s no way that I can fly all that way without some rest stops, Natsu, or fast enough to keep up to the Christina on my own. We seriously need to teach you how to read a map better,” Happy opined in his typical unforgiving manner. Even when it came to his friend, he did not mince words. “You’re really an idiot sometimes.”

“You of all people don’t get to say that you stupid cat,” Carla said almost automatically, before flinching a bit as Happy looked at her, blushing and looking away quickly.

The others all wondered what the heck that was about, although Ranma agreed with the sentiment, given how often Happy’s lack of forethought had gotten him in trouble in the Blasted Lands. *Mind you, the rest of us could say the same thing and I’m certainly not going to start throwing stones myself.*

Instead of saying all that out loud, he continued his conversation with Irene. “Ignoring the flamethrower and nail for brains, there’s no real reason for me, at least, to go with you. I’ll get there on my own or with Juvia helping along.”

“Point of order. One, is the chance that even you, the Water Dragon Slayer, unburdened, could go nearly as fast as the Christina will, once I am done enchanting it, is ludicrous. My enchantments on our own vessel coming to Ishgar cut down what should have been a trip of nearly a week to barely 4 hours.”

She smirked at the look that Ranma gave her, half challenge and half surprise at that. Although he wasn’t questioning the idea that she could do so. By this point, Irene had a good enough handle of Ranma’s personality to understand he was instead wondering if he should take that as a challenge, and go through with his idea of swimming all the way to Alvarez.

Would you still call it swimming? If what he is doing is using magi-surfing? Aquaplaning? Irene shook off the droll thought and continued. "Point of order two: Arriving by ocean would only have you on the shores of the Empire, which would entail still more travel using our methods of mass transportation, or your own two feet, further slowing you down. And finally, point of order three: although I am reluctant to share this with anyone. I can make the trip pass in relative comfort for all of you with an enchantment of my own."

"Wait, what?" Natsu and Gajeel asked as one, while Ranma's eyes widened then narrowed speculatively. "You're a Dragon Slayer too. I forgot about that for a second," he mused.

"I tend not to actually think of myself in that manner if I can help it, so you're forgetting is understandable. But yes, I do have an enchantment that both tethers you to your chair and creates a cushion of air around you so that you don't become sick while travel--" Irene broke off as Natsu and Gajeel practically rushed her. Gajeel bowed formally in front of her from so close he nearly faceplanted in her cleavage, while Natsu took it even further, getting on his knees and wrapped his arms around her legs.

"Please mistress, teach us your ways!" both men shouted as one.

It was only Ranma's self-control and his extensive use of the Dragon Weed for nearly more than a decade now that stopped him from being nearly as ecstatic about the idea of being able to use actual transportation without becoming sick. Still he looked at Irene soulfully, almost ready to pull out the old 'puppy dog eyes' attack. *Where's Wendy when we need her?!*

Irene let loose a laugh that many a anime ojou-sama would've envied, one hand coming up to her face as she even went so far as to assume the anime-patented ojou-sama haughty stance. "OHOHOHOHO, I am not going to teach you my spell, children," she said condescendingly. "None of you have the ability to use it. Young Wendy might, since it is based on air magic, but whether or not she will share it with you is up to her. I will, however, use it on you all, including Laxus and myself for the trip there."

And the trip back to Ishgar as well, Irene thought to herself. Irene had already been considering walking away from the Empire back when she was wondering about her connection to Erza, something that had begun soon after Zeref's mental domination had disappeared and she had recognized the effect for what it was. Now that she had a grandson, leaving the Empire became an even easier decision. *Brandish will probably be joining me, although I am not quite certain about that. Given how quickly she struck up a friendship with Lucy and her girlfriend, though, as well as our past discussions and the fact she doesn't have any truly close friends in Alvarez since Dimaria died, it seems plausible.*

Breathing a sigh of relief, Ranma nodded at her, then looked around them, as Irene did the same watching as the other members of the group heading to Alvarez joined them in clumps. This included Erza, who was currently carrying Enma and being trailed by Lisa, Anna and their children. "I must say, once your Kings made an agreement with us, they have reacted with all due dispatch and in far greater force than I expected," Irene murmured.

Not only were Ranma and the other two young Dragon Slayers coming with them, Laxus and Wendy were also coming with them, along with the still absent Jura. The once more absent Warrod, who had left the palace soon after Irene and Brandish had headed toward Magnolia, would also be going with them. Irene's daughter Erza, Jenny, Juvia, Wendy and the exceeds rounded out the group from Fairy Tail that had already gathered in the palace gardens.

As Laxus walked out of the palace and moved to join Irene and the three Dragon Slayers, Irene looked over at her prospective son-in-law. *And isn't that an odd thought to think, but accurate for all of that. And I will make certain that he does make an honest girl out of my daughter after this is over.* The thought made Irene smile as she looked at Erza and Enma, but after a second she looked back at Ranma speculatively. "It doesn't bother you, bringing all three of your lovers into a battle like this one? One that will be incredibly dangerous?"

"It does a little bit. There's a big part of me," *the part that Genma nurtured so well, "that tells me I should protect them," and that women are weaker than men. I still need to deal with that thought after all this time, dammit.* "But, well, the others tried to talk Erza out of coming with us because of Enma and you know how well that went. I also trust all of them, not just to look after themselves but also to look after one another. Besides, Jenny, Juvia and I, along with these two lugs," Ranma indicated Natsu and Gajeel with a thumb, which nearly caused Natsu to bite him, "we've been training specifically to take on Acnologia for the past two years in the Blasted Lands. They aren't about to back down now, and I think I'd be insulting them if I asked."

"You certainly would insult me if you asked again," Erza said as she joined them, putting an arm around Ranma's waist. This let Enma leap off of her shoulders and onto Ranma's, from where he scrabbled into position on his head with all the adroit skill of a little monkey rather than a large toddler. "I've also been training for this confrontation, and I will not be persuaded to be left behind! Not by you either mother, so don't even try."

"And what about your little one? Shouldn't he get a say in things?"

Erza simply shook her head, waving back towards the palace. "Bisca, Mirajane and her sisters are more than willing to look after Enma for a while." She smirked, then pointed up at Enma. "In fact, I just asked Enma himself about this."

Irene and Ranma both blinked at that, while Jenny and Juvia chuckled as they too moved over to join their lover, nearly switching places with Natsu and Gajeel as they moved away to speak to their own lovers. Seeing that, Irene had to shake her head at how much of Fairy Tail had come along to the palace. Jura and Warrod were not an insubstantial force to be sure, but it was Fairy Tail who is putting forth the bulk of the magical power here.

Frankly, if not for the fact that the King wanted to see us off and how long it took them to deliberate things, it might've been better simply to meet in Magnolia rather than here, especially with how many are here just to see us off. The whole guild acts far more like a family than a guild, don't they?

"Big Red, Big Red!" Enma shouted from Ranma's shoulder, holding out his hands towards Irene.

Obliging, Irene sent a small enchantment towards the youth, causing him to float up into the air and come towards her via another small enchantment, the law of attraction acting on his body. "Hello, little one." Once Enma was clinging to her shoulder and playing with her hat happily, Irene turned to her daughter, smiling blandly as Enma began to tug at her hair to the point where it might've been painful for anyone else. But along with being a Dragon Slayer, Irene had a phenomenally high personal pain threshold, even if her actual endurance wasn't as high as the other Dragon Slayers. "You were saying?"

"I asked Enma if he would be sad if I was gone for a few days," Erza said with a shrug before doing so again. "Enma, will you miss Mommy?"

While Ranma snickered at the Mommy part, Enma shrugged, either not understanding the question, or really not being the type to miss Erza when she was gone. "Play? Play friends?"

"Yes, your friends will be here with you, as will Bisca and Mirajane," Erza explained.

"Mama go play," Enma answered, the fullest sentence he had yet used around Irene as he dismissed the idea Erza needed to be there.

She clapped politely while also looking at her daughter, shaking her head. "And here I thought that I wasn't exactly mother of the year material. Really, asking your toddler son if he'll miss you and just going along with it?"

"I have never claimed to be a natural mother. Enma will be fine. Even if all of us die he will have numerous mothers, fathers and brothers to watch out for him."

"OH my god, Erza, that's so freaking morbid!" Jenny groaned, shaking her head.

Erza just shrugged. "It isn't that I don't love Enma, but I am fully aware that others look after him as well or better than I do. Toddlers and babies are hard, and now, as before, I am not willing to change my entire life to revolve around him."

"Better get used to it," Juvia stated just as bluntly, while Ranma winced a bit and acknowledged that he didn't fall in love with Erza because she was motherly. "Enma isn't going to be the only little one in our little family for very long after we return, if Juvia can help it. And..." She smirked slightly, turning to Ranma to give Ranma her best bedroom eyes. "Juvia can help it."

Ranma coughed gently, but considering that they had discussed this idea before, didn't blush too much, while Laxus shook his head, waving a finger at Enma and deciding to change the subject a little. "Really, Big Red? You couldn't come up with anything better for Irene, little man? Not even something like your 'Sparky' for me?"

"I am actually fine with Big Red for now. Enma can come up with something better in the future, so long as it isn't anything similar to grandmother or its many iterations." Irene posed for a second, one hand on her hip, her chest slightly thrust out as Enma began to pull and play with her hat again. "I don't think I could ever be called that, could I?"

"You don't really think I'm going to touch that one, do you?" Ranma snickered, shaking his head.

For his part, Laxus, the only other man in the small group at present, briefly looked down at Irene's chest. Realizing that Irene had caught him, simply wagged his eyebrows at her as if to say 'can you blame me,' which, come to think of it, was a response all of its own, Irene realized.

However, a new voice cut into the conversation for a moment. "Those who are most concerned probably know there is fire to go with the smoke."

This confusing sentence had everyone blinking, even as Irene turned and glared towards Warrod, the Wizard Saint, whose appearance was almost as odd as his mode of speech. He looked almost like a tree: his head looked like a gnarled tree trunk, complete with hair that looked a cross between that of a tree and a broccoli head. The high colored green kimono, trousers and coat he wore hid most of his body, but Irene was pretty certain the rest of his body matched his face.

"And you would know all about firewood wouldn't you, Warrod? Or has it been so long since you were last burned you have lost your fear of the flame? If so, I can remind you of it quite easily," Irene drawled, a simple enchantment creating a flame around her arms that she raised towards him.

Warrod shook his head, backing away rapidly, one hand coming up to cover his mouth lest he say something that might set Irene off. The tree man had been on his best behavior ever since the two Spriggen had arrived, knowing that either of them could beat him. Irene could probably do so with ridiculous ease, while Brandish would need a bit of effort.

Chortling at that, Irene shook her head as she gazed around at the group who had started to break off and talk in small groups around them. "Going back to my earlier comment, I thought the Kings of Ishgar might decide to keep some of you Dragon Slayers in reserve in case we fail to defeat Acnologia. I am also wondering why they didn't insist on more of the Wizard Saints coming with us. That healer they have for one, and Wolfheim, perhaps. I thought that at least Draculos would come with us, if only to provide overwatch and coordination rather than assuming the Empire can do so. We can, but..."

"Why?" Ranma and Laxus said as one, before looking at one another and grinning. "They are all weaker than us," Ranma went on, with Laxus nodding agreement. "And standing on the sidelines just shoutin' encouragement'd hurt their pride too much."

Both of them had their own reasons to be annoyed at Draculos and Wolfheim at present. Both men had looked down their noses at Laxus for more than a year now, since

Lexus had become a Wizard Saint, treating him like he was a young upstart unworthy of the title despite his magic and deeds. As for Ranma, the two Wizard Saints had treated him like dirt on their boots since the first time they actually met.

Feeling someone's eyes on him, Ranma turned to stare up at the second story of the palace and one window in particular. There, Draculos stood, staring out over the group, his face set in its normal saturnine look of disapproval. "Yeah!" Ranma shouted, staring up at the older mage. "I said you're weaker than us. Want to come down and do something about it?"

"Ranma, just because you're going to be bored for the next four hours or so that it takes us to get to Alvarez is no reason to pick a fight with the Wizard Saint," Erza declared, smacking her lover lightly on the shoulder.

Lexus made to open his mouth, but Erza pointed at him. "And you, don't encourage him. You're supposed to be a guild master. You got special dispensation to join this mission, but that is no reason for you to act in such a manner."

While Irene chortled and nodded in approval at her daughter's way of dealing with both younger men, Draculos scowled, but moved away from the window, shaking his head. *Blast it all, the brat is right. I felt his magic power when he stared down the Kings Council, and when it comes to a Dragon Slayer, I don't know if I'd be able to get through that durability they all share. God Serena was the most powerful us of us for a reason after all, and Lexus was easily able to step into his grandfather's place among us.*

Normally, Draculos wouldn't have even bothered to see off the group. However, he was irritated by one more member of the group that was being sent into Alvarez, who was even now being escorted by the Royal Guards through the palace. The prisoner Azuma was also being sent along with them at Ranma's behest, and he had arrived at the palace escorted by Rune Knights barely 30 minutes ago. *And was promptly forced to not engage Wolfheim in a fight. The younger generation is so uncouth, I almost hope he starts a battle royale right here rather than go along with things as Oceana thinks he will!*

Nearby, where Ranma and his immediate and not so immediate family were talking, Gajeel and Levy were leaning against a tree together, the shorter of the pair shaking her head. "Are you sure you want me along on this?" She wasn't asking because she was afraid to go, or because Levy thought she wasn't up to it. Given the role that she and Wendy would hopefully be taking over, Levy felt she would do well enough. Still, it seemed unusual for Gajeel to actually admit that he might need someone's help, regardless of the enemy he was set to fight.

"Hey, I'll have you know I've grown up over the past few years," Gajeel mock-growled, his shoulder touching Levy's a sign of public affection that, no matter how mild, he wouldn't have been comfortable with before his time in the Blasted Lands. "I'm not like those two idiots who kept on sniffing around you for so long."

“Hey! Jet and Droy are my friends. And they stopped doing that a while ago,” Levy shot back, mentally adding, *and it’s probably a good thing that they did, considering how passionate me and Gajeel were when he returned. Although thankfully, his place has soundproofed walls, unlike Ranma’s place.* Levy had learned he and the others had received a noise violation warning from their neighbors, which was hilarious and a little startling, although not as startling as Jenny’s look of pride when she had brought it up. “And what does that mean anyway?”

“Whatever. Anyway, I know I can’t do everything on my own,” Gajeel stated seriously. “Even the strongest of us sometimes need someone there to back us up. And as long as you don’t get too close to where the action is too often, your power is one of the best support types for us Dragon Slayers there are out there. Me and the Flame-tard both agreed on that point.”

At that point, he waved towards Natsu, who was also nearby talking to for other members of Fairy Tail who didn’t need to be there but had come along to say their farewells. Lisa and Anna had brought along their kids, who were both acting far more normally to the idea of one of their parents going away. I.e., they were crying at the moment, tugging at his hair and demanding that, “Papink,” not leave.

Needless to say, both Anna and Lisa would be remaining behind with their kids, helping Bisca and Mirajane with Enma. Neither of them had any support spells that would be of much assistance, although Anna’s use of wands and so forth might have allowed her to join the support group. Mirajane also wasn’t going along, although in her case, it’d been a brief spar with Ranma that had proven that Mirajane still didn’t quite have enough magical power to fight someone like Acnologia. She wasn’t as fast in the air as Jenny, couldn’t transform into water like Juvia, nor did she have the armor to hang out with Ranma as Erza could with her Requip.

“I’m honestly kind of surprised that Litsu and Atsu latched onto Natsu so quickly,” Gajeel murmured, changing what he had been about to say to continue to convince Levy that her presence would be helpful as he looked at the softly crying toddlers.

Levy smiled and went with the change in topics, Gajeel’s response already having been enough for her. “I don’t think it’s so strange. For one thing, neither Anna nor Lisa has evinced any interest in going out on missions until their kids are at least in their preteens, whereas Erza had to be nailed in place by Master Makarov and Laxus to stop from taking missions until Enma was weaned off her milk.”

She smirked a little at Gajeel, whose eyes had flicked down to her chest, a chest that had grown a bit in the past two years, although barely to the point where it matched where Anna and Lisa’s had been when Ranma and his group had left. Given certain conversations she had, she knew exactly what Gajeel was thinking, although she didn’t comment on that now. “Another, Atsu and Litsu don’t like to see anyone leave. They latch onto people and just decide that they are not leaving, and it’s almost acts like cats at times.”

Gajeel blinked at that, then smirked nodding. "When a cat falls asleep on you, you can't move?"

"Only in their case, they don't have to be asleep to get you to stay still," Levy agreed with a snicker.

She looked up then as Warrod made his way over to them.

"So, you would be the former member of Phantom Lord, Gajeel right? Knowing what I know about my former fellow Wizard Saint, I imagine you are enjoying life among the Fairies far better," Warrod said, humming thoughtfully as he reached up to run a finger along a tree branch, which began to sprout new leaves as he touched it. "How is Fairy Tail doing these days? You could have knocked me over with a paperclip when I heard that Makarov actually stepped down as guild master. Although, how much of the tonnage has actually been removed from his shoulders is a question."

Gajeel shrugged. "I haven't been back long enough to figure out what's different, so don't ask me."

"Heh, well I've been a part of the guild my whole life, so I can comment on it a lot," Levy giggled. "Lexus is a generally good person, but he's still got an abrasive attitude, and Mirajane and Makarov have to do a lot of soothing among the merchants and so forth. But I will say that his idea of instigating a series of exercises and contests every month has livened up Magnolia and the guild itself and made certain all of us come up with new ways to use our magics. We're not as wild and unruly as we used to be, but I think in the main, were still Fairy Tail."

Levy cocked her head thoughtfully, looking at the tree-man. "You were once a member, weren't you, Mr. Warrod?"

"And there we see a sign of someone who reads, not just does," Warrod snorted, nodding his head. "Yes, I was a member of Fairy Tail, but I left soon after Makarov became guild master. Not because we don't get along, but because we both received Wizard Saint Status at the same time. The Wizards Council didn't need more reason to dislike our guild then or after, and I felt leaving the guild would let me do more good outside Fiore, anyway. Still, that's nice to hear. Change is always good, but you shouldn't change what you are fundamentally."

Levy nodded firmly. "If you removed the wildness and individuality from Fairy Tail, it wouldn't be Fairy Tail at all. Lexus just wants to make certain that everyone in the guild is able to look after themselves on missions, and he's a lot stricter about what kind of missions can be taken by who and how many people are sent on troublesome ones."

Lexus was also extremely strict about people actually taking missions in the first place. If you had excuses, like Anna and Lisa did, he was fine with that, or if you had a job at the guild like all three Strauss girls. But a few of the guild members had been forced out into missions for the first time in years when he took over, including Carla's favorite drinking buddies and the perennial board hoverer, Nab.

The idea of the money of any job being **immediately** used to pay for any damages done on it, which before this had only been a move used to keep people like Gray and Natsu in line, had also rankled a bit. Laxus had a habit of basically showing up wherever damages were reported to look at them, rather than simply take the mages words that such damages couldn't have been avoided.

Warrod opened his mouth to more questions about the guild but before he could Gildarts interrupted them, coming out of another entrance rather than, thankfully, smashing down a wall as was normal with the man. Being lectured by both Laxus, the King and Makarov had seemingly instilled the man with the ability to walk around obstacles, rather than through them, although Levy was certain the change was only temporary.

"Yo, there you are Warrod, and here I was waiting at the bar for you," Gildarts announced.

"The castle has a bar?" Gajeel asked Levy, confused. "Or did he leave too at some point?"

"Probably just means the cellar. You know how he and Cana can both put it away. I wouldn't be surprised to learn that most of the bars across all of the peninsula banned both the pair of them," Levy answered, speaking loudly enough for Gildarts to hear with a smirk.

"OY, that's harsh. And it's only half the bars in Fiore, Cana's only rarely visited any of the other nations out there. The rest don't care where their booze goes so much as money flows," Gildarts said with a laugh, before turning back to Warrod. "I got what you asked me to pick up, by the way."

Gildarts pulled out a magazine, on the cover of which could be seen a scantily clad young lady wrapped around a tree branch, and the letters Dr, the rest of the word covered by Gildarts' hand.

In reply, Warrod hastily reached forward, grabbed it, and stuffed it somewhere, before whistling cheerily as he put an arm around Gildarts' shoulder leading him off. "This place has a bar you say, shall we see what we can do about its store before we have to take to the wild blue ocean above our heads?"

"I see your manner of speaking hasn't gotten any easier to understand, but sure, that sounds like a great idea," Gildarts said, leading the way back into the palace, passing by the last group of individuals that would be joining the mass of Fairy Tail mages on this mission.

Brandish was there obviously, although she had been taking some time to speak with the Princess that morning. For some reason, the two of them had hit it off. Currently, she was escorting Azuma, the former member of Grimoire Heart and frequent escapee. His movements were also watched by Seilah, as well as Wendy, who hadn't gone to complain about the plan to travel by ship to Alvarez with the other Dragon Slayers.

"Azuma, how're you doing, man?" Ranma said, moving over to the other man, holding out his arm to shake despite the fact Azuma wore handcuffs, a wry smirk on his face. "Prison life, *snort* doesn't look like it disagrees with ya so much."

The former member of Grimoire Heart held out his hand firmly also ignoring his handcuffs and the two men shook hands. Despite the fact that they had once been enemies, the pair of them got along extremely well, even now that Azuma was a prisoner of Fiore and technically should have been locked away due to his capture at Ranma and Fairy Tail's hand. That had not stopped him from breaking out over the past few years to fight Erza or any of the other members of Fairy Tail, including Laxus, who also nodded at the bomb and wood magic user, hence Ranma's snort.

"The food they serve us prisoners is actually quite good, and it keeps a roof over my head, I don't have to pay for when I'm cooperating. When I'm not, Erza and Laxus have both been accommodating with my desire to become stronger," Azuma replied with a small chuckle of his own.

"Hah! Fighting you has helped me perfect a lot of my lightning-based attacks, to say nothing about how taking hits and explosions from you have helped my toughness training," Laxus waved that off.

"True, but I'm still glad that you all thought of me for this. If I had learned about it in the news or something similar, I would have been furious at missing such a fight. However, after all of this is over Ranma, I also demand a fight with you," the other combat junkie stated to Ranma, the original model.

"Heck yeah. I haven't had time to spar with Erza or any of the others that we left behind bar a quick match with Mirajane," Ranma agreed instantly. "I'm down for that kind of thing and it'll be easy to schedule it too. My time journeying around the world is done after we tear out Acnologia's heart."

"Settling down?" Azuma's eyes flicked over to where Enma still sat on Irene's shoulder, gleefully playing with her hair and hat. The witch's hat she wore apparently fascinated him. "I don't think I would have decided to go that route myself, but I can at least understand it."

Ranma snorted, and Azuma went on. "Unfortunately, I won't be able to stop by nearly as often as I would like, given the whole prisoner thing."

"You have only yourself to blame," Seilah said firmly. When Azuma looked at the demoness, she looked back stoically. "Unlike Ranma and Laxus, or indeed Erza, I have no need nor desire to humor you. The fact that you broke out of jail so often is not mitigated by the fact that you went back willingly. You will have to serve more time for each time you've broken out."

"Oh and isn't that a fine speech from little 'miss I was part of Tartarus,'" Azuma growled. However, he didn't make any move to demand a fight with her. Azuma had little in the way of defense against Seilah's macro magic, and one time that he had attempted to

attack Wendy in order to force her to fight him Seilah had dealt with him by controlling his movements and making him sing aloud as he marched down Magnolia's main street singing a raunchy song that had the lines 'Tip me over and pound me out!' For someone like Azuma, such humiliation was a far better deterrent than simply beating him in a fight like Gildarts had at one point after coming back from God Serena's mansion.

"It's good to know that the king agreed to at least cut down on your sentence for being part of Grimoire Heart for taking part in this," Laxus said, actually almost succeeding in keeping a straight face. Before he ruined it by smirking. "I'm almost surprised that you didn't agree so quickly that you beat him to the offer."

Azuma rolled his eyes at that, but Ranma and Laxus both understood that it had indeed been a near thing. Laxus then gestured over his shoulder towards Brandish and the others. "Come on, I'll introduce you. It'll make things less awkward when we're all aboard the Christina."

This left Ranma and Seilah alone, for the first time since Ranma had returned from the Blasted Lands with his companions. He was about to turn away to follow the others when Wendy came up, moving around everyone else's bodies with the ease of long practice. She had grown to the point where her head came up to Ranma's chest, and had actually put on a bit of curves, although Ranma doubted that she would ever be as tall or anywhere near as stacked as her Edolas version. *How did Juvia put it? Edo-Wendy got a double helping of pudding, and our Wendy got a double helping of sugar to be so nice?*

Wendy smiled up at both Seilah and Ranma, before her face firmed and she took Seilah's hand. "Ranma, before the Christina arrives, Seilah and I have something..."

"You two are together?" Ranma interjected, cutting off his little sister's words. He smirked at Wendy's startled look as well as Seilah's suddenly blank one, where it had previously been warm and inviting as she looked down at Wendy. "What, you think I wasn't aware of Seilah's feelings for you before I left? Please! I'm not that dense."

In this lifetime anyway, Ranma added mentally. He liked to think that he probably would have noticed something about someone else's romantic entanglements even in his past life. He'd noticed Ryoga's crush on Akane for instance. Nevertheless, he wasn't about to swear on that. "Yet bringing it up like this does give me a chance to give you the shovel talk."

Seilah flinched backwards a little as Ranma held up a hand in front of her face, his hand moving so quickly it almost seemed, even to Seilah's advanced reflexes, as if it had teleported into its new position, pointing a finger right between Seilah's eyes. "You hurt her, I bury you. You break my imouto's heart, I tear out yours. Okay?" Ranma said, his voice sounding almost jovial, but his blue eyes suddenly looking more like the dark depths of the ocean waiting to consume rather than the normal shining aqua they had been.

Whereas Seilah was a little more than startled at this sudden transformation, Wendy took it in stride, and hopped upwards in the air, smacking Ranma on the nose like he was a dog. "No, bad big brother! Don't bully my girlfriend."

"Oh, come on! I've never actually needed to use those kind of threats seriously before as you've never been interested in anyone before even if someone was interested in you, like that prince from Bosco. And it's good practice for when I have a daughter of my own, you know?" Ranma mock whined, lowering his hand, his look changing back to jovial and good-natured in an instant.

"Don't worry, you can reuse that line in the future if Sting or Rogue come along, I certainly have been tempted to use even more bloodthirsty threats on more than one occasion with the pair of them," Seilah said, just as the Christina came within sight in the distance, coming down towards the palace quickly.

Even Wendy nodded, even a bit sadly at that. When she and Seilah had gone looking for Rogue and his companion after the fight with Possible Future Rogue, she had thought to find someone younger than her, who she could then bring into their by-that-point expanded family. Instead, Sting and Rogue were both only a few months younger than herself, and were not at all little brother material. Instead, they both had begun to develop a crush on her almost immediately, one that she had not felt comfortable with.

"Oh yeah, you mentioned having met two other Dragon Slayers didn't you?" Ranma asked, shaking his head. "Ehh. I don't think I'd use that kind of threat with the pair of them if they're as young as Wendy or younger. It'd feel more like bullying in that case."

Wendy laughed, her good humor returning as she snuggled into Seilah, feeling the older woman's breasts pressing into the back of her head, her arms going around Wendy. *A part of me can't wait to grow up more, but Seilah is so good for cuddles at this height!* "I kind of agree it would be bullying. They're both way weaker than Natsu was when we first met him, and haven't grown much stronger since the first time we met. That's why I'm not so harsh on them when they come around looking to fight or spend time with me." She frowned, cocking her head thoughtfully to one side. "And honestly, I'm not sure how to discourage them without being rude about it."

"Ehh, sometimes being rude's kinda necessary." Ranma shrugged his shoulders, watching as the Christina landed. "But that reminds me. Did Natsu and Gajeel come to talk to you privately yet?"

Wendy shook her head replying in the negative, and Ranma looked down at her again, trying hard to concentrate on Wendy's face rather than the soft pillows of Seilah's **massive** breasts as they enveloped her head from behind. While perfectly happy, and indeed most of the time overwhelmed, by the fact that he had three girlfriends, Ranma was still a hormonal young man, and that kind of sight took a good bit of willpower to avoid staring at.

However, despite that, his voice was serious as he leaned forward and rested a finger on Wendy's nose. "You need to do that on this trip, Wendy. Trust me. They've got some

meditation practices that you would get a lot out of. I'm not gonna spoil the surprise anymore than that." *Partially because I don't know if ya'd believe even me without proof.* "But, it will get you in touch with... With precisely why your Dragon Seed doesn't affect you as much as mine does. Believe me, you'll want to do it as soon as possible. We've all been busy with other things, other family issues, but this is **important**."

Wendy frowned a bit, but nodded, wondering what that was about. Ranma smiled at that, then gestured over to where the rest of his little family was waiting. "Now come on, let's get this show on the road or in the sky anyway."

Wendy giggled and pulled slightly away from Seilah, moving to hold hands with her instead as the two of them moved over to join the others. "I told you it wouldn't be so bad."

"You aren't the one whose heart he threatened to tear out, love." Seilah rejoined, shaking her head, before smiling. "But you were right anyway."

By the time they rejoined the others, the Christina had landed, and Juliet and Heine made to enter it even as Jura came out. He blinked at the two of them, as well as over at Irene as Juliet shouted something about how they need to inspect Christina to make certain that it was up to Irene's standards.

She waved them off, and the pair darted inside, while she nodded politely to Jura. "Ignore them, it's busy work but it keeps the pair happy. Iron rock Jura. It is interesting to meet you in such circumstances."

Jura's lips twisted a bit at Irene's attempt to sound formal when Enma was still planted firmly on her shoulder, now having fully pulled her hat off her head, waving it around like a banner. Which included smacking it into Irene's face even as she spoke to Jura. "It is interesting to meet you under these circumstances as well," he deadpanned, his eyes on the youngster making it obvious what specific circumstances he was talking about.

Irene's face split off into a smile and she lifted Enma off her shoulder, hugging him tightly to her chest with one arm even as her other hand gently pulled her hat out of his hand. "Yes well, formality and acting human are not exactly easy things to combine. On behalf of the people of Alvarez, thank you for agreeing to help with this mission."

She looked over at the gathered wizards. "That goes for all of you. While the various agreements with the King's Council that we have made here mean that the various nations of Ishgar look to profit from this, I am sure you all will individually still receive the gratitude of the Empire."

Doing this for the people of Alvarez and the gratitude of the Empire, Jura mused thoughtfully to himself. Now isn't that an interesting turn of phrase. And isn't it frightening that Acnologia is beyond even such a woman as this. I can feel the power roiling off of her, even more than I can from Ranma and the others who I have not seen in so long. The difference of a few years is truly frightening.

For his part, Ranma could also tell that Jura was stronger than the last time he had seen the man. In fact, he was at least half again as strong as Jura had been before from what Ranma could sense. He walked over to the man, with Azuma falling in behind him, from out of the crowd along with Natsu who shouted, "Jura! We have to make time for a spar man, I seriously want to see how I do against a real Wizard Saint!"

"OY!" Laxus growled, giving the Fire Dragon Slayer the finger. "What's that supposed to mean, I'm a Wizard Saint too, you know?"

The mage counsel had been incredibly reluctant to gift Fairy Tail another Wizard Saint title to go with Makarov's, but when Makarov had stepped down from his position as guild master and then a year later as Wizard Saint, they had agreed to allow it. The fact of the matter was, that while Makarov still had the magical power to be a Wizard Saint, he didn't have the magical endurance any longer, not after his brush with Acnologia and the subsequent health issues he'd been dealing with.

At that point, greetings, such as they were, were quickly interrupted by a shout from inside the Christina. "Wh—Juliet, we've got stowaways! The Ishgari are plotting something!" Heine yelled.

"Crap we've been discovered!" another voice shouted, sounding almost haughty and arrogant despite the panic also apparent in it.

"Eh, then we'll just have to prove we belong here. Let's do it by taking out these two!" a second new voice answered, one that Wendy had heard before enough times to recognize it despite the intervening outer hull of the Christina. Even as Wendy eeped and covered her face in her hands, that voice continued, shouting out an attack. "Light Dragon's Roar!"

Jura turned back as well, sighing, but Seilah beat both him and Wendy to it. Looking over at Ranma, she jerked her head towards the flying ship. "That would be Lector and Sting's voices. And where they go, Rogue is sure with Frosch to follow."

The whole Christina shook for a second, then Ren and Eve were sent tumbling out along with Juliet, followed by Heine, who was quickly reforming into her human body, her magic, Slime, having saved her from any real injury. As the two members of the Trimens tried to land in a cool manner,

Sting and Rogue appeared in the doorway. "See! We're strong!"

"Yeah, we deserve to go on this mission!" Lector shouted beside Sting.

Cocking his head thoughtfully, Ranma took in the appearance of these two younger Dragon Slayers, knowing their names and something of their personalities along with that of their exceeds from Wendy. *Huh, I wonder if they came from the past like Wendy-chan and the boys. If so, why are they so young? Meh, I'll probably never know.*

The two youngsters stood a bit taller than Wendy did with the one with blonde hair being a bit taller. His hair was almost like Natsu's, short but spiky. Rogue wore his hair longer, covering half his face. While Sting, dressed in a white undershirt and orange vest, gave Ranma the impression of being a cheerful kid, if just as combat crazy as Natsu, Rogue gave Ranma the impression he might be a chuuni. *He looks like a kid who is into mysticism and acting all emo never realizing how lame it is. Well, he's young yet, hopefully he'll grow out of it.*

"We want a chance to show you that we are true Dragon Slayers, and to stand with our role models, Natsu and Gajeel," the quieter Rogue added. "We are the same age as Wendy Marvell, and if she is going along—"

That was as far as he got before Natsu with a happy shout, charged forward. "Oh yeah, a fight before we go, that's what I'm talking about!"

His eyes widening, Ranma lunged forward, but thankfully, Jura was closer. He raised a stonewall between the two youngest members of Lamia Scale and the charging rhino that was Natsu looking for a fight, and the Fire Dragon Slayer slammed into and through it, causing him to slow down considerably and lose his balance before he slammed into Sting and Rogue. Neither of whom even then was fast enough to dodge. Both youngsters found themselves slammed to the floor of the flying ship as Natsu fell on top of them.

"Well, that worked." Ranma laughed with Laxus and Gajeel, as Erza sighed and walked around Jura's wall before grabbing Natsu up off the ground.

She shook him, gently for her, but enough to cause the Fire Dragon Slayer some severe flashbacks. "That is enough, Natsu. Don't bully the youngsters."

"Ooo, that was seriously uncool, but on the other hand, it's Natsu!" Sting muttered, pushing himself to his feet. Unfortunately, as Erza released Natsu, Jura reached down and picked up both Sting and Rogue by the scruff of their necks as if they were recalcitrant kittens. "You two, you are in big trouble. You know that Master Babasaama told you, you couldn't go on any dangerous missions until you hit fourteen, and here you are, ignoring her orders to come on the most dangerous mission most of us have ever been a part of? Prepare to be spun when you get back."

"You'll need us, though," Lector stated firmly. "Sting and Rogue are real Dragon Slayers, not like—"

"Finish that sentence and get punted," Natsu growled, becoming serious as Gajeel grimaced. "We've slain a dragon too. It wasn't nice, it wasn't fun, it was just, just necessary. Killing like that, it's not something you should be proud of."

At those serious words from one of their idols, both Sting and Rogue stiffened, looking down, dark memories coming to them despite how much Frosch and Lector had tried to help them deal with those memories. Having killed their own parents, admittedly at said parents' encouragement, was something neither had gotten over, nor didn't really know how to deal with.

The seriousness of the moment brought on by Natsu's words didn't last thanks to the next bit of chaos coming from a surprising source. Up to this point, Brandish had seemed to Ranma like a well-adjusted, smart young lady who tended to remain in the background while around Irene, and who got along very well with Lucy back at the guild.

That idea went out the window though when she charged forward so fast that she smacked Gajeel aside, a loud "EEEEEE!!!" coming from her. Before anyone could stop her, Brandish swooped down on the two exceed, pulling them into a tight hug. "EEEE!! They're so cute, I love cute things! Although they could be a bit larger..."

Somewhat stunned by this, none of the others did anything, instead watching as Brandish used her magic on the pair of Exceed, freezing them in place and enlarging them to the point where they were almost her own height. Brandish then cuddled into them, a faint sigh coming from her. "Ah, bliss..."

Shaking his head as the rest of the group got over their surprise at that, Ranma turned to Irene. *Well, at least I know why Happy stays away from her now. Heh. Bet you Carla'd be a major snuggle target if she didn't stay in her human form.*

"Irene, if ya could corral Brandish. Jura, turn those two over to the princess and Toma," Ranma suggested. *Given how much of a crush they're supposed to have on Wendy, I'd wager they'll be putty in the princess's hands, heh.* As someone who always reacted better to feminine voices of authority over male ones, Ranma could recognize that in others. "Beyond that—"

He broke off as Eve hastily raced back into the ship, the hounds of hell, or in this case, Seilah, on his heels, her eyes and hands glowing with Magic. "What the?"

Wendy came over, pouting and wiping her cheek, a faint blush on her features, and Ranma nodded. "Let me guess, he offered a kiss for checking if she was injured and didn't wait until you could tell him off?"

"Eve did what?!" Sting and Rogue began to thrash in Jura's hands, magic flaring all around them, but they had about as much luck getting out of his grip as a kitten would a lioness. "Let me at 'em!"

"Nope. Not dealing with this right now. Everyone aboard," Irene ordered. With manifest reluctance, Irene pulled Enma off her shoulder, handing him off to Ren, who blinked.

The tanned member of the Trimens had been trying his tsundere flirting on her, but this was not a response he'd ever seen before. This was made worse a second later as Enma's hand found his eye, he dropped the boy, who landed on his feet, and then bowled Ren over by accidentally hitting him in the nuts as he fell.

"That's my boy," Erza and Ranma said as one, while Enma raced off, shouting, "Climb!" heading towards the tallest tree in the palace garden as his parents looked at one another and laughed.

“Master Makarov’s still here, right?” Lisanna asked her twin. “Only, I don’t know if we can corral him and our own kids on our own.”

To one side, Levy and Gildarts stood, watching the chaos of this, and the sight of Brandish grabbing both Frosch and Lector up off the ground, shouting out how the ‘kitties’ were hers now. “You know, this almost feels like home, doesn’t it?” Gildarts laughed, while Levy could only nod in agreement.

Ten minutes later, finally, the last of the group actually going to Alvarez were aboard, and Ren, recovered now, sighed theatrically. Before he could say anything, however, Jenny poked him in the side of the face, gesturing towards the pilot’s cockpit with her other hand. “Don’t even think about it. I don’t think anyone here is going to be interested in your normal attitude. Get us in the air, and maybe you can try it out on some unsuspecting Alvarez ladies.”

Scowling ferociously at his former guild mate and glancing towards where Irene and Brandish sat, Ren sighed theatrically. “We’ll be at cruising altitude within a few moments. If everyone could take the time to buckle up, as well as tell my companion here what kind of food or drink they want on the trip? Also, Dragon Slayers I would appreciate it if you are near a window please. None of you bar little Wendy are women and I refuse to clean up after you.”

“Don’t worry about that,” Irene said stated firmly as all the Dragon Slayers quickly gathered around Wendy, a visible flow of magic around each of them. “I have already taken the opportunity to enchant all the Dragon Slayers. They will not in point of fact be touching anything aboard this moving vessel, and will be perfectly fine with the transportation. I’ll further enchant the Christina once we are at altitude. Just be aware of that because you will be going a good deal faster than you might think this ship is capable of.”

Eve couldn’t stop himself. “Of course! I am fully prepared for any speed with which you would be able to move me or this vessel! But might I ask, would you mind me calling you big sister?”

Irene shivered a bit, and glared at the younger boy. “That is not one of my fetishes thank you very much. Keep that kind of thing to yourself.”

Eve tried to act as if he had no idea what she was talking about before he looked Brandish’s way, but Jenny grabbed him by the ear and dragged him towards the front of the vessel. “Honestly! It’s like you’ve both gotten worse since I’ve left the guild, and honestly, I’d say your self-preservation has gotten just as bad! You know I can pilot this vessel on my own right? You could stay behind. Although if you tried to flirt with the Princess, I’d wager that her bodyguard would have you in two pieces almost as quickly as Seilah will tear you apart if you try anything on Wendy again.”

While the others laughed at this, the Dragon Slayers had their own business to deal with at the back of the ship. With Ranma reminding them what they had to tell Wendy, both Natsu and Gajeel had become unwontedly serious, waving off any of the others attempts to

talk to them for a moment. Even Happy was serious, as he nestled into place on top of Natsu's head, a sight that made Wendy nervous.

"I don't know how to say this to you Wendy, but, well I'm just going to out right say it. When we were in the Blasted Lands, we met with another dragon," Natsu began. "One who walked us through a series of meditation practices. Well do the same for you but right now, the important thing is what those meditations let us do..."

OOOOOOO

It took Seilah shaking her shoulder enough to make her head bob like a certain child's toy to wake Wendy up from her meditation, and if not for the fact that Wendy had warned Seilah that she might start crying while she was meditating, the sight of the tears on Wendy's face would have had Seilah demanding blood from the trio of Dragon Slayers around her, despite the fact that all three of them could probably beat her with depressing ease. "Wendy, you asked to be woken up when we started to land. We're arriving at the palace in Vistarion."

Nodding to Seilah, Wendy got up, then even as she did so, Wendy hurled herself forward. Putting her arms around their waists, she pulled both Natsu and Gajeel into a hug that might well have broken lesser men's spines with how hard she was squeezing them. "Thank you!" she whispered, her voice low and intense as she surreptitiously wiped her tears on the sides of their shirts. "Thank you so much!"

Both young men, who were now nineteen, looked a little uncomfortable, but Natsu laughed it off, ruffling her hair while Ranma looked up from where he had been putting away a deck of cards that he and the others had been using. Once he had made the introductions and helped to explain everything to Wendy, he hadn't really had much input to give about how to reach her Dragon Seed. Instead he had first slept, then let the rest of the group take turns amusing themselves by beating him in cards. Ranma's inability to have a poker face when it came to playing cards or games of any sort coming back to bite him again and again over the four hours of the trip.

"I take it that it worked, you were able to see your mom?" Natsu asked.

Wendy let loose a loud humm, squeezing both of them even tighter. "Yes! She's there, Grandeenay's here." She pulled back then, tapping her chest. "With me. She's happy for me, still loves me! We talked the entire time!"

Natsu and Gajeel looked at one another, then shrugged their shoulders, deciding to put that down to a female thing. They'd certainly had more important things than just talking to their old men for hours. Heck despite having spent weeks meditating and meeting with their parent, neither man could remember a time when they talked uninterrupted to Metalicana and Igneel for more than twenty minutes before the dragons or the Dragon Slayers started a fight.

Regardless, it was nice to know that they'd helped, and they both said so now.

Juliet and Heine led the way up off of the Christina. They'd made it clear since they'd hit Alvarez's borders that the ship was under the aegis of the Spriggan, despite its foreign configuration, and they'd had an escort of smaller flyers from the time they'd reached the coastline, but there were still some proprieties to be met. Behind them, came Irene and Brandish, all four women stopped and stared at Invel, who was standing there waiting for them. That was not normal, nor was the part agitated, part worried, part hopeful look on his face as he stepped forwards to greet them.

"Irene, Brandish." Invel ignored Juliet and Heine, looking suspiciously over the shoulders of his fellow Spriggan as the Ishgar mages came out. His eyes widened at the sheer amount of them, and the fact that he recognized so many of them. "The Dragon Slayers and... many other war potentials. Your diplomacy has certainly borne incredible fruit. I honestly didn't believe the report you sent back about that score."

"Why ever would we lie about that kind of thing? Or were you expecting the Kings of Ishgar to pull some diplomatic trick and not send us immediate aid?" Brandish inquired, not taking umbrage at the man's statement. Invel looked harried, tired but energetic, if on the manic side of that scale.

"More of the latter than the former," Invel admitted. "Neither of you are known for your diplomacy, after all or your legal prowess."

Both women could admit that was fair enough and turned to watch as Ranma came out with Erza. Invel's eyes flicked over Erza for a moment, then back to Irene, but if he was wondering if there was indeed a connection between them as some of the report stated, since Erza had changed her last name, he didn't question it. Instead, Invel kept his attention on Ranma, his eyes narrowing. "The anomaly."

"I'm a what now? I ain't arguing, I'm just wondering," Ranma drawled, smirking just a little bit as he emphasized his hick accent. Something about this guy was making him want to get under his skin, and acting stupid often worked to do that on uptight people.

"The anomaly. You killed Jacob Laszlo, a mage that was being considered to become a Spriggan. And it is well known that you took part in the destruction of Grimoire Heart and Oración Seis. Most Rangers don't stand out like you do, in fact, we've only ever been able to identify a few of you at any one time, and none had nearly as much war potential as you do," Invel admitted, shaking his head.

"So... yer callin' me an anomaly 'cause I did a good job?"

"No. You're in anomaly because some of your abilities and techniques make no sense when it comes to our understanding of Magical theory, and you seemingly have no past that our spies have ever been able to discover until you wash ashore in minstrel," Invel retorted, pushing his glasses up his nose. "I don't suppose you'd be willing to fill in the blanks?"

Ranma just snorted at that, and Invel nodded as if to say he hadn't thought so, before gazing at each of the Fairy Tail mages in turn, his eyes flicking to their guild crests as he did. He gestured Irene and Brandish to walk with them, then called over his shoulder for

the others to follow, making certain that there was a certain amount of space between them as he leaned in closely. "Were you able to discover anything about Zeref? Surely, the Emperor isn't really dead. I have long felt that Fairy Heart could have given the Fairy Tail guild some means of sealing him away somewhere. If you've found any hint of that..."

Irene scoffed, while Brandish shook her head, sighing mentally. It had been clear long before they'd left the Empire on their diplomatic mission that Invel's devotion to the Emperor had nothing to do with any kind of mental domination that Zeref had been working on the pair of them. Much like Larcade, his loyalty was genuine, and it looked as if he still didn't want to admit that the Emperor could be killed.

However, Irene had absolutely no sympathy for the man on this point, and turned, looking over at Ranma. "Ranma, Invel is asking about Zeref. What did you say happened to him?"

A blunt speaker knows another one's tells, and Ranma instantly answered just as Irene had expected. "He's dead. Kicked the bucket, had his immortality cheat code broken, finally found the ending that he said he wanted for so long, but really wasn't actually seeking, the little prick." At that point, furious at Ranma's flippant attitude towards his master and thus not questioning whether or not the pair were telling the honest truth – after all, Virgo still couldn't go back to the Celestial Spirit Realm - Invel attacked. Raising a hand he launched an ice wave of such incredible cold that everyone there began to feel as if they'd been dunked in the northern ocean save for Natsu.

Even before Ranma could react, Natsu surged forwards as if he had been waiting for this. His whole body became wreathed in flame in an instant, and his hands thrust towards Invel. The cold front and the ice melted between the two men and all around the group while elsewhere around Invel the landing area and the other flying ships there all froze solid.

In an instant, Natsu was in Invel's face, slamming his forehead into the bespectacled Ice mage, causing him to fall back. "Ha! That's what you get, Ice Prick! We're here to help, and you attack us just because Ranma's being Ranma! Well, I've been dying to see how I do against someone outside our little group, and you just volunteered!"

Behind Natsu, Ranma folded his arms and nodded thoughtfully, not exactly impressed with Natsu's speed or skill, as Ranma could have easily dealt with that attack himself, but understanding where Natsu was coming from. It was why he had been so eager to agree to spar with Azuma when they returned from this mission, even if fighting alongside one another would give both of them more insight into how much they had grown since the last time they'd seen one another. Now they both exchanged smirks and Ranma held up a small sign. "Eight out of ten. Great threat, but Ice Prick is too generic."

Azuma snorted, holding up a seven. "I agree with your points, but a headbutt just isn't threatening enough."

While the two combat junkies were having their own private joke, the Fairy Tail mages all had their heads cocked to one side as Laxus whispered theatrically, "So, it wasn't just a Natsu and Gray issue, but a real fire and ice thing?"

The others all laughed, some in nostalgia, some because they honestly thought the joke was funny, but Warrod, who had made a nuisance of himself aboard the Pegasus several times due to his strange sayings, gestured at the ground. Buried roots underneath the concrete of the landing area burst upwards, grabbing at Natsu as well as Invel, who had recovered from the headbutt and had been raising his hands again to use his magic. "In searching for shadows, you often miss the trees."

The oddity of this phrase took everyone there back, even Gildarts, who was easily the most used to Warrod's strange phrasings. However, a new voice spoke up, thoughtful and almost amused, as Larcade landed behind Invel, placing a gentle hand on his shoulder.

Gentle looking anyway, Ranma judged. Judging by the whiteness of the guy's knuckles, that grip was probably extremely strong.

"I think that Wizard Saint Warrod is telling you that your loyalty should be to the Empire, not the individual emperor. It is what we have been telling people since Zeref had disappeared, yet you seem to not have taken it to heart, Invel. I understand, believe me I do. I wish for my father to still be here even more than you do, I'm sure. But that is not going to happen. We have to deal with reality, not the..." He smiled thinly over at Warrod, who gulped a little and took a step back. "Shadow of what might have been made of our hopes and dreams."

With a sigh, Invel slowly nodded and gestured. The ice around them began to dissipate, and he straightened, although the posture was somewhat ruined by how he had to reach up to his forehead to rub at the bruise forming there, having taken far more damage from the headbutt that Natsu and nailed him with than the Fire Dragon Slayer.

Ranma could've told him that one. Even Ranma didn't get into a headbutting contest with Natsu. Despite his incredible durability, Natsu still had an edge on him when it came to how much blunt force trauma his head could withstand, something that the pair of them had learned when the entire group in the Blasted Lands had accidentally gotten drunk on a fruit drink that they had been told by Kurnugi was still good. It was, as none of them had even been able to detect any alcohol in it, but whatever had happened in the hundreds of years since it had been set down had given the drink a heck of a kick, Ranma reflected now, as the new pretty boy stood forward.

"Greetings, mages of the peninsula. My name is Larcade Dragneel and I am the Emperor of Alvarez."

While several of the mages made genuflections or nodded their heads in respect, Natsu blinked, staring at him, followed by the others as Larcade's last name registered. "The heck? Your last names the same as mine? Are we some kind of relatives then or something?" *I mean, I know I come from the past, so who knows where my family originally came from?*

Igneel said he took me in, but maybe I was part of a larger family, and they just never found me or something.

“... I have no idea,” Larcade admitted, shaking his head. “Zeref gave me that name, although if it was his last name I don’t know as he never used it. When we were away from the public eye, it was always Zeref, when we were in public, it was always the Emperor Zeref. No last name was ever given for him, so I don’t think it was his. Perhaps in some strange measure, we are related or perhaps it is in homage to someone else who had that name.”

Irene remained silent as Natsu and Larcade looked at one another awkwardly, wondering what to do with this information if anything. Seeing how Larcade seemed to be a permanent Etherious, like Seilah, in that his mental faculties have been fully retained despite Zeref’s imprisonment there didn’t really seem a point beyond spite to mention it now.

“I assume you and the remaining Spriggan are going to be joining us in fighting Acnologia right?” Gildarts asked, cutting through the awkwardness while Warrod kept silent, watching Larcade, the others following behind them engaging in their own smaller conversations. “That’s what Irene and Brandish promised, and if you think we came here to fight your fight for you, you got another thing coming.”

“Both Invel, myself, and the other two remaining Spriggan will all be fighting alongside you, yes.” Larcade shook his head. “The death of our fellows, Dimaria, Bloodman and Neinhart proved the folly of thinking there is anything like overkill when it comes to Acnologia. Moreover, undoubtedly eating those three will probably have given Acnologia even more strength than he did when he arrived in your Empire. The reason for his being here at all is still evading him thankfully, although we’ve had to help that along the past few days.”

In actuality, eating Bloodman wouldn’t have given Acnologia any power up. He was an Etherious, and his Curse wasn’t the same as most Arcana. However, Larcade didn’t know that, and Irene, the only one there smart enough to think along those lines, didn’t mention it right now. Similarly, Acnologia had only eaten half of Dimaria, while he had finished her and Neinhart alike off with his breath attack. Yes, that had empowered Acnologia further, but not all that much, something that, along with the precise manner of the two Spriggan’s deaths, the other Spriggan were not aware of.

“Which is costing our Empire terribly,” Invel growled out, his hands twitching a bit. “To say nothing of the recent... escalation.”

“Perhaps you could explain that a bit, Your Majesty?” Erza asked respectfully. While he wasn’t her king or emperor, the title alone made him worthy of some respect.

“We will explain when we get to the war room. That kind of thing is better with visuals,” Larcade said lazily, although there was nothing lazy about his eyes as he swept his eyes over the group behind him for a moment, before turning back again. “And might I say that it was extremely encouraging at how swiftly the King’s Council decided to act? I’m not

certain how long we could've kept up the ruse, especially after, as Invel put it today's escalation."

He snorted then. "Even without that, we would've run out of forests eventually if nothing else. Wood is going to be at a premium for the next few years unfortunately. Unless, we can purchase your services, Warrod? I understand that growing forests back is something of a specialty of yours."

"Plucking an apple before it is ripe and expecting it to be sweet is foolish," Warrod laughed.

That one at least was easy enough for all of them to understand, even Natsu and Happy. Larcade surprised everyone there by laughing at he led the way off of the palaces landing area and into the palace itself. From there, it took barely five minutes to reach the war room, where Gildarts and Erza stopped, staring, utterly amazed at the amount of magical technology on display. Indeed, even Wendy and Seilah, who had seen Mard Geer's experiments and laboratories, were impressed.

The only group that wasn't, was that one who had entered the Blasted Lands. They had all seen more examples and better ones than the displays here, yet even Ranma had to admit that it was a definite sign that the Empire was advanced in comparison to Ishgar, even if the peninsula tended to produce stronger mages as a whole.

Wall and Ajeel waited for them there, and after a round of introductions that nearly led to another fight between Azuma and Gajeel when Ajeel insulted Gajeel by saying, "So you're the one who's singing is so bad our spies say it could be a psychological weapon, huh?" everyone was seated around the table set at the far back of the command center.

"All right. First, I will explain what we have learned since Irene and Brandish left us of the threat of Acnologia. Most importantly, we have learned what Acnologia is after. There is another dragon hidden within our Empire."

Natsu and Gajeel blinked at that, while Ranma frowned a bit, but shrugged his shoulders. It made sense, after all. Acnologia had become Acnologia in the first place by eating dragons, and only later grew in strength when he continued to eat them and other magical beings. Dragon Slayer and dragons would be his equivalent of a feast. However, there was one point he wanted to clarify, which Laxus beat him to. "Define hidden in this case?"

"You've been told that Acnologia has been targeting forests. What you haven't been told, because we learned this after our diplomats left, is that those forests were all interconnected by a hidden energy signature running through the very ground of this continent." With a gesture, Larcade sent one of the nearby techs scrambling, and the main map on the far wall of the command center shifted forwards, copying itself onto another lacrima set into the table midair.

Another few taps had that lacrima on, and some new data spread across the map as Invel took up the tale, pointing to every attack that the Black Dragon had made.

Gildarts was the first one to notice when the pattern shifted. "Wait, you just said that he attacked here right?" He gestured at the map, almost pushing his finger through the hologram for a second. "But that doesn't look like it's a forest. Is it too small to be on the map?"

"It is. And we don't think that Acnologia would've targeted that point on his own, but we fooled him," Larcade stated, his tone both proud and weary. "You don't need to know all of the details, but we were able to basically re-create the energy signature that Acnologia seems to be tracking to lure him away from a few of our cities, and to gain us some time for you all to arrive."

"It has cost the Empire, though," Invel said, sounding pained for a moment, which had nothing to do with his bruised forehead or ego. While he was still glaring at Natsu occasionally, Invel was a thoroughgoing professional and while his loyalty had always been to Zeref over the Empire, his plans of conquest for the future, he still did have some loyalty to the Empire and its people. "We're essentially using entire groups of twenty or more nature mages to create rituals that, along with some Machias technology essentially mimic the magical signature of a dragon whose element is wood or nature magic."

He glared around the table, making certain the seriousness of his words got across. "These are sacrificial gambits. Unfortunately, it seems as if Acnologia cottoned on to our ruse earlier this day. Instead of simply taking out the forest we had lured him to, he burned the entire area, and then..."

"And then assaulted and wiped-out a nearby city of my folk," Wall stated, scowling angrily. "It was our technology that allowed the ruse to exist in the first place, and we knew that it came with some risks. But losing thousands of our people was well beyond even the price we were afraid we might need to pay. It will take us generations to rebuild our numbers."

"As it will take the entire empire to gather so many nature magic users," Larcade added. "The numbers aren't comparable, and I make no bones of that, but your city, Wall, wasn't the first one that Acnologia has annihilated."

For a moment, the mages around the table fell silent, then one after another, they offered their condolences, even Natsu and Happy knowing to be serious now. But Gajeel then asked, "So if you were able to figure out a way to replicate the magical signal that Acnologia was trying to find, does that mean you know where this net of energy was originating from? Is that your plan? To ambush Acnologia wherever the signal is coming from originally?"

"Exactly." Several techs worked for a few seconds on the display and soon it changed, zooming in under their direction to one point on the map. "This place is one of the smaller forests in the empire, and it has a nearby town. The most important feature though, is the mountain, as you can see, which was a former volcano at some point, has a large observatory on it."

“Neat!” Natsu exclaimed, staring at the image of the mountain avidly. “If I didn’t know precisely where my dad’s soul was, I might be wondering if he was hiding underneath there some for some reason. Well, that, and the fact that my dad isn’t the hiding kind of person anyway. Not without a lot of reason.”

“Idiot,” Invel stated, shaking his head at Natsu’s statement, a sneer on his face. “We just finished telling you that it was a nature magic type signature that Acnologia has been searching for. Are you that much of a buffoon that you do not know the difference between fire and nature magic?”

“What was that Icy Shit?!” Natsu growled, standing up and making as if he was going to attack Invel despite the moment of seriousness while Wall, Ajeel and Larcade were all looking at Invel in surprise for the little outburst.

Erza grabbed Natsu’s shoulder and tugged him back down into his ship chair, growling into his ear, “Don’t make a scene!”

“If the energy source is a dragon, one that uses nature magic...” Ranma looked over at Gajeel. “Does that description ring a bell with you?”

Gajeel nodded. “Aldoron. One of the largest dragons to ever live. Heck, most of that mountain might actually be him that dirt and stuff has grown over. Imagine him as Warrod dialed up to a thousand and also a dragon in shape, for what it means for that species anyway.”

“Will your powers be able to work in an area where Aldoron has taken up residence?” Juvia asked, looking over at Warrod. She had decided on the trip here, that he was a bit of a pervert, but at least he seemed somewhat knowledgeable in his field, so she was willing to put up with him.

“There’s no way of knowing if there’s fish until we go to the river,” Warrod said, causing many of the wizards around him to grumble a bit, but at least that had been understandable. However, when Warrod went on, his normal mode of speech was in stark abeyance. “However, it will become aware of not only us, but Acnologia very quickly. What Aldoron does then, I have no way of knowing.”

“Aldoron was described to us as one of the greatest sleepers of all dragonkind. It’ll take a bit to rouse him,” Gajeel supplied. “Heck, given what Kurnugi told me, I’d wager that if he can, Aldoron’d simply stay asleep and hidden.”

“Still, it is something we will have to work into our plans,” Gajeel mused. “Me and Natsu, I think we’d be a hard counter to anyone using nature or wood magic.”

“With a bit of my Ice magic in place as well,” Invel agreed.

Ajeel and Laxus also stated that their magics will probably do extremely well against anything using wood-based powers. With that, the planning continued, getting down to more specifics. The easiest aspect of this was putting together the support team.

This consisted of Wendy, Levy, Seilah and Wall. While Seilah was fast enough to join the hit-and-run team, her powers would be more useful in forcing badly wounded or near death fighters to retreat, or to use the environment to screen such. Meanwhile, Wall would provide surveillance, as well as communication. Like Seilah, he simply wasn't durable enough to stand up to a fight against Acnologia and wasn't fast enough to get away if he caught the black dragon's attention. Worse, his normal magic, Weakness Analysis magic, would probably not work on Acnologia until he was worn down. It didn't work on Irene or Larcade at all, and both were less powerful than Acnologia.

Not that being part of the support team would be easy. No, they would be routinely going forward to provide aid where they could or had to. In particular, Wendy would be as important on that particular front as Irene would be with her enhancement magic.

The second group was also somewhat easy to understand, although here, Invel argued vociferously that his place was next to Larcade who shook his head. "No. Invel, you don't have enough durability to face Acnologia head on like myself and the rest of the straight up fighters. And you're not fast enough to join the hit-and-run team. No, both you and Miss Juvia's should be with the pinning team."

"I'm not going to argue about my placement on it," Brandish said, shaking her head. "So long as my magic proves capable of working on things that have been created or are being manipulated by Warrod or Jura, that seems a perfectly fine place for me."

Juvia also nodded. "While Juvia can transform into water, that is not always enough. And if Juvia is close enough to Ranma that we can perform Unison Raid or Juvia can support him in other ways, Juvia is pleased with that."

That was the pinning group in a nutshell. Warrod, Jura, Invel, Juvia and Brandish. The water mage went on to gesture to Invel saying, "While we will in no way be able to perform a Unison Raid, our powers will work together quite well, giving both of us more range to our attacks and making it easier for us to pin Acnologia down."

"That's all well and good, but why am I on the hit-and-run team?!" Ajeel shouted. "Why do you think someone like me will want to hit and run when I can instead fight straight up?!"

"I object to this as well. While my powers will of course be helpful in pinning Acnologia on the ground where we are most effective, I am not known as Iron Rock Jura for no reason," Jura protested before anyone could answer Ajeel.

In response, Gildarts stood up, smiling wanly as he pulled aside the leggings he wore, showing his artificial leg, then his arm. "That's why. Jura, your magic lends itself to strengthening your body just as much as mine does to resisting magic and damage. But Acnologia did this to me in an **instant**. I barely knew he was there before he hit me, and it wasn't like he was hunting me, I was simply a target of opportunity. Dragon Slayers are just built to take far more punishment. My magic, like yours, can make a big difference on the

battlefield, but not if that bastard is able to target us with either his magic or his physical attacks.”

Natsu grinned cheerily at both Gildarts and Ajeel, although his grin at Invel became a little more challenging. He was always interested in fighting new people. “How about a little challenge? The two of you use your best attacks possible on one of us, and we see if you can take our best shots in turn.”

“Actually, Ajeel and I have already had this conversation. I’m not a Dragon Slayer, but my durability was trained into me by the Emperor himself, so unless you want another demonstration, Ajeel...” Larcade drawled.

“I’m not questioning your place in that group, Larcade! I’m questioning **mine** not being there. I’ll take you up on that offer,” Ajeel said, looking at Natsu and the other Dragon Slayer before settling his eyes on Erza, the only other non-Dragon Slayer other than Larcade who would be part of the straight up fighters. “I know that I’m more durable than the redheaded wench is!”

Seeing that there would be no point in continuing while this argument raged, everyone adjourned for a moment to head outside into one of the training areas. There, surrounded by lacrima specially created to keep magic within the training zone, Erza stood across from the two Spriggan, Belserion on her shoulder. Jura had withdrawn his objection upon seeing Gildarts’ injuries, knowing that he wasn’t quite as durable as the crash magic user. Nevertheless, the two Spriggan, in the way of young men, weren’t willing to just back down.

They really should have. The following demonstration lasted barely long enough to be called one, and ended with both Invel and Ajeel nursing minor concussions, and Natsu geeking out about Erza’s new armor, one of three that she had never used before he left for the Blasted Lands.

Later, as the two Spriggan were getting healed from their injuries, the planning continued. Several of the empire’s planes had already been rerouted to the palace, and the group would be leaving shortly.

The final two teams were thus set. Invel would join the pinning team as Larcade had thought he should. The straight up fighters would be Ranma, the rest of the Dragon Slayer bar Wendy, Larcade himself and Erza. The hit-and-run fighters, the fighters who would deal out damage and then retreat quickly away from Acnologia before he could target them in turn, would be Jenny, Gildarts with Irene’s enchantments to help him move, Ajeel and Irene herself. The overall battle would be commanded by Wall, who would hopefully have the best position in order to see the entire fight.

With all that in place, the group adjourned and headed out to wait for their planes where they found food waiting for them. All of them, regardless of the team, hoped it would not be their last.

OOOOOOO

As he flew eastward toward where he finally hoped to find his original reason for being on this blasted continent, Acnologia's thoughts were furious and wrathful. *I expected the humans of Zeref's empire to do something, but to actually be able to trick me for nearly two days? To send me on not one but several wild goose chases, one after another?* That he had not anticipated, and Acnologia had found he did not like being made a fool of.

Hence his destruction of the Machias city. He had eaten his fill there, to be sure. The city had contained numerous mages and far, far more magical devices. Yet that hadn't equaled even one Dragon Slayer, let alone an ancient dragon like Aldoron, who had been steeping in his nature magic for centuries.

Regardless, it seemed as if the Empire had finally gotten the message. As Acnologia's senses flared out, searching for his quarry, he could detect no further attempts from them to lead him away, and Acnologia knew he had previously already burned Aldoron's scattered offshoots, the Nature Seeds that Aldoron had scattered across the continent in order to trick any other dragon searching for him.

All that remained now was to find Aldoron himself. And although it had taken in the better part of the day after dealing with the Machias city to cross from west to east, Acnologia was now nearly within sight of where the wretch had hidden himself.

As he winged closer, the black dragon became aware of more than just his initial target, the other scents coming to the fore rather than hidden under the scent of the nature element dragon. For just a moment, he thought the humans were again trying to trick him with a different ruse than before, but as the black and dark blue-scaled dragon continued on his path, he realized this was not the case. There truly were Dragon Slayers there as well, more than one of them, hence why he felt it couldn't be a trick.

So the Empire not only learned what I was searching for but brought in Dragon Slayers? And one of them... at least one of them smells familiar... Within a few more wingbeats, the scent had settled into Acnologia's mind, and any confusion he'd been feeling faded instantly. The Ocean Dragon Slayer and the Fire Dragon Slayer for certain, and there are others, others, no, all of them. ***They lived!?***

The thought blasted through Acnologia's brain with all the power of a firecracker going off in an enclosed space. In response, he roared furiously, the sound loud enough to cause tremors for miles around despite the fact that he was nearly two miles above the ground. *They survived?! Those Dragon Slayers I fought on Tenrou Island! I thought I had killed them all; I thought I had killed the one who cost me an arm, but he is here now?*

Coming on the heels of the first flash of fury, this last thought calmed Acnologia down somewhat, although a simmering rage still bubbled inside him, furious at being tricked. Why, if all of them lived, it felt as if Acnologia had been the one to be beaten back, to retreat. ***That cannot be allowed!***

Come then, Acnologia roared in his mind, his wings beating all the faster. Come then, and thank you for giving me this chance to right that wrong.

As he flew closer, Acnologia became aware of the fact that there was another Dragon Slayer beyond the group of Dragon Slayers grouped together at the top of the volcano that had presumably grown over the body of his original target. This one was a little further east and south from his current position, isolated and alone in comparison to the others.

For just a moment, Acnologia pondered the idea of peeling off and dealing with that Dragon Slayer first. *I wonder why whoever that is has been placed out there on his own?*

That was because, for all the knowledge they had built up about Acnologia's target, they still had no idea how accurate his ability to discern different magical signatures was, nor any idea from how far he could sense such. Indeed, if Acnologia had not been so furious at the empire's deceptions and how long this hunt had already taken, to the point of becoming fixated on Aldoron, he would have felt Ranma and the others arriving on Alakitasia.

The plan had been to have the support team close enough to be useful but far enough away to be out of the blast radius of the main battle. Yet for just a moment, because of that and Wendy's presence, the entire plan teetered on the brink of disaster, a tipping point that none of the planners had anticipated.

If he'd attacked the support group, the hit-and-run team would've been forced to engage him on its own. The straight-up fighters and the pinning team would have had to hurry to catch up to them on their own. Thus, Acnologia would have faced them piecemeal. This would have been disastrous for the overall plan and could have meant defeat in detail. Such was the strength of Acnologia, even against monsters like Irene.

However, after a second, Acnologia decided against it, perhaps succumbing to the arrogance of his draconic form or his own bloodthirsty nature. *After I have my fill of the others, perhaps I would enjoy an honest chase rather than another game of hide and seek. All the better to work off the calories.*

A bit of good humor restored, Acnologia continued on his way until he was within range of his breath attack. He had begun to build that up the moment he had sensed the Dragon Slayers, and now, a bright bluish-white light filled his mouth before he let loose with a roar, filling the sky with his power, sending it forward in a wide-angled attack fit to remove any mountain from existence.

Scattered around the dome of the massive observatory, Ranma and the others saw the attack coming. "Well, it looks as if Acnologia wants to start this party with a bang," Ranma growled while Wall quickly gave out orders to the pinning team, scattered throughout the forest to bunker down for a few moments.

That forest was not the same as when they had arrived. Hundreds of large stones had been brought in to help Jura's powers, dozens of sand pits had been dug, while elsewhere, two lakes that wound through the forest had been made to burst, and thousands of large water containers were also scattered around. Juvia stood near the largest of these, beginning to pump out enough water to slowly turn several miles of forest into a muddy

swamp. Juvia's powers could pull the water back out of such with ease by this point, and it would also help Ranma, even if it might hinder a few of the others.

There had been a discussion on that point, but the pros ultimately outweighed the cons, and it was agreed upon in the end. Similarly, hundreds of trees throughout the forest had received the Warrod/Brandish Touch and loomed over their fellows, several times their previous size. Although right now, Acnologia's line of advance had him coming in almost entirely opposite from Juvia's current position. Azuma, on the other hand, had to be warned to wait by Wall, to avoid giving his position away as Acnologia was going to fly right over where he was supposed to be stationed.

Wall would've also issued orders to the heavy team, except Ranma interjected quickly, "Don't worry about it. Gajeel and I have got this. Natsu, back us up if we need to. The rest of you, scatter."

"Hey, who the hell are you to give me orders, huh?" Laxus grumbled, even as he, like Erza and Larcade, obeyed, darting down off the mountaintop and down toward the forest below. There, they found prepared hiding places built along the road and the side of the cliff face with Gildarts' crash magic. "You get his attention. We'll start landing some punches," Laxus shouted over his shoulder.

Grinning, Ranma nodded, and he and Gajeel began to gather their powers. Ranma's attack was finished first, concentrating his magical powers into his hand, forming what looked like a spear topped by a spinning talon, the spear forming forward from his hand as he held it over his shoulder the water at the butt of the spear roiling around his conjoined hands which he thrust forward.

"Water Dragon's Biting Thrust!" Ranma howled, sending forth the extremely thin, exceedingly fast-moving spear of water magic, connected back to his hand by the extending staff of the spear. Ranma aimed to pierce through Acnologia's incoming attack at a small point, thinking he could take advantage of the wide-angle nature of Acnologia's attack. *It can't be that powerful if he's let the energy spread out so much.*

Beside him, Gajeel had a different idea in mind. "Metal Dragon Slayer's Thunderous Ram!" He snarled, slamming his hands together, then ripping them to either side before thrusting them forward. Magic which had built up around his body in a wide aura of power almost as wide as the observatory itself, burst out towards Acnologia. It followed on the heels of Ranma's attack, crashing into the incoming blast from Acnologia as Gajeel continued to funnel his magical power into the assault.

Ranma's attack began to drill into the oncoming attack, but any thought that Ranma would be able to overpower Acnologia's attack even at a narrow point of contact quickly went away as his assault began to fizzle out even as he kept empowering it further. Around that smaller point of contact, Acnologia's attack continued until it crashed into Gajeel's slightly slower-moving magical blast.

At this point, Acnologia became astonished to feel his magic being slowly repulsed and held in place. He was unable to overwhelm Gajeel's assault as he already had Ranma's, and now, as Gajeel held his attack across the entire front of the blast, Ranma's attack, which had still been continuing, began to make headway again, slicing deeper into Acnologia's beam.

Furious at this, Acnologia empowered his attack still more, his eyes narrowing dangerously over his muzzle as he did so. This proved to be a mistake, as it was precisely what Laxus and Erza had been waiting for. The pair zoomed forward, keeping low to either side of Acnologia before rising quickly to attack him from both sides. Lightning slammed into Acnologia's wing from one side as Erza attacked the other, but their timing wasn't quite perfect.

Laxus' attack hit first, causing Acnologia to twitch away from it and making Erza's attack on his other wing miss, slamming into his back instead. Belserion still landed home with a thunderous retort and actually knocked Acnologia down in the air by a few inches, but his mighty wings remained powerful, and he remained in the air easily, lashing back toward with a tail strike before Erza could get out of range, his tail flashing out and down with all the speed of a striking cobra.

The blow crashed into Erza's body with enough power to shred even someone like Brandish in half, only to simply send Erza away with a grunt. This opened him up to another strike to his back leg from her sword, the same sword Erza had used during their fight on Tenrou Island. "Fairy Meteor!" Coated in white and crimson energy, the blade lashed down towards Acnologia's tail.

This close, with his magical senses on high, Acnologia could feel a sliver of a dragon's soul within, even without concentrating on it. The attack wasn't strong enough to cut through Acnologia's scales even along his tail, but the impact, backed up by sword and magic, did cause him to grunt as several of the scales at the root of his tail, instead of being cut, buckled under the impact .

Erza had mainly been training up her magical reserves, speed and reaction time in the past two years in order to wear three new suits of armor that would otherwise have been too magic-intensive to use, especially when coupled with Belserion. These three armors were the only ones that Belserion felt could stand up to a fight against a dragon.

The Armadura Fairy armor was the only one of those three armors that she'd had two years ago, although it could be said the second had been around back then as well, even if it's new iteration didn't look anything like what it had been before. The Armadura Fairy armor was still, in Ranma's words, 'too pink to be believed' but it incorporated black scales taken from the original battle against Acnologia, which Erza had gone back to Tenrou Island to collect at Master Mavis's insistence. The majority was covering her chest and built into the helmet, which had not been a part of the original prototype. That, and a new internal rubber-like layer, allowed the Armadura Fairy armor to withstand a lot more damage than previously while also allowing her to move and fly incredibly quickly.

Even as he struck at Erza again with his tail, Acnologia lunged to his other side, trying to chomp down on Laxus, who buzzed away in lightning form, appearing not far away only a few yards to the side. A second blast of lightning slammed into Acnologia, his head this time, but this only caused the massive dragon to roar in frustration, not pain, as did Erza's next attack on his rear quarters. The next second, a blast of magic from Acnologia's one remaining foreleg caught Laxus in turn, causing him to grunt in pain as he was hurled down into the forest below, where he crashed, burying Laxus in the ground.

"Well, fuck," Laxus grumbled as he pushed himself out of the furrow his rapid landing had made. That hadn't hurt all that much, but it was something to be aware of for another reason. "Troops, remember, this asshole can launch attacks from anywhere on his body, and can do it with barely any buildup.

Thankfully, while Acnologia could indeed do that, his attention was not an infinite resource.

Before he could follow up on downing Laxus, Gajeel and Ranma's ongoing attacks, which he had somewhat forgotten about, slammed into him. He hadn't moved nearly enough to get out of the way of even Ranma's attack, and Acnologia now roared in real pain as the two attacks hit. Ranma's attack attempted to stab into him like a drill on overdrive, causing Acnologia's scales to crack and break but thanks to not hitting straight on due to Acnologia's turning away, they didn't give way, instead creating a furrow of cracked and warped scales straight across Acnologia's chest scales. That was bad, and caused Acnologia's eyes to widen, even so, while the other simply slammed into his whole body like an overlarge battering ram.

Acnologia's wings faltered as he grunted under the impact of that attack, losing altitude quickly, thus pulling him away from Ranma's attack and Erza, although Gajeel's still hammered his body for several more seconds. It didn't do much other than cause him some discomfort, though.

Then, Natsu decided to get into the act. "Fire Dragon Slayer's Tail Stab!" From his hands and all around Natsu, an image of a dragon's tail began to form out of fire, then flashing forward. This wasn't a continuous attack but rather a large dart of flame around two stories tall that was condensed and magnified for all of its size before being launched away from Natsu.

That attack slammed hard into Acnologia's chest before he could dodge, and Natsu's aim was good, targeting a portion where Ranma's attack had already hit, missing only by a few inches. Acnologia began to hiss as the scales of his chest began melting away, turned into slag under Natsu's assault, and twisted away, once more spreading the damage from the attack so that it didn't amount to much more.

Feeling the sting of real pain, Acnologia summoned up his healing magic, concentrating on the wound that the Fire Dragon Slayer had caused. *They are stronger than before! Those attacks should not have been able to hurt me, let alone from so far away, yet they did. Well, let us see if they can survive this!!!*

Before any of the other fighters could continue the attack, or Wall could direct the hit-and-run team in from where they were hiding behind an illusion spell created by Irene higher up in the atmosphere, Acnologia lashed out with another blast of power from his mouth. And this time, neither Natsu, Gajeel or Ranma had time to build up a sufficient attack of their own to counter it.

Indeed, Gajeel and Ranma barely had time to even brace right before the new attack slammed into the observatory, while Natsu leaped forward and down, rolling off the outer edge of the caldera to try to get under the blast. Behind him, the attack slammed into the observatory, sending all three men in different directions as the observatory itself was shattered. The magic crashed into and through the stone masonry and metal, which was no match for that kind of magical power. Ranma and Gajeel were hurled away, gritting their teeth in pain, while Natsu yowled as he was sent end over end by the backwash.

His one real wound healed, Acnologia flew closer, circling down towards where he had seen Ranma go. He well remembered that particular scent and knew Ranma was probably the most dangerous of his current opponents, despite the fact it had been the Fire Dragon Slayer who had hurt him a second ago. Another attack formed quickly in his mouth, blasting towards Ranma unimpeded by either of his other attackers as this move had put more distance between himself, Erza and the recovered Laxus, although Erza felt that was more chance than planned. They still struck him, but with longer-ranged spells, and neither Fairy Blade: Meteor or Laxus' lightning could even tickle Acnologia.

Ranma was caught midair by Acnologia's next blast and found himself groaning in pain. The impact reminded him strongly of taking a breath attack from Kurnugi, only several times stronger than any he'd taken sparring with the hermit-like dragon. Yet the attack wasn't enough to truly hurt him, not after all the Toughness Training he had been doing over the past two years. It was painful, sure, but it wouldn't incapacitate him.

Using the momentum of the attack to his advantage, Ranma shifted down and to the side of the original attack, forcing Acnologia to twist around to follow him, and a moment later, Ranma lashed out with his own attack in turn. It wasn't much of an attack, simply a long-range version of the basic Water Dragon Slayer's Claw without any of the concentration or rotation speed that had made his first attack dangerous but it still blasted into Acnologia's chest with enough power to push the large dragon upwards higher into the air.

This kept Acnologia's attention fully on Ranma and for a moment, the two of them exchanged mid-ranged attacks, with Acnologia moving to land in an open area near Ranma's position, wanting to close with the Water Dragon Slayer who looked to have been isolated for a moment. This was not the case, proven in a few minutes by Natsu, with Happy carrying him, coming down from on high along with Erza and Laxus, who had caught up with Acnologia by this point. Coordinated by Wall, the three of them slammed into Acnologia from behind and above, with Erza closing to use Belserion again, and Laxus shouting out "Lightning Dragon's Breakdown Fist!"

While these attacks were unable to penetrate Acnologia's wings, which very much were not simple sinew, the attacks did stop them from working. The next instant, Acnologia

found himself crashing into the ground in an open area directly below the summit of the former volcano instead of landing lightly as he had intended. More attacks crashed into him, and Acnologia lost his footing for a second. Without being braced for it, the next blast from Ranma sent him rolling into and through dozens of trees further down the mountainside.

“Pinning team engage. Azuma, hold him in place. Jura, close in and engage with caution. Brandish, Juvia, Invel, you’re still too out of position. Move westward around the mountain, Ajeel, the same, but eastward. You’re the next closest to Jura, estimating with your Sand Surfing you’ll be there five minutes after Jura,” Wall ordered, looking over at Warrod. “You’re up, Tree Man.”

The Wizard Saint nodded. The only member of what he liked to call ‘Team Flycatcher’ who could use his power from any significant distance, Warrod stood between two trees that Brandish had grown on the outskirts of the forest, his hands resting on two different trees. While the rest of the mages and their imperial army allies had been preparing the area for the fight to come, he’d simply been meditating, connecting via his Green Magic to the forest.

This had been far harder than usual and had taken all the prep time the group had been able to use before Acnologia was sighted. Even while asleep, Aldoron’s simple presence had permeated this particular forest and the ground around it to a tremendous degree. Indeed, Warrod reported that Aldoron had been the source of this forest and maybe many others on the continent. His magic permeated each and every tree within the forest and a good deal of the other plants, but that presence was dormant, unaware even peripherally of Warrod’s meddling or the destruction of his Seeds elsewhere by Acnologia.

Warrod normally used his Green Magic to make plants grow faster or instantly create new ones. Because of his Green magic affecting his body so much over the decades, Warrod had developed the ability to, in effect, take a page from Azuma’s book and expand on it to a strategic level. Azuma could link with and take magical power from a single tree, as he had from the Tenrou Island tree. Warrod could spread his will through a forest, helping it grow faster than normal, directing it to grow in a specific way, or even causing the trees to bend to his will for a certain amount of time, letting him attack, defend or, in this case, with some difficulty try to pin Acnologia in place.

Azuma hadn’t needed Wall’s order through their magically enchanted headphones to know that the time had come for him to get involved. Indeed, Acnologia had crashed down almost on top of Azuma, who had been racing closer to Ranma’s position from where he had been moments before. Now he grinned, charging forward from where he had merged with one of the trees Brandish and Warrod had worked on. Doing so was much more difficult than it would normally be as if the tree itself was fighting him, which Azuma had anticipated thanks to Warrod’s warning, while they had been preparing the battlefield, yet it had also given him a tremendous burst of magic to use in his attacks.

This he did now, attacking Acnologia from behind before he was aware of the new attacker’s presence. “Burst Claw!”

This explosive assault, aimed by a nearby tree limb, slammed into one of Acnologia's back legs, even as Warrod's power began to cause all the other trees around them to grow. Some deformed to try to latch onto Acnologia, while the others simply grew, creating a canopy over the black-scaled dragon, who had stumbled from the first strike, knocking him further off-balance.

Still, Azuma scowled angrily. *That blast should have done more damage! This creature's magical resistance is incredible.*

Acnologia snarled, pushing up off the ground with his three legs explosively, shattering the trees attempting to hold him to the ground easily, taking still more strikes from Azuma's Great Tree Arc magic as he did, but still not seeming to feel any of them. Meanwhile, Ranma and the others closed behind still more of their own attacks, which Acnologia did feel. Blood and scales burst from several wounds, but regeneration magic instantly began to work quickly repairing the damage but eating further into his reserves.

So there are other rats around here, Acnologia growled internally. *The Dragon Slayers and the woman with the soul-infused blade to hammer me, and others to pin me down?* Responding to a blast from Ranma, he razed the ground around him, then pushed up off the ground.

He was almost off the ground and entirely out of reach for Azuma and Warrod's efforts when Jura became involved. Stone spikes and stone columns grew out of the ground, not attacking Acnologia directly but trying to bind him or interfere with Acnologia's attempt to get up into the sky.

This didn't work so well either. Acnologia shattered the various stone spikes and columns, then was in the air, blasting down at the area he had been in, in an effort to kill his attackers. Jura was flung away by the backblast, and Azuma had to hastily merge with a tree to ride out the blast near the edge of the attack.

Far away, Warrod winced, a pulse of something going through the woods, almost breaking his control of the greenery before going away. *Is, is that a sign of Aldoron waking up? Not good.*

"Hit-and-run team, wait until the heavy team has closed. I want a full team assault," Wall ordered, wincing as he saw Larcade finally get involved. "This could be bad," the Machias muttered under his breath.

Wendy looked over at him, and Wall shrugged. "I honestly can't calculate one way or another the odds of Larcade's various magics working on Acnologia. It could make this fight far easier, or just... do nothing at all."

"We have other problems right now," Warrod warned. "The big tree is about to sprout some little acorns..." Warrod trailed off as Seilah reached over and grabbed his tree-like hair.

"Speaking plainly or become fertilizer," Seilah growled. While she could not use her powers from this far away, her magic senses were actually second to none, and while Nature Magic wasn't her forte, she could still feel something stirring within the forest.

"Aldoron's slowly waking up, and his subconscious mind is, is doing something," Warrod stammered.

Without a word, Wall diverted several of his I-Spys down into the forest, searching for anything unusual going on. The I-Spy drones were small devices that Wall had devised to allow him to monitor the battlefield. There were more than a few dozen in the air above the forest, with several near Wall for just this purpose. "Invel, Juvia, wait where you are for a moment. Brandish, divert to their position. Hit and Run team, continue as planned."

Wall turned to look at Wendy. "Wendy, move forward, enhancement magic on any of the combatants you meet. Gajeel especially needs some speed-type help to keep up with the fight."

"Of course he does," Wendy grumbled even as she lifted off, glowing white and green as her Sky Dragon Slayer magic flowed out of her in an easy stream. "Silly Gajeel and his pride. He still should've let me enchant him like I did Gildarts-oji-san and the others, but no, just because Ranma-nii and the others said they didn't need it..." her voice slowly away as she raced off, out of sight within a few seconds.

At the same time that was going on, Larcade, who'd been dealing with much the same thoughts about his various magics since the first time Acnologia appeared in Alakitasia, instantly decided to bring out the big guns. An aura of white magical energy appeared all around him, shifting this way and that with his movements as if it was made of smoke as he called out one of his most devastating attacks. "White Arts: Rest in Peace!"

The attack was intended to feed off one of the three primary needs of any being made of flesh and blood: in this case, drowsiness. The others that Larcade's magic could manipulate were the need and the need to procreate with Pleasure. Larcade had long known that the last one would be next to useless against Acnologia, leaving him the other two and his Light Magic-style attacks, which he also feared might well be useless against Acnologia.

Larcade's power flowed across Acnologia, but after a second, he saw no discernible change. The monster didn't even slow his attacks on the others down. *Crap, does that mean he doesn't feel the need to sleep? Or can my magic not overcome his resistance!?*

He watched Acnologia smash Laxus out of the air again, this time getting lucky enough to send him falling right onto Azuma as he came out of a tree. Then Larcade was forced to dodge another blast of magic, having no desire to see if he could just walk off those magic blasts like the Dragon Slayers already had. "Blades of Light!"

The Light Magic attacks flashed out from Larcade's outthrust hand but plinked harmlessly off Acnologia's flanks, not even denting his scales. *Fuck, just as useless as I feared!*

Larcade didn't see Acnologia's tail flicking up and around until it slammed into him. The son of Zeref was flung through the air like a ball struck by a bat. He crashed into the mountainside well above the current center of the battlefield, smashing through the stone pillars attempting to keep Acnologia on the ground. This allowed Acnologia to bring around his sole remaining forearm in a blow that caught Erza midair, sending her flying off as well with a shout of "Blast it all!" as Acnologia gained air supremacy once more.

The blow hadn't been strong enough to hurt through her armor, but still. "I am already getting tired of being smacked aside so languidly."

"There is nothing languid about it," Belserion's voice came from her blade. "Do not worry, Erza. Acnologia is not used to fighting so many different magics, so many opponents he knows he has to take seriously. He will make a mistake sooner or later. Even better that regeneration magic of his is eating into his reserves"

Back in the main fight, though, it seemed as if Belserion's words were wishful thinking. Ranma, Laxus and Natsu fought side by side for a moment, taking most of Acnologia's attention, while Gajeel followed on the ground, but in the air, Acnologia had most of the advantages. Happy and Natsu were fast and agile, but Happy couldn't even get too close to Acnologia's breath attack or worry about being burned. Ranma was limited with his Boosted Step technique, as Acnologia simply flew away from him, not letting him use the momentum of Acnologia's strikes in return to aid Ranma, leaving both him, Azuma, and Gajeel behind occasionally, making the onus of the fight fall mostly on Natsu and Laxus.

Another advantage quickly became apparent as Happy grunted suddenly, and Natsu blinked. "Huh, why do I feel like we're back in the Blasted Lands?" Natsu muttered.

"Natsu, Acnologia's doing something! I'm feeling way more tired than I should after only ten minutes of flying you around! Unless you've put on weight somehow. Did you eat a house?"

"Oh, hush up," Natsu grumbled even as he ducked under another blast of magic. "I only had a few flambé burgers when we arrived here, and houses aren't for eating, no matter how much they're on fire."

"FUCK!" Ranma far more aware of his reserves, both magical and ki, knew what was going on. "Acnologia's putting out some kind of field that's draining magic around him!"

At that, Natsu's eyes widened. That was the same subtle attack that had wrecked so much havoc on the dragons of the past when they fought Acnologia. The same that had made Igneel and the rest feel they were too weak to take him on, forcing him to first run away and then hide inside Natsu. "OH, that's notGGGG!"

A blow caught Natsu with a claw to the chest that had him gasping out blood as a rib cracked. His durability was such that the claw couldn't penetrate, but that was easily the strongest blow that Natsu had felt in his life, and he found himself hurtling away. Like Erza before her, Natsu was learning that controlling his position in the air after getting hit was just as annoying as getting hit.

Left to face Acnologia alone for a moment as Laxus had been smashed aside, Ranma ducked under a blow from Acnologia's foreleg, slamming a hard magically assisted strike into his chest and then jaw, trying to follow up with a third only for Acnologia to shift his head out of the way of the blow then back, slamming into Ranma from the side, only just missing biting down on Ranma's lower half. Like his lover, this sent Ranma flying, and he found himself crashing into and through several trees before rolling to a stop. He hopped to his feet easily, howling, "You'll have to do better than that, asshole!"

Snarling, Acnologia moved after him, leaving Azuma, Jura and the newly arrived Ajeel behind. Ranma backed away further, dodging incoming attacks that tore up the surrounding forest, leading him back toward Gajeel.

Elsewhere in the forest, however, other events were transpiring that would divert further aid from the main battle. Glowing red and green magic pulsed up from the ground into four specific trees scattered around the forest. These trees had large, reddish jewels set inside their trunks, barely visible, like a single baleful eye hiding within the wood. Now as this new pulse of magic hit those gems, they shattered, releasing further magic within. The impact of this to the trees was different for each, but equally troublesome for the anti-Acnologia task force.

Having been warned to be on the lookout for anything unusual, Juvia was quick enough to attack the shifting tree nearest her, Brandish and Invel. The tree, which had been shifting to resemble almost a humanlike form, was sliced in half from her attack. Its face, the first part that had started to form, was caught in a permanent expression of surprise.

However, nearby, another tree surged with new magic, sending out a pulse into a dozen nearby trees. Brandish struck and shrunk one, while several more froze or were sliced apart, but dozens more finished transforming into tree-like creatures with sharp claws and purple spots acting as eyes. They moved quickly, far faster than most humans would have been able to keep up with as they closed with the three mages.

Watching this from on high with his I-Spys, Wall could see that, perhaps because of Warrod's influence on the forest, another, similar looking creature was having far better luck at creating an army. It was a small one, but it was made of rapidly growing wood golems summoned out of small seeds this creature, who looked more human-like in that it had hair, actual eyes and a face along with a ribcage of wood, spread around him. They instantly began to march towards the main battle around Acnologia.

"Irene, divert from the Hit and Run team," Wall ordered. "We need a large portion of the forest razed. We have an army of wood golems moving to interfere in the fight. Everyone, be aware, Warrod says this is Aldoron's subconscious response to what's been going on. We need to be ready for further reactions."

A moment later, Wendy, who was a few minutes away from coming within sight of Gajeel as he tried his best to follow the fight in the air, also came into contact with the last of the strange Nature Magic constructs. This one seemed to be a smaller form, almost childlike,

but Wendy didn't even slow down. A blast of Sky Dragon's Roar caught the creature even as it started to sprinkle some kind of small flowers around, blasting into and through it.

Turning to Warrod, Wall growled, "Can you tell us more about what to expect from Aldoron?"

"No," Warrod stated simply. "His spirit is still asleep, so it won't be conscious, and if it hasn't happened yet, I think that we won't see more reaction unless he wakes."

Wall breathed a sigh of relief, while elsewhere, Ranma, Laxus, Natsu and Erza continued to fight Acnologia, the others having closed in again, while Ranma held Acnologia's attention again. They were soon joined by Gajeel. Boosted up into the air by Wendy's Vernier, he announced his presence with another attack that had taken him a bit to build up.

The Metal Dragon Slayer crashed down from on high, his attack going before him. "Metal Dragon Slayer's Fanged Rain!" Thousands of large, thick spears of metal stabbed down at Acnologia from above in a cascade, covering enough area to encompass Acnologia and hundreds of yards around him.

Yet for all the momentum and force that Gajeel could impart to the attack, most of the iron spears simply tinked off of or found themselves embedded very slightly into Acnologia's scales, where they were quickly freed by a simple shimmy from the dragon. Only two of them hit with enough power to hurt Acnologia, having caught him at just the right angle on his wings. Those wings, which looked more like exceedingly thick plates in the barest form of overly large feathers, were still not as durable as the rest of the dragon, and the two spears stabbed deep as the barbed tips caught on flesh rather than scale, causing Acnologia to howl aloud in real pain for the first time in the fight.

Even Ranma and Natsu's strikes to his chest hadn't hurt that much, as the scales their attacks had hit had rapidly grown back thanks to his regeneration ability. With the spears in the way, though, these wounds wouldn't heal until Acnologia removed them.

Even better, the sudden injury to his wing caused Acnologia to lose altitude once more. Several more blows from Ranma followed, hammering him still further, along with a blast of a similar size to Gajeel's from Natsu.

This forced Acnologia to the ground once more, and now Wall ordered the remaining members of the Hit and Run Team for the first time. Jenny and Gildarts, flying thanks to an enchantment from Irene moved down from where they had been hovering above the battlefield, the illusion magic covering them disappearing as they did. The pair hammered Acnologia from every direction. Right now, Jenny wore her Deathscythe Mecha Soul, but she had others she could upgrade to if she wanted, while Gildarts of course had his Crash magic.

Gildarts' magic didn't do much. His Crash Magic couldn't even find as much purchase on Acnologia's body as he had back on Tenrou Island. Jenny's first strike with her scythe missed as Acnologia veered away from her, and she was forced to evade a mouth so large it could have eaten her without chewing. However, this opened up for a blow from Ranma

who crashed into his face, a claw of water slamming into Acnologia's jaw, shattering two teeth before he was slammed away by a return strike.

Acnologia growled furiously as once more the trees around him tried to bind him in place. Jura and Azuma were still trying to close with the fight, something that made Wall curse a bit, having hoped that Wendy would run into them too on her way to Gajeel. They had missed one another, and now the Sky Dragon Slayer was caught in the same battle as Irene against the growing forces of the wood golems. *Luckily, it seems as if Brandish, Invel and the water mage look to be close to dealing with that first horde. Warrod's influence on the forest seems to have slowed its growth.*

The fight around Acnologia heated up for several moments, as the Dragon Slayers exchanged attacks after attacks, with Natsu joining the Hit and Run team for a bit, using Happy to fly in and out while Warrod's magic pinned Acnologia in place. Gajeel and Ranma fought Acnologia straight up, while Laxus lashed him with attacks from a bit further away, and Jenny and Gildarts came and went. Still, though, Acnologia's armor was such few of their strikes mattered. Eventually, Gildarts was too slow, and the backwash of a near miss upended him, causing him to crash nearby. Natsu was similarly smashed out of the air by a direct hit from Acnologia's magic. Even Laxus was hurled aside, although from a physical blow from the monster's tail, causing him to be tossed up and over the forest.

Seeing Gajeel go down to a paw strike and seemingly in danger of getting eaten, Ranma charged forwards at the same time as Azuma caught up to the fight. He landed several explosive blows with his Chain Burst and Burst Claw on Acnologia before disappearing into a tree. Then he began to use still more trees to reach towards the monster, joining his efforts to that of Warrod in trying to keep Acnologia on the ground.

"Ajeel, you're nearer the fight with Acnologia, get it stuck in damn it!" Wall ordered, some frustration in his voice. *Ajeel should've been much faster than this.*

"Fine by me, damn it, but be aware, my Sand Magic is having trouble transforming the local ground, far more than I was having before," Ajeel warned.

"Just deal with it, Ajeel. Gildarts, Jenny, remember you need to retreat so Acnologia can't target you. Get out of there the moment Ajeel arrives, and always be aware of your reserves. Remember the draining aura he's putting out," Wall advised. "Ranma, Laxus is coming back in from your right. Keep his attention on you and maybe turn him around if you can!"

"What ya think I'm trying to do, Tin Man?!" Ranma laughed wildly as he charged forward, his whole body flaring with ki for a second before he dodged under a breath attack. The next second, Ranma lashed out with the vorpal blades of the Yama-Sen-Ken towards Acnologia.

There was no real way to empower vorpal blades more, make them deadlier than they already were, so Ranma, having seen this attack do very little against Acnologia back on Tenrou Island, knew he wasn't going to see much impact. Nevertheless, Ranma had trained

so that he could launch more vorpal blades with a single attack, and instead of the four or six he had used a few years ago, the attack that struck Acnologia consisted of twenty of the things. They sliced and dug into his scales, unable to penetrate thanks to how durable those scales were, but still leaving marks scattered across Acnologia's body and causing the massive dragon to howl in pain again, much like someone who had just taken twenty paper cuts.

Lexus added to this a moment later. None the worse for wear from the blows he'd taken so far, the young Wizard Saint slammed down into Acnologia's back even as he began to build up another blast of magic. "Lightning Dragon Slayer's Heavenward Halberd!"

Yet even as the attack struck, Acnologia acted, twisting around so quickly that Lexus didn't have a chance to turn into lightning or shift away. Even though it had caused actual blood to burst from under many of his talons as they sloughed or exploded away from the point of impact and his sudden shift of attention allowed both Ranma and Gildarts to land their own punishing blows, Acnologia's teeth then tried to clamp down on Lexus' lower body.

Desperately, Lexus grabbed at the beast's upper jaw and stopped it from closing, if only barely. The monster's teeth still stabbed deeply into Lexus' hands and sliced into his outer thighs. "ARGHH!!"

Acnologia shook him like a massive wolfhound with a rat, trying to break Lexus' grip on his upper teeth. Thankfully, at that point, Ajeel arrived, and Ranma attacked again.

"Water Dragon's Slayer's Whirling Bite!" Ranma howled, lashing out with another of his more powerful attacks. The attack created a dozen fang-shaped spears of water, each ending with a drill bit of water, the water there moving faster than Ranma could have ever made it move before he practiced in the Blasted Lands. He couldn't quite control where the spears struck after launching them, but they could do a lot of damage, as was proven a second later.

Ranma's blows smashed into Acnologia's side and back leg, smashing dozens of scales to pieces and drilling deeper, causing more blood to burst from his body at each point of attack than even Lexus' earlier attack. Acnologia stumbled, snarling in pain around Lexus' body. A second later, the ground him turned into sand, as Ajeel finally arrived.

That sand then quickly formed into fists, launching punch after punch at the downed dragon, doing little but leaving Acnologia open to Azuma's attack and unlike Azuma's previous blows, this one truly hurt, as it caught Acnologia in his eye. This caused him to drop Lexus as he reared back in pain.

With both his thighs bleeding, and his hands stabbed through by teeth that were so wide they had nearly cut his hands in half despite his durability, Lexus became the second person Wendy had to help. Although thankfully for him, Wendy was already in the area thanks to needing to help Gajeel. She zoomed in and out of the battlefield so fast that Acnologia, still being pressed hard by the others could notice.

Observing the other fights elsewhere, Wall breathed a sigh of relief. Irene had just dealt with the growing army of golems by turning a large area of the forest into a mass of lava. Although she seemed, going by what his I-Spy was telling him, to have tired herself out more. "Warrod, is the ground and the forest still fighting you?"

"You mean where Miss Fiery Hair just had a temper tantrum in the form of a lava cake hold the cake?" Warrod growled, gritting his teeth as he continued to control his long-range attack, binding Acnologia's wings to his body. "It's not actively fighting us yet. But Aldoron's subconscious pumped so much passive magic up into the forest that anything that large is going to take a lot more power to create than you might expect."

Wall nodded at that, but as the creator of the wood golem army disappeared, ordered Irene towards the main battle. "Brandish, you two. Invel, Juvia, finish those tree creatures off, that one seems able to transfer between them. Denude the forest if you have to."

"We were already doing so/I don't need your permission for that, Wall!" came the join replies from Juvia and Invel respectively.

Wall ignored this, though, continuing to direct them in, hoping they could come in from the right flank of the fight. With that done, he issued a few more orders, keeping Wendy close to the battle but out of sight in a ravine nearby, while Levy, who had been standing silent nearby, raced forward on an odd looking cloud, zooming deeper into the ocean with an I-Spy in hand.

With Acnologia reeling from continued attacks, Ranma pressed in, slamming bodily into Acnologia's neck. The impact pushed him sideways and onto his unwounded side for a second from the sheer power and momentum of Ranma's charge. Acnologia's neck had bent with the assault, making it clear that Ranma's attack hadn't done too much damage, but it'd been strong enough to put the monstrous black dragon onto its side just before Jenny and Irene came back in from on high, the enchantress having closed quickly with the main battle.

Irene's attack slammed down and into Acnologia, an enchantment to cause the very air he breathed to explode and poison him. A second later, he reeled in pain again as the very air in his nostrils exploded, causing him to gag even as his nose nearly disappeared. The poison effect, however, didn't seem to do anything, and Irene cursed as she flew upwards again. "He's immune to poison too. And my spell to change the air to make it explode didn't get very far into his body."

"All Dragon Slayers, Levy's moving forward to Acnologia's right, currently. Pull back if you need to refuel," Wall recommended. He wasn't certain how well the Dragon Slayers or the others were dealing with the odd passive-draining magic Acnologia was putting out, but they had been the ones facing it the most. "Larcade, where are you?" Wall wondered, having no I-Spy on the Emperor at present. "

“Having issues with getting there at all,” Larcade grumbled. “I found myself buried when I was flung away, damn it all. Also, be aware the fight’s begun to cause fissure to open up in the ground in places well away from where the fight is currently.”

Growling, Jenny flew upwards as Gildarts’ attack came in from behind, dodging a magical blast and flailing tail as it crashed through several sand arms. Acnologia roared silently, while still more of the air he was trying to breathe attacked his body under Irene’s enchantment control. From all around him, Azuma, Ajeel, Ranma, Erza, Gildarts, Jura and now Brandish attacked as she arrived.

Brandish didn’t attack directly, knowing her magic wouldn’t be able to take hold of Acnologia. Instead, the trees all around Acnologia became huge as her magic worked on them, letting Warrod and Azuma pin Acnologia again despite his best efforts to get up into the air again. Out of the corner of her eye, Jenny also saw Natsu returning to the fight, still munching on a FIRE word that Levy had made, while Laxus and Gajeel remained behind him for a moment, eating their own elements.

From on high, Jenny could also see that none of their attacks were doing enough damage to Acnologia to slow him down. Scales were getting smashed off, slagged, or crumpled or torn away, but they were healing almost as quickly as the damage was being dealt. *I know that regeneration of his is going to start slowing him down, but with the passive aura draining our magic, it won’t do so fast enough. And if none of those attacks work, my Deathscythe plasma scythe isn’t going to be hot enough to matter, either. Time to bring out the big blades, heh, as opposed to the big guns.*

With that, Jenny landed on a tree that Brandish had just grown to the size of a large tower. It shivered and quaked but was still stable enough for Jenny to cancel her current Take Over form. “Take Over: Mecha Soul: Strike Sword!”

This was another Take Over form that greatly resembled a Gundam but was built more for flight than the Deathscythe and was also designed even more for close combat. Twin plasma blades popped out of holsters on either side, and then, as she flew upwards, Jenny activated this form’s afterburners, pushing her still faster, far faster than her Deathscythe form could move.

By the time she had flown around the mountain twice, Jenny had achieved her fastest speed. Below, Acnologia was still being held in place thanks to Warrod, Jura, Ajeel and Brandish. Natsu and Ranma were also doing a great job of keeping Acnologia’s attention on them, although their attacks were still only causing minor wounds without enough time to build up more dangerous attacks, and Gajeel and Natsu had yet to rejoin the battle.

That ended now. With a sonic boom, Jenny flashed through the upper foliage of the battlefield, slicing through everything in her path, up to and including one of Acnologia’s wings. Her blades, burning hotter and stronger than anything she had used before, sliced half one of Acnologia’s wings off as she passed by.

With a scream, Acnologia tried to attack her but his lunge missed. Jenny moving too quickly for him to catch. And then he felt several yards of his tail just disappear, torn apart by Crash magic, causing Acnologia to scream again.

From where he had closed to almost touching distance with the black dragon, Gildarts grimaced from the effort, his teeth nearly grinding against one another to the point of pain as he pushed still more of his magical reserves into the spell. The spell should have been powerful enough to remove Acnologia's entire tail, yet the black dragon's magical resistance was such that the amount of power that Gildarts was putting into the attack only served to allow him to remove about a yard's worth of his tail. The good news was that it removed the whole area, not just the scales covering that area.

Even as a small part of his brain was thankful for the fact Crash magic didn't leave behind bleeding wounds, Acnologia let loose a roar, blasting out raw Arcane from every inch of his body shattering the efforts of Jura, Azuma and Warrod to keep him in one place, faster than a striking snake, Acnologia twisted around. The next instant, a breath attack blasted back and down towards where Gildarts had quickly attempted to retreat.

The air in front of him became enchanted, transforming to be almost as dense as steel for a second as Irene ceased her attempts to ignite the air within Acnologia's lungs, but even that wasn't enough to prevent Acnologia's attack from slamming into Gildarts. The blast of magic caught him in his hastily outstretched mechanical arm, hurling him backward through several trees and one of the prepared stones. Luckily, he, like the rest of the hit-and-run team, had also been enchanted by Irene to be a bit more durable, and although he could feel most of his ribs break, Gildarts was still in one piece, so long as you didn't count his slagged metal arm.

"Seilah, retrieve Gildarts for Wendy's healing. Levy, pull back. Follow the ravine northeast, it will keep you hidden" Wall ordered. Seilah had already headed forward to meet up with Wendy, so this was a better use of her than simply patrolling the sky looking for further trouble from Aldoron.

Thanks to the rapid blast of magic, Ranma, who had been clinging to the black dragon's neck for some time, enduring being slammed into the ground again and again, while hammering blow after Dragon's Claw into the dragon in turn, lost his grip. He now found himself smashed aside by a blow from Acnologia's foreleg just as Larcade finally got within range of his own magic again, hitting Acnologia's other side again with one of his more powerful attacks.

"If sleepiness won't get through, then maybe something to do with hunger will!" Larcade growled, furious at the fact that a single hit and the vagaries of the fight had sidelined him so far. *I will not let this creature ignore me any longer! I am Larcade, son of Zeref, and you will learn you overgrown lizard!* "Famished Soul!"

For a second, Larcade could feel his magic latch onto something within Acnologia, bypassing a significant chunk of his magical defenses. Or perhaps the ongoing need to power

his regeneration spell had begun to tell? Regardless, there was something there, and Larcade poured more of his power into the spell.

However, Acnologia was a master of Arcane, he could feel the change as it began and, ducking under a spell from Ranma and a blow from a tree controlled by Azuma, Acnologia twisted around a bit to bring his is back leg into range, catching Larcade with a kick that drove the air out of his lungs and cracked ribs as he was picked up and hurled away.

This caused Larcade's spell to cut out even as Ajeel succeeded in encasing Acnologia's head in the sand. The sand user attempted to suffocate Acnologia while two golems of his creation surged upwards from nearby sand pits. They added their efforts to the pinning team as water flowed over Acnologia's rear and tail before solidifying into ice as Invel and Juvia finally arrived. The next second, ice spikes began to stab at Acnologia, trying hard to penetrate his scales with scant success.

"Juvia is most annoyed at how much distance Acnologia can cover in the air and is very grateful that he will no longer be able to do so!" she growled as her body pumped out still more water, which the nearby Invel began to freeze as it closed with Acnologia. "Now let us see if we can do more than simply pluck his wings!"

While the ice was irritating and somewhat painful when the intense cold came in contact with a wound, the blows from one of the sand golems caused Acnologia to scream aloud in pain again as its fists and then its entire weight landed on his already ruined wing. Ajeel's attempt to stab his throat with Sand Daggers, though, failed as his control of that sand wasn't good enough to control them after the sand left his line of sight.

Regardless, that one strike from Jenny to his wing had done a lot of damage. Indeed, it was the only real, debilitating damage they'd been able to do so far. His teeth, the missing yards of his tail and even the missing talon were all more cosmetic than anything else. Missing half of one of his wings, though, that meant Acnologia would never be able to fly as well or as fast again, if he could at all.

Once more, Acnologia found himself thrashing in the grip of stone columns, sand golems, trees and roots galore as the pinning team kept him occupied long enough for Ranma to get to his feet. As fast as he destroyed them, they reformed, leaving him vulnerable to the hit and run team, Ranma, and the rest.

With both Laxus and Gajeel having finished renewing their reserves, Wall organized their attack. With Ranma holding Acnologia's attention from one side, and Natsu coming in from the side where Acnologia was already missing an arm, Gajeel came in from behind, and Laxus went for the wounded wing as if to finish off Acnologia's ability to fly entirely.

While his claw slammed down into Ranma, Acnologia didn't see Natsu coming thanks to Azuma and Ajeel's ongoing attacks. Both Ranma and the claw itself were rimmed with magic, and for a brief moment, Water and Arcane Dragon Slayers strove directly against one another in a contest of strength and will before Natsu's attack hit.

At the same time Natsu hit, Jenny was directed back into the fight at an angle, following up on Erza, as the two women targeted the same point as Natsu. Although this time, Jenny attacked with her Deathscythe form again. The Strike Blade form still took a lot out of her, something about that form affecting Jenny's mind even more than her magical reserves.

Natsu's fire attack flashed over the stump that had once been Acnologia's foreleg shoulder before his battle with Ranma in the ocean, disrupting the contest and searing further scales to slag. This was followed by Jenny's attack, which opened up a gash across his chest through the already ruined scales, her plasma scythe stabbing into the black dragon's body.

So solid was the black dragon that, as Jenny had seen before, even a plasma blade couldn't cut out and away from that initial impact point, and almost instantly, Acnologia's healing magic began to work again. He reared up, smashing aside the sand golems and the columns of stone, clawing at the vines and tree limbs, trying to keep him in place.

Erza's attack came in next, hitting with enough force to blast through scale and slice bone yet the knee that had been her target held, to her surprise. Not letting up, she twisted around a wild tail swipe, slamming Belserion down into his foot as he raised it to kick her away. Blood spurted as Belserion overcame Acnologia's scales right behind a claw, shearing it off in a welter of blood before the blow landed on Erza, causing her to be sent backward.

Unlike before, however, Erza was now on the ground, and this time, she wasn't willing to be smashed away as Larcade had a moment before. A barked command of, "Stiletto Foundation!" had the Armadura Fairy Armor's greaves grow long spikes that stabbed deep into the ground from their soles, literally latching her in place for a second.

As Acnologia lifted his rear foot back for another kick, Erza caught it on Belserion, removing another talon, only for her eyes to widen as the foot kept coming, catching her full in the head.

Despite her armor stopping the attack from instantly killing her here, Erza's spikes betrayed her. Unable to smash her away like a ball, the full power of that strike instead nearly broke Erza's neck and back due to the simple impact of the blow, and would have done far more if not for the fact that she had added a helmet to her Armadura Fairy Armor. Just as when someone wielded a warhammer against a normal man in armor, it wasn't always about getting through the armor; it was about cracking the far weaker bones inside through blunt force trauma.

Only the fact that the blow didn't hit just her head kept Erza from dying, and even so, the blow had badly dented her helmet and the upper chest of her plate armor, doing enough damage in that one hit to make the Armadura Fairy Armor practically useless as Erza's eyes rolled up in her head and she fell, boneless to the forest floor

"Brandish, get Erza out of there, meet up with Wendy. Follow the I-Spy," Wall said calmly, still watching from on high, while Juvia's water lances flashed in cutting into the

wounds Erza had created and forcing Acnologia away from her lover. Even as that happened, though, Wall could see something building within Acnologia, the bluish whorls on his scales glowing. "Jenny, pull back. Long-range attacks for now. Gildarts, move to help Jura to your right. Ajeel, Irene, Azuma, pull back, Acnologia's gearing up for something."

Brandish might have said something in reply, but Ranma didn't have time to really listen in, as he and the rest of the Heavy Team found themselves under furious assault from Acnologia. No longer was he lashing out with single brutal magical strikes launched from his mouth or forearm. Instead, small blasts of magic began to flash out from his body randomly, lashing the area around him in a wide angle, removing trees, pillars of stone, and hammering the Heavy Team back. Worse than the power of those strikes, each of which was stronger than Ranma's pre-Blasted Lands breath attack, the speed of the attacks meant that Ranma, Natsu and Larcade, newly returned after getting healed by Wendy, had to dodge wildly, while Laxus, had to zip away.

Gajeel, unable to dodge, had to grunt and pull up his Scale Armor to tank the hits as they came. Even so, the blasts hurled him back and away as Acnologia fought Ranma and Natsu, the only two now within physical striking range.

Elsewhere in the woods, as those strikes continued, Seilah got very unlucky. She was still using her magic to drag a reluctant Gildarts away from the battle when both of them were hit by a strike from Acnologia, which sent them both screaming headfirst into one of the swamplike areas the group had prepared beforehand. Acnologia's attempts to follow up on that, though, were blocked by Juvia as she pulled herself up out of the water, blocking the strike with a wave of water that instantly turned into steam. That steam was hot enough to bother both of the others, but it kept them alive.

Soon, the damage being done to the surrounding forest forced Warrod to try to use his Green Magic to restore the cover it had provided for Jura, Ajeel and Azuma, but the process took too long from this distance. The nearest members of the pinning team were forced backward along with the wounded, all three of them taking punishing hits to the point that Ajeel lost an ear, and Jura felt his forearm break from a bolt of magic that had already been slowed by several of his stone pillars. Brandish also screamed out in pain as a bolt caught her leg, shattering bone and nearly removing the limb entirely. This, in turn, pulled Irene away from attacking Acnologia, helping the younger woman retreat back toward Wendy.

Worse, Warrod could feel something else as he used his Green magic. The presence within the woods was slowly rousing. Almost like someone who had been asleep but felt the sun's rays on them, Aldoron very clearly didn't want to wake up, but the battle going on throughout the forest was too loud for him to ignore. "Aldoron is waking up slowly. If he does, I will lose any connection to the forest," he warned.

"What, no quips?" Wall murmured as he sent Levy forward again to support Wendy and the wounded.

Despite Warrod's warning, Aldoron remained asleep as the battle became a seesaw. Jenny's attack on Acnologia's wing had forced him to the ground, taking away his mobility. Yet Acnologia's own shift in tactics had caught everyone by surprise, and his durability was beyond anything any of them, even the group who had trained in the Blasted Lands, could deal with easily. He was hurting, badly, but as Jenny had been worried about, his passive magic draining aura meant his regeneration magic wasn't taking it out of him enough just yet.

Twice in the span of twenty minutes, Azuma and Jura were both forced to retreat away from the point of contact, battered and wounded. Ajeel, Jenny, Irene, and Gajeel all had close calls, with Gajeel nearly losing his head, although not as closely as Brandish with her leg. Larcade began to be battered, along with Erza, her armor slowly becoming a mass of dents and broken spikes rather than a whole suit, while he tried again and again to latch Famished Soul onto Acnologia. But now aware of his magic, Acnologia's magic resistance was better able to block it, making this difficult.

Of them all, it was Irene who was doing the most damage during this portion of the battle. From on high she created dozens of what she called 'Yata Mirrors'. These Mirrors reflected back against Acnologia any attack that hit them, causing still further wounds to the black-scaled dragon. She also created a gravity enchantment that slowed down Acnologia, and more than once used her ultimate magic and her Disappear enchantment was strong enough to smack Acnologia around the battlefield. Even though her Separation Enchantment couldn't work this, in conjunction with the attacks made by the others, allowed Irene to overload Acnologia's ability to heal. While on the defense, Irene's Concept Enchantment joined with Wendy's to give the defenders a speed and durability advantage.

However, despite all of this, Acnologia's raw durability and endurance was just insane, augmented as it was by his passive draining aura. The Yata Mirrors couldn't be everywhere, and nothing Irene could do was able to save all of her team members from taking hits.

Jenny found herself being smashed out of the sky by a bolt of magic from Acnologia that sent her cartwheeling into the ruins of the observatory higher up the mountain. Her Deathscythe form was up to the task of taking that blow, but not by much.

Groaning, Jenny, canceled her Take Over form, laying there for a second, recovering her breath, feeling a kind of crawling exhaustion seeping into her, a sign of magical exhaustion. *No enchantment from Irene or Wendy will help if I use up all of my reserves, and unlike Ranma, I can't renew my magical reserves by eating an element. Damn it, I trained for two years to grow my magical reserves, and because of that cheating fuckwit's passive ability, I'm feeling it after a little over two hours of fighting. Ugh.*

Slapping her Face, Jenny pushed herself to her feet, shifting into another Take Over form.

Instead of charging back into the attack, Jenny stayed where she was, shifting forms into another mechanical creation.

This one was one she had created after connecting to a mechanical spirit in the Blasted Lands. The thing was the infantry equivalent of the Man of Iron the group had stayed in for so long, a version that had become popular after the city-states had generally lost the ability to build larger, more capable magi-machines. The Long Tom, though, had a weapon that none of her 'Gundam' type armors could match for sheer impact. *If my Deathscythe weapon can't do anything, none of my energy beams will be able to. So, Big FUCKING AMMO it is.*

Long Tom was ungainly in the extreme, having only one arm, the other having been replaced by a gun twice as long as the mech was tall. Its legs were stubby and not very mobile, its body more of a cylinder than anything else. However, there was no problem with the gun, which Ranma had once called a rail gun, or its targeting systems.

Solid slugs going at speed even Acnologia could barely see began to hammer him, and with each strike, Acnologia's scales shattered for nearly a yard in every direction, matching the damage Irene, Laxus and Ranma could do when one of their strikes hit home. When one of them nearly hit his eye, Acnologia learned to dodge whenever he saw those attacks coming, although Jenny was forced to dodge as well a second later. Acnologia's return shot nearly removed the top of the mountain, blasting open a hole in the side of the shallow caldera where the observatory had been, the rim of the caldera acting like an outer wall.

Jenny wasn't there. She had shifted into one of her more economical flight forms and moved off. The next moment, she shifted back to Long Tom and blasted Acnologia again several times from another angle. This time, she nearly blew off two of Acnologia's claws from his remaining forearm before she was forced to retreat. "Little by little, we're doing this!" Jenny shouted into the task force's comms.

"Maybe, but it remains to be seen who breaks first. Our Heavy Team, or..." Wall broke off suddenly with a curse.

Closer to the fight, Larcade, Erza, and the Dragon Slayers were still trying hard to give as good as they were getting, but neither side was able to land a really telling blow, not even like Jenny was doing at range. The passive aura Acnologia was putting out was really starting to take a toll on them, even as his healing magic was doing the same to him. Acnologia was now missing a lot of his scales, and every blow was starting to hurt worse, but without Irene and Wendy's enhancements, at least Gajeel and Natsu would have already been forced to retreat again. As it was, both men were too stubborn to do so, while Ranma was using more of his ki than his magic to keep on the front lines.

Of Team Heavy Larcade had been getting steadily more frustrated, more and more reckless, pouring his power into every spell he shot out, trying hard to get through Acnologia's magical defenses but not getting anywhere with Famished Soul or White Magic.

Again and again, Larcade could feel his magic almost sloughing off the monster, Acnologia's magical resistance keeping his powers just were not doing anything. Intellectually he knew they were slowly wearing Acnologia down, but the feeling of not

having done anything, of not being worthy of his crown or his father's love, made Larcade reckless.

Finally, as Laxus and Natsu were hammered aside by a sweep of Acnologia's stunted tail and Erza and Ranma charged his head along with Irene and Gildarts from above, it got to the point where Larcade was so frustrated with this that he began to curse, his normal lazy, laid-back air left behind with the flyers that had brought them to this forest in the first place. "Damn you, damn you! Feel something!"

Yet this time, finally, finally, Famished Soul got through. Larcade's eyes widened as his spell caught, and he poured out as much of his magic power into it as it possibly could.

Acnologia's eyes widened as he too felt the spell take hold, but as battered as he was, he couldn't do anything to combat it. "ARRRGAAAA!!!" he shouted as images of dragons and Dragon Slayers appeared all around him. Normally Famished Soul would, if used on a group, make the members of that group attack one another, driven mad by hunger and seeing one another as food. However, with what amounted to a feast around him already, Acnologia's mind instead began to play other types of tricks on him.

Blinded to reality for a moment, Acnologia reared and lashed out. More and more powerful attacks blasted out of his body, unaimed and wild. They still forced Irene to dodge and smashed into Ranma with enough force to hurl him backwards with a cry of agony, but Acnologia in turn became utterly unaware of his real surroundings. He was no longer even trying to dodge or avoid injury and the task force instantly began to take advantage.

With Jenny, Irene and Erza attacking from range, Laxus and Natsu hammered Acnologia's head, neck and chest. At the same time, Gajeel came in from behind, his arms shifting and transforming, his body silenced by a pair of Quiet Boots that Levy had crafted from her Script Magic, his presence further covered by Larcade's magic making Acnologia nearly blind to his presence.

Unlike the other Dragon Slayers, mastery of his Metal Dragon Slayer powers had given Gajeel the ability to transform his arms and legs into weapons. Now, his arms fused into one above Gajeel's head, then enlarged until they were practically the size of Acnologia's body, forming into the shape of a giant saw. "Metal Dragon Slayer's Secret Attack: Twirling Fang Saw!"

Gajeel's built-up magical power gleamed green on the sheen of the metal, nor was it simple iron or even steel. Although it was immensely energy-intensive, Gajeel's body had shifted into a hybrid metal he had developed while fighting Kurnugi. It could hold an edge that was sharper than a razor and had magical absorption properties, much like the metal of the Iron Giant, although the edge dulled quickly, hence the sawblade shape of his attack.

Gajeel's attack hit, then began to saw through Acnologia's one remaining wing.

For the fourth time in this fight, Acnologia screamed in real agony, and his stunted tail flashed up in instinctual response and into Gajeel, smashing him with enough force to break through Gajeel's durability with the pure impact of the strike. Gajeel coughed blood as

he felt his Scale Mail crumple and a few of his ribs go as he was flung away, but he had done enough damage.

Acnologia's days of flying, however this battle went, were completely over now. Even as Gajeel was flung away, the black dragon's second wing fell away, spurting blood in all directions, completely removed from his shoulder bone, hanging onto his body with only a bit of membrane further down.

In a way, this attack proved to be a mistake, as the pain of it broke Famished Soul's power on his mind. Eyes clearing once more, Acnologia roared, launching an attack back towards Gajeel, hoping to finish the Dragon Slayer off, but Ajeel conjured a golem in front of him out of a sand pit. The golem crashed with Acnologia, going chest to chest with the larger dragon and holding him in place.

That was when Larcade made the mistake that, in turn, caused Wall to curse. Larcade had remained where he had been when his magical assault had finally latched onto Acnologia, and now, Acnologia pounced, blasting out a magical beam from his foreleg. The next attack from Acnologia was almost as powerful as his earlier attacks had been, and it came towards Larcade far too quickly for him to dodge in a thin beam of destructive magical power.

The attack crashed into and through a hasty defense set up by Jura and Invel. Jura hastily raised a stone pillar between Larcade and Acnologia while Invel raised a wall of ice to defend his emperor.

Those defenses barely slowed the attack to the point where Larcade could leap to the side, but that was enough to save his life. Rather than taking Larcade in the head or neck, the attack slowed enough so that Larcade could shift sideways. Even so, the attack seared into Larcade's upper arm and out the other side, causing Larcade to scream. The attack had literally removed his upper arm entirely while his forearm landed with a thud on the floor of the forest.

Acnologia's twisted around taking a returned Ranma under fire, while slamming his tail into the already badly wounded Larcade but Seilah zoomed in, grabbing up the man and retreating quickly, while Laxus and Irene aimed attacks at Acnologia's wounds.

At this point, Acnologia started to lose what measure of self-control he had gained since breaking out of Larcade's enchantment. The black dragon thrashed and blasting away at everything and everyone around him nearly frothing with agony and wanted to hurt everything around him. The only difference from before was that Acnologia's attacks were smaller, the power in them condensed.

For a moment, this forced them all to retreat, as every member of the group took multiple hits. Warrod, Azuma and Jura grimaced as the thrashing shattered all of their creations again, and Jura gasped as his durability was shattered by a single strike, causing him to grunt and collapse to his knees in agony, a hole burned into his side and out his back. Only a roll to the side saved him from another blast, which went on to carve up still more of

the forest, something Ranma, Gajeel, Irene, Natsu and Laxus' attacks were also doing, creating a fractured, shattered hellscape.

Just as the thought occurred to Ranma that there were more downed trees around them than living ones as far as he could see, Azuma and the distant Warrod gasped as suddenly, they lost all control of the woodlands around the battlefield, while the Dragon Slayers all twitched, including Acnologia. The others stared around them even as Acnologia's eyes widened, then narrowed in delight.

"Fuck! Aldoron's awake!" Azuma shouted, his mind reeling from the impact of the dragon on his attempts to control even a single tree. Azuma stumbled, but his Lost Magic allowed him to retain some measure of his power. Regardless, he charged forward toward the fight, knowing that he no longer had enough magical capacity to waste on long-range attacks.

He had it far better than Warrod, something Wall made them all aware of a moment later. "Teams, be aware Warrod is down. He's alive, and his, his feet have buried into the ground, but he isn't responding to anything. He's just slumped in place. Seilah, get Larcade back here. We'll remove him from the battlefield entirely for now."

On the heels of Wall's words, the earth roiled. It bucked, heaved like a living thing as a loud, groaning kind of roar reverberated throughout the forest for miles around. From the ground sprouted wooden spears the size of trees, which launched upward as if a porcupine had figured out how to go on the offensive. Irene was forced to dodge one, halting her ongoing attack on Acnologia, while Brandish, who had just been about to rejoin the fight, was forced to dodge, then fell, shrieking, in to a chasm as the ground surged and opened up around her. Wendy and Erza also had to dodge, while nearer the battle, Acnologia and several of the others were hit by the spears flashing up from the ground. Those strikes hurled them in every direction, leaving only Gajeel, who was easily the heaviest of them in contact with Acnologia.

Even as he found his body hammered and tossed upwards by the impact of the wooden spears underneath him, Acnologia grinned in sudden delight.

Unlike the other Dragon Slayers, his senses were so acute he could feel where Aldoron was, where his head and magical core were.

With a roar of triumph, launched himself forward, past a quickly recovering Ranma and Natsu, smashing them to either side before they could get their feet under them with his shoulders as he raced on all three legs up the mountain.

Aldoron's timing and position were incredibly unlucky for the giant dragon. His head, which looked for all the world like a child had tried to carve out a semi-draconic Halloween doll out of wood, reared up out of the top of the mountain, which had already been shorn mostly by Acnologia's attacks when the battle began and then towards Jenny when she took a position there. The otherworldly nature of Aldoron's face was made worse by the tons of dirt, grime and stone falling away from it as his body began to shift and move underneath

the forest, his legs slowly pushing up and out of the ground he had inhabited for several hundred years. Yet for all his sheer size, his head was coming up out of the ground far too close to Acnologia's former position.

Now, even as he dodged attacks from Irene and Jenny, taking still more wounds on his back and tail to the point he lost another yard of his tail, Acnologia closed.

Before Aldoron's red eyes could fully open, Acnologia was on him. His foreleg grabbed at the bottom jaw of the monstrous Dragon, and he flung himself forward, his mouth wide gaping as he bit deep into Aldoron's neck. With a roar, both human and bestial, he tore into Aldoron's neck as he activated his Dragon Slayer power, the power to take strength from an element.

Acnologia was an Arcane Element Dragon Slayer. Magic itself. Acnologia could eat any kind of magic and could gain power and strength from drawing in the magic of others into himself. It worked best against dragons and was easiest through simply eating a source of magic rather than pulling magic in via his aura, as he had been doing since the battle began.

Dragon magic also tasted better to the point that any other meal almost turned to ash in Acnologia's mouth. And now he supped deeply of this new source of power and sustenance.

Whatever Aldoron had meant to do died as Acnologia's will reached into and tore a tremendous chunk of his magic out of him in one long sip. The massive, ancient dragon lost even a chance to scream as his magical power deserted him, infusing Acnologia with further power. He was still alive, and began to frantically shift his head this way and that to dislodge Acnologia, but it was the movement of a dying beast, the prey knowing that the lion had caught it in his jaws and would not be letting go anytime soon.

Irene snarled, seeing luck and chance turning against them again. "NO!" Irene grasped her magical reserves, which were still immense despite the ongoing draining nature of fighting Acnologia. Her red magic flashed out over the entire area of the forest and beyond, trying to grasp onto the very world, but in this, Aldoron's presence fought her. His magic permeated everything even as his own magic was being sucked away by Acnologia. Yet Irene persevered, and after a second, her power latched onto something, not Aldoron, but Acnologia. "UNIVERSE ONE!!"

This was an area of effect spell that allowed Irene to basically control the land in any way she could. In this case, with Aldoron's magic blocking her, she couldn't really do anything to the land itself, but everyone else within miles found themselves randomly teleported away, with only the object of her spell, Acnologia being teleported away in a direction she wanted him to go.

Ranma found himself crashing into the ground several miles away, so far that only the reverberations in the land and the groaning of stone against stone told of the titanic battle that had been going on up to this point. He lay there for a second, stunned by the sudden shift more than anything else, something all of them were feeling at that moment,

while in the sky, Irene slumped, the effort of trying to fight Aldoron for control of this area having pushed her almost to the edge of magical exhaustion.

Acnologia found himself crashing to the ground with enough force to cause all of his myriad wounds to scream at him. Yet even as he crashed into the ground, Acnologia rejoiced. His healing magic had been pushing his reserves down to the dregs, but now, he could feel Aldoron's magic settling into him, rebuilding his reserves. For a moment, he thought about husbanding it, but his wounds were so bad he couldn't. *Damn it all, but I will at least be healed of, well, most of my wounds.*

While being incredible, well beyond most healing magic, Acnologia couldn't regenerate missing limbs or bits. His teeth would not return, his tail, or the missing talons. *To say nothing of my wings. But I will at least be whole enough to take my vengeance, and sup on the other Dragon Slayers.* With that, Acnologia began to glow, the blue whorls in his battered form gleaming green, which enveloped his entire body.

As this was happening, Acnologia reached out with his senses once more. He could instantly tell that the wound he had given Aldoron was terminal. Even dragons could not survive having a portion of their throat removed and most of their magic eaten. He could also sense the other Dragon Slayers, including the supporter, but only a few of their fellows. *Your gambit failed, enchantress. I live, and now the battle begins anew, with your allies scattered!*

Acnologia wasn't the only one who knew how bad this was going to get. Pushing himself to his feet, Ranma reached up to the headset they all wore, thankfully finding it still in one piece. "Everyone, Dragon force, **now!** Erza, Irene, Jenny, hang back until you can aim for his eyes or we can slow him down again! Everyone else pull the fuck back! You don't have the reserves for this!" he shouted, charging towards Acnologia's position, thankful he had been teleported so close to where Acnologia had been. Although he wasn't the closest, that honor went to Laxus and Azuma.

Even as he raced forward so fast, the blasted landscape around him became a blur, Ranma reached inside himself and pulled his Dragon Slayer powers into every inch of his being. This wasn't as 'easy' as it was for Wendy or one of the other Dragon Slayers because he lacked a Dragon's Seed, a single source of power he could pull on consciously. Ranma's ki and Dragon Slayer abilities were always balanced, fighting one another and growing stronger because of it.

Yet Ranma had spent two years trying to perfect this technique, and within a second, his body changed as his magical signature ratcheted higher and higher, to the point where Acnologia could feel it. This was followed by his eyes widening as he took in the feeling of the other Dragon Slayers. Yet he remained where he was, letting his healing magic heal his assorted wounds, knowing that unless he got lucky and could eat one of the other Dragon Slayers, this would probably be the last time he could use it, especially on such a scale. *And I am far too battered to continue this fight if I do not heal myself as completely as I can.*

When he was finished with the transformation, Ranma's body was now covered with blue scales, and his hands had formed into veritable dragon paws, although his claws were far smaller than the size of his hands would suggest. His face had also shifted, changing to accommodate the fangs that had replaced his teeth, while his face was lined with scales.

Similarly, Laxus was no natural Dragon Slayer. His body underwent a tremendous change, becoming covered with yellow diamond-pattern scales. They didn't look nearly as thick as the ones covering Ranma's body, but an aura of lightning enveloped him from head to toe, and his hands, if anything, looked even more draconic looking with larger talons and accompanied by what looked like large tusks appearing from his elbows and thrusting backward. Similar tusks grew out of his back, further lightning crackling between them.

His transformation complete, Laxus howled, sending a blast of lightning magic across to slam into Acnologia so hard that he lost his footing. Laxus continued, hammering Acnologia until he found himself stumbling down into a ravine, where he smashed into the sides as he fell, each hit causing a surge of agony through his wings. Despite the magic surging into his system, the wounds his regeneration couldn't heal before were still there. Both the one that had been halfway cleaved off and the other that had been still attached to his body by a bare string of tendons were next to useless.

This was exacerbated by Azuma's arrival on the scene. He hadn't retreated with the others, and now, with Aldoron dying, his magic fading from the forest, Azuma reached out, grabbing as much magical energy from the forest and through it the Wood Dragon as he could, powering a single attack as roots and vines tried to enfold Acnologia as he pushed himself back out of the ravine, a breath attack lashing up towards Laxus. **"Terra Clamare!"**

Acnologia tore his way out of the vines and tree branches, binding him too fast for the attack to hit him fully, yet the attack, the most powerful in Azuma's arsenal, still struck. Acnologia's ravaged wing was completely torn off his body at that point, and several dozen more scales exploded off of him along and underneath where the wing had hung despite the power up he had just gotten empowering his toughness further as well as being used to fuel his healing

"GRAAHHH!!!" Acnologia screamed, but he could detect the source of that attack and lashed out an instant later, the blast flashing out from his foreleg. Azuma had no chance to dodge or even leave the tree he was currently inhabiting. Acnologia's attack, fueled by Aldoron's essence, slammed into and through him, removing the upper half of the tree, And Azuma's body, in an instant.

As Ranma, Natsu and the others closed, the battle became something of a stalemate again. Healed of most of his previous wounds with even the stubs of his wings healed over, Acnologia weathered dozens of long-range, wide-area attacks from every one of his enemies, with Irene trying to slow him down and succeeding mostly but pouring out her already badly drained magical reserves like water to try and contain the more powerful black-scaled dragon.

Despite having replenished and expanded his magical reserves, Acnologia could feel his physical body beginning to give out, his regeneration starting to falter as the wounds piled up. *Damn it, I must close with them and use my Arcane Eater aura more or else I will be overcome despite Aldoron's contribution.*

With a roar, Acnologia astonished his enemies by taking a page out of Natsu's book: he pushed his magic out of his feet, sending himself airborne. It wasn't very impressive looking, but it was quick, and he closed with Irene before she could teleport, disappear behind an illusion, or even react at all. A blow crashed down into her, sending Irene towards the ground, cracking ribs and puncturing a lung even as Natsu closed, only to reel away as Happy shouted, "My magic, I, I'm getting too tired. Natsu, I can't carry you anymore!"

This forced Natsu to the ground, which left Laxus and Jenny to fight Acnologia in the air for a few moments, as Ranma and Gajeel were also husbanding their magic at this point. Seconds later, Jenny was knocked out of the air. Her flight-capable Gundam form was nearly smashed into pieces around her, but it had defended her from serious injury.

Despite that, Ranma and Gajeel's attacks long range attacks hammered home, smashing Acnologia out of the air to crash down into the forest again.

While Wendy and Seilah retrieved and retreated with Jenny and Irene, the four Dragon Slayers hammered Acnologia from every angle, using more overpowered, attacks now, while around them, bits of elemental words floated, having given them all a much needed refueling. Levy had gotten so good at targeting them by this point that Acnologia, busy as he was with the others, couldn't figure out where these words were coming from.

Acnologia dodged under Natsu's attack, then, as several attacks from Ranma and Gajeel hit him, realized at last that he needed more maneuverability. Between an eye-blink and the next, he transformed, which had the added benefit of further blocking the agony from his ruined wings.

Rolling forward and kicking up and off the ground in his human form, Acnologia lashed out with a kick that caught Laxus in the face as he darted in, shattering scale, bone and teeth, hurling him away despite his Dragon Force.

Ranma crashed into him, lashing out with punches and kicks that Acnologia didn't bother trying to block, instead responding with strikes of his own, only getting in one for every twenty that landed yet both of them grunted in pain at the impacts. Acnologia was getting the worst of it but a magic blast from Acnologia's knee caught Ranma in the leg, causing him to stumble. A second blow to the chest sent him to his knees before magic blasted out from Acnologia's mouth into Natsu's incoming attack. Even now, this attack overwhelmed Natsu's breath attack, going on to crash into Natsu's face and head, hurling him backward and nearly killing Happy where he still clung to Natsu's back. The two crashed to the ground, Natsu groaning and moaning, his face looking like it had just taken a first-degree burn.

With Wall's help, Jura, Ajeel, Juvia and Invel joined the fight again at this point. This in turn let the four Dragon Slayers retreat and once more refill their magical reserves with Levy's help.

Yet all of them were feeling it by this point, as, although Wendy could heal their bodies, their minds and reserves were something else entirely. Yet still they fought, refusing to retreat now regardless of Wall's shouts to keep the range open.

This included Erza, who returned to the fight now in a her newest and most energy-intensive armor. With the help of Pergrande-born blacksmiths, magical researchers from Seven, still more scales from their first battle with Acnologia and lacrima from Fiore, Erza's chief armor supplier had come up with an entirely new type of armor, which they called simply called the Warform.

It looked almost animalistic at first glance, coming complete with a pair of bat-like wings that almost resembled Mirajane's devil form. It had segmented armor, which was spiked in places to almost resemble that of an armadillo lizard, but with a hardness that would put even that tiny, nigh-indestructible creature of Desierto to shame. The helmet, made to look like a mix between a full-face plate helmet and a demon's head, interfered with her peripheral vision, yet its strength and durability allowed her to hold the line just like a Dragon Slayer.

As Acnologia concentrated on Erza, giant hands of sand and stone crashed down onto Acnologia only to shatter as he kicked up into the air. This opened him up to a blow from a stone column, and several ice and water attacks, yet they didn't bother him nearly as much as a single attack from Belserion which cracked in, nearly breaking his wrist.

Gaining some distance from Erza with some difficulty, Acnologia furiously hit the entire area with a wide-angle assault, causing his current attackers to grimace and need to protect themselves. Two of them, Ajeel and Jura, screamed in pain as the attack washed over their positions. Jura lived through the attack, the flesh nearly seared from his bone on both arms, but Ajeel did not. His entire body disappeared, turned to ash and smoke from the attack.

Invel was just barely out of range of that attack, and he responded quickly with ice-make attacks, but this only served to draw Acnologia's ire his way over Erza who he ducked around for a second. The next moment, faster than Invel could move, Acnologia was in front of him, his fist lashing out.

Only Juvia's intervention saved Invel at that point, as a battering ram of water appeared. She formed into her watery body a second later to one side of Invel, grabbing his arm and pulling him away, only for both of them to scream as a near miss from Acnologia, which would have killed them both save for Erza's intervention, washed over them both. Invel and Juvia both collapsed, screaming until Juvia turned into a barely there puddle, steam washing up from his changed body, while Invel just collapsed, burns covering his body. In Contrast, Juvia hadn't been physically hurt, but the agony of the blowback had knocked her entirely out to the point where her body couldn't sustain itself.

Belserion's edge caught Acnologia in the back of one of his shoulders, without any magic due to how fast Erza had reacted. Thus, it wasn't able to penetrate his body, such was Acnologia's durability even now. Yet it had smashed his upper body forward so that his attack hit the ground at Juvia and Invel's feet rather than the pair dead on.

Acnologia rode with it, doing an actual handstand and lashing out with a kick back into Erza. The kick smashed several of her armor's spikes off as it landed, and she felt her armor give along with her ribs, as she was hurled away.

Then Ranma was there, slamming both of his hands down on top of Acnologia's head as he stood up, crashing his head back into the ground. He was then forced to dodge a blow from Acnologia as he rolled to the side, but before Acnologia could do more, Ranma lashed out with a point-blank Water Dragon's Claw attack that caught Acnologia in the center of the chest, lifting him up and hurling him away from Erza.

Before he could land, Natsu and Gajeel, also having filled their reserves up a bit, double-teamed him from either side, forcing him to twist in place this way and that in order to block their strikes. Both of them were in Dragon Force like Ranma and Laxus and had been before they had retreated, although, unlike the two more unnatural Dragon Slayers, the differences weren't nearly as odd. Their hair color had changed: Gajeel's had turned white, while Natsu's normally pink hair had shifted into a fiery orange color, which almost matched his aura, although the aura had a hint of gold to it, while Gajeel had scales like Laxus' covering his body, providing even more defense than his normal Scale Mail.

This defense was put to the test as blow after blow got through his defenses. Acnologia was simply faster than he was.

Laxus arrived back on the battlefield before Gajeel was overcome, grabbing Acnologia's hand right where it had been about to strike Gajeel's throat, his own fist slamming into Acnologia's face with bone-crushing force, lightning roiling around his fist. "Lightning Dragon Slayer's Furious Barrage!"

As Acnologia was sent reeling, Laxus' fist opened, and from each talon, he sent another lightning blast, searing into Acnologia's face one after another, building and burning him.

With a roar, Acnologia lashed out with his own attack, black and blue magic coalescing around his arm as he punched out. Laxus and Gajeel alike were flung backward, howling in pain as the strikes hit, overwhelming their durability, breaking ribs and opening gashes along their chests.

However, Laxus' arrival had allowed Natsu to gather his own magical attack. "Fire Dragon World Ending Solar Flare!"

The attack was so intense that it resembled the plasma of Jenny's Strike Blade Mech Soul Take Over more than fire. However in his human body, Acnologia was able to dodge far better than in his original form. The heat of the blast still seared into his side, but the main beam missed him by inches, allowing him to close. Before Natsu could recover, a blow

caught his chest, cracking ribs and causing Natsu to spit out blood yet when he tried to follow up, Erza's blade slammed into Acnologia's face. Once more she hadn't been able to gather any magic into the blade yet also like before, the blade hit like a massive bludgeon, shattering bone and teeth alike.

The next instant, while Ranma's drill-like attack crashed into Acnologia's side digging deep.

With a furious effort, Acnologia blasted a magical attack from his entire body into Ranma's chest, the power of it causing Ranma to cry out in pain and spit blood as he felt his entire rib cage shatter, being hurled backward away from Acnologia.

The next second, a similar attack hit Natsu, who was already in a bad way. Not only had Acnologia's blow broken something inside him. The heat of the attack he'd launched had even overcome his natural fire resistance, and his body needed a second to get over it. A second that Acnologia did not allow Natsu to have. He grabbed onto Natsu, then activated his element again, as he breathed in. "Your power is mine!"

Natsu's eyes widened, and he growled, trying to wrench himself away from Acnologia, only succeeding in not getting his throat torn out by the monster. Instead, Acnologia's teeth bit down on his shoulder. Natsu's Dragon Force flickered out, and as he screamed in agony.

Yet even as Acnologia tried to activate Arcane Dragon Slayer magic, Irene struck. Her reserves were nearly nonexistent, yet she still could power some of her enchantments to call on, and she could attack outside of Acnologia's passive draining aura. "Wound enchantment!"

Acnologia screamed aloud as the pain he was causing Natsu shifted onto him. Natsu stumbled back, freed but still reeling from the experience, and then he found his body not his own for a second. "Macro, attack him, Natsu!"

Seilah was nearby, having been ordered forward to help remove the wounded once more. Indeed, she was doing so even as her Macro curse took hold over Natsu, holding Invel on one shoulder.

At those orders, Natsu's arms came up under their own volition. One hand grabbed onto Acnologia's arm, while his other began to batter Acnologia's face, as he howled. "Fuck you, you asshole, you're going down! For Grey, for Elfman, for everyone!"

Acnologia roared, blasting point-blank into Natsu's face, hurling him away again, but before he could do anything else, Erza stabbed her blade deep into the wound that Ranma had already caused in Acnologia's side. "Fucking die already, you cursed remnant of the past!" Belserion's spirit snarled as his fang dug deep.

Acnologia screamed and cried out, but no amount of regeneration, which he barely had access to any longer regardless, was going to help him now that Belserion was literally buried six inches deep into his side, deep into his guts and stomach. With a wild scream, he

brought his fist down on the blade halfway along its length to the hilt. That blow hit with all the power of Acnologia's desperation, and with a crack, Belserion shattered, literally exploding in Erza's hand, shredding it into flinders. Her upper body armor was also badly flayed underneath the magical energies caused by that impact, the Warform armor being sliced through in various places despite all its durability.

Even as she stumbled away clutching the remnants of her hand, Erza's eyes stared at where the blade had been, knowing that the final vestige of Belserion went with it. "B, Belserion!"

Seeing this, Irene screamed, "Move it, daughter!"

Yet a large portion of the blade was still stuck in Acnologia's side, and he went to one knee rather than following up on her injury. Gasping, he reached with a maimed hand towards the end of the embedded portion, trying to pull it out with his three remaining fingers coughing blood, glaring around him only for his eyes to widen as Ranma came back into the attack.

Ranma didn't let up, forcing Acnologia to raise his arm to defend himself, only for his arm to be smacked out of position before Ranma landed several monstrously powerful blows. Even with Acnologia still subtly putting out an aura that drained the magic of those around him, Ranma had fallen back on his ki, which made him far stronger and faster than the grievously wounded Acnologia. His teeth were barred in a snarl as Erza fell back, her hand dripping copious blood, the sight of which drove Ranma to a fury that nearly pushed him into using emotion-based ki.

Desperate, Acnologia blasted Ranma direct as he had Natsu, but then Wendy was there, coming down on his head with a kick powered by her own Dragon Force. Ranma's blow took him in the chest at the same time, but Acnologia roared, once more thrusting out with all of his magical energies, pushing them away, creating yet another crater in the forest. This caught Laxus just as he was trying to attack again.

Acnologia stood there, staring wild-eyed and gasping first at Ranma and Wendy as they pushed themselves to their feet, then over towards Laxus, who landed, one leg seemingly not up to taking his weight, nearly buckling under him from a wound he'd taken somewhere. He then looked at where Natsu lay, groaning.

Acnologia pushed himself to race forward toward Natsu, determined to drain him and then finally overwhelm Irene and the last three Dragon Slayers on their feet.

He never reached Laxus. Instead, he found his feet almost glued to the ground. "I think not," Irene hissed. "This is where it ends, my old foe!"

"Water/Sky Dragon's ROAR!!"

The attacks weren't supposed to create a unison raid, but they did. Water and air magic merged as they flashed towards Acnologia, crashing into him with all the power of a hurricane, and Acnologia screamed as the last vestiges of his magical reserves were all

forced out at once to stop him from being filleted. Despite surviving the attack, though, Acnologia was hurled backward away from Laxus, the spell that had been sticking his feet to the ground broken.

He landed a yard back from his previous position as Wendy gasped, going to one knee, having expended almost all of her magic in that one attack. She'd been moving around retrieving the wounded and healing from the start of the fight and had previously cast as many enhancement spells as she could on every one of the fighters, further weakening her even before the fight began. Using Dragon Force on top of that had taken it out of her a lot.

"Good job, Wendy. I got this." Resting a hand on her head for a second, Ranma moved forward as Irene moved to help Erza. Like everyone else, his magical reserves were badly depleted thanks to the draining aura that Acnologia had used, and his body was beyond bruised. It felt like his stomach was still knitting itself back together, and the skin of his upper chest felt like it was on fire despite his ki healing.

But that was all right. I've still got ki, you fucker. A moment later, Ranma stood over Acnologia, staring down at him as his ki gathered in his hands, shaped into a cat's claws. "Just fucking die already, you genocidal asshat."

Acnologia glared right back, opening his mouth, magic beginning to form there again despite his own physical exhaustion, the amount of blood he'd lost since Erza stuck the blade still in his side into him. However, Ranma hurled his hand down, lined with bright blue energy. Ki claws slammed into his head. Acnologia's resistance failed within a breath, and the claws continued on their way, slicing into and through Acnologia's head, cutting it into ribbons.

OOOOOOO

The aftermath of the battle wasn't pretty, and not only because of how much of the area surrounding Aldoron's resting place had been battered and blasted. Barely a few trees still stood from the original forest, and the mountain had basically begun to collapse the moment Aldoron had begun to stir. The former volcano was still settling as his body began to decompose quickly, shifting hundreds of tons of dirt and rock.

That was only the change to the surrounding area, though. The worst damage had been dealt to the force of mages sent after Acnologia.

Ajeel and Azuma were both dead. Azuma's magical resistance and durability had been no match for Acnologia, as they had known going into it, and it had taken only one strike he couldn't dodge to kill Ranma's fellow combat junkie, something he was deeply sad about. Ajeel, in contrast, had gotten just a little too cocky after it seemed that Acnologia had begun to run out of the added justice of Aldoron's demise.

Warrod was in a coma, his mind broken. The mental battle with Aldoron once the dragon awoke had come upon him so abruptly and with so much force that he had no chance to protect himself. Mind healers would be able to bring him back, and his strange magic was keeping him alive for now, but Wendy wasn't able to do anything more for him.

Erza's hand had been a total write-off after Belserion exploded in her grip, removing all her fingers and turning her palm back to her wrist into a mangle ruin. She had a few broken ribs as well, despite her armor. Yet she was content. Alvarez had incredibly advanced magical devices and medical devices, and Larcade had already promised that, like himself, she could have her pick of any kind of magical hand she wanted.

Not even an hour after the battle it ended, she was already thinking about things she wanted to add to "My new magic fist. I must admit going without a weapon would be odd, so perhaps some kind of hidden sword function? No, a series of daggers, yes. It will be somewhat annoying to not be able to truly feel through a fake hand as well as I can my real one, but always having a weapon on me sounds like a marvelous idea."

Jenny had come through the battle relatively unscathed, despite being the source of much scathing on Acnologia, her armor protecting her even as her magical reserves gave out. Juvia's injuries, in contrast, were far harder to quantify.

The human body wasn't supposed to be able to turn into water and certainly wasn't supposed to then be boiled almost to the point of turning into a gas. The pain of that strike had been enough to knock Juvia out, turning her into a puddle. The others had an incredibly hard time reviving Juvia to the point she could reform her body into a human shape at all, let alone human, and when she did, Juvia was still in intense pain until Wendy's magic soothed her. She spent the next two days asleep, her body and spirit recovering from a type of injury none of the others could really understand, not even Ranma.

Her partner throughout most of the battle, Invel, had been hurt far worse. Second degree burns on his arms, and third degree burns on his legs and the front of his body. Yet thanks to Wendy's healing magic and Irene's aid, just like Juvia, he would be right as rain within a few days. He wouldn't even need to worry about scars.

Unlike Ranma, who now had a huge burn mark on his chest from where he'd taken a final blast from Acnologia that sent him reeling right before Laxus had come back into the fight. That scar refused both Wendy's magic and Ranma's own ki healing for some reason.

Regardless, the group was victorious. Acnologia lay dead, their dead friends had been avenged, and the Empire was forever grateful for their help. That gratefulness came in the form of feasts on top of the promised medical aid, although for most of the next two days, everyone just wanted to relax. The fight hadn't lasted long, especially to the group who had gone into the Blasted Lands, yet it had been so sharp and explosive that it pushed all of them to their limits, even Ranma.

On top of that, he and those who knew him had to deal with Azuma's death. For Ranma and Erza that was easy, as he knew that was the way his fellow combat junky would have wanted to go out. For Wendy, it was more difficult, along with not being able to do anything for Warrod's coma, with the others falling somewhere in between them. As for Larcade and the others, they got over Ajeel's death a little too quickly for Ranma's mind. He didn't seem to have been all that popular, but neither he nor any of the other wizards from Ishgar cared enough to look into why.

Nor did these days of exhaustion and sadness stop Juvia once she awoke from her pain-induced sleep. She was a woman on a mission, and now that Acnologia was dealt with, nothing was getting in her way. That very night, she was in Ranma's arms, needy and demanding.

Ranma wasn't going to argue with her on this one. Indeed, he was quite enthusiastic about the idea himself. By the time the Christina lifted off from the palace, Ranma was pretty sure that Juvia was already pregnant.

Thankfully, this time, it also allowed the Empire and Ishgar to establish regular communication. This, in turn, allowed Ranma to present his final report to the King's Council. Well before they landed in a field outside of Magnolia, Ranma was a free man.

The group waved farewell to Jura and then headed into the town, with Ranma putting his arm around Erza's shoulder and the other around Juvia's waist as Jenny led the way with Irene talking about interior design of all things. She had resigned from the Spriggan, citing familial loyalties in Ishgar, and after hearing about Enma, Larcade had acceded to her resignation.

Surprising Irene, Brandish had decided to remain in the Empire. She would act as the Empire's primary ambassador, but she also wanted to do what she could to help the Empire rebuild.

"What now, Ranma? Are you just going to laze about, become a stay-at-home dad?" Laxus teased gently.

Ranma snorted the very idea, with Gajeel and Natsu snickering at the image that idea conveyed. "Nah. I don't think staying home and just watching the kid, or rather, kids," he smiled tenderly down at Juvia, who smiled widely, "is for me any more than it is for Erza."

"All too true, future husband of mine," Erza snorted.

"Right? While I'll cheerfully take my turn watching them, it isn't enough of a goal for me. I don't know what I'll do, but I do know I want to put down roots. There's our formal weddings and everything, and beyond that, I'm thinking about joining the guild, maybe taking some easy jobs for a while like you normal mages." He smirked over at Laxus. "You wouldn't happen to know any guild that was accepting applicants, would you?"

The End

I could go on here, maybe show a few scenes from five years down the line or something? But frankly, I don't think it's necessary. The Answer to life is 42, after all.

More seriously, the battle with Acnologia was the penultimate scene, the last big-time enemy that Ranma's special talents and skills would be useful against beyond any doubt. I hope it was worth the wait. I also hope that the battle as it flowed made sense and that you enjoyed this story of Ranma in a strange land. I'll see you in my other stories, folks, and as always, please leave a review.