

Hey all! A day late, but considering that both Hiryō and Justlovereadin' were able to edit this, I think it was well worth the wait. Hiryō was able to point out several name-type mistakes, give me opinions on various issues with flow and character personalities. Justlovereadin' helped point out several mistakes in terms of flow and things already written that I had messed up, and found several cut-off sentences and word choice issues that I missed. I was even able to Grammarly the majority of the chapter!

So without further ado...

I don't draw and ain't Japanese.

**Edit 2/2:** Made a mistake when I pasted in the lemon segment from the wrong document. My bad, pointed out by Hiryō!

### Chapter 37: Draconic School

Kurnugi was a good listener, staying silent through most of the story, only asking questions occasionally about the types of magic that Ranma and the others described as they talked about how they had fought Acnologia. Not having run into them before, he was fascinated by the various magics the mages of Fairy Tail and their allies used. "Hmm... it sounds as if you humans have yet to regain any of the magi-tech of your ancestors, yet your magic has evolved well beyond what normal individual humans from the continent would have been able to do. Certainly not to the heights that ritualized or industrialized magics had reached but still, fascinating to hear about."

Ranma noted that every time any of them mentioned Acnologia by name, Kurnugi's expression twitched. It was as if he could act calmly enough about the fight itself, but whenever that name came up, it acted like a pinprick to his self-control.

"And so you came into the Blasted Lands, as you call it, to train yourselves, to try and find enemies that were on a scale with Acnologia and to work on larger attacks," Kurnugi mused when the story finished, tapping the sword at his side thoughtfully. "Understandable, I suppose. Dealing with the background magic of the Blasted Lands will also strengthen your natural defenses to magic as well. You may find yourself immune to small scale magical attacks, particularly gases or other things that could affect your senses."

"That's right. And now Juvia thinks that it is your turn to tell us something. How does a dragon come to be here? Why are those dragon-like creatures after you? And forgive our curiosity, but can you tell Juvia and her friends anything about why the Blasted Lands became as

they are?" Juvia asked, her voice ending on a somewhat plaintive note. That was something that all of them had wondered about occasionally. Even Natsu, not exactly a fan of learning history or anything like that, had wondered how the Blasted Lands had been created. What strange madness had driven humanity to such incredible extremes?

"Hmm... Well, the first is easy enough to answer. I was friends with the people who lived in Ven'auel long ago. They always welcomed me, and I helped their Occultic Smiths, their master forgers, with several projects. While I was never the master of metal that my friend Metalicana was." And here, the whimsical, almost smiling look on Kurnugi's face seemed to fade for a second, and he looked at Gajeel closely. "And you and I will talk at some point, Iron Dragon Slayer. As to the second, though, that one will take a tale, and you will need some background that you do not yet have to understand it."

Kurnugi gestured around them at the library and then out beyond into the city. "This is the city of Ven'auel, the city of water and forges, as I said. Yet they had another aspect to their character. They loved fantasy and stories." Here, Kurnugi's eyes lit up like a fanatic, reaching over to gently pat a few of the nearby books. "I am a lover of stories, and I was exceptionally pleased to find that the library here in Ven'auel had not been damaged over much when I arrived."

"Holy crap, he's a male version of Seilah!" Ranma muttered under his breath, nearly causing Jenny to laugh aloud, although it did earn him an elbow in the side. He subsided as Kurnugi went on.

"This is Varsdaska. It was once one of the biggest libraries beyond the city-states that were devoted to writing and preserving knowledge." Kurnugi shook his head to the side. "But of course, those city-states also were some of the most magically advanced, and that made them even more of a target than the rest. And when they were attacked, well, it was not with the 'clean' weapon that was used here in Ven'auel."

He paused then, removing his hands from the books and leaning back, crossing his arms and staring upwards at the ceiling. "You realize that while I was traveling around Baraketh, that is the name of the continent before the conflicts truly began, the various city-states were already arming themselves monstrously. I cannot tell you what led to such a ferocious level of armament, although I can recall that there had been tensions between groups of the city-states for long periods before that."

"So, it was a Cold War sort of thing, all sides ramping up their weapons production?" Ranma stated, thinking about that and how it kind of paralleled, in a way, the history of his own world. *I honestly figured it would be something like that.*

"A... a cold war, hmm... yes, that is an excellent turn of phrase. There were few enough alliances between the city-states that were worth the paper they were written on. But there was peace, if only because there were so many city-states, and everyone knew what they had to

lose if the war began. Why start a war if you did not think you could win, after all? But as the Cold War, to use your phrase again, continued, as I traveled, I could sense that people were beginning to warm up to the idea of various things that would drive them to war. Be it a desire to spread out due to overpopulation or feeling enclosed or even in danger from another city-state. Sheer arrogance also began to rear its head. Thoughtful leaders slowly became replaced by ones more certain in their own weapons and magic than was wise.”

Kurnugi frowned thoughtfully. “Looking back, I don’t think that, had things kept going in that direction, that anything would have happened to push things over the edge. I think that the humans of the various city-states would have calmed down. If not for two things. One, they severely overestimated how well their magical defenses worked. And two, there was a plague.”

Ranma was not the only one to gasp at that, and Kurnugi slowly shook his head from side to side. “It began simply enough. Some disease or another infected the animals around the cities of Dulok and Fen, causing massive famine throughout both of their lands. Their neighbors offered what aid they could, while also shutting down their own borders but that led straight into a food epidemic within those cities.”

Here, Kurnugi actually shivered. “And then the disease spread to the humans. I remember at least four, maybe five years of panic growing throughout Baraketh, as there did not seem to be any cure. Fen and Dulok were both pushed almost to the brink of ruin. They joined together under one government when the government of one of the city-states completely collapsed. That was **unheard** of: that one government would directly control two city-states. And at any other time, it might’ve caused uproar. But with the other city-states clamping down on their borders and even using some of the built-up magical weaponry to do it, it didn’t really come as any big surprise.”

“Eventually, someone found a cure for the plague. Someone in those two cities, I believe, although do not quote me there. Like many of the other dragons who moved around Baraketh at that time, I had fled from the human territories the moment I learned of this plague. Considering that many of the animals the humans kept for food and other things were magical in nature, there was no telling whether or not the disease could spread to us. And while dragons have incredible immune systems, it isn’t infallible.”

That was something of an overstatement, a fact that Gajeel and Natsu both recognized. Both of them had been sick several times over the years, even the simple cold occasionally. Ranma was the only one who looked nonplussed at the very idea, but then again, Ranma had ki healing.

One thing that Kurnugi had just said had grabbed Natsu’s attention even more than that point. “Hey, wait! You talk like there were a lot of dragons going around being friendly to humans at one point. Was one of them named Igneel!?”

“The fire Dragon King? Yes, he was somewhat friendly with humans. He had a bit of a temper, and he wasn’t all that bright...” Kurnugi said, smirking as Natsu seemed to growl at him for the insult while the others all around him nodded their heads sagely as if to say ‘like father like son.’ “But he was an affable sort. I only met him occasionally, and only once during this period we’re talking about. Whereas Metalicana was my friend, and the two of us often traveled together in those days. Like myself, he was very welcome here in Ven’auel and in other places. So much so that the people here and elsewhere had started to get past his prickly exterior.”

This caused another round of nods, excluding Gajeel and including Natsu this time, the same thought of ‘like father like son’ going through everyone’s heads as Gajeel snorted, looking away. “As if I’m anything like that bastard!”

“Really? I rather think you sound exactly like him. He was always stuck in his... I have read it being called the emo phase, or the internal teenage years,” Kurnugi said, gesturing once more to the books around them and causing Ranma and the others to break out into guffaws while Gajeel turned red in the face. “But once you got past that act, you found he had an incredibly decent mind and a knowledge of his element that no human could match.

“... I’d like to talk to you about him some other time, but we’re getting off-topic,” Gajeel said, trying to act as if he was affronted, while also smirking at the idea of his father being called an emo.

“Yes, back to my history lesson, I suppose. I wish more of the newspapers and recording devices used by reporters had survived, but that sort of thing was only routinely archived in a few of the city-states, and I have not found any yet here in Ven’auel or in any of the others I have spent time in over the centuries.” His expression smoothed out, and he continued to explain the Blasted Lands’ history, “It was a sudden reversal. One year, everyone was scared about the plague spreading. Two years later, the plague had been defeated. Fen and Dulok started to get back on their feet, the others breathed sighs of relief and many of them began to feel arrogant again. Arrogant that the disease had not come to their lands, arrogant that it had been defeated. They did not realize that Fen and Dulok were in such bad shape that they could not rebuild themselves. They needed immense resources from other city-states, and only a few were willing to provide any, now that the diseases had been beaten. And so, they went to war with their neighbors, launching preemptive strikes on them and then moving into their territory quickly to gather resources.”

Kurnugi sighed. “At first, it looked as if it would be contained to that one area. The city-states they attacked were utterly astonished. None of them had anticipated the action, although looking back, I have to wonder if that was hubris, blindness or ignorance. Again, I was not exactly close to the matter at hand. Regardless, Fen and Dulok smashed three others, gathering what resources they could to rebuild themselves, using the conquered populaces as slaves. But those three city-states had allies and the war began to spread. And then, some of the other city-states decided that it was time to take advantage of the chaos. What had been a slowly escalating war in one area of the continent quickly spread out.”

Kurnugi shook his head from side to side, his eyes far away for a moment. "I remember being a wing at one point heading to the city of Windemere. A city that was mainly devoted to working with plant life of all sorts. I believe it is the home of the Organically Composed Human Army System."

"The orcs?"

"Is that what you humans call them? I just call them green men. But yes, them. It was an extremely well-thought-out and designed system, and they had spread it throughout their territories to various small outposts. Even in those days, there were dangerous predators, bandits, and, of course, other city-states to defend against." Kurnugi then shook his head and turned back to speaking about the city of Windemere. "As I said, I was within sight of Windemere when a massive beam of magical energy crashed down from on high."

"Like the Etherion?" Jenny asked.

"Ah, yes. That is indeed the one. Perhaps some of the designers of that weapon apparently escaped the turmoil to Ishgar, the outer wilds as it and other peninsulas were called then." Kurnugi laughed quietly. "To think that such a small pinprick of land is now the only area connected to Baraketh where humans can live. But I don't doubt that system is still around, if in a far reduced fashion."

He then sobered, shaking his head, making a sound like metal scrapping on metal, and it was only then that Ranma realized Kurnugi's human form had lost some of its humanness. His hair now ended in tiny swords, and scales had appeared on his shoulders and hands, his emotions getting the better of him despite the dry way he was trying to explain the depths into which the humans of the continent had fallen. The noise was coming from the sword tips of his hair against Kurnugi's scales.

"Er, my man, don't look now, but your dragon side is showing," Ranma interjected, gesturing to Kurnugi's shoulders.

"OH, I'm so sorry, that is quite rude of me." With that, Kurnugi closed his eyes and concentrated. A moment passed, and then the dragon features disappeared, leaving Natsu to mumble about how that had been too cool, causing Ranma and the others to roll their eyes.

"Now, where was I? Ah, yes... the destruction of Windemere. The city's shields held for a few seconds and then were gone. Seconds later, so too was much of the city, seared to ash." Kurnugi sighed again, shaking his head. "And you must understand that if there is a word that encompasses the chaos and madness that gripped the continent, it is the word escalation. With every month that passed, it was as if whatever restrictions how the humans acted towards one another were being removed, the violence intensifying, the carnage and death spreading."

“That’s crazy! Surely, I mean, there’s no way...” Ranma paused, gathering his thoughts, and when he spoke, it was in a far more serious voice than the others normally heard from them. “Humans are good at war. We’re good at fighting, are good at tactics, strategy, all that stuff. But learning all that stuff also teaches most of us that there needs to be a check on that kind of thing, rules of engagement, lines you just don’t cross, and some things you just don’t accept. These city-states were not barbarians. They were not all xenophobes, racists or bigots. There had to be some that were willing to pull back from this madness if only to realize that attacking other city-states like this was removing what they hoped to gain in the war.”

“There, you speak to things I cannot answer. I only know what I observed. And what I observed was the humans falling into madness,” Kurnugi answered bluntly.

“It could have been that once the first city-state had been wiped out, it just made everyone else afraid. Everyone else felt as if they had to strike out quickly, holding nothing back, or they’d be overwhelmed?” Gajeel suggested. Of the others there, he was easily the most philosophical about combat, war and so forth.

“Again, I cannot say, although that makes some sense. I was in another city a few weeks later after Windemere was destroyed, and I could feel the tension. All the civilians suddenly realized that magical defenses could not stop magical offenses of that nature. Truly, the city-states were eggs surrounded by mountains of steel. If an attack could bypass that steel in some fashion, the egg would prove little defense. And every city had some long-range magic of mass destruction.”

Kurnugi grimaced. “And so it proved time and time again. The Material Disruption magic, which somehow took stones apart in some small, tiny, tiny form, turning anything it touched into bombs. Several cities, including the city that had come up with that weapon, were destroyed within a few hours of one another. Then there was the Blood Crystallization Depopulation System, which hit here in Ven’ael and in several other cities. That seemed to be a weapon that a few city-states had come up with either from stealing from one another or through secret alliances. A mind control magic that turned the city’s own defenders against it. The Solar Blade was the last orbital weapon built before the war began. It destroyed two city-states in one attack, moving from one to another, creating a deep chasm between them so wide and so deep that magma erupted from below the earth, spurting out in a wide portent that soon covered the ground in every direction around it. Like blood trying to clot a deep cut on a human body. Madness, utter madness. And worse, when the defenders of the city-state lost their homes, they simply went on the attack.”

Ranma grimaced, wondering about his own world. *Ugh, what would a group like, say, Japan’s navy, or worse, the army, torturers and assholes or rapists and mass murderers, what a choice, would’ve done if America had just... wiped out Japan, sinking the islands below the ocean...* “They would’ve fought to the last man, wouldn’t they? They would’ve simply attacked whatever enemy was closest, not caring about what happened to them, just wanting everyone else to pay.”

“I do not know if that happened in every case, but in many cases, yes. Sometimes, without a hand to guide them, magically augmented or automated defenses like the orcs simply continued to run, defending their territory or expanding mindlessly. And here in Ven’auel, there were the Men of Iron.”

“Men of Iron? Do you mean those giant robots? The ones with a command team in the head? We are staying in one a few days travel from here,” Gajeel said pointing in the direction he hoped was east. However, unlike Ranma, he really didn’t have much sense of general directions like that.

“Indeed, that sounds like a Man of Iron. There were around a hundred of them, although I might not be remembering correctly. Ven’auel had attempted to stay neutral, simply defending its borders with the Men of Iron and other defenses, devoting much of its time to trying to figure out a means of defending against other city-states’ long-range magical attacks. But it did not work. As I said, the Blood Crystallization Depopulation System struck here, killing all within the city in a... a truly horrible manner. I was not here for that, but I was close to another city struck with the same system after the actual violence began to subside and saw the result left behind. The blood of the people struck by that wave of energy slowly turn to stone, starting from their blood outward...”

Kurnugi was not the only one who shuddered at that, with Juvia, in particular, wondering how that would feel, your very blood turning into stone, until even your heart was frozen in stone. “They died screaming. Eggs guarded by steel mountains, as I said. And then the Men of Iron simply attacked everything.”

“W, when did the magical saturation start?” Juvia asked, while the others were all looking at one another, somewhat shaken by the revelation of how humanity had acted so crazed.

“Two years into the conflict,” Kurnugi stated, sounding far more certain about that than anything else bar the start of the conflict. “Small things at first, but then, larger. The very land became soaked with magic, the air heavy with it. It impacted animals, large and small first, then humans, and finally, even their rune or ritual-based magical attacks did not quite function as they should have. But by then, it was too late to stop. Too many militaries had been suddenly deprived of anyone holding the reins or any reason to hold back. The violence continued for another ten years or so, with magic continuing on a downward spiral.” Kurnugi shook his head. “It was at that point that myself, my mother Celine, and other dragons who had been within the continent began to flee. While we were immune to it, we are not entirely immune to many of the long-range magical attacks.”

“Where was Ishgar in all this?” Juvia inquired. “Juvia knows our nations were not around back then, but even so.”

“Nothing. It was not colonized at the time. As I said, I know that at least a few groups of refugees began to try and flee to it late in the war of mutual destruction. But what came of most of them, I know not. Indeed, my guess about the Etherion is only that, a guess. I do not know much of the early history of the peninsula myself, although I believe that they were aided by the Sage, Belserion and he was instrumental in helping them to create what amounted to the first nation-state of the peninsula. Such as it was back then.”

“We know there were other nations back there in Ishgar,” Ranma interjected. “I know that Crocus was built on the top of another city, and I know that Belserion was part of another nation called Dragnof.”

“But those rose to prominence nearly a hundred years or more after the destruction in Baraketh finally began to die out. And then came the northern dragons.” Kurnugi shook his head slowly from side to side. “I had known that there were other dragons out there since I was a hatchling, even though my mother never spoke of the northern dragons. She and I came from the deep south. I was born on a somewhat small island down that way, situated along the river Ashkala. Have you been able to penetrate the continent far enough to see the river? If you think how the magic has affected the air and the land is amazing, how it affected the Ashkala River is frankly appalling.”

“We haven’t seen any rivers. Streams, a few ponds and a whole lot of rain is all,” Ranma reported, looking intrigued at the idea that there was a massive river out there. *If it had an island large enough to support a Dragon somewhere along its length, the thing must be way wider than even the Yangtze and Nile combined!*

“Focus, Ranma-sama,” Juvia said, reaching one arm over to gently tug at Ranma’s pigtail. “You were saying something about the dragons from the northern continent?”

“Yes. On the northern continent, dragons had come to rule from one edge to the other. Everything else was prey. That was how they saw the world. They did not interact with the rest of the world overmuch until the war here on Baraketh began to end. After that, they started to spread into this area and to hunt humans and other beasts. Soon, that activity spread even to the survivors in Ishgar and elsewhere. Soon, the northern dragons concentrated on Ishgar, where humans had begun to rebuild new nations for themselves, such as Dragnof. Not even caring that the humans were doing so with the aid of other dragons.”

Kurnugi shook his head, looking at the humans with some amusement despite his grim tone. “For my part, I’ve never understood why so many of my brethren thought humans were tasty. I simply cannot see it myself. But they thought you humans were simply another kind of prey species. It did not matter to them that you could build, think and use magic. You were not dragons, and thus, you were lesser in their minds. That belief soon spread to dragons from other territories, even to many who had been wary of humans before the war in Barakesh. But not all dragons fell into that mindset. Metalicana, myself. Belserion was closely involved with



humans both before and after the war. My mother as well, although frankly she... I have read the phrase cold fish, and from the first moment I came upon it, I knew it described her.”

“It sounds almost like you’re estranged from your mother,” Jenny mused before a horrible thought occurred to her. “It isn’t your mother who is sending those dragon creatures down here, is it? We haven’t somehow found ourselves in the middle of a family squabble or anything so stupid, right?”

Kurnugi looked both affronted and disgusted by the very idea, his face actually turning green for a moment. “No! Whoever did that, I... ugh! No, although ‘mother’ is part of that, that **creature’s** name, she is certainly not **my** mother. And I will ask you to make that kind of insinuation again. Or else you will find my hospitality rapidly decreasing.”

So warned, Jenny subsided, actually bowing her head in apology. Kurnugi stared at her for a few more seconds before turning back to the original discussion. “At any rate. Many of us dragons joined with the humans, moved by a feeling of empathy or simply self-interest. After all, humans can create so many things that we dragons could not. I know many dragons were actually motivated by food. Like myself, they could never understand why you humans seem so tasty to so many when you actually created so many more tasty things yourselves.”

Ranma and the others all snorted that, and Kurnugi went on in a much better mood than a second ago. “We were led by Belserion and Igneel. One was the organizer, the other...” He suddenly grinned over at Natsu, his eyes not on Natsu’s eyes but rather on his chest for some reason. “Was the blunt object. The one leading all of the fights but never really organizing anything or leading other dragons in a meaningful manner despite calling himself the ‘Fire Dragon King’.”

While the others all laughed, Natsu took this easily, shrugging his shoulders. “Why’d anyone wanna bother with leading other people or giving out orders when you could do something yourself? Being king doesn’t mean you’re all about, you know, waving your hand in declaring someone else should do something, making laws or any of that crap. It’s all about being the strongest!”

“And that right there, ladies and gentlemen, is positive proof that Natsu is more dragon than human,” Ranma quipped, causing Jenny, Juvia, Gajeel and even Happy to laugh, while Natsu simply looked proud, and Kurnugi started, staring at Ranma for a moment, before going back to looking at Gajeel and Natsu.

When his guests’ laughter subsided, Kurnugi went on. “At any rate, we fought the dragons of the north numerous times, but only in small groups, with the humans doing what they could. But slowly, the Northerners began to attack Ishgar and the humans there in greater numbers. It took several months for us to realize why. They had declared a Great Hunt against the humans. Whichever dragon ate the most humans would become their king, the acknowledged strongest and most powerful regardless of element type or past grievances.”

“And then Acnologia happened?” Ranma guessed.

“Indeed,” Kurnugi said, his desire to keep speaking on the subject waning. “A large number of dragons from the north came together in one attack on a city, whose name I cannot recall, and then Acnologia happened. He’d already been given Dragon Slayer powers, and he used them to good effect, slaughtering many of the dragons who had come to that festival. He bathed in their blood as the other Dragon Slayers fought elsewhere throughout Ishgar. And whereas the other Dragon Slayers all tried to fight the transformation, Acnologia gave himself to it. Whereas for most, it took decades to succumb to their dragonification, it took him merely a few years to become a real dragon. After that, Acnologia began to hunt every other dragon down throughout Ishgar, both dragons and Dragon Slayers. Belserion died, as did my mother and several others.”

Kurnugi shrugged. “I am not too proud to admit that I fled. Metalicana disappeared along with Igneel and a few others, while ancient Typhon retreated into the ocean, far away from any conflict. I at least attempted to fight Acnologia first, but when he nearly took my head off and would had, if not for the distraction of another dragon named Garneticus, I decided I could not face him in open battle. I retreated, and, I am not too proud to say it. That, that **monster’s** power was far beyond mine at the time. I seemed to be but a hatchling to him. And even now, after training and growing in power in the ruins of Baraketh, I doubt I could match him.”

He looked at Ranma closely, shaking his head from side to side. “Throughout those years of slaughter, no other dragon or Dragon Slayer could do more than knock Acnologia back on his heels or the airborne equivalent. He sustained a few minor wounds, but they all healed quickly. Yet you, you took one of his hands. That is a delightful tale to me. It also shows that perhaps you and your mages have a chance of doing what any number of dragons could not: working together to slay that monster.”

“Does that mean you can help us in some way?” Ranma leaped at that. *YES. More training and an actual dragon-sized sparring partner!*

“Perhaps. We will speak of that tomorrow.”

It was with a start that Ranma and the others realized they had been talking for hours. Looking around, Ranma could see that the sun was nearly gone. The shadows around them had lengthened by a tremendous degree, and none of them had noticed, as engrossed in the exchange of histories as they were.

“I’ve been talking long enough and most particularly about serious matters,” Kurnugi went on, looking at Gajeel. “Instead, I would like to hear of this one and how well my old friend did as a father. Frankly, I cannot see him as such. Hah! Of all of us, I could only really see Grandeeney as someone who could be an excellent mother. One to put my own to shame for

certain. But fatherhood among dragons is even rarer. Metalicana was a decent friend, but a father, no.”

For a second, Kurnugi smiled at some hidden amusement or joke in those words. Seeing that, Ranma wondered if perhaps there had been a rivalry between Selene and Grandeeney. Judging by how the spirit of Belserion had reacted to Wendy’s scent and Atlas Flame had talked about her, he knew that she had been something of a celebrity among dragons. *Or maybe even an idol.*

“Now, tell me, what horrible habits did he teach you?” Kurnugi went on. “How often did you have to look after yourself, and did he understand that you were not only small but squishy? I honestly cannot imagine Metalicana as a father even of a dragon kit, let alone a human.”

Gajeel snorted, leaning forward eagerly. “Hah, he did always seem to think I was made out of metal. And I have got some stories to tell you. And to this day I’m grateful I wasn’t a baby but a toddler when he took me in.”

“Hey, let me get in on this too,” Natsu snickered, with a drowsy Happy on his head. The cat had fallen asleep during the discussion and only now roused himself to shout ‘aye sir’ to emphasize Natsu’s words. “I’ve got some funny stories to tell of my time with Igneel. And you said you’d met him. Maybe you can tell me something about him, too.”

“That sounds like an excellent way to pass the time, so long as the two of you start first. As I said, I’ve done enough talking for a bit.” Kurnugi smiled at the two young men and then looked over the others, his tone turning more formal, even haughty. “I do not own the city, but it is my home, and as such, I will give you all leave to move around the area so long as you do not disturb anything,” he seemed to pause then thinking, before adding judiciously, “unless something else attacks you first. In which case, you may defend yourself so long as you do not damage any of the buildings. I consider this entire city something like a monument to the friends I had made among the humans within and would take it poorly should you damage it.”

Hearing the warning tone in the sword-wielding dragon in human form, Ranma and the others nodded while Jenny and Juvia looked at one another, eyebrows rising in sudden interest. It was Jenny who spoke up, as Ranma and the others answered Kurnugi’s words in the affirmative. “In that case, I suggest we all spread out a bit. We’ve been cooped up in our little base for a little over a year now. Let’s get some space.”

At those words, Ranma’s eyes widened as well, but he quickly regained control of his expression, while Gajeel simply snorted. Even Natsu only took a few seconds to get what Jenny was really after. Moreover, wonder of wonders, he didn’t say anything, merely nodding his head with a bland, “That sounds like a good idea,” showing a certain amount of maturity that Natsu would never have shown before the battle on Tenrou Island.

“I can get behind the idea, although we might want to try and do something about those weird cleaner critters we saw,” Ranma said, thinking with his big head rather than his little one for a second. “We should also maybe look into a few houses nearby and see if we can find an actual kitchen and get it up and running... without the ambient magic making it explode, turning into purple pygmies, or come alive and try to eat us instead.”

“On that point, I cannot help you, although the Head Librarian had a house just to the right of the leftmost side of the library if you enter from the front entrance. As for the cleaning critters, as you put it, there is a way to write you into the book of citizenship for Ven’auel that we can look into tomorrow,” Kurnugi said, waving his hand early at the problem before pointing at Gajeel. Ranma noticed the sword dragon slayer liked to use their words back at them for some reason. “And now, I demand some stories of my own! Ones that are actually pleasant, if you please.”

Ranma asked if any of the others were hungry and quickly got out some of their pre-prepared meat sticks and other things, leaving them there with Gajeel, Natsu and Kurnugi. Gajeel asked him to leave behind all of the boy’s camping gear as well, since Ranma had kept that in his Requip Space as well and Ranma did so.

They would probably set up their own tent within the library to be closer to Kurnugi, who both Gajeel and Natsu were fascinated by, above and beyond the fact that he was a transformed dragon in human shape. The knowledge that he had met their parents in person lit a fire under both boys, with Gajeel being just as interested as Natsu to the point he showed it almost as much as the far more emotive fire user. Not so with Ranma, since the only mention of Typhon Kurnugi made was when Kurnugi said he had fled into the ocean. And Ranma had never been as close to Typhon as all three of the other Dragon Slayers were to their parents. *Honestly, I probably would be more interested in tales of Belserion, but it seemed as if Kurnugi treated Belserion with more respect than friendship.*

Jenny, Juvia and Ranma exited the library the same way they’d entered on their own, and within a few paces of exiting out of the whole, Juvia was in Ranma’s arms, kissing him hungrily, one leg wrapping around his waist as she began to slowly move her hips against his center. Ranma quickly returned the favor, both hands going to her rear, practically lifting her off the ground as he kissed her back just as hungrily. Jenny also got in on the act, leaning in to hug them both from the side, kissing one, then the other on the necks, collarbones and jaws until they broke their own kiss and turned her attention to her.

A certain problem had reared its head occasionally over the past year as the group camped out in the head of the Man of Iron. For one thing, what the designers of the Men of Iron thought were soundproofed rooms had not considered the massively enhanced hearing of Dragon Slayers. If the trio of lovers were not careful, certain noises could be heard in the command room where Natsu and Gajeel had camped out from the flag room. For another, once the visor was closed, the air circulation within the Man of Iron was exceptionally bad, and did not really work well at getting rid of smells.

(Any kind of smells. Which occasionally had been a problem entirely removed from the lover's situation.)

While they had run into that problem early on thanks to Ranma creating that muck that helped keep the bugs away, none of the lovers had realized that it would become a problem later on, both during and after lovemaking. Not even Juvia was immune to the glares and sideways looks that they got the first time the trio of lovers had gone all the way since moving in. Even with Ranma and Juvia able to provide water to bathe, that still put a damper on their lovemaking.

In particular the need to stay quiet. While Jenny was the only one of the two who routinely shouted 'words of encouragement', Juvia was in no way silent.

Another major problem, though, was the fact that the group had run out of morning-after pills and condoms somewhat quickly, despite the amount Ranma had brought along in his Requip Space. While Ranma could make a kind of primitive rubber, he and the girls were both terrified of Jenny or Juvia getting pregnant while in the Blasted Lands. There was no telling what the ambient magic would do to a baby, even protected in the womb of the mother. To say nothing of how hard it would be to give birth or care for the baby afterward. In addition, what if, while pregnant, Jenny or Juvia passed through one of the Wild Magic Zones? One that transformed them? How would that affect the baby? Juvia knew for a fact, she would lose her ability to transform into water, having discussed that with other full-body transformation-type mages in the past.

This obviously meant that all of their lovemaking was either non-penetrative or with Ranma in his girl form. Both options were bad when it came time to interact with the world beyond the lover's tent, alas. Both Gajeel and Natsu had gotten in touch with their draconic sides far more over the adventurer's time in the Blasted Lands, and this had an impact none of them had foreseen, when the pair of currently unaccompanied Dragon Slayers smelled Ranma's 'mark' on the girls. The smell somehow lingered despite the lovers' best efforts, a scent only the three Dragon Slayers could pick up, well above simply the smell of the trio's exertions. It was as if the scent was the equivalent of a dog marking his territory to the Dragon Slayers. Gajeel and Natsu just could not help it. If they smelled that, they became surly, annoyed and angry simply by being near the two girls or Ranma.

And in a way, it was more of a problem, when Ranma was in his female body. Afterward, Ranma gave off the scent of a dragoness in heat without any male marking her. The first time Natsu tried to smell Ranma up, while Ranma was in her female form had the two brawling in a knockdown, dragged-out brawl that had done more to damage the control room than the group had done to make it a living space. Gajeel had at least had the restraint to not just come up behind Ranma in his female form and start smelling at his neck.

But now, they would be able to spread out, to stay away from one another until the draconic scent or whatever faded. That was a very, very good thing in all three lover's minds.

Ranma didn't even look up from kissing Juvia as Jenny slowly pulled away, grabbing his and Juvia's hands and leading them away.

With Jenny pulling them along, the trio began to enter some of the nearby houses, one after another. Most turned out to be cafes or offices, but a few were actual houses, although it was kind of hard to tell, since they were occasionally interspersed with a shop or smithy.

In one such, the door to the smithy was open, and within heat radiated, showing something was still going on with. That was startling enough that Ranma pulled out of his kiss-created fugue, to head in that direction. Looking inside, Ranma blinked in the firelight from an active forge. A little creature peered back at Ranma, the thing looking like a cross between an imp and a series of bellows and hammers all mixed and conjoined together, having hammers, tongs and other implements rather than hands.

Behind Ranma Jenny hesitantly waved at the creature. It blinked, waved back with several very strange-looking tools, and then went back to work, piling up bits of metal in the doorway.

"Well, at least it didn't attack us," the blonde chuckled weakly, then looked toward the stairway leading upwards. "You don't suppose there are any of those creatures upstairs?"

"Judging by how hot they keep the smithy, I don't think so," Ranma said, sniffing the air, trying to get past the intoxicating scene of his two lovers. "Come on, let's head up. I can't smell anything up there but normal mildew and I'm tired of looking around for a place to camp out."

#### **Lemon start:**

Still kissing and feeling up one another over their clothing, the trio had some difficulty going up the stairs to the second floor, but they were eventually able to get there. The first room they looked into turned out to be a bathroom, the sigh of which had both girls staring in unabashed delight at the tub, the shower and what looked like the rusted remains of several different nozzles. While Ranma and Juvia could see to all the group's water-based needs, there was a vast difference between that and a series of showerheads certain to have dozens of different settings.

The **look** they gave Ranma was quite eloquent, and he shrugged his shoulders. "I can't promise anything, but I'll try. And come to think of it, there might be stuff like soap or something around here as well that could have been preserved by spells or simply being in containers that could've survived this long, right?"

That earned him an even deeper kiss from Jenny, followed by a full long tongue kiss from Juvia, which felt almost like she was trying to suck his tonsils out. Meanwhile, Jenny turned them away from the bathroom, tugging and pushing her lovers along, turned towards one of

the other doorways. All the doors in this house, bar the one to the smithy, seemed to have been made of wood and simply rotted away over time.

This one seemed to be the master bedroom, but it wasn't usable. The bed had completely collapsed at some point, leaving only bits of cloth and wood still visible in a pile in the light of Ranma's glowing fingers, a ki trick that meant he had no need of a torch even though the sun was now down and he was fully night out. The three of them could also see the slight distortion in the air of a Wild Magic Zone.

The next bedroom had also seen much of its furniture collapsing due to the passage of time, and yet the shape of the bed was still there because here it had been formed out of the stone of the wall of the house. There was still a problem, though: the bed was too small for all three of them, something Ranma pointed out between kisses. "There's no way we'll all fit on that. We might have to sleep in the tent again..."

There was no real hardship in his mind, but Jenny and Juvia wanted to spread out a bit more. The tent was magnificent, admittedly, but with all of the cooking supplies and other camping gear in there, including several small knickknacks that Ranma and Natsu had gathered since entering the Blasted Lands, it was a bit crowded.

The two girls exchanged a glance. Whatever mental discussion occurred, Julia lost, pulling away from Ranma with a final kiss to his lips and then her his jaw before she whispered, "If Ranma could bring out the tent, Juvia will set it up out in the hallway. Then we will take out all of those cushions and things and set them up on the bed and next to it. That way, there will be enough space for all three of us, and we can still use the tent for cooking."

"For now," Ranma murmured, "I want to see if..."

At that point, Jenny kissed him, halting his words even as he began to use his Requip Space to pull out the tent and things. This pushed his ability to multitask to the limits, as Jenny was in no way a docile kisser. Her tongue dueled with Ranma's in his mouth, then hers, pressing her body against him, then pulling away before rubbing her chest lightly against him. Jenny's hands were also always moving, demanding that he do the same to her. Moreover, while Juvia had agreed that she would be the one to set up the tent, she hadn't pulled away from her lovers yet. Instead, she had taken to kissing Ranma's neck and collarbone before moving over to kiss Jenny, reveling in the different textures of their skins, the little mewl that escaped Jenny when Juvia licked her ear.

Eventually though, he was able to remove the tent, tossing it in its magically enhanced bag out onto the floor of the hall. With a little grumble of annoyance, Juvia pulled away to follow it while Ranma grabbed at Jenny's shirt, yanking it upwards. Understanding what he wanted, Jenny stepped back lightly, allowing Ranma to tug her blouse off, whereupon he tossed it into a corner.

Then Ranma's hands were in her hair, pulling her into another kiss that took her breath away, pulling a moan from her even as his hands went to unclasp her bra and then down to unbuckle her pants. Jenny's hands were busy, too, pulling Ranma's shirt out of his trousers and then up and off of his head as well, interrupting their kiss for only a second before they were kissing once more.

Later, Jenny stood back, kicking off her leggings into the same corner where Ranma had tossed her shirt, and from the light of a lamp that Juvia had somehow set up without either of them noticing. Ranma stared at Jenny's body as she stood there, hopping on one foot to remove her hiking boots and sock from one leg, her panties having come off with her leggings.

If anyone who had known Jenny as simply the model Jenny Realight saw Jenny now, they would have been utterly astonished at the change that had come over the woman since first getting involved with Ranma and then this past year in the Blasted Lands. There were still hints of that model. Somehow, Jenny still retained enough lipstick to use it every day after so many months, as well as nail polish.

But in the main, Jenny had left that persona behind. The tiny scars on her forearms and hands were not the only ones. She had a few on her side near her waist, a waist that was much thinner and far more toned than it had ever been before, and another one just below her breasts. Those breasts were still magnificent, even more perky than they had been when Jenny was a model, still capped with light pink nipples that begged for Ranma's attention. There was also a little scar on her ass, visible as she turned around in place in order to keep her balance.

Seeing that, Ranma knelt down right behind her and began to lick and bite at her rear, causing Jenny to gasp as the leg she'd had in the air fell back down. She nearly lost her balance, leaning forward to put her hands on the frame of the bed to stay upright. "Ranma, nnnn, I still need to remove my boot, darn itTTTT!"

Ranma bit down lightly on her rear, giving her a light smack with one hand while his other hand worked gently up her inner thigh. He rested two fingers on her outer labia for a moment, moving them back and forth there for just a second before pulling back so that Ranma could grip her hips with both hands. Leaning in, he nibbled and licked at her thighs from behind, then moved back upwards. He took several moments just lavishing kisses on her rear around the scar there, then did the same to the ones on her side before moving back upward, leaving Jenny's sex throbbing, almost pulsing with need as he leaned in to hug her from behind.

The feel of Ranma kissing her scars, the most intimate sign that he could give her that he did not care a wit about them was almost enough to make Jenny swoon, and she turned, kissing him ardently on the lips. With one hand in his hair she held him there as she leaned back and away from the bed, just reveling in his touch, in the way he slowly took command of her until she spotted Juvia, who she had just seen reenter the room carrying several of the large pillows from the tent in front of her. Seeing the other woman, Jenny lifted her leg almost straight up like a gymnast, wiggling her still-confined foot at Juvia.



Tossing the pillows into the bed frame to join several others she had already piled up next to it, the bluenette filled the frame of the bed from head to foot, finishing the task of enlarging the 'bed' so it could accommodate all three of them. With that done, Juvia moved over and gently took Jenny's foot in her hand as the taller girl lowered her leg, pulling off Jenny's hiking boot and sock. Glancing her way, Jenny barely got out a nod of thanks done before freezing, stunned as always by the sight of the other girl naked. *She must have changed even as she was setting up the tent.*

Ranma also looked over at Juvia, taking in the differences between the two women with delight and awe that two such amazing women had decided he was good enough to love them. Jenny was thinner, tougher looking, stronger looking now, although she had always done so in comparison to Juvia. Juvia didn't look as... Not soft but curvaceous as the woman had been before coming to the Blasted Lands, yet her breasts were still fuller than Jenny's, a little rounder although not as perky. Yet she also had a few scars.

Not as many, obviously, but the ones that were there were noticeable: a few on her right breast from a monster bite, another claw mark on her thigh. Both had infuriated Ranma when they happened, but they had also spurred Juvia's training. Since the ambush that had caused those scars, Juvia had taken her water transformation to the point where she could actually heal wounds by simply shifting into her water form, keeping the image of her undamaged body in her mind as she transformed back.

Juvia's lips were also a little fuller than Jenny's but not adorned with any kind of lipstick. Although she had occasionally used some nail polish to make her nails blue to match her hair.

Pulling forward and out of Ranma's hug, Jenny shifted around, kissing him ardently on the lips, while Juvia got involved, working Ranma's trousers down to his ankles before standing up and leaning in to kiss Jenny on the lips, as Ranma pulled back to work on Jenny's neck. The blue-haired woman then moaned throatily as Ranma switched to her, nipping, licking and biting at her collarbone and neck, while she grabbed his shaft with both hands. Having already seen that it was hard and ready, provided a little bit of water to act as a bit of lubricant. Just like using her water form to heal, Juvia had discovered she could change the viscosity of the water she became to create a kind of lubricant.

Not that much was needed at this point, as Ranma's pre-cum did the job very nicely. She smeared her palm over the bulbous head of his cock for a few seconds, then worked her hand up and down his shaft, and then back up, repeating the action until his entire cock glistened with pre-cum. Then she pulled back, ignoring Ranma's growl of protest as she moved down their bodies, licking at Jenny's nipple, then Ranma's, her hands moving off of his shaft and up his body for a second, reveling in the muscles there. Ranma was even more defined than he had been before entering the Blasted Lands, but more than that, his muscles were just larger all around, a sign that he had aged over that year, with wider shoulders and more muscles elsewhere.

*And I see that he has also shaved recently,* Juvia thought, breathing out a loud, “Ranma-sama,” as her hands fondled his balls for a second, delighting in the fact that there was no hair down there just like there wasn’t for Jenny, whose pretty little vulva was very obviously wet in the light from her own arousal.

For just a second, Juvia watched as Ranma’s hand trailed from Jenny’s breasts downward. Soon, a single finger stroked along Jenny’s pussy, coming away with her juices glistening on it. Juvia leaned in, licking the digit, then working her tongue along it before pulling back and doing the same to Ranma’s cockhead, causing Ranma to growl and buck his hips.

Juvia pulled back just a little bit, looking up as Ranma and Jenny began another kissing duel. Jenny rapidly lost, leaning into Ranma, his arms around her, his hands on her rear, squeezing and pulling her even tighter against his side, but he had shifted his hips accommodatingly, so that Juvia could more easily access his shaft. She watched as one hand began to move up Jenny’s back and around to her breast while the other one shifted to her hip and then around to her front. Jenny simply concentrated on kissing Ranma, her own arms limp around his shoulders.

Then Juvia turned back to matters closer at hand, eyeing the long, veiny shaft in front of her for a second before working her hands once more up and down, her mouth opening.

Ranma groaned into Jenny’s mouth as he felt Juvia’s mouth on his cock, first just licking the head for a few seconds, then mouthing it, before pulling back and then shifting forward, taking his cock entirely down her throat in a way that Jenny, and before her, Erza, had never been able to do. Perhaps because of her water form, Juvia had no kind of gag reflex, and delighted in getting Ranma off with her mouth. With Ranma playing Jenny’s body like a violinist, Juvia began to buck her head back and forth, loud moans and whimpers coming from both girls to accompany Ranma’s deeper growls and murmurs of, “Damn Juvia, feels good!” when he pulled back from Jenny’s lips.

How long the three of them stayed that way, with two of them closing in on their orgasms, none of them could tell. Nor would they have cared, really, not unless they were attacked.

Which had actually happened. There was a reason why the lovers had not simply taken to leaving the Man of Iron when they needed some ‘them’ time.

The first to go over the edge was Jenny. Ranma had been playing with her, pushing her ever closer, then slowly backing off, moving his hands to less sensitive areas. Now, with one hand up in Jenny’s hair, gently stroking the back of her head and then behind one ear, Ranma’s other hand dipped low once more. Instead of simply stroking along her pussy lips, two fingers suddenly penetrated Jenny’s moist cleft, curling just right to send Jenny over the edge.

She threw her head back from their kiss, her voice a hoarse shout of delight. “Ranma, cumming!”

Ranma had also been pushed close to the edge by Juvia, although there it had not been deliberate on Juvia’s part, simply his endurance only being slowly eroded over time by the magic of her mouth. Hearing her sister-wife cumming, however, Juvia pulled back, then thrust her head forward once more, taking Ranma’s entire shaft into her mouth and down her throat, adding a suction action to it along with working the bottom of his shaft with her tongue as best she could.

That was enough to push Ranma over the edge as well. The hand in Jenny’s hair released its grip, as she fell against Ranma’s side, traveling down until his fingers wound through Juvia’s hair in turn, holding her in place gently yet inexorably as he grunted and came down her throat. Ranma kept her there for the first few spurts, then released her, his hand just gently patting Juvia’s head as he breathed in deeply as his cock continued to fire bursts of cum into Juvia’s mouth.

Humming in delight, Juvia slowly pulled back, letting the next few shots fill her mouth, gulping it down even as she pulled back. Even so, she still had a mouthful of cum as she unsteadily pushed herself to her feet, leaning in to give a slowly recovering Jenny a kiss. The two kissed deeply, passing Ranma’s cum between them, before Juvia pulled back, briefly changing her body into its water form to get rid of the taste of Ranma’s cum so that she could kiss Ranma in a moment. While both girls were more than fine with kissing Ranma after he had gone down on them, the same could not be said for Ranma, who hated even the faintest hint of his semen on their mouths.

The two girls switched positions, with Ranma now kissing Juvia as Jenny worked her way down his body, rubbing her hardened nipples against his chest and then down further. Capturing his long shaft between her breasts, Jenny began to give Ranma a boob job, leaning down to lick and suckling at his cock head whenever her movements caused it to appear out from between her cleavage.

For a few moments, Ranma was simply enjoying kissing Juvia as he had Jenny, kissing her until she ran out of breath, then moving down to her neck while both of them nipped and looked at one another. He especially enjoyed how Juvia let out long moaning sighs of, “Ranma-sama...” every few moments. But as he felt himself begin to become sensitive once more down below, he decided to move things along. Whereas before, his hands had simply been moving up and down Juvia’s back and only occasionally around to her chest to fondle her breasts, now both hands moved down, gripping her by the hips and lifting her up into the air. There, he held her for a second, before letting her legs fall down onto his shoulders, leaning in to begin to lick and nibble at her pussy.

Ranma had accumulated quite a lot of experience going down on all three of his lovers before he, Jenny and Juvia had left Erza behind to enter the Blasted Lands. And Juvia had

already been worked up to a tremendous degree. Thus, it did not take him long to push Juvia to the point where her hands clamped down into Ranma's hair to the point where she was in danger of dislodging the Dragon whisker, her legs wrapped around his head, and her low moans became near shrieks of delight. "Ranma-sama, Ranma-samaAAA!!!"

She came as Ranma plunged his tongue deeper into her pussy, adding three fingers from one of his hands as he did. The added stimulation was enough to throw Juvia over the edge like a stone from a catapult, and she came **hard**, squirting into Ranma's mouth and over his face.

For a moment, Juvia simply thrashed in midair, her back arched, her arms splayed out as her body spasmed through her orgasm and then a series of aftershocks as Ranma kept on gently licking and sucking at her pussy. His fingers continued to move in and out of her, her legs still locked around one another behind Ranma's head. However, as she started to slowly come down from that high, her legs released their grip, and Ranma gently pulled his hand away from Juvia's pussy, that hand shifting to join its fellow on Juvia's back.

They moved slowly to her hips, then pulled Juvia away from his head. Reaching over Jenny's kneeling form, Ranma laid Juvia out on the now enlarged-by-pillows bed. Still twitching occasionally and almost utterly out of it from her orgasm, Juvia made no protest to this, although Jenny did when Ranma reached down and gently pushed her away from his cock. That protest ended as she saw the mess Ranma had made of Juvia, and the blonde crawled up and over the foot of the bed before laying out on top of Juvia, pressing the shorter girl's body down into the pillows as she began to lick and nibble at Juvia's breasts.

Behind her, Jenny could feel Ranma moving into position. Not to penetrate either girl, much to her thankfulness and annoyance, but to slide his shaft in between them so that it rubbed against the top of their pussies where they met as she lay on top of Juvia, her hips to either side of the other girl's already open legs.

Feeling that, Jenny threw back her head and moaned, staring ahead of her at the wall, which the bed merged into, before the thought that something was missing came to her. And not just the feeling of Ranma plowing into her as she very much wanted him to do. No, even in her hormone-addled state, Jenny knew that would be a very bad idea. Rather, the former model suddenly realized that she missed Erza being there with them.

Jenny had felt moments like this before: when they were training, traveling or simply joking around the campfire with the others. That someone was missing from the relationship. But now, in the throes of ecstasy, she realized that Erza should also be there with them. Jenny missed the feel of hugging Erza, of looking up at the redhead from between her legs, of seeing Titania, the queen of the Fairies and undisputed alpha of the trio, fighting Ranma for dominance. That was when making love with them was always the hottest when the two of them really tried to dominate one another. *Juvia's a sub and no help whatsoever, and while I might be a switch, I can't keep up with Ranma in either form for long.*

At that point, Ranma's cock shaft began to rub against her clit, and all thoughts of the missing redhead left Jenny with a moan. She leaned down to kiss a slowly recovering Juvia. Both girls worked their breasts against one another, one hand moving in between their bodies to pinch and tweak nipples, while Ranma did the same from behind, occasionally adding a slap to the rears or finger into their pussies.

How long the trio of lovers stayed in this position, none of them knew or cared. When Ranma began to feel himself coming, he leaned over Jenny, leaning around her to capture Juvia's lips as Jenny was busy licking and nibbling at Juvia's collarbone. His helping became faster, his fingers, with one hand on either girl's pussies, thrusting in faster and harder. Ranma alternated both the speed and the movement of his fingers very slightly within their holes, adding to the simulation.

Juvia was the first to crescendo again, and she was slowly recovering as Ranma had removed his hand from her when Jenny and Ranma both came. Ranma's cock fired again like an artillery gun, the cum blasting up between their bodies, covering both girls in the sticky mess from near their navels up to their breasts. The last few shots even appeared out from where their breasts were pressed together.

Jenny slowly rolled off of Juvia, grateful for the extra space that a series of pillows had made on top of the side of the bed there, watching as Juvia splashed Ranma with a water ball to the face. Both girls had taken it upon themselves to make certain that they showed Ranma equal amounts of love in both of his forms every time they were together. This was no different, although once more, Jenny could simply not take her eyes away from Ranma as the change happened or after.

Like his male body, Ranma's female body had changed over the past year. His muscles were much more visible than before, and although Ranma's female form hadn't grown taller, it had grown in the shoulders and hips, becoming even more womanly. Her breasts were smaller than either Juvia's or Jenny's but were almost ridiculously perky. *And thankfully, the fact that Ranma shaves down there also carries over from one form to the other,* Jenny thought, her gaze locking on the tiny, tiny pink slit between Ranma's legs, pulsing with arousal and dripping wetness down her legs.

For her part, Ranma was a little annoyed, but not overmuch with this change. She would've liked a bit of warning, but it'd been many years since Ranma had not been comfortable in 'his' female form, even when it came to lovemaking like this with her girlfriends. *So long as they don't try to do any kind of penetration or anything.*

That had been a near disaster early on in their exploration of the Blasted Lands. Juvia had once tried to coax Ranma into letting the two girls finger her, but to Ranma even one finger had been a complete turnoff, to say it mildly. More accurately, it caused her to freak the hell out and nearly punch both girls out as she ran away. There had not been a hint of it feeling good for

Ranma. She could feel good with someone stroking her pussy or even licking it, but the actual penetration had just felt so unnatural to him-then-her that it had been a complete turnoff.

For just a moment, as Ranma released her hair from the Dragon Whisker, she ran her fingers through it, pulling some of her hair down to look at it. As she did, Ranma's teeth gritted in a sudden, almost physical pain, a need to see another red color there, the color of Erza's hair instead of Ranma's own. To see Erza again, the redhead's intense brown eyes, the loving smile that she had. *Fuck me, but I miss her even with Jenny and Juvia here!*

Leaning up, Jenny pulled the redhead down between herself and Juvia. Taking full advantage of the fact that Ranma's mind seemed to be elsewhere for a second, both girls rolled on top of the redhead, with Juvia giggling that now that she'd actually gained a few inches, she was taller than Ranma in this form. This allowed the two of them to do what they wanted with Ranma for a few seconds. Ranma was still feeling incredibly sensitive from her orgasm in her original body, and it didn't take them long to have Ranma coming, bucking her hips up and off the series of pillows.

Grinning triumphantly at that, Jenny twisted around, shifting away from her to lovers for a moment and then getting to her feet and heading over to the tent visible out the door by the small lantern that Juvia had set up. Ranma watched her go through half-lidded eyes before turning his attention to kissing and making out with Juvia, now starting to play with the other girl's breasts again, pushing aside the idle question of what Jenny was up to.

Then Jenny was back, tapping Ranma on the shoulder. Both redhead and bluenette turned their attention from one another to stare at where Jenny was kneeling beside them on the pillows, holding what looked like...

"Is that a dildo? Where the hell, when did you..." Ranma had many questions, but all of them were pushed to the side as one very important question came to the fore, although not in the form of a question, but rather a warning. "Don't even think about getting that anywhere near me!"

"I am going to in a way, but not in the way that you think, Ranma. I know you've got problems with the very idea of that kind of thing. But I thought of another way we could have some more fun," Jenny said soothingly, running the dildo down her chest to where it rested between her breasts, then trailing the tip of it down further.

"I suppose that makes sense," Ranma answered, nodding his head. The only other idea they'd had that would've allowed them to have some kind of full-on sex was anal sex, and while the girls had been willing to experiment, it had not felt good for either. In fact, it had been quite painful, and that pain had not gone away after they'd finished. While Ranma had found it somewhat interesting, he hadn't pushed for anymore when both girls decided that had been a one-time thing.

“You don’t know the half of it yet, Ranma.” Jenny giggled, then handing the dildo to Juvia, turned around and leaned back over the edge of the pillows that marked the edge of the enlarged bed in turn. She’s coming back up with some strange belt/garter combination that she must’ve made from some of the leather they had accumulated in their efforts to expand their wardrobes here in the Blasted Lands. Taking the dildo back, Jenny somehow slotted it into a hole on one side of the contraption, twisting it at the base so that it locked in place, although Ranma couldn’t figure out how.

Seeing this, Juvia shouted in delight, looking between it and Ranma. “Excellent idea, Jenny!”

“What is it?” Ranma asked, nonplussed.

“It’s called a strap-on, Ranma-sama. It’s a thing girls sometimes use on other girls when they want to act the part of a man,” Juvia explained, taking the contraption from Jenny and rolling away from Ranma, holding it over her hips to show Ranma how it would situate itself right at the top of her pussy. “You wear it like this, and then you can have sex with us in your female form just as you would in your male body!”

Ranma’s eyes widened, staring at the thing, then she shrugged her shoulders. “Well, you two were willing to try anal sex, so I suppose I can try this for you. Just as long as no one tries to use that on me.”

“It won’t. It’ll still stimulate you by pushing against the top of your pussy with the end here, but nothing will go into you, Ranma,” Jenny soothed while Juvia squealed excitedly and rolled over, pushing Ranma down onto her back and shimmying down to the foot of the bed to help get the redhead into the strap-on.

This took some doing, but within moments, Jenny also began to squeal. Although these squeals were in an entirely different tone, as Jenny’s little surprise proved its worth, and the night continued for the three lovers.

**Lemon End**

**OOOOOOO**

The next day, as the three lovers slept in, Natsu became the first of the adventurers to wake up. Exiting the tent, Natsu paused, staring, looking at where Kurnugi was also sleeping, lazing about in human form within the library in a large, extremely padded chair in the corner he had led Natsu and Gajeel to the night before as they exchanged stories. *You know, whenever I imagined what dragons would be like in their lairs, it never occurred to me that they might go for comfort so much. I know my Pops never made anything but a molten lava bed for himself occasionally when he decided his joints bothered him or whatever.*

At the time, Natsu hadn't really believed his old man on that score and just thought that he wanted to be surrounded by heat for a bit. Now, though, he wondered if maybe for Igneel, it had been because laying on lava had been like laying on a waterbed would be for a human. *If so, he could have at least shared the wealth*, Natsu grumbled, not remembering that at the time, he certainly had not built up enough immunity to heat that he would have had to survive such a thing. *Huh, come to think of it, I wonder what Pops would look like as a human?*

The image Natsu came up with was somewhat like Gildarts, only with fiery red hair, a long beard and a few scars on his face. Realizing where most of the inspiration for that image was coming from, Natsu quickly shook his head and tried again, coming up with an image somewhere between the first one and a blacksmith he had seen once working on Erza's armor. *Grrr... this is kind of hard.*

When the third image he came up with still didn't look quite right, Natsu promised himself to play with it occasionally as he stretched, looking over to where Happy had decided to nap last night, a small fishing line attached to his tail, the end of it going into the small pool in front of him. Having eventually gotten bored of the stories that Kurnugi was telling Natsu and Gajeel of their parents, he had known a few of Igneel, which Natsu had been ecstatic to hear, Happy had gone over to one of the ponds nearby, wondering aloud if it could possibly have fish in it.

Even Natsu had thought that was silly, but he hadn't said anything at the time. *After all, where would the fish come from in a tiny pond like that made by rain runoff? Still, I know Happy's gotten kind of grumpy about how fish we find always tastes like something else. Even those flying fish we found a few weeks back tasted more like chicken.*

Leaning down, Natsu scooped his little buddy up onto his head, feeling the cat nestle into his hair like a bird in its nest, mumbling unintelligibly under his breath. *Now, let's get to exploring!*

Happy only really woke up as Natsu stood outside the library, staring all around him at the city, then whooped, waking up as Natsu leaped up onto a nearby rooftop. "Waaaah, Natsu! W, what's going on? Where, why am I flying without my wings?"

"Hey, little buddy! I just thought, you know, it's early morning. I'm not hungry yet, and we've got this whole city to explore, right?" Natsu explained.

"So long as we don't want to run into those weird cleaning things," Happy said mildly, tugging at the pink locks in front of him. "They were freaky, and I don't want to see what happens if they touch me. You saw how fast they were cleaning up that flying monster's corpse. I got so little flesh to lose in comparison to all of you."

"Point. But I bet a fireball will do for them just as easily as anything else." Natsu grinned. "We haven't yet run into anything that couldn't be dealt with by enough fire."



He carefully did not think of how well Ranma countered his abilities, or the fight with Acnologia, or any of the other battles Natsu had run into where he'd been barely able to eke out a win. Instead, he twirled in place for a moment until Happy shouted, "Stop!" and then looked in the direction that he was currently pointed towards. Since it wasn't towards the walls of the city but further along the edge where the portion of the outer crater abutted the portion of the city that sprawled out of the crater that seemed as good a direction as any.

With a whoop, he leaped forward, landing on the next roof over in that direction and racing along, then jumping down onto the streets when that building ended. "Let's explore, Happy! We'll be ninja archaeologists!"

"Aye, sir!" Happy exclaimed happily.

"... By the way, do you think if a dragon has red scales, he'd have red skin as a human? Or would it just be red hair?"

Two hours after the two intrepid explorers left, Gajeel slowly roused himself, a faint smile flickering over his face as he began to recall the conversation of the night before. It has been amazing to hear so many stories about Metalicana, and also kind of annoying. Apparently, his old man had also been into piercings at one point *Although I still maintain that getting pierces into skin is way more metal than just piercing your metal scales with other metal bits. Fucking cheater. Still, who knew those marks around his eyes were the equivalent of eyeliner.*

To hear that Metalicana had also acted the part of a gruff, no-nonsense sort, much like Gajeel portrayed himself, was completely pants when it came to talking to female dragons, and had also attempted to become a heavy metal singer had hit a little too close to home. *The only damn differences between us are the fact that I'm human, and can actually play the guitar and actually sing, unlike Pops, whose voice apparently could curdle milk and whose lyrics were enough to make actual musicians scream in mental pain. Heh... Kurnugi really had a way with words there. No wonder though it caused the two of them to fight. I'd hate for someone to say something like that about me. Not like they could, since my singing's so good.*

Since there was no one around to burst his self-delusion, Gajeel finished his grumble about the many similarities between his father and him on a positive note before pushing his way out of the tent and looking around for Natsu, only to pause and stare at Kurnugi in his giant plush chair, some of the same thoughts that had gone through Natsu's mind when he saw Kurnugi resting going through his mind in turn. Nevertheless, in Gajeel's case, when it came time to wonder what his father would look like, Gajeel felt he got it right the first time. An older man with massive muscles on his arms and shoulders, with black hair going to steal gray in places, a perfectly trimmed goatee, wearing somewhat grubby clothing perhaps better suited to going to a particularly violent concert of some kind. *Now, would he go with studs and other piercings or just rings and chains along with that eyeliner of his?*

It surprised him to learn that his father and Igneel had never taken human form, as far as Kurnugi knew. *Pops never seemed like the sort to not learn something he could use in a fight or just to show someone else up. I would have figured Pops'd learn how to turn human if Kurnugi did just to prove that his friend wasn't better than him.* However, apparently, hubris didn't seem to be enough motivation for Metalicana in this instance.

"I decided to learn how to transform myself into a human because I wished to learn how to read human books and interact with my element on a scale similar to that of humans. After all, there is no real point in calling myself a sword element dragon if I cannot wield blades myself," Kurnugi confessed, patting one of the falchions at his side. "It made me something of an odd duck, as humans would say, among dragons. Although, to me, all ducks are odd, freakish little creatures. But even those dragons who enjoyed living with humans did not often take human form. My mother was the only other one who knew how to transform like this and did so regularly."

"Yeah, I suppose I can't see my old man being the type to want to curl up with a good book," Gajeel had muttered at the time.

"Why did your mom want to learn how to transform into a human?" Natsu questioned.

"Selene liked to think of herself as the most beautiful woman in the world, and she saw all these human women in magazines and so forth and decided to show them up. It worked, too," Kurnugi said dryly, shaking his head slowly. "Whenever Selene transformed into human form, all the menfolk, and indeed many of the women around her, started to practically worship the ground Mother walked on. Which, needless to say, she quite enjoyed. What Mother did not enjoy was the fact that even though she could not transform, Grandeeney still had a larger following than she did among dragonkind and humankind alike. The humans considered her a 'draconic angel', which Selene could not compete with. Her appellation was the 'Icy Queen of the Moon'. Even the blindest of her followers could never call Mother kind."

Gajeel was broken out of his musings as several different smells hit his nose at once, indicating that breakfast was being cooked nearby.

"I hope those three remembered to use soap and **really** wash themselves down. Water alone does not cover that kind of thing to our senses. Even if we're practically out of soap, it's worth it," Gajeel mentally grumbled, remembering the issues that kind of thing had caused for him and Natsu. *Although I gotta wonder if they're doing it as all girls again. It's one way to make certain there're no long-term issues, and I gotta say it's...*

Then Gajeel resolutely smashed himself in the face with a steel scale-clad hand. **NOPE!!**

The noise woke Kurnugi up with a start, his blades coming out so quickly they looked like they'd teleported into his hands, serving to help banish that particular line of thought from Gajeel's mind. It was better for all concerned that such thoughts did not remain in his head for

very long. "Sorry about that," Gajeel said to Kurnugi, who was looking around blearily and angrily.

Evidently, the sword-wielding dragon was not a morning person, something that Gajeel knew he shared, along with Jenny. "I didn't think you'd want to miss breakfast, though, considering that you said last night that one of the things you missed most about humans not being around was food."

"True. I've tried to cook for myself, but I just can't get it right. There's always something off about it, or I make foolish mistakes or just make assumptions. Like thinking that all meat is supposed to be cooked in the same manner, or that every kind of fish can be scaled the same way. Even following the numerous cooking books I've found doesn't help much. I can make something edible but can't seem to figure out how to change the recipes enough to deal with the changes the background magic has made to the animals or ingredients," Kurnugi grumbled a little, still not pleased at being awake but understanding Kurnugi's point. The older man then stared at Gajeel's face for a moment. "Did you get punched somewhere? You know, if there's not enough space in that tent for the two of you to share, you're welcome to try and find some other bed or something in the city."

Gajeel shook his head. "No, no, um, nothing like that. The tents are bigger on the inside a bit. This is... call it self-correction. Now come on, let's see what the actual cooks among us have been able to find."

Still looking a little confused at Gajeel's facial bruising, Kurnugi nodded, and Gajeel led the way outside to where the smell was coming from.

Ranma and Juvia had woken up before Jenny, and while Juvia had to wait until her everything below the waist started to work again, Ranma had awakened with his normal level of energy despite their exertions of the night before. After a short make-out session he left Juvia to rest, heading out to explore the house the three of them had burst into the night before. Its kitchen, though, unlike the weird metal and ceramic-like nest-infested forge, did not work due to the fact an old s-cart of some kind had smashed into the side of the building, wrecking that area.

Leaving the house, took him five tries to find a house that had an intact kitchen that wasn't saturated in a Wild Magic Zone. It then took another hour or so to get it running by replacing some of the metalwork, removing the original lacrima-empowered stove and replacing that with a simple, if makeshift, grill.

The air fryer he found also seemed to work, although Ranma very much wanted to make certain it actually produced normal food. In the Blasted Lands, you could never tell with anything that had previously been powered by magic. There was a reason why Ranma had never even attempted to repair the air circulation system in the Man of Iron despite the issues the lack of said caused. The same could be said for the fridge, the dishwasher and the steamer.

By the time Kurnugi and Gajeel woke up, Juvia had come to take over, so that Ranma could start to look around for animals and ingredients. Both of them had also found some soap in the house they'd taken over the night before, something all of the adventurers would be pleased by over the next few months.

Gajeel was happy for it right now, not smelling anything from Juvia, as he and Kurnugi followed their noses to the house where cooking was occurring. Although the sight of Juvia leaning down to look under the sink, presenting her best assets his way, brought some of the earlier thoughts on the trio of lovers to mind and Gajeel resolutely shook his head again, looking away. *Thank God, they all aren't the kind to just not care about other people's opinions when it comes to stuff like that. I don't know if Natsu or I would've been able to put up with it if they were all lovey-dovey, touchy-feely, sex smelly all the time.*

For the second time that morning Gajeel grumbled under his breath. *Freaking Ranma! He just had to bring those two along, didn't he? Then again, that would be one hell of a sausage fest ugh. Well, for a large amount of the time anyway. There's also his curse to consider. After so many months away from Levy, even her red hair and overdone tits wouldn't be all that...*

For the third time that day already, Gajeel had to banish certain thoughts from his mind, a task made all the easier when he smelled Ranma coming their way. A moment later, Ranma walked up from one of the other nearby buildings, nodding at Kurnugi and Gajeel as he carried what looked like a pole over one arm, with several large rabbits skewered on it.

Well, they were what Gajeel and the others thought of as rabbits. Large fluffy ears, prone to running away, long hind legs. The fact those hind legs were covered in scales rather than fur and the fact the critters could act more like chameleons to blend into the background or occasionally were poisonous, simply made it clear that they are the Blasted Lands version of bunnies. Until they tried to unionize and attack them or developed some kind of offensive ability, Gajeel was fine with calling them bunnies.

"Heya, all. Hope you're hungry. You know the meat on these guys goes bad really quickly if we don't eat it," Ranma greeted Gajeel and Kurnugi. "Even if we try to smoke it for some reason or put it in my ki space. Which is just weird. Meat going bad when frozen? I think that's one of the most bizarre things we've run into in the Blasted Lands."

"And yet you can actually cook with them to the point they are tasty?" Ranma nodded, and Kurnugi shook his head dramatically, lamenting, "Once more, human ingenuity wins over draconic brute power. I think there is one rapid feet for each of us?"

"Rapid feet?"

"That is what it translates to. They were named in some ancient language at one point, but I was always told that it was simply easier to call them rabbies. And that was before they were affected by the rise in the background magic of the Blasted Lands," Kurnugi explained.

“They are supposed to make delicious eating. But that was before the Blasted Lands came to be, obviously.”

The rumble from his stomach showed that some things carried over despite his form being so much smaller than his birth form. That made both Ranma and Gajeel wonder aloud how big Kurnugi would be and how loud his stomach would be if he were in his dragon form.

“I am around the size of the library in length, minus my tail,” Kurnugi answered bluntly, shrugging his shoulders. “Of course, that does not include my wingspan, which I know is quite large for dragonkind. But no two dragons are ever the same, as all of you should know. At least, beyond the four legs and wings.”

“True enough. Anyway, I was able to find several small urban gardens that have gone out of control over the decades. Among them were several herbs that we know have not been affected overmuch by the background magic of the Blasted Lands. I gathered as much as I could,” Ranma announced, coming through the doorway into the house where Juvia was cooking via the sole remaining upright doorway, dumping bushels of various herbs into the sink from his ki space.

“My, that looks amazing, Ranma-sama! Fennel and rabbit meat sausage, I think, along with eggs and some stonebrowns,” Juvia said with a smile.

The stonebrowns were what the group of adventurers called their equivalent of hashbrowns. Potatoes were not a thing here in the Blasted Lands, but there was a kind of equivalent, a local plant that looked like any normal kind of stone. The only difference was that they were ovoid in shape and always had a red mark on them that looked somewhat like an eye. Well, that and the fact they didn’t smell like a stone to any of the three Dragon Slayers. Something that none of the three had been able to truly describe to the two girls or even Happy, who, while having a decent sense of smell, certainly wasn’t up to the level of the three Dragon Slayers. In particular, Natsu had gotten quite good at picking them out from a field of normal rocks.

Once the outer rocklike shell was removed, the interior tasted somewhat like a potato. It had an extremely strange aftertaste, one that could be far too sharp, almost lemony if the stontatos were not cooked properly.

They also were loaded with the same kind of magic that all of the creatures and fauna of the Blasted Lands had taken in over the centuries. Much like the first time the group had had to rely entirely on a hunted animal for meat, they had hunted for themselves rather than what they had brought into the savage lands. It definitely had an impact on Jenny, Juvia and Happy. The three Dragon slayers were able to eat them with no problem, but the others went through what Ranma likened to a version of the same Element Sickness that Natsu had gone through when he had willingly eaten the lacrima of the Tower of Heaven. Nevertheless, by this point,

their bodies had gotten used to it and could eat anything they had tried to eat within the Blasted Lands.

“Sounds amazing! I think I will ask that, as long as you all are in the city, you cook such meals at least once a day and that I partake in such,” Kurnugi said, his words barely heard over another growl from his stomach.

Juvia agreed but didn't turn away from the stove she was working at, grateful that Ranma had thoughtfully already let them bleed out. *I am also thankful that he still had enough energy to wake up earlier than Jenny and me to repair this kitchen. Although, I do wish that we had been able to wear him out for once. I fear, to do that, we will need to wait until we are back with Erza again, although that will not stop me from trying,* Juvia thought, looking over at Ranma with a small, sultry smile on her lips.

Somehow, despite everything that had gone on between them over the past year and even before that, Ranma found himself blushing at that look faintly, to be sure, but still getting a little flustered. He didn't back away, simply gazing back with his own version of bedroom eyes until a thrown stone from Gajeel smacked into the side of his head. He turned a glare on Gajeel, who glared right back, and after a second, Ranma nodded in contrition, reminding himself once more that certain social proprieties had to be maintained.

*And speaking of, where is the troublemaking portion of that pair?* Although Natsu had mellowed considerably when it came to charging into danger over their time in the Blasted Lands, he was still the one who routinely decided to punch first question the unconscious body of his enemy, kind of person. *It's made for some tasty meat and near-chicken type food, but still.* “Where's Natsu?”

“I don't know. Natsu was gone when I woke up. Judging by his scent, he went that way,” Gajeel announced, pointing back over his shoulder along the outer edge of the library, indicating that was both the direction that Natsu had come from and that Natsu had come out of the same hole in the outer wall of the library that Gajeel and Kurnugi had. “But if he smells the food, Natsu's bound to come back soon. And if he doesn't, more food for us.”

“Juvia will certainly not leave this food to go chasing after him,” Juvia affirmed.

Given the snorts and eye rolls from Ranma, Gajeel and the newly arrived Jenny, none of the others expressed any interest in that idea either. Although Kurnugi also didn't look as if the concept appealed, he still frowned a little. Something niggled at his brain for a moment. “I had hoped to give you all an offer this morning, but I will wait to do so until your friend returns. It isn't so fascinating a concept that I wish to speak about it twice.”

Then what was bothering Kurnugi finally came to him, the same thing that he had forgotten to tell his guests the evening before. “Drat. I forgot to tell you all, besides the cleaning creatures, there are a few other beasties around, and most of them are, I would say, around as

intelligent as that blue-furred cat creature that you all are accompanied by. I would take it as a favor if you all left them alone unless they attack first.”

“What kind of beasties are we talking about, and are they really that smart?” Juvia asked, somewhat confused. “We’ve run into a lot of monsters in the Blasted Lands that are able to think and realize when a fight is lost and even to strategize up to a certain point. But that’s a vast difference between that and Happy.”

“As much as he seems to have been hit by a stupid stick occasionally in comparison to other Exceeds we know,” Ranma quipped, to which Gajeel barked a laugh, the two of them exchanging grins. “Like Dragon Slayer, like Exceed, right?” While Ranma normally wouldn’t be that mean, Natsu’s lack of tact and hammer-like nature had annoyed him more than once. He liked the kid. In fact, Ranma felt he was as close to Natsu and Gajeel as he had been to Laxus before they had left Ishgar. However, that didn’t mean he wasn’t going to rib him when he got the chance.

Kurnugi snorted that, having also gotten the impression the night before that Natsu did not seem the type for deep thoughts. “Well, there is the Jelly Generator, the Blacksmith’s Assistant, although those should not bother you unless you actually enter some of the forges where they are nesting. And worse is, is the SRC.” When the others all looked at him, Kurnugi gestured down to the ground beneath his feet. “Rat-shaped sewer-dwelling creatures that had been magically created in one of the other city-states in order to keep the sewers clean. They were one of the most lucrative exports of that city-state, and it spread throughout the Blasted Lands before the Cold War portion of the troubles began.”

He shrugged then. “They’re hyperaggressive but also not really willing to come out of the sewers that they control. And as to your question of whether or not they are actually intelligent, I do not know for a fact that the SRC are. Why would I go down into the sewers? But I do know that the jelly generator and the Blacksmith’s Assistant are. I have actually had several conversations with some of the blacksmith assistants, and they are remarkably well-informed about everything to do with smithing or metallurgy. It is some kind of familial memory. And they are utterly uninterested in anything beyond that and each other.”

“When you say that, you seem to imply that they are a stable creature, that they can breed and reproduce on their own,” Juvia said, now somewhat concerned. “Is that the case, and is it the same with those small cleaning creatures?” *I wonder if those were Blacksmith’s Assistants, we saw on the first floor of the building, Ranma, Jenny, and I found for ourselves last night. Oh dear, I hope our activities did not drive them off.*

“It is. They breed quickly, as there is little to endanger the Blacksmith Assistants here within the city, and they have no interest in anything beyond the forges where they were created to help out. But they can and occasionally do defend their territory. As for the jelly generator, there’s only one of those creatures. But like the blacksmith assistants, well, here in Ven’ael, adding personalities to their magical creations was all the rage in the years leading up

to the war. At least on the civilian side of things,” Kurnugi added as an addendum. “The Men of Iron were certainly never given personalities. Which is probably a good thing, considering that two or three of them would have a decent chance of beating a normal dragon. I will warn you that the only one of the trio that is supposed to be as intelligent and alive as they are these days is the blacksmith assistant. The others are not supposed to be that smart, and certainly in the case of the jelly generator, not mobile in any way.”

“How did that happen then? Frankly, a lot of the weird mutations we’ve seen thanks to the insane amount of background magic in the Blasted Lands are really out there, you know?”

“In this case, I actually do have a theory,” Kurnugi said, sounding somewhat excited actually to share it with someone. “In the very early days of the war, Ven’ael came under attack by one of its neighbors, who thought to preemptively strike at it with their land troops rather than any strategic magical weapon. Ven’ael one of the premier city-states for metallurgy of all kinds. The attack took the city by surprise, as well as the magic involved. The infantry of the enemy army used shrinking rays of all shapes and sizes, which could shrink both living matter and nonliving matter as well as some defensive wards that would shrink anyone who came within a certain area.”

“Wait, if you shrink a Man of Iron...” Jenny looked a little queasy. “Then, then what happened to the people inside?”

“Apparently, they shrank along with the rest, which is why the attack didn’t work in the long run. While the enemy did have large-scale mobile guns that were designed to get through a Man of Iron’s magic sealing metal, they had to use several such guns to deal with even a single Man of Iron. They also had no idea how many Men of Iron Ven’ael had made. The attackers were overwhelmed soon after coming within sight of the city’s walls. The enemy city-state lost a large number of its troops, but the forces of Ven’ael let some go in return for a counterspell. But Ven’ael never got that, and one of the city’s generators had been struck by a beam. As it wasn’t shielded against magical attack, it was shrunk down tremendously, making it almost useless and de-powering a large portion of the city for a time. But it was also the only jelly generator that survived another round of attacks later on, and it is still around today even though the people here were wiped out by the blood crystallization weapon.”

Kurnugi paused then, then shrugged his shoulders. “As to how it developed legs, the ability to move around or create a face out of its jelly, I have no idea.”

Once everyone recovered from their faceplants, Kurnugi looked at them closely, then gestured out the nearby window in the small house that Ranma had decided to use as their kitchen. “Is your companion the type to simply attack before understanding what he is facing?”

“Yes,” was the chorused reply, and then Ranma and Gajeel looked at one another then sighed. Ranma headed towards the door, with Gajeel following after him. “You two keep cooking. We’ll figure out what kind of trouble Natsu is in.” As were cut through by a loud



“WHHHOOOO!” in the distance, the sound barely registering to them, although the fountain of flame that shot back down into the city, carrying the distant figure of Natsu back down of sight, was certainly distinctive, even at this distance.

They looked at one another and then shrugged their shoulders as one and leaped up onto the nearest rooftops, heading in that direction. “Say what you will for Natsu. At least he’s always easy to find.”

**OOOOOOO**

For the first hour or so after leaving the library, Natsu had darted into every building they’d passed by. In this way, Natsu and his companion came in contact with a group of weird-looking critters. The pair had entered one of the large ziggurat-like buildings to look around, only to find what looked like labs, smithies and work rooms all around. While some of the stuff looked kind of interesting, neither Natsu nor Happy were all that interested in craft stuff.

Nevertheless, as they passed a doorway, the head coming from within caused Natsu to stop. “Ooh, it feels as if something is going on in there Happy!”

“Maybe, but you’re the only one that likes fire, Natsu. If fire bursts out at us when the door opens, you better be ready to eat it all!” Happy exclaimed, climbing down from his normal pink perch to hide against Natsu’s back.

“Hah! Sounds like a plan to me,” Natsu snickered, reaching forward to pull the door open.

Inside was a large smithy with several workstations surrounded by a series of furnaces. All of whom were on, being tended by eight or nine creatures that, in Natsu’s opinion, looked like someone had decided to take everything from a smithy, meld it into one, then give it the ability to move on its own.

One was standing at a nearby furnace, putting something within, pulling its arms out without seeming to have felt the heat at all. Now it turned to stare at the human and Exceed in the doorway, Happy’s head barely visible sticking up from over Natsu’s shoulder.

The two explorers looked back at the creature, waiting for it to do something interesting. However, it simply looked back at them, then turned aside. That served to annoy Natsu a bit. “Oy! Don’t ignore us, you bastard!”

The creature did just that, turning back and, with a kind of hook arm, closing the door in their faces. “OY!!!”

Seeing his hotheaded friend raise a burning fist to smash the door down, Happy tugged at his pink locks. Activating his Aero magic, he began to pull Natsu away. "Natsu, let's just go. You heard what Kurnugi said. He doesn't want us to start a fight or damage the city."

"Ugh! Fine," Natsu grumbled. "Now stop pulling on me, I know, drat it."

Happy did not stop until the pair of them were back outside, figuring it was better to be safe than sorry. After that, they moved on, finding various interesting knickknacks and other things, always being on the lookout for Wild Magic Zones, of which there were a lot within the city. Something that even Natsu had to admit made sense. *After all, the cities were both the source of a lot of the magical stuff and also targets.*

They had known that sitting off that morning, having seen and avoided Wild Magic Zones the day before with the others. All the adventurers had gotten very good at spotting the things when they had time to do so, although even Jenny, the best of them at doing so, occasionally missed.

Avoiding these WMZs had Natsu and his hat/little buddy moving deeper toward the center of the portion of the city on the floor of the crater. Which was fine by them. This brought them closer to several of the larger buildings besides the ziggurats, and they even found what looked like a small inner city park. Long having outgrown its original boundaries, the garden had grown to encompass several blocks in every direction, covering them with a shocking amount of green. That was kind of cool, as was the fact several of the streets around there were smaller than elsewhere in the city, almost becoming like mini-tunnels. It was so cool that Natsu completely forgot the fact people had lived and died here, that this must have been a market for foot traffic at some point in the ancient past, simply exploring and having fun.

Coming out of that area, Happy flew up and then directed Natsu back to the area around the crater wall, saying, "There are some huge stairwells there; they go zip one way, sag another, and they are right next to and behind the waterfall, they look really cool. Oh, and there's a weird yellow metal dome thing."

Thinking that sounded kind of interesting and figuring that looking at the city from the portion at the top of the caldera sounded like a lot of fun, Natsu moved in that direction.

The pair of them were almost equidistant from the library again when they passed another major ziggurat. Around the side of it came several hundred of the same little cleaning creatures that they'd seen the day before. The creatures spotted Happy and Natsu at the same time and, after a second, spoke in that strange warbling, many voices as one thing they did. It sounded even creepier coming from a larger number of them. "Unidentified human creature. Searching database. Creature found. One warning has been given. Subroutine to enjoy punishment enabled. The level of penalty has been decided: humiliation. Please do not resist."

Natsu blinked, then grinned, both hands lighting up with fire. He was over how creepy the creatures acted and not really concerned about whether or not they might actually be able to hurt him. Now, he just wanted to see how they fought. "Bring it on, you little bugs!"

The swarm of little creatures spread out as it came towards them, but he simply waited, the flames in his hands separating into dozens of small fireballs that hovered above his hand, bouncing from finger to finger and into one another. "That's right, come to me! I'll fricassee the lot of you!"

When he deemed that the creatures had come close enough, Natsu began to hurl small fireballs their way.

Showing a sense of preservation that not all of their enemies in the Blasted Lands had, the small creatures zipped backward or to the side to dodge the fireballs, their small, toy like faces shifting into smiles of manic glee. They moved almost like greased lightning, so fast were they, but Natsu had spent so much time sparring with Ranma and the others he was used to dealing with that kind of speed. He quickly sidestepped the first group that reached him, leaping up into the sky and bringing down a fiery claw that scattered them again, killing none of them, but that was fine. Natsu lashed out again and again, forcing the group to retreat.

He missed that one of them hadn't attacked Natsu directly. Instead, it had climbed the side of the ziggurat. Now, when Natsu had turned away, it leaped at him from behind.

Happy instantly proved his worth as more than just a head warmer while on the ground. "Natsu, behind you!"

Instantly, Natsu turned, lashing out with a punch. Nevertheless, the little strange creature dodged at the last second, rolling in midair to one side, its job done. Two others raced forward from both sides, smacking into Natsu's heels, almost crawling up his legs. He yelped, jumping into the air, and reached down, trying to slap them away. They zipped off but had pulled away a large portion of his makeshift shoes, the shoes dissolving under their touch. "Dang it! What the heck?"

"Keep your head in the game, Natsu!" Happy admonished. "Ranma and Juvia might be able to make you some new shoes from stuff we find here in the city, but only if those little guys don't kill you."

As Natsu landed, several more of the tiny creatures raced forward, dodging again as Natsu threw fireballs at them as he backed away before suddenly charging at them.

This didn't work. The little cleaners simply spread out again. Moreover, as Natsu landed, they all came in at once from every direction rather than a single fanlike zone. This time, Natsu was able to tag a few of them. Indeed, he was able to hit most of them. They were extremely

fire resistant, though, something he had to comment on. “Dammit, why can they take so much of my fire? It’s like only the impact matters to them at all.”

“Well, we were told this city is a place where a lot of smithish stuff happened, right? Am I using that word correctly?” Happy grumbled for a second, hanging on for dear life even as he hummed thoughtfully on that point for a second before shaking his head and going on. “That means they probably are used to working inside forges and around fires and stuff.”

“That just means I need to burn even hot...” Natsu began before one of the creatures racing towards him twisted around even as it leaped up into the air towards his face. “Wha...”

\*BLOOOSHHH!\* From its rear end, the autonomous cleaner released a giant pink fog. A pink fog, which instantly exploded, as it impacted one of Natsu’s fireballs right in front of Natsu’s body. It was more sound and flashing light than anything else was, blinding Happy, although Natsu had blinked at just the right time to save himself.

“ARRGH, my eyes!” Happy shouted, clamping paws over his eyes, rolling from one side of Natsu’s head to the other.

As the light from the strange blast dissipated, Natsu blinked, then grinned cheekily as the creatures all quickly retreated. “Is that it? Is that all you were supposed to do to me? Just dissolve a portion of my clothing and then fart in my direction? It didn’t even smell bad!”

“Humiliation has been given. Punishment is over for now. Register yourself with the Tourism Bureau or declare yourself a citizen of Ven’ael. If you do not, lethal measures will be applied upon our next meeting starting two hours from now,” the multitone voice answered again.

Natsu shook his head, then blinked as he felt as if something bright was just underneath his eyes. Natsu then looked down at himself for the first time since the explosion had dissipated. Only to find himself completely covered with eye-searing pink and puke-green glitter. “What the hell! How did you... what is this...”

On the top of Natsu’s head, Happy had thankfully been outside of the zone of whatever it was that had impacted Natsu. With watering eyes, he glanced over the edge of Natsu’s head, shrugging as he patted Natsu’s salmon-colored hair companionably. “Well, it makes sense. Remember, they almost look as if they are made to appeal to kids, so obviously, any kind of humiliation they come up with isn’t going to be the painful type.”

“Yeah, but come on! This is so bizarre! And it’s not as if I have a lot of clothing to choose from, you know. I hope this stuff comes out when I wash it, or else I might just be going around in underwear and my scarf.”

For a moment, Natsu almost wanted to make a quip about being like his friend Gray, but the memory of his death was, more than a year later, still too raw for that kind of thing to be spoken aloud and he shook his head. "What do you think the others will do when they see me like this?"

"Aye, sir, they'll all laugh hysterically. Like hyenas," Happy supplied, snickering now himself as the pain in his eyes finally went away. "Fufufufu..."

"Some help you are," Natsu growled, then looked angrily around for the little creatures, hoping to demand that they change him back. But instead, all he saw was them fading into the distance along one of the roads. "Hey! Get back here and change me back! I'd rather you have tried to hurt me more than this!"

The multitonned voice of the herd of little creatures sounded off once more. The most mechanical, most infuriating laughing sound that Natsu had ever heard. "Subroutines were activated so that units could enjoy the punishment given. HO. HO. HO. HO. HO. HO. HO."

"Why, you little!" Natsu growled, then raced after them, the sound of the semi-mechanical laughter having worked on him about as well as waving a red flag to a bull. In response, the little creatures zipped away, portions of the swarm breaking off and heading into different alleyways, even as they allowed a smaller portion to lead Natsu away. Soon, only a handful of them was leading him away straight down one of the thoroughfares.

This group stopped abruptly when several of the little creatures ran around a turn only to run smack dab into a gelatinous mass in front of them. The seven artificial cleaners bounced off the slime-like wall only to be caught by what looked like electric tendrils of some kind that buzzed out of the new creature.

Natsu was so close behind them that as he came around the corner, he couldn't stop either. With Happy still on his head, Natsu found himself smacking into something that felt like a giant Jell-O house. He bounced off with a cry of anger and annoyance, rolling in midair to land on his feet, staring at what was in front of him.

Coming around the corner slowly was... Well, frankly, it looked like a giant Jell-O turtle without any head to see at the moment. On its back are several large slabs of metal that looked like they shown with reflected sunlight on one side but didn't on the other. They were shaped like a dome, or perhaps the Jell-O mold was shaped like a dome, with these things simply stuck on the sides. Regardless, it looked to all the world like a turtle shell that came down to around stomach height on Natsu. Below that was what looked like eight tiny legs, each of them far smaller than the legs of a creature this size should be, yet working in conjunction they seemed able to move the beast along well enough.

As Natsu watched, the little cleaner creatures that had slammed into it were set down gently by the lightning tendrils almost as if the lightning was some kind of hand. However, to

Natsu's annoyance, they were set down underneath the creature. A second later, they scuttled away through the leg, laughing at him once more.

"Hey, wait! I still need you to reverse this. Come back here!" Natsu shouted, charging forwards, his hands lit up with fire as he tried to punch the creature out of his way. This didn't work, the blow simply sending ripples throughout the creature. The jello also bounced back all the energy of Natsu's attack, causing Natsu once more to be flung off his feet.

Only now did the creature seem to respond to Natsu's attack. Four of the large panels of steel on the side facing Natsu shifted around, and a long neck slowly pushed itself out, looking for all the world like a Brachiosaur's head sticking out of a turtle's body. This was even further reinforced a second later, as a face appeared on the Jell-O mold of the neck. A second later, two eyeballs open, staring down at Natsu almost in question with its head cocked to one side. "Blooo..." It intoned before lowering its head toward Natsu.

Happy thought that the creature seemed to be somewhat near-sighted. It didn't seem aggressive or even all that angry right now. If anything, the jello turtle seemed confused. It didn't know what to make of Happy or his trusty steed/mobile napping spot.

"Oh, you want to fight!" Natsu shouted, assuming the creature was going to try to bite him in his extremely slow-moving manner. "Take this! Fire Dragon Slayer's Claw!"

The hit to its head seemed not to bother the creature at all. The flame didn't catch, and the impact did nothing but send ripples through its head, neck and body. Using the returned momentum of his attack, Natsu dodged to one side, then leaped upwards, racing towards the creature's main body. He jumped up, lashing out with both feet down into the creature's side, only to be bounced away again, flipping and flying through the air.

While others might well have been discouraged by this point or worried that their magic hadn't seemed to do anything against the creature, Natsu enjoyed flying with his little buddy a lot. Being in the air like this was fun, so instead of becoming even angrier, Natsu found his earlier anger at the tiny cleaner things starting to dissipate as he flew through the air. With a whoop, he used his fire to push himself back down towards the ground, landing easily on a nearby rooftop.

He raced back towards the creature, which had begun to turn away, and shouted out, "Oh no, you don't! Let's see if you can do that again."

With that, he leaped forward, coming down on top of the creature's back from directly above, only to be again bounced away, going straight up this time. "Wooo! I don't think even you could go this fast, little buddy! It's like using a trampoline almost, but one that's all rubbery and Jell-O like."

When he came down this time, Natsu was grinning at the creature, and all of his fire magic dissipated as he landed. While on his head, Happy looked as if he was going to be sick. Flipping through the air so often and then going straight up like that, while flipping like a soccer ball was not good for his little stomach.

Knowing though that Natsu would take it poorly if he was sick on him, Happy leaped off, heading towards a nearby doorway, holding his stomach and looking greener than blue in the face for a moment. "UGHH... you have fun, Natsu. I'm just going to curl up over here until the world stops spinning. Don't come complaining to me if you fall through a WMZ."

Natsu ignored him, waving his arms wildly and shouting, "Can you do that every time! That was fun!"

This seemed to work to get the turtle thing's attention. The creature once more extruded a face cocking its head thoughtfully to one side, then slowly looking upwards, then back at Natsu.

Nodding wildly, Natsu exclaimed, "Yeah! Up and down like that. Er, unless it hurts you or something."

"MMMMbrghooo..." The turtle intoned. With that, it seemingly settled down in place, a certain sign that it was fine to try again at bouncing Natsu up into the stratosphere. The Fire Dragon Slayer whooped and leaped forward.

This was the site that Ranma and Gajeel found, with Natsu bouncing up over and around the jello turtle, which in turn seemed to be swaying in place, a faint smile on its face. "What are we looking at here exactly?"

"Don't look at me, man. I just got here too," Ranma answered Gajeel's question, then yelled out Natsu's name. Both Natsu and his new friend (?) turned in their direction. The smile on the creature widened slightly, and it nodded its head to them, even as Natsu bounced off the jello turtle's back once more in an angle, flipping himself several times in midair to land right in front of the two of them, whooping with joy. "That is so fun!"

"Right, exactly how did you meet this creature?" Ranma asked, wondering if this was the jelly generators that Kurnugi had been describing earlier. He then began to laugh, his words barely understandable between his guffaws. "And why the hell are you all glittery? You look as if someone tried to use you like a disco ball!"

Grumbling as he remembered what the tiny cleaning monsters had done, Natsu quickly explained, having to wait for several minutes as his fellow Dragons Slayers got over their laughter at his expense. When they finally seemed somewhat back to normal, Natsu excitedly waved at the creature. The jelly generator had waited, watching them with a smile on its jello-like face. Nevertheless, since it didn't seem as if they were in any rush to join Natsu in bouncing

off its back, it now slowly turning away from them, the jelly generator's head disappearing back into its body and its legs shifting underneath it until it once more moving away down the street.

"I mean, it is so cool! Bouncing off doesn't really hurt. It's like bouncing off a really comfy sofa, only it can hurl you up so fast it makes my Afterburner look slow. And better, the jelly guy was somehow able to aim me so I didn't run into a WMZ! I only had to watch out for them on the way down."

"That's nice at all, but you better be able to get rid of that glitter stuff. And I am not coming any closer to ya just in case that glitter spreads," Ranma drawled. "Come on, you're missing breakfast."

"I don't believe it. Natsu goes out trying to punch something and instead makes friends with it." Gajeel shook his head in consternation. "How does that even work?"

"You would know. Fairy Tail did the same with you, didn't they? And Juvia too, come to think of it," Ranma quipped.

"Huh, so it's some kind of strange Fairy Tail guild super magic, the power of making friends with your fists." Gajeel nodded slowly, while Natsu simply looked proud. "That makes a disturbing amount of sense, and I can only hope that they continue to use this power for good and not evil."

"Just deprive Erza of her strawberry cake. Then you'll see true evil." Natsu shuddered, to which Ranma laughed, leading the way back to the others.

True to Happy's prediction, both women also laughed like hyenas at Natsu's new look. Even Kurnugi barked a laugh, although he looked a little embarrassed at doing so.

When they all sat down to eat, Kurnugi mused about the adventure that Natsu had run into. "Well, the jelly generator being friendly is not news to me. I suppose it can afford to, considering nothing else in the city is able to harm it. Even a fully powered attack from one of you would have difficulty putting it down. The jelly generator doesn't eat, doesn't really bother anything, and only really cares about going around and using its solar-powered electric magic to empower the city as was its function." He paused then, before smirking just a bit. "And zapping pigeons. Magically mutated or no, it hates those little poo droppers."

"Where did the name jelly generator come from anyway? I mean, yeah, it looks like jelly, but that name seems too cute to be the official name?" Jenny asked, wishing now that she had seen the creature. *I also wonder if I could somehow use my Take Over: Mecha Soul on it? I've done that a lot of times to magical constructs over the years, stuff like my S-bike form or my first flying form. But none of them have been sentient. I would definitely want to ask for permission before trying, anyway.*



"I have no idea about the official name. Those devices were always called jelly generators," Kurnugi answered with a shrug. "When they were designed, there was a major push to make more child-friendly automatons. The Autonomic Cleaning Magical Entities, or Amcees for short, was developed at around the same time."

"Bastard freaking, farting, I'm gonna..." Natsu grumbled, causing the others, even Happy, to snicker.

"As you all surmised, they were actually designed to be somewhat child-friendly, although this backfired a little bit," Kurnugi snorted. "Children were always running off after them, petting them, or trying to take them home. It didn't interfere with their work, but it did sometimes interfere with parenting."

"Which is probably why they didn't turn and attack you again," Juvia pointed out, looking over at the still-grumbling Natsu.

"Yeah, I can see that. You have a kid on your hand who isn't exactly in your good books. You're trying to get him or her home, and he suddenly pulls away, racing in a different direction to chase after one of those things. Or a kid just leaves their parents behind when they aren't looking," Ranma mused.

"Something like that, I suppose. I've never been a parent. I just remember a lot of complaints about that kind of thing. But there is a way we can stop them from treating you as invaders. We will have to head to a specific building on the outskirts of the city, however. Which will take a bit of climbing, I'm afraid."

After the meal was over, and Kurnugi had repeated his earlier request that as long as they were in the city, the newcomers would cook for him, Kurnugi led them towards where the city of Ven'auel sprawled half out of the crater. There, they found the long, winding set of stairs that Happy had reported to Natsu. Next to them were, along with a defunct elevator, its doors open and the elevator cart half in and half out of a pile of rubble at the bottom of the shaft.

The group wound their way up the stairs, which Ranma remarked would have made some decent exercise to start the day with back when he was younger, smiling as Natsu leaped up to stick his head through the waterfall as they passed behind it. The others simply shrugged their shoulders, used to Ranma's ideas of training, although by the time they were at the top, all but Ranma were sweating a bit. More thanks to how hot it was currently, but even so, Juvia had to question this. "And the people living here actually used those?"

"No, not often. That is why the elevators were there," Kurnugi answered dryly. "But none of them have any power, and most of the elevator shafts are filled with debris and rubble anyway from a kinetic strike into the city. These are simply emergency stairs, holdovers from before the elevators were built."

“Besides, even if we somehow powered the elevator up again, who knows what has happened to the enchantments on it,” Ranma pointed out. “Would anyone here trust any kind of safety enchantments after so long soaking in the background magic of the Blasted Lands?”

“Nope.”

“No, sir! /No chance!”

“Juvia is surprised you do not think that such would be good toughness training but is most happy to not need to go through with such.”

“Gihhi! No thanks,” was the chorused reply from Ranma’s companion, while Kurnugi simply chuckled quietly.

As they exited the wide square around the elevators and the entrance down into the stairs, Kurnugi gestured for his guests to follow him through the streets on the upper portion of the city. Naturally, they still had to avoid several WMZs as they went, but generally speaking, he led them toward one of the outer walls.

“Do the Wild Magic Zones screw you up too?” Natsu asked, glaring at one large such zone in front of them that seemed to sprawl out of one building on one side of the street and then straight across to what looked like a restaurant of some kind. “I’d kind of hoped that if we got strong enough our Dragon Slayer Magic would let us ignore that kind of thing.”

“Ha!” Kurnugi snorted. “I can ignore some of them, the smallest ones. But I have also run into others that fill my nostrils with smells ranging from roses to tear gas. I have also spent time transformed into a strange monkey-lizard hybrid, the magic of the WMZ, as you put it, fighting my magical defenses and creating a horrible hybrid of my normal draconic body,” Kurnugi snorted. “The WMZ’s magic does not register to our magical resistance as an actual attack, and are thus able to bypass our resistance to a certain degree. I prefer to ere on the side of caution.”

As they went, the adventurers noticed that this area was evidently a little richer, the people here were a little better off. The buildings were a bit larger, and there weren’t nearly as many small stores, although there were still several large ziggurat-like buildings looming over the smaller buildings. As they looked into a few of the buildings, the newcomers could see that each individual house seemed more richly appointed. Or rather, what they could see anyway after so many centuries showed that, anyway.

A surprising amount of furniture had survived in various states of disrepair, so that was a bit more than they had expected. However, like below, nowhere did they see any sign that anyone, but Kurnugi and the various creatures lived within the city, which made it all a little macabre for Jenny and Juvia, although the three Dragon Slayers took it more stoically.

Soon, the group entered what looked like an office building of some kind. There were dozens of signs indicating various offices, what looked like elevators and what was also obviously some kind of security station. One that was covered by a WMZ thanks to several automated turrets and what looked like a runic ward on the ground.

Stepping into a side office on the first floor, Kurnugi gestured them into a room around the size of the living room in the house Ranma and his two lovers had appropriated the night before. On a raised dais in the center of the room was a book with an old-style quill attached to it by a gold and silver chain of some kind. All around them on the floor was a series of wires connecting into and becoming part of a magical circle embedded in the floor. There didn't seem to be a WMZ in here, but that didn't mean any of them were any less wary of what could be here unseen.

"Step forward, write your name and hold your hand above the book. If there is still magical energy within the system, you should be able to write yourself into the book of citizenship for the city. That will be copied into the hordes of Amcees when they next dock with their scattered holding pens. I'm actually interested to see if you can at all, and if you do, what the effect will be."

The fact that Kurnugi said this while standing by the doorway, well within bolting range, did not imbue any of them with confidence. Nor did the fact he refused to meet any of their eyes.

After a second, Ranma stepped forward, gesturing the others back out the door. Kurnugi followed them, still looking into the room with what Ranma mentally described as 'semi-mad scientist curiosity'. "If the system is mutated into something dangerous, I'm the one most suited to face it." *With Natsu a close second*, he added in his thoughts. The kid's ability to get back up after taking a pounding was something Ranma greatly respected.

Juvia and Jenny didn't look happy, but they all nodded and watched as Ranma stepped forward, took the pen up, and, after wincing a bit as it began to siphon off his magical energy, wrote his name out on the page of the book. Placing his hand on top of it, Ranma watched as an image of his face appeared to one side and then slowly dissipated, turning into tiny motes of magical light, which then dissipated into the magical array all around them.

At that point, there was a loud thrumming noise. Ranma instantly got ready to leap away, but while the ground underneath them shook and there was a hellacious whine that had all but Jenny and Juvia grabbing at their ears, nothing happened until there was a popping noise as a sign appeared in the air over the doorway.

The suddenness made all of them, even Kurnugi, start to lash out before pausing as they saw what had happened. The sign was a long, festive-looking blue banner on which there were a series of words. Kurnugi read them aloud for the benefit of the newcomers. "Welcome, citizen, to the city of Ven'auel. We hope you enjoy your time here, and don't worry, the Amcees

don't bite. A somewhat typical welcome for tourists across the city-states when there was tourism back before the plague and everything else, followed by a small local joke."

Ranma and the others all stared at the sign, then back to Kurnugi, who shrugged his shoulders, a wry grin splitting his normally serious-looking face. "What, did you expect the people of the city to all be serious-minded folk? And welcoming newcomers into the city like that is certainly better than welcoming them with mistrust and narrow eyes, which became all too much the norm before the war. This reminds me of happier times."

The adventurers could not argue that point, and one by one, they moved forward, writing out their names. When the last one, Juvia, took her turn, the whining became so loud that even she and Jenny had to cover their ears. It ended abruptly in the sound of a distant \*BOOOOF\*, followed by the ground underneath them heaving.

Juvia instantly turned to water, flashing over in a waterfall towards Ranma and the others. With Natsu and Happy in the lead, the group raced out of the building, skidding to safety as they turned around to look at the building they had just vacated. But thankfully, nothing happened except for a strange crystal-like growth at the back of the building, shattering and falling away.

"Okay, that's enough of that!" Ranma said firmly. "I think we just got really lucky."

"Agreed." Jenny knew more about basic rune or written enchantment-type magic than the others, and while that in no way let her explain what she saw in the Blasted Lands, she could at least understand how complex something like the book and its accompanying wards would need to be. "Whatever magic was in that system is gone now, and we should be very thankful it doesn't seem to have mutated beyond growing that crystal thing on the exterior magic-gathering portion. Let's just hope that it took for Juvia at the end there."

Juvia nodded in firm agreement with that concept, and after a moment, Ranma took charge. Looking over at Kurnugi, he asked, "So, you said you had an offer for us?"

Kurnugi nodded and led the way back to the open square at the top of the cliff leading down into the rest of the city, explaining as he went. "It is obvious that on top of the training regimen, you have all come up with already, you three, in particular, need help in getting in touch with your dragon selves. Is that accurate?"

"Eh, that's close to right for these two, not for me," Ranma admitted, pointing ahead to draw Kurnugi's attention to what looked like a WMZ just around the corner. Kurnugi nodded, and the pair led the others to leap up onto the building directly across the street rather than following it. "I have an inner dragon self, but I've conquered it already. I just need to be able to pull my ki back and, at the same time, release my Dragon Slayer magic. My Demon Slayer magic also kind of gets in the way of that a bit, but I'm working on it. The problem is making certain I can also come back, which is a problem I do have in common with these two."

“Well, I can offer some meditation on that sort of thing if you wish it. I had to do something of the reverse in order to transform into a human body. Whereas you Natsu, and you, Gajeel, need to be able to get more in touch with their own dragon sides. And before you say anything, I don’t believe either of you will need to worry about the dragonification aspect as Ranma does.” Turning from where he had been gazing around, trying to determine a route over the rooftops that would let them bypass the WMZs that were up here, Kurnugi gestured them all back down into the road once more before practically glaring at Gajeel’s chest for a brief second.

Nevertheless, it was gone so quickly that none of the others noticed. “On top of that, I will help you all in the form of sparring, both in this form and in my dragon form outside of the city. To our east there is more than enough space for us to go wild, I believe you would say, with large-scale magic usage.”

“And what do you want in return? You definitely aren’t doing all this out of the goodness of your heart or just because you like our food, are you?” Jenny asked shrewdly, her knees bending a bit as she landed alongside the others. *A few years ago, a drop of five stories like that would have forced me to either have Ranma catch me, my preferred option or use one of my Take Over forms. Now, I can take them as easily as any of the boys or Erza.*

Just like the night before, the thought of Erza came to Jenny, bringing with it a strange bit of nostalgia and sadness. *I know she wanted to stay behind to help Fairy Tail after the losses they took against Acnologia, but even so, I miss her, and I know Ranma and Juvia do. I catch him occasionally just staring back west, and I know its about Erza, while Juvia occasionally gets depressed about a lack of her ‘mistress’. Damn but did I peg that one right during that party in the guild hall. As for me, a year gone, and it is still strange not to wake up and half to spit out red hair, or joke about lingerie not being armor or the proper amount of daily exercise for those of us who don’t eat Strawberry shortcake every day.*

Kurnugi’s words brought Jenny back to the here and now as he answered her question with a simple if startling statement. “I want your help in dealing with Motherglare.”

The others all paused in their progress along the street, looked at one another, and then back to Kurnugi, somewhat confused. He hadn’t used that name in front of them before, and they were wondering who Motherglare was.

Kurnugi did not allow them to remain in ignorance for very long. “Motherglare is the dragon who is sending the draconids against the city. She is one of the worst among the northern dragons that is still alive. In fact, considering that Acnologia practically wiped our entire race out, she might indeed be **the** worst. It isn’t as if I’ve left the Blasted Lands in search of any of my fellows. But I fought her several times in the war, and I know she and Belserion, in particular, loathed one another.”

“Who came up with the name Motherglare? It sounds like something you’d name a devil-worshipping nun or something,” Gajeel grumbled. “One of the really kinky ones who likes S&M and wants to sacrifice the main character to her dark patron.”

Now it was his turn to feel the gazes of all the others on him, and he shrugged. “What, I read smut sometimes. I’m not ashamed of it like you original Fairy Tail prudes.”

Kurnugi sweatdropped, deciding not to mention the fact he rather enjoyed those kinds of stories. “Anyway, Motherglare is named so for her particular magical ability, which is very odd, even for dragons. Motherglare can pop eggs out of her own body from various points on her back. She can even launch them as if they were weapons in close combat. All without ever having a mate. The eggs first hit with explosive force and also release the draconids. Who age and become more dangerous as they grow but do not gain any kind of self-awareness.”

“They sound almost like worker ants in a hive, with her the queen,” Juvia murmured.

“Come to think of it, that actually matches with how the draconids fight, right? They don’t really care about their own lives so much when they’re in large groups. They simply rush forward and attack all together. They have some organization, sure, like we saw with the huge groups attacking the city. But not a lot, and it’s pretty obvious that they don’t really think for themselves,” Natsu observed.

Ranma nodded, agreeing with that description, while Kurnugi thought for a moment before agreeing as well. “She is willing to throw away thousands of their lives, if such can be said to have lives in the first place, and indeed has thrown millions away since I moved into the city over the past decade.”

“They are after you, then?” Gajeel asked.

“They are. When first I realized that Motherglare had settled down where she had, I moved out to try to fight her, to force her away if nothing else. Yet by that point, Motherglare had already given birth to several hundred of her creatures. And they’d had time to grow. Far more than any type you’ve seen in the attacks on the city if you have observed such before the ones you fought before entering the city. These are almost fully-grown and are dangerous in large numbers, even to other dragons. I could fight fifty of them, eighty perhaps. Two hundred? More? That is beyond me. But you, all of you, are able to fight them just as I can.”

Narrowing his eyes, Ranma asked, “Why are they after you?” He really did not want to get involved in some personal spot between two dragons, no matter how personable Kurnugi seemed to be or how awesome a fight this sounded like it might become. If it was something personal like Kurnugi spurning this Motherglare or a family beef between the two of them? He’d had enough of that kind of drama in his last life to get involved with the dragon-sized version of it in this one.

“Why wouldn’t she?” Kurnugi asked as if the idea that the two of them could live so close together and not come to violence was completely impossible. “I know that Motherglare wants Ven’ael. She’s spent several decades hiding where she is, an old lacrima mine but still just an outpost of Ven’ael. For all I know, it could simply be a pride thing. She wants the city rather than the outpost. On the other hand, it could be the fact that she simply wants to kill me. It isn’t as if we’ve actually talked at any point beyond threats and curses,” he ended in a grumble, shaking his head.

“How long has this been going on?” Ranma asked.

Kurnugi frowned thoughtfully. “I was wandering the Blasted Lands for around three hundred years or so after the Festival of Dragons and my mother’s death. I’ve run into four dragons in that time, but none of them was interested in starting any conflict with me or getting friendly. My first run-in with Motherglare was around forty years ago or so, and the draconids started to attack Ven’ael around eight or nine years ago. The first assault came as a surprise, but I followed it back to its source before being repulsed. They are no real threat to me, but they have damaged the city, specifically the wall and some of the nearby houses facing toward where Motherglare resides. I cannot attack Motherglare because of how many near-adult creatures she has guarding her at all times. In fact, she’s probably added to that number over the years. I need human-type intelligence to figure a way around that problem, and I need your powers alongside my own to rid myself of her and the draconids for good. Now, do we have a bargain?”

The adventures all looked at one another and slowly, one by one, began to nod. Kurnugi smiled back at them. “In that case, perhaps you would like a map of the area to start planning out how to go about this campaign? I understand you humans enjoy doing such things.”

OOOOOO

The adventurers took the next five days to settle into the city more, eager to enjoy the ability to spread out and sleep outside their tents. Even though it did occasionally strike all of them as if they were preparing to live in a mausoleum.

Being the best at repairing things or as he put it, “Martial Arts construction, magi-tech version” Ranma first worked on repairing everything he could in the kitchen they decided to commandeer, while the others searched the buildings near the library, which they had all decided would be the center of their habitation within the city, for other less damaged kitchens. They didn’t find any, and occasionally ran into WMZ type trouble. Juvia would never live it down that she came back blue from head to toe, as if someone had taken the color of her hair and simply dyed the rest of her body that same color. The effect was not lost when she transformed into water, simply coming back when she reformed.

The fact that it was **everywhere** did, admittedly, add something to their nighttime activities. Jenny and Ranma were both utterly fascinated by the strangeness of seeing their own

normal-colored hands moving over the light blue canvas of Juvia's body. However, since Juvia complained that it itched whenever she was in direct sunlight, this was not nearly enough to offset her irritation over the next few days when the impact of that particular WMZ finally faded.

Similarly, Gajeel found the floor of one kitchen collapsing underneath him, dumping him into a larder. There, he too fell through a WMZ, one that practically froze him in place for several hours, during which he could only be thankful that so many centuries had passed. Both the food kept there and the various fungi and creatures that had eaten it had all turned to dust before he fell into the larder. It took the others several hours to find him and pull him out of the WMZ's area of effect via use of a rope.

When it became clear that they couldn't find another kitchen there which was in any better shape than the one Ranma was already repairing the others quickly shifted targets. When they weren't otherwise occupied, Gajeel and Natsu worked together to repair the walls of the library, having learned enough construction from their time in Fairy Tail in Natsu's case, and that plus the time with Ranma in Gajeel's. The walls they put up weren't nearly as thick as the previous ones but would work to keep out further damage from wind and rain. Similarly, they patched the holes in the ceiling.

Kurnugi was somewhat nonplussed by that, readily admitting that it was a good idea in terms of keeping the books from getting further spoiled, but also saying that he much preferred the natural light in comparison to needing to leave the library to read by sunlight. Kurnugi was adamantly against using any kind of torch or other lighting system within the library, and they hadn't found any supplies like flashlights or the equivalent yet. Although considering that the flashlights of the city-states had also run on magic, they would either have been dead, turned to rust, or mutated by the background magic by this point. Alternatively, any combination of two of those choices.

Meanwhile, Happy, Jenny and Juvia spread their search even wider, looking not for another kitchen, but instead furniture that was intact enough to use. They found a few things, mostly in basements or behind display cases that had survived thanks to various enchantments for a long while after the wars within the Blasted Lands had sputtered out. Both girls were deft hands at sewing and repair work by this point and were quickly able to fix several large plush chairs, as well as repair a few beds. Every mattress they found was a complete write off though. Even those that had been semi-preserved had degraded to the point where, when Jenny touched one of them, it simply came apart.

And the less said about the mattresses, which had magic embedded in them for shifting under the user or keeping cold the better. Both girls agreed that mattresses should not try to attack you the moment you sat on them.

Once Ranma was done with the kitchen, he and Natsu headed out past the city, hunting down a few specific types of animals, the Blasted Land's equivalent of sheep in point of fact.



While they wouldn't be able to re-create actual beds, they could make extremely soft comforters to go with the dozens of pillows that Ranma and Wendy had used within their tent.

After all that work was done though, it was decided to start taking the fight to Motherglare. After looking over the map, Ranma and the others all had a decent understanding of the terrain between the old crystal mine and Ven'auel. Unfortunately, that terrain had undoubtedly changed during the war and after. Kurnugi reported that what might be a small stream or a tiny lake to the northeast of the mines might well have dried up or moved entirely in a different direction from what he could remember of his clash with Motherglare. There were also not very many usable (defensible) terrain features between the mine complex and its patron city.

There had been at one point, but when Kurnugi came back into the area he reported that the steep hills and the one small military outpost shown on the map were gone. "The Military outpost looks to have been conquered at first, then demolished to the bedrock. The hills were just flattened, much like this one butte of stone. Pity, I remember perching there many a time in my dragon form," Kurnugi opined as Ranma and the others asked him to point out where the terrain had changed over time. "As to more detail about that specific area, I regret I have no real eye for such. The only thing that stuck out to me was the fact I remembered a lake being nearby and it wasn't there any longer."

Because of that, it was decided that instead of launching an attack with the six of them, Ranma and Jenny would try to sneak in to discover more about Motherglare defenses, the terrain around where she was staying, and how many more adult versions of the draconids there were, their numbers closer to home, and any usable terrain features. "Attacking an enemy in the positions they've prepared for you to attack is stupid. And even with all of the training we've got, if Kurnugi says that the older versions of the draconids are dangerous in large numbers, we need to be aware of how many there are going forward," Ranma said, arguing Natsu and Gajeel down. The other two Dragon Slayer's had wanted to just rush in.

Not, mind you, that they hadn't been facing combat since moving into the city. While the various creatures within the city seemed to want to leave them alone, or like the jelly generator were quite friendly, everyday bar the first one they'd spent in the city had seen legions of the draconids attacking it. This had given Kurnugi enough time to observe all of their various magics, giving pointers to the Natsu and Gajeel as well as showing his own strength, wiping out whole legions of the draconids with ease. Exempt from that was Ranma, considering he was easily the best when it came to repairing things, as well as living off the land, gathering food and other things throughout the city. He was so good in fact that by the time their houses were ready to be lived in, they'd amassed quite a lot of herbs, spices, vegetables and fruits from various overgrown gardens scattered across the city to go with the meat of the rabbit like creatures that seemed to infest some portions of the city regardless of the little Amcees.

Moreover, every day since then, more of the draconids had been coming with more and more of what Natsu, Gajeel and the others had thought were older versions of the regular kind.

They were, but in Kurnugi's words, "If we scale it on a scale of one to eight, with a regular draconid being one, those are two or perhaps three," the transformed Dragon had said, pointing to one of the incoming draconids that was bulkier in comparison to the others, with vestigial wings on its back, a long tail about as long as a regular draconid, and a slightly longer neck. "That would be a three. The more concerning ones are at least a seven or an eight on that scale, and I have not seen Motherglare sending any of them after us here just yet."

There was a problem however with two of them going off like that. Juvia was the one to bring it up, looking extremely cross as she did, while the others finished eating their dinner, looking at the map, with Kurnugi mumbling about what he thought might have changed from what he remembered seeing during his own initial fight with Motherglare. "This has been an issue with us all along, when one of us scout, they have to report back to the rest of us physically. But Kurnugi, you said that Motherglare's lair was what, a full half days flight from here for you? And we have no idea how that would translate to any of us walking that distance."

"True," Kurnugi said, frowning slightly and coming back to the here and now. "I do not know how far that is for a human in hiking distance that kind of experimentation was never done in the past. But surely, some kind of communication magic exists? Why did you not bring any of it along?"

"It was the one thing we forgot in our packing," Ranma said dryly, shaking his head. "And honestly, I don't think any magical communication would be able to work with this much background magic to have to punch through. No, we'll simply have to trust that whoever we send, well whoever goes with me really, will be able to handle themselves. This is an infiltration mission, not a combat one."

"Oh yeah, Nin Nin, baby! Take me, I can totally be a ninja!" Natsu exclaimed.

"Real ninja don't actually announce their presence at all and would probably just be wearing whatever would get the job done. Besides, you and Gajeel should stay here to train with Kurnugi," Ranma advised. "And Juvia, I'm sorry, but you don't have any magic that helps you blend into the background."

"Not unless there are bodies of water nearby," Juvia agreed, a scowl on her lips as she crossed her arms under her prodigious chest. "Juvia could always be carried in your mouth whenever we are in danger of being discovered, Ranma-sama."

"While you might be kind of comfortable with that, I'm not," Ranma answered firmly. "Besides, most of the time we'll be traveling unseen, not just hiding until patrol passes by or whatever." He went on in a more conciliatory tone, taking her hand and lifting up to kiss the back of it lightly, "Besides, someone needs to stay behind who has some common sense."

"What am I, chopped fish!?" Happy exclaimed, while Natsu and Gajeel both argued that they too had some common sense. Even Kurnugi looked at all three like they'd just grown a

second head, and eventually the two Dragon Slayer's looked away, while Happy tried to argue vociferously that he did have common sense. "It's the only way I've stayed alive with some of the adventures that Natsu and I go on.

"And yet, you then turn around and antagonize Lucy and several others when you don't really have to. You also don't exactly blend in Happy," Ranma rebutted, which finally shut the little Exceed up. *Come to think of it, why hasn't Happy ever tried to push to try to discover if he can transform into his human form? I know he once said that was just bizarre, and he really didn't like the fact that Carla liked to stay in her human form for so long. But even so, it would really help him become tougher and stronger in combat.*

"Again, the argument comes down to the fact that I can use my Umi-Sen-Ken, and Jenny has a Take Over form that allows her to blend into the background quite literally."

"And it's one of my most mobile forms too," Jenny added, pulling her sister wife into a side-hug for a second. "Don't worry, you know how fast that form and Ranma can move. We'll be back in three, maybe five days at most."

"In that case, you better pack enough supplies so you don't have to hunt while you're out there. No matter how careful you are, that might bring the draconids' attentions down on you," Gajeel advised.

That was sensible, and the pair of scouts took another day for the twosome to prepare, during which time the city was again attacked by another Legion of draconids. Mostly ones and twos on Kurnugi's scale this time, but with a few fours leading them. Not many though. Watching the others deal with this incursion, Ranma wondered aloud, "Is it because she can only make a finite number of draconids at any one time, or is there a reason why she doesn't seem to want to sacrifice the older ones as easily as the younger versions?"

"It could simply be a matter of time. Remember, Kurnugi said he didn't know how long it took for a draconid to fully mature, so maybe it's a long process, and any draconids that are say at the midpoint along that process become too valuable to be risked as lightly as these attacks are thrown at Kurnugi," Jenny suggested. Then an idea occurred to her. "Maybe they really are needed close to home. Maybe there are other monsters out there that are fighting Motherglare from other directions. That could be something to look into."

"Maybe, but not in terms of trying to bring them to our side. To quote a famous pirate from back where I was from originally, my enemy's enemy is my enemy's enemy, no more, no less."

Jenny snickered at that, and then looked over to Kurnugi, who was watching the two Dragon Slayers as they worked the field with their long-range attacks, his eyes narrowed. "Gajeel! If you're having trouble widening the scope of that attack, then don't bother with making certain that the needles you're hurling out are pointed. Instead, concentrate more on

creating speed in that attack along with the numbers of needles. A blunt object going fast enough will still do a lot of damage. We'll start working more on shape change magic in the future. Natsu, your attack is still taking too long to build up. You need to work on that!"

Having said his piece, Kurnugi turned away from watching the other two Dragon Slayers, nodding to Jenny and Ranma. "Actually, if the two of you want to leave now, that might not be a bad idea. Circle around, get past this group, and then simply follow the trail they've no doubt left behind them back to Motherglare. Just remember, the draconids also have a good sense of smell. You'll have to be aware of that."

Jenny grimaced having forgotten that, while Ranma also looked a little annoyed, but he still nodded his head. The Umi-Sen-Ken would probably still work. *Probably*. "In that case we'll head toward the easternmost gate, leave the city that way, then as you said circle around this group. Maybe we'll get lucky, and Motherglare will have given orders for the older draconids to pull back, although I doubt it."

"Almost certainly not. While they are certainly more valuable than the lower level draconids, that doesn't mean they are actually prized by their creator." Kurnugi actually shuddered a little. "It makes me very glad indeed that none of these creatures are actually natural. The idea of Motherglare being a mother to anything or anyone is a terrifying one."

Ranma snorted at that, and then shouted farewell to Gajeel and Natsu. After sharing a kiss with Juvia, he and Jenny raced off, using the wall for the most part until they got to the edge of the crater, where Ranma climbed as Jenny used one of her flying forms to ascend upwards, grateful that they hadn't yet run into any Wild Magic Zones. They did have to skirt the outer wall of the top portion of the city because of them, and indeed, one Wild Magic Zones nearly covered the entirety of the wall there. Nevertheless, they were able to get through the gate and out into the countryside beyond quickly.

There, Ranma looked over to Jenny. "I think from here on, we should go under our camouflage techniques as much as possible."

Understanding, Jenny nodded, and held up her hands to either side of her, reaching into herself for one specific mechanical soul. "Fine, but don't make fun of my appearance again in this form, okay? You know I'm sensitive about that kind of thing."

"I don't know why, I think you're ridiculously cute in it. Not sexy as you normally are in anything you put on or any mechanical soul, but still..."

"If that was in any way true, I'd be kind of worried about your fetishes Ranma," Jenny drawled, causing Ranma to laugh, before she went on to call out her spell. "Take Over: Mecha Soul: Spy Guy!"

When the flash of transformation magic disappeared, Jenny's form had shrunk by a good 2 feet, becoming almost **squat** with thin spindly mechanical arms almost looking like a robotic spider's, a long, segmented elongated face ending in a tube, which acted in this form like a cannon. Her hair and her eye color were the only things that showed her original form, her wild mane of blonde locks, very apparent on top of what should very obviously have been a smooth metal surface, as well as her deep blue eyes. The rest of her was painted in what looked like jungle camo, the overall appearance somewhat reminding Ranma of a game he'd once seen advertised that had apparently been really famous. About an elf kid rescuing a princess. *Although in that game, they were plant creatures, not robots.*

However, as Ranma watched, a camouflage effect took place, covering Jenny from head to toe, including her hair, blending into the background. Even better, unlike most chameleons, when Jenny moved, she was still completely invisible. Ranma would have to be standing directly next to her to be able to smell her out, and that boded well for their mission. Nevertheless, he could still detect Jenny via his ki sense, which would let them communicate even while Ranma was under his Umi-Sen-Ken.

"I'll be flanking you on your left. Be on the lookout for Wild Magic Zones," Ranma advised, reaching forward towards Jenny, touching where her robotic arm had been originally. He felt her grip his hand once. Even though looking down at it, it looked almost as if he was gripping a portion of the background, the camouflage effect being so impressive as to cover even that action.

A moment later, he was off, trusting Jenny to be able to keep up with him. The Spy Guy was actually extremely quick on its multiple robo-spider legs, although Ranma also kept an eye on her via his ki sense. While that form didn't eat up much of her magical reserves when she used it, running with it certainly tired her out. She would need to stop at least twice a day to rest and have some water, which Ranma could easily provide.

The two of them easily found the trail of the draconid legions heading further north. It looked as if every group that had been sent against the city had marched along the same path, leaving a brown battered landscape behind them, stomped straight through what were normally green fields with the occasional tree.

With Ranma's whispered instructions leading them, they decided to stay off that specific trail, but within some sight of it from a distance using a spyglass. That way it was hoped that they wouldn't run into any further draconids heading southward to attack Ven'ael.

However, that evening some of their good luck failed. The sky opened up, dumping snow on them from the moment the sun began to go down and lasted until late in the night. And one thing the Spy Guy Mecha Soul could not handle was the cold. The moment they saw snow beginning to appear above them and the temperature dropping so dramatically, like everything else in the Blasted Lands, the weather was grossly affected by the background magic so drops in temperature like this are not exactly unusual, Ranma called a halt. "Jenny, let's put a few hills

between us and where the draconids' trail is. If you can call that thing a trail anyway. Transform back, have something to eat. I'm going to dig us a hiding place."

Jenny did so, shivering even as she transformed back into her human body, catching the heavy fur jacket that Ranma tossed at her, wrapping it around herself and kneeling down on the ground so it covered more of her, rocking in place as she worked her hands under her armpits. "Fuck! The moment the temperatures started to change, I could feel it, all my joints started to freeze up. Wherever that mecha comes from it cannot handle the cold. And it certainly isn't just made of normal metal either. When it started to get cold, it felt so bad it was like I'd just jumped into an ice floe."

"Sorry love, I should've remembered that form doesn't handle the cold quicker," Ranma said. He had come out of the Umi-Sen-Ken when he gave her the order to do the same, and Jenny now watched as Ranma used his fists and hands to tear into the earth for a few moments, creating a series of walls and a small cave, which she crawled into a second later. Ranma then hugged her over the heavy fur coat, the heat of his body doing more than the coat did to warm her up.

Outside the snow began to fall in earnest, large chunks of it looking almost like play cubes coming down from the sky. "I'll dig us an igloo when there's enough snow, and then we can light a fire to stay warm."

Normally, Jenny would've said something about there being better ways of staying warm, but she was still too cold right now to even move with Ranma's arms around her. By the time there was enough snow for the Ranma igloo plan though, she had warmed up. By the time he was done, Jenny had asked him to get out the tent and their cooking supplies. After setting up the tent, she had even begun to cook a small meal.

Within the tent, it was toasty warm, and once Ranma transformed into his female form lest they be tempted by other things, it became even warmer.

Luckily, the snow and the cold didn't last for very long, the next day becoming so hot that the snow started to melt away. This of course made it hard going for the two of them once they set off again, and Ranma actually carried Jenny on his back in her Spy Guy form for most of it, being able to more easily push through mud and melting snow than Jenny could. Still, it slowed them down. It took them all that day and a large portion of the next before they started to see other draconids in the distance.

These draconids were larger than any of the others they'd seen. They stood at least four stories tall, some of them even taller. Most draconids still retained the normal semi human appearance, hunched over, walking on their hind legs, using their forelegs as arms. These had much longer necks, and the vestigial wings they'd seen in the larger than normal draconids that had begun to lead the attack against Ven'auel weren't vestigial at all. Several times the two infiltrators saw the draconids actually able to lift themselves off the ground with those flying

around. Some of that almost looks like training to Ranma's eyes, while at least a few of them were very obviously bringing back food from a hunt or heading out on one.

Beyond those however, there seemed to be two varieties. One, while still retaining their wings, seemed primarily to stay on the ground. Their wings looked different somehow, more... well, metallic than the rest of the draconids, although Ranma would've been hard-pressed to say why considering the draconids themselves looked almost mechanical most of the time. at least in their armor. These seemed to be in charge of groups of the smaller ones, because they were always surrounded by them, moving around the area purposefully.

Ranma did not need Jenny's breathed word of, "Patrols," to understand what they were up to.

However, there was another variety of draconid as well, and these Ranma considered were probably the ones that Kurnugi had been worried about, or at least the immediately younger version of said. They still retained the same facial expressions as the regular draconids, no eyes, a mouth that looked more like a metallic jaw than anything else did. Nevertheless, there the similarities ended. Their arms were longer, they moved on all fours when on the ground, they had tails that were at least twice as long as their bodies, and they flew as much as they walked. They were also far larger all around, being at least twice as large as the other more advanced varieties.

With a gentle tap of his hand against where Jenny's voice had come from, Ranma led her away, skirting further around the area and away from the patrols. They came back in at another angle still further west hiding out once when a patrol came by them so close that Ranma feared that Jenny's scent might be picked up even if the draconids wouldn't be able to see her. But soon they passed the patrol and pushed deeper into draconid territory.

At around midday, a new variety of draconid made its appearance. Larger by three or four times even than the flying ones they'd seen earlier that day, these creatures came close to Acnologia's size. Each had noticeable differences to their bodies that marked them out almost as individuals, as well as eyes, although their mouth remained the same almost mechanical jaws. Their hands had grown another few claws as well, the claws coming up to seven instead of the normal three from previously, and their armor looked as if it was covered by barnacles of some kind on top of the regular metallic type of armor.

And there were a lot of them. From where the two of them had stopped, Ranma counted at least thirty or so. They seemed to lounge around the area, filling up miles upon miles in every direction he could see, and he wondered if there would in fact be a path forward through them that wouldn't take him and Jenny over their bodies to see where Motherglare was keeping herself.

Once more, Jenny whispered into Ranma's ear, her voice odd and fluting coming out of that long snout of her Spy Guy form, interspersed with the word spy every few seconds. "How

much do you want to bet \*spy\*, that those are the nearly adult versions of the draconids \*spy\* that Kurnugi warned us of \*spy\*? They certainly look dangerous \*spy\*, and with their enhanced armor, who knows how \*spy\* much of a punishment \*spy\* they could take.”

These larger versions of the draconids senses were also remarkably keen, as two of the nearest creatures turned their heads towards where Jenny and Ranma stood. She froze and Ranma did the same, watching until the creatures seemingly lost interest. Neither spoke though, with Ranma tapping gently on the hand and pulling back once more.

In the interest of learning more about how many of these creatures there could be and hoping that they would indeed find a way towards Motherglare, Ranma led the pair of them wide again, trying to go around this obstacle. This time the pair went so wide that Ranma estimated they were actually to the north of where they had first spotted this new type of Dragon. But thankfully, at the back of what Ranma supposed he could call defenses that Motherglare had laid out between her and Ven’auel, or perhaps more accurately between her position and Kurnugi’s, the fully adult version of the draconids did not cover the land like so many giant slugs. Here, the pair of them could move between them without any danger of coming within a few hundred yards of one.

And in the distance, the pair of them began to make out some kind of noise. It took them a few more moments of traveling into the area where the larger draconids laid out to realize that that distant noise was in fact a voice, accompanied by something crunching down on something hard. *Oh great, so we have two options here. One, we’re going to find out that these draconids evolve to the point where they can actually talk to one another, which probably would not be a good thing in terms of how intelligent they’d be in a fight. Or two, we will find that Motherglare has gone around the twist and is talking to herself.*

It turned out to be the latter, but it was actually a good thing, because as she talked, Motherglare actually gave the pair some information, which they avidly listened to as they continued their way forward.

”Soon, soon, a two hundred, I will have two hundred true sons! Yes, yes, thousands, millions of the lesser might’ve died, but the stronger, the stronger they have survived. They have grown. With them, with them I can challenge Kurnugi. Bring him to heel! Then, then build up an army, cover the Blasted Lands from one and two another. Search out any weapons, any of the human magics that still exist here that could be used to defeat Acnologia!”

Ranma blinked, frowning at that. Not Motherglare’s tone, he’d gotten used to that half-crazed, half-feminine, half-trollish gargle before he or Jenny could make out the actual words. No, he was surprised that neither he nor any of the others had thought about the possibility of there being a magical weapon of some kind within the Blasted Lands that they could use against Acnologia.



*Mind you, finding something like that would be like finding a needle in a haystack, and it's really doubtful that any of the long-range strategic magical assault systems would still work as they did back then. But could the Etherion hurt him? It's doubtful, considering how fast Acnologia could go, that they be able to actually target them, but even so, it's an idea, I guess. Makes her being here at least somewhat understandable.*

Ranma tuned back into Motherglare's words signaling Jenny to hold for a second, as ahead of them, the way was barred once more from actually getting close enough to Motherglare to see her by several more of the larger versions of the draconids. But from here, both of them could see a large hill, and an equally large entryway into it looking like a mining entrance. It was from that hole that Motherglare's voice came. And as they watched, something in the darkness of that entrance shifted.

Then came dozens, then hundreds of child-sized egg-like objects which rapidly grew in the air to approaching the size of a normal human adult. They shattered on the ground all around the entryway, birthing new draconids, all of whom began to march south.

Watching this, Jenny began to count in her head, wondering how quickly Motherglare could do something like that, and what kind of fuel she was using to create the eggs in the first place.

"Yes! Yes! More, more pawns, more of my egg children. Overwhelm Kurnugi, overwhelm his new allies. Where did they come from, where! Dragon Slayer Magic, dragons? Which? Working with Kurnugi, working with him! With him and not me, why! Acnologia!"

The semi-coherent rambling cut off abruptly as a shriek filled the air, so loud that Ranma had to bite back a verbal whimper of pain and Jenny twitched. "Acnologia! Curse you, Acnologia, never again! I will overwhelm you, I will bring an army against you, an army that will cover this continent! Driving everything before me, driving the humans, driving the orcs, the other creatures and monsters against you! You will never get close enough to me, never hurt me again! All will bow, all will be fed to me!"

*Holy hell, she's completely insane.* With that, Ranma decided they didn't actually need to see Motherglare. They'd seen and heard enough, and Ranma had an inkling of an idea, as another fusillade of eggs were launched in the air, Ranma used his ki sense to find where Jenny was, then moved over to her, gently tapping her hand with his own. She flinched a bit, but quickly grasped his hand in one of her robotic ones and he squeezed twice, a single they'd come up with after their initial scare with the larger dragons hearing Jenny's voice before to signal that they needed to retreat.

They did so, retracing their steps entirely. There, where Ranma estimated they had begun to move southward again towards Motherglare after skirting around the army of larger draconids, Ranma saw what he had thought he had seen the first time in the distance. In an area patrolled heavily by the mid-tier draconids there was a small lake. *Excellent.*

With that, and with Motherglare's paranoia, he had a plan, and he leaned into Jenny, whispering in her ear. "Let's head eastward around this lot and then back further south. We need to get back to the others."

The return trek took them another day and a half to get out and away from the territory the draconids were patrolling heavily, and then another day to get away from an area where only the smallest variety of draconids went, hunting mostly, but still spreading out in a continual pattern away from Motherglare's lair. Thankfully, once they left that area behind, Jenny was able to transform back into her human form, stretching mightily and pulling Ranma into a quick make-out session. When she finally pulled back, she breathed deeply. "Damn! I've never had to spend so much time in one form before, let alone a form that transforms my body so much. I did not like that **at all!**"

"I would apologize, but that form was really useful, and it's not like you would've let me make this trip alone, would you?" Ranma quipped.

"What, let someone out into the Blasted Lands without another person around to watch their back? Even Natsu has Happy when he goes out on his own," Jenny joked back before Ranma interrupted any more words with another kiss. Then he stepped back, and Jenny transformed into one of her flying forms, flying up into the air before coming back down to pick up Ranma, racing back towards the city.

There, they arrived just as the last vestiges of another draconid attack was finished off by Kurnugi, a wide blade of energy coming from one hand around twice the diameter of any of their large-scale attacks. It still struck with enough force to do the job though, slicing through the draconids easily.

Jenny landed on top of a rooftop near the outer wall where the others were standing, and before she could fully transform back into her human body, both Ranma and Jenny found themselves lifted up in a hug by Juvia a, who twirled them around as if they weighed nothing at all despite the fact that Jenny's current flying form, which minded Ranma nothing so much as an anthropomorphic personification of a B-52 bomber, was actually kind of heavy, needing to be so in order to deal with lifting someone else for such a long period. "You have been gone for **days!** Juvia was incredibly worried! We are not doing this again, this whole splitting off thing."

"Actually, we might have to do it at least one more time," Ranma said, only for his words to be cut off as Juvia hugged him even more tightly. "We can talk about it," he squeaked. *Since when is Juvia so strong! This almost feels like Erza is trying to squeeze me in half.*

Jenny the other hand simply finished transforming into her human body and hugged her sister-wife just as tightly as she was being hugged in turn, kissing Juvia and interrupting her ire. By the time she came up for breath, Juvia's anger had completely dissipated, and she was in danger of turning into a blushing pile of water at their feet.

“Oh great, the moment they’re back, they start up with that again!” Gajeel mock-grumbled, although he and Natsu were both grinning and he took his turn to thump Ranma on the shoulder when Natsu did the same. “You worried Natsu, Happy and Juvia you know.”

“But not you because you’re all stoic and such. Heh, and liking heavy metal, the color black and dark poetry. There was a word for people like that back in my old dimension, Chuunibyos. Ya think yer standing out, by acting like a rocking rebel one moment and all quiet and withdrawn the next, but ya ain’t,” Ranma snickered.

“You wanna go, drainpipe!?” Gajeel growled thrusting his forehead against Ranma’s.

The two of them were pulled apart by their fellows while Kurnugi watched on, amused. The dragon-turned-temporary-human waited until Gajeel’s grumbles and Ranma’s snickers had both subsided, speaking over Natsu’s attempt to get a better explanation of the term Ranma had used to ask what the two scouts had found.

Ranma rapidly reported what they’d seen and heard, and then asked, “So what have you all been up to?”

Gajeel and Natsu exchanged glances, and Natsu smirked. “You remember how we’ve been told a few times that the two of us and Wendy don’t have to worry about the dragonification effect? Both Master Makarov and Porlyusica said that. That that they couldn’t detect any hint of our dragon powers taking over our bodies, but couldn’t figure out why? Kurnugi did. It turns out that our parents aren’t as dead as we thought they were. Oh, and we’re from the past. From when Zeref walked Earth Land and Acnologia began his rise.”

Both Jenny and Ranma simply blinked, looked at one another, then back at the others, and then Ranma said. “I’m sorry, what?”

### **End Chapter**

I wasn’t quite happy with the how of the conversation between Gajeel/Metalicana and Natsu/Igneel. It just felt forced and weird. I also think the G/M conversation was a bit forced. So that scene will let the next chapter start out with a bit of humor. After that it will be all combat, all the time, both with Ranma and the rest, and elsewhere as Acnologia moves against the Empire... and Erza discovers the joys of parenthood. Yes, she would call that a battle. It counts.