

Hey, all, here is the next chapter of *Making Waves!*

In less happy news, given my 'head issues' LOL, my time on fic has sucked balls this month (ADHD, head pains and ITCHING do not go together well), and, also unfortunately, FILFy teacher this month is a particularly challenging chapter. There's a whole mess of violence, a whole mess of moving parts, and it is going to be massive chapter to boot LOL. Given all that, and the importance of the chapter in the great scheme of FILFy's ongoing plot, there is no way I could finish it and get it out to my editors in enough time for even one of them to get it back to me by the end of the month. So unless a lot of you tell me in your reviews here that you would like to see the unedited product, you all will have to wait for August before you see it. Sorry folks.

I will apologize for this over on fanfic by updating *Remodel* and *Making Waves* over there. Here, alas, I won't be able to do so. I probably won't even be able to even get out the small Episode style update by the end of the month, unless I get really lucky. We will have to see.

This has been edited by the estimable justloverreadin' and Hiryo.

Chapter 33: Merely Traveling Becomes True Exploring

As his friends stood around him, Ranma stared up and up and further up at the group of giants who had come out of their village to greet the travelers. A nice-looking, if primitive, place, Sun Village was built into the side of a hill, with different segments being leveled off and a few built directly into the side of the hill rather than on it. Most of the houses from where the travelers stood were single-story houses, beyond a few larger guard post-like structures, with each house built in a far more open fashion than most humans would have preferred, with lots of large windows. Those windows were simple openings in the walls, with no glass visible anywhere in the village. Instead, pieces of clothing were hung in many of them or indeed as doorways instead of wooden doors. And every building in the village was built more on the scale of mansions rather than any regular house Ranma had ever seen.

This was fair enough, considering that the Giants themselves were all at least five stories tall, with one or two being even taller. Yet looking at them, Ranma could only shake his head and mutter, "They are so not like how I expected them to be."

Of course, Ranma never met a giant before, but he had imagined they would look like a human only far larger, or perhaps like the giants in a children's book he had once had to read when he had been forced to go to school by a truant officer back in his old world. While these giants certainly seemed friendly, they frankly had more in common in terms of appearance with the dwarves he had seen in a cartoon movie once.

Well, minus the beards, anyway. But they had the same big noses, round face is, and small eyes along with the same clothing Ranma could vaguely remember from the movie. *On the other hand, after so long, it's a wonder, I remember anything at all beyond the dragon.*

“At least they’re friendly,” Jenny replied to his mutter, nudging him in the side and pulling Ranma from his musings. “Count your blessings.”

Indeed, this seemed to be the case. All of the giants were smiling at the humans who had followed Flare to their village, and their spokesman boomed out a question, as he raised a hand and then lowered it towards Flare, “Well, strangers, while we normally don’t get visitors, you’re welcome all the same! Little Flare at least will enjoy having people near her own size around. Won’t you, little one?”

Beyond the fact that the giants didn’t seem to have any kind of volume control, this seemed a very friendly greeting, although the hand going towards Flare did point out a bit of a problem for Jenny and Juvia. They watched as the younger girl laughingly activated a kind of magic neither of them had seen before. “Crimson Hair, Spider Leg escape!”

Flare’s red hair shifted and moved to become a series of spider legs, with which she scuttled a few paces to one side then leaped upwards, sliding between two of the giant’s outstretched fingers. A second later, that hand impacted the ground with a reverberation that could be felt through the traveler’s feet.

Despite her close escape, Flare giggled, hopping back up and onto the hand. She was then raised up to eye level with the giant. “And I see you found my dog!” the giant boomed at the young girl, his breath causing her hair to flutter. “Honestly, at this point, I think he likes you better than me!”

This caused Flare to laugh again, and the giant lowered her to towards the ground, where Flare hopped up and over towards the dog, rubbing his ears cheerfully, although her eyes were straining towards Happy once more.

On his normal position on top of Natsu’s head, Happy caught that and shivered, nestling in deeper into his pink couch. “Natsu, protect me from the dog lover!”

Ignoring that, Jenny frowned, looking at the bruises and cuts Flare sported and then back to the giants. “I’m thinking image here, an image of... oversized affection, shall we call it?”

“You think that the Giants cannot control their strength well enough and have sometimes hurt Flare without meaning to?” Juvia guessed, not commenting on the term that Jenny used since she couldn’t come up with a better one offhand. “Juvia thinks that we should talk to Flare. Juvia too believes that perhaps the dog’s exuberance is not the reason for all those tiny scars Flare has.”

Ranma heard the two of them talking but didn't join that conversation. Instead, he addressed the giant who had spoken to them while the two other Dragon Slayers were busy staring at the village, taking in the sights with interest, seeing much the same things Ranma had with one addition: in front of a few of the houses were weapons. These were obviously made to the size of the giants and were extremely well-made.

Natsu could spot a large hunting spear, although Natsu had no idea what the heck a giant could use a hunting spear like that for. *It would split any bear or even a Vulcan I've ever seen in two!* There were a few swords and shields scattered around, the shields so large that Natsu thought one could probably be used as a wok large enough to cook a meal for the entire guild. There were lots of hammers, small ones in terms of the giant's size, which looked to be wielded in one hand.

And all of these weapons were hung over the doors to the various houses. Natsu had seen similar things a few times, weapons that had become family heirlooms or were otherwise important.

"Thanks for the warm welcome," Ranma said, raising his voice slightly so the giant could hear him from way up there. "And maybe you would get more visitors if more people actually knew that this village existed outside of legends?"

This caused the giants to boom in laughter, but Ranma didn't sense that any of them were exactly unhappy with that state of affairs.

One of them then asked, "If that's the case strangers, why are you here? I can't imagine that our village is on the way to any other place after all."

The very idea of that sent many of the other giants into gales of laughter, with Flare joining them, her own giggle almost drowned out by the louder noises of the giants. But Jenny and Juvia made a point of catching her eye and smiling at her, causing the younger girl to blush shyly and look away. It was evident to both of Ranma's lovers that she hadn't had much contact with people her own size.

Perhaps even women in general, Jenny realized as she looked around the village. She didn't see any female giants around, which raised several odd questions in both her mind and made her concerns about Flare even worse.

"Well, first, let's take care of the 'stranger' bit. My name is Ranma, with me is Natsu, Gajeel, Juvia, and Jenny. We've come here because I once heard about a village with a sacred fire in it, and Natsu here is a Fire Dragon Slayer. We came here hoping he might be able to learn something from your sacred flame."

The giants are looked at one another, sobering slightly, before their spokesperson nodded. "Well, Ranma, my name is Dram, and I'm Headman for the village this month. We do

have a sacred fire here, one we worship. It is the source of much of our village's well-being, making our farms more productive and the local forest vibrant and green. What do you mean when you say you want to learn from it?"

Natsu spoke up before Ranma could, stepping forward. "I'm a Fire Dragon Slayer like Ranma told ya. But as to what I'll learn from your sacred fire, I don't know yet. I'd want to see it first. But if it's important to you, I won't try to fight it or eat it if that's what you're afraid of."

"Afraid?" For a moment, Ranma was a little concerned that Natsu's bluntness had offended them, then the Giants began to laugh. "Afraid of you fighting the sacred fire? What a funny thing to say, stranger! Almost as funny as that pink hair of yours."

"Hey, you big bastard! My hair is salmon-colored, not pink!"

Gajeel joined in on the chorus that was the reply to that. "You know they already have a name for that color, right? It's pink!" Even Flare and Happy joined in on the retort to that.

After another round of laughter, Dram gestured at the humans to follow him into the village as several of the other giants turned and went back to their own work, heading out to the farmsteads that the travelers had passed by earlier or heading into their houses. "Regardless of what we think, it will be the sacred fire itself, which will decide what to do about you wanting to learn from it."

That was the first clue that Ranma and the others had that the sacred fire would have some kind of sentience. So Ranma and the others were not entirely surprised when they came upon the sacred spire itself, and it started to react to their presence.

The sacred fire was situated in the direct center of the village, on a portion of the hillside that had been flattened out entirely and then lined with white stones. A well-like structure lay at the center of this area, over which the sacred fire bloomed. There didn't seem to be any source of the fire. It just hovered there above the well, flaring up into the sky at least two stories tall.

At first, it appeared to be just a small pillar of flame, about the same height as Ranma standing with his arms above his head. But as Dram led them closer, the column of fire blossomed, shifting into what almost looked like a draconic face for a moment, complete with black eyes that stared at the newcomers and a long snout in which teeth, of a subtly different color than the rest, could be seen. Since everything was made of fire, there wasn't much detail that could be picked out beyond the eyes and mouth.

"Wow! A fire dragon that's literally on fire!" Natsu shouted as he raced forward, running between Dram's legs to get closer to the sacred fire, staring at it intensely. "That's so cool! It's like that battle aura from Wendy's Dragon Force, only made of fire! How cool would it be if I could do something like that, shaped how I want it to be!"

“Not cool at all! Too hot!” Happy answered, already sweating from being near the sacred fire. “If you use something like that in battle, I wouldn’t be able to fight with you, just like with that blue-whatever guy! I’m not fireproof like you, Natsu.”

“Actually, Natsu wasn’t technically fireproof. An enemy’s magical fire could hurt him if the attacker’s magic was powerful enough if Natsu didn’t eat the attack in question before it hit him. But he was certainly more durable to heat and fire than Happy was.”

“You speak as one who uses fire magic, stranger. Yet that does not explain why you are here before me,” the sacred fire intoned. Its voice was a hissing crackle, yet powerful, thrumming through the air in a way that reminded Ranma of Belserion.

“Holy hell, it really is alive!” Natsu breathed out a bit of flame in shock. Then he reached forward with a finger to poke at the fire, causing Dram to grumble behind them at the impertinence.

But the sacred fire twisted away, becoming larger for a moment growing a forelimb complete with a clawed paw which smacked Natsu backward. Ranma was interested to note the flame had acted like it was a physical thing, a solid, rather than made entirely out of flames. “That was rude, you little brat! Hasn’t anyone told you not to poke people?”

“Lots of times, but how are you exposed to learn anything if you don’t poke things?” Natsu asked as he hopped to his feet, and fire burst from his own hands, covering them in claws. “Still, if you’re strong enough to bat me aside like that, maybe I don’t have to try to eat a bit of you to learn from you.”

“Are we just going to ignore the fact the freaking flame is talking to us?” Jenny asked, watching this in shock.

“Yes, yes we are. Honestly, it isn’t even in my top twenty strangest things I’ve seen,” Ranma quipped.

The sacred fire laughed. “My, you are certainly a fiery fellow, aren’t you?! And yet, you are also a mystery. That magic you’re using looks somewhat familiar. You’re not just any normal fire magic user, are you?”

“Nope! I am Natsu Dragneel, the Fire Dragon Slayer!”

That caused the sacred fire to pause, then it laughed, its voice becoming even more crackly and fiery sounding than before as it waved its paw towards Dram, gesturing him backward. “That is quite the bold claim to make before me, the dragon Atlas Flame!”

Natsu stumbled, staring at the sacred fire. “So, you’re a dragon!? But then... how do you fit in that hole? No dragon I’ve seen or even heard of can change their shape like that, and

Igneel wasn't on fire all the time either. It'd have been darn annoying to cuddle with him at night if he had been."

Atlas Flame the sacred fire rear back, becoming taller for a moment as he stared down at Natsu. "You know of Igneel, the Fire Dragon King?" the voice then turned sardonic. "And cuddling? That does not match my memories of my king... at all... not even a little bit."

"Yeah, well he was my Old Man! Igneel found me, adopted me, taught me everything I know!" Natsu answered proudly.

"Which still leaves quite a lot of room for more learning," Ranma quipped from behind them.

Natsu turned just enough to give him the finger before turning back to Atlas Flame as the sacred fire spoke. "I don't suppose you have any proof of that? Although I do sense something familiar about you... It is not as if you and I have met before, but as if there is some other scent I know mingled with your own."

"It's probably coming from this." Natsu held up his scarf, waving the end of it towards Atlas Flame. "Igneel made me this scarf from his own scales."

Atlas Flame seems to consider that for a moment, then the sacred flame visibly shrunk to signify a nod. "That could be it, I suppose. Although it doesn't feel quite right."

Then the fiery head seemed to shake from side to side, growing back to its original size, growing further until it seemed as if the front half of a dragon sat there, flowing out around and above the well. "Still, that is neither here nor there. You say you have come here to learn, yes? And you bandy about my king's name. As Igneel was an old friend, I suppose I should volunteer to help you. But I'll need to see what we have as starting point first."

"Wait, does that mean we're going to fight?!" Natsu questioned excitedly. "Hell yeah!"

Atlas Flame appeared to laugh again. "Hahaha, I am afraid that is beyond me. The body you see before you isn't really alive as you would use the term. It is more a memory of my power and personality. After all, even dragons are not truly immortal, and when I created this flame before you, I was already quite weak."

"Did you fight Acnologia?" Ranma interjected from behind Natsu.

Atlas Flame seemed to see him and the others for the first time, and once more, the image of a dragon made out of fire now seems to sniff the air. For something that itself said it wasn't alive, his mannerisms could've fooled you into thinking it was. "I sense the power of the ocean or water on two of you and metal on another. But you, the human female with the sunflower-colored hair, I can't sense anything about you."

Jenny simply shrugged at that, taking a step backward from the flame. "The only one of us use here to learn from you is Natsu, so that doesn't matter much, dragon."

"True. But you mentioned Acnologia. Yes, I fought him once. Thankfully for me, I wasn't the only one in that battle; if that beast had been able to concentrate solely on me, it would've extinguished my flames with ease! Yet you speak of that creature as if you too have faced it."

"We all have," Gajeel answered, speaking up for the first time since they had reached the village. "I'm Gajeel, the Iron Dragon Slayer, son of Metalicana. And all of us recently fought Acnologia. We lost, but we survived, and now we're all on a training journey to learn and grow stronger."

Atlas Flame fell silent for a time, his form pulling back and almost disappearing down into the well.

When Natsu made to poke his head over the side of the well, Ranma grabbed him by the scruff of his shirt, pulling him back. "We gave him a lot to think about just then, and if this is some kind of spirit we're dealing with, it won't be as quick to think things through as a living creature might."

Ranma's prediction was proven correct. A few minutes of boredom later, the sacred fire reappeared, reforming into Atlas Flame's face. "And so you have brought Natsu here to me to learn. Very well. I will teach you what I can. Let's see how hot you can make it!"

With that, the heat around the sacred fire shifted into its half-dragon form again, spreading out quickly, the heat of it rising dramatically. Jenny and Juvia both gasped, and Flare, who had followed behind them, stumbled backward, sweat dripping off her face despite being the furthest away from the fire. Dram also stumbled backward, wiping at his forehead with a massive hand and then flicking it to the side, sending droplets of sweat the size of Ranma's head into the air, where they hissed and turned into steam before they could reach the ground.

Natsu didn't stumble. Instead, he simply grinned, slamming one fist into his chest, not even feeling the heat even as he turned and tossed Happy towards Gajeel, who caught the Exceed easily. "Bring it on! But if we're not going to fight, what are we going to do?"

"Show me what you can already do, launch your attacks into me! Start from your weakest attack and then move up to your strongest slowly. The magic flames that you create will empower my spirit further, and once you are finished, I will know how to train you. I already have several ideas I might be able to help you with, starting with my own specialty, Solid Flame."

"Woot! I'm getting all fired up!" Natsu shouted before he raced towards Atlas Flame's now-looming form.

As the first attack from Natsu crashed into the fiery form of Atlas Flame and the spirit started to laugh, Ranma smirked, turning back to the others. "Well, this seems to have worked out well enough for Natsu, so why don't we leave them to it? Dram, I don't suppose you all have a room fit for people our size, do you?"

"Not a bit of it," Dram said before turning away from the site of Natsu attacking the sacred fire with a look of bemused amusement on his face, although he also looked a little guilty seeing Flare with them. "But if you have tents or similar, you can set up in any of our houses you wish."

"You can set up near my house!" Flare exclaimed, almost reaching out to grab Jenny and Juvia's hands, before pulling back somewhat shyly. "That is if you want to."

Juvia smiled and reached forward, taking Flare's hand before she could pull fully. "That sounds lovely."

While the offer might've sounded lovely, Flare's actual house was anything but. The shack, which was a much better description, was on the outskirts of the town, situated to the side of one of the houses near where they had first met with the giants coming into the village. Indeed, Ranma had actually seen it when they had her first arrived but had thought it a pile of wood stacked outside the house.

The shack was made out of bits of wood left from larger projects, put together haphazardly with nails the size of swords, tips sticking out here and there. Whatever their ability with stone and steel, it was evident that the giants had a major issue with building small things and that wood was not their favored material either.

Jenny and Juvia took one look at that, then turned to Ranma. "Tent," they both ordered as one.

Chuckling at that, Ranma nodded and pulled out his tent from his Requip Space. Once they had finished setting it up, Jenny took charge. "Come on, Flare. Let's see if we can come up with some more dresses for you first. You can't be Happy in that smock, can you? And I'm a pretty good needleworker, so I could probably take a few of my own dresses and size them to fit you."

Flare looked a little overwhelmed by this, but also wistful and in awe as Jenny and Juvia led her into the tent. And since they had yet to see a single woman, Ranma wondered exactly how many other girls she'd ever seen in her life.

Reflecting that he would have to look through his item space for a bit to see if he had anything of Wendy's that could fit the older girl if Jenny couldn't make good on her boast, Ranma followed the trio and then poked his head into his tent. "Remember, ladies, I'm not going to let you two just skive off to play dress-up with Flare, every day is a training day, and I

expect you, Jenny, to be available for sparring this evening. Juvia, I'll want to see you in the afternoon."

Jenny grumbled a little bit at that, but Juvia simply nodded. "Juvia will be there. Dressing Flare to be a little more presentable, and to show off her pretty hair, is something that can be done in a single morning. Any more than that will be a long-term project."

Flare, who had somehow snagged Happy and was now clutching him like a toy, looked a little annoyed at being talked about like she was a project, yet also intrigued, and Ranma winked at her before striking a mock-heroic pose. "In that case, I'll volunteer to be a colors tester later on if you need another redhead to try things on and if you need help with your needlework, Jenny. But for now, I'm going to grab Gajeel, and he and I are going to go out and spar."

"Wait, don't leave me!" Happy shouted, struggling in Flare's grasp. "This sounds far too much like trying on clothes for my tastes."

"Among other things," Jenny murmured. Really, the whole new clothing thing was but the start. She was more concerned about Flare's overall health than that Flare had earlier admitted she only had one item of clothing. The fact she lived in what could charitably be called an extremely primitive hut was another concern altogether.

While Gajeel was cackling, both at the idea of sparring with Ranma, and Happy's wail of despair, Ranma shook his head. "Have fun, you two. And Happy... Suffer."

With that, Ranma left the tent, joining Gajeel outside and looking up at Dram, who was looking a little guilty, poking his fingers together and looking away from Flare's hut. It was evident that he at least understood how poorly made it was compared to the houses the giants themselves lived in. "Is there any place nearby where Gajeel and I could go and spar using our magic without damaging anything important?"

Dram nodded and gestured them to follow him out of the village and into the same forest they had passed by before, heading down another trail which led away from the village in a different direction than the animal track Flare had led them along to Sun Village. Soon, they came to a large quarry, and when Ranma use the word large here, he really meant it. It was easily the same size as the village itself, obviously the primary source for most of the stone used in its construction. The quarry walls looked almost like mountains themselves craggy and marked by the tools of the giants.

"So, what are we going to be doing?" Gajeel asked, moving to face Ranma, as that he began to move into a series of stretches while Ranma did the same.

“Let’s work on your accuracy and speed first. Forty-five minutes of that kind of sparring. Then we’ll move on to your shape change abilities. I want to see if you can form your arms or legs into other shapes other than those large saw blades of yours,” Ranma ordered.

Gajeel held back a wince. While not nearly as out there as the idea of his being able to change his body into other kinds of metals other than iron, it was still hard. There was a reason why creating his saw blade was one of Gajeel’s secret attacks: it took a lot of magical power and concentration. *Still... huh, has he never seen... oh right the last time I used this was in my attack on Fairy Tail. Oops.* “Gehehe, I can already do that.”

With those words Gajeel held his hand up towards Ranma’s face, and from his palm shot out a small bar of iron. “Iron Dragon’s Iron Bar!”

Ranma dodged it by a bare inch, but couldn’t dodge fast enough when Gajeel bonked it against his head, his eyebrow starting to twitch as Gajeel gently began to tap the bar against the side of Ranma’s head. “Okay, but even so, there’s room for improvement, right, and if you keep doing that, I’m going to shove that bar up your ass.”

“Kinky.” Snorting, Gajeel reabsorbed the iron into his body, reclaiming the magic he had used to create it. “But you’re right, I can probably work on this kind of thing more. If for no other reason than to bring down the magical cost of my higher end transformations. So what are you going to be working on?”

“Seeing as you just created what amounts to an iron dildo you are the last person to talk to me about kinks,” Ranma snorted, shoving the other Dragon Slayer’s shoulder before becoming slightly more serious as he held up his hand, murmuring, “Water Dragon’s Claw.”

A large claw of water appeared from one finger, then on a second finger, another claw of water appeared. The water of this one looked to be rotating in place rather than simply shaped into a claw. A third followed, rotating in the opposite direction before all three of them fell apart. “More control for me. While Dram might have said that this is a place where we could go all out, I don’t think it’s a good idea to go all out with larger attacks here. Besides, I still think that more powerful, targeted attacks are going to be just as important against Acnologia as large-scale ones.”

Gajeel grunted at that, disagreeing but not willing to get into it. “Let’s go then!” he said as he straightened up from one last stretch, thrusting out one hand palm outwards, his other hand clenched into a fist and held close to his body as he was taught by Ranma.

Grinning, Ranma rushed forward into Gajeel’s range, then began to dodge, shouting out comments and suggestions as he did. Of course, the comments were always intended to get under his opponent’s skin, adding yet another layer to what they got out of the sparring. Because if you didn’t keep your head against Ranma even in a spar, he would know it and would take advantage of it.

By the end of the second session of sparring, however, Gajeel was already improving his body-shifting ability. He had shifted one hand entirely into an iron paw and had even been able to add saw-bladed claws to it by the end of it, which had cut into the stone where Ranma's head had been as Ranma had leaped up over it.

After that, the two of them shifted into meditation. Ranma wanted Gajeel to get in touch with his inner draconic side, a segue into using Dragon Force like Wendy and Ranma could. This was a long-term project for both Gajeel and Natsu, but Ranma felt that Gajeel was progressing a bit faster than Natsu was. Indeed, he was progressing a lot faster than Ranma had initially since he had only begun to be able to use Dragon Force after he had fought the mental representation of the dragon magic on his body.

While they were still working at that, Juvia arrived. Both Dragon Slayers indeed smelled her coming, but Gajeel was deep into his meditation so much that he didn't acknowledge it, instead simply staying there with his eyes closed as Ranma twisted around onto his feet, hopping up and walking towards the water mage.

He smiled at her tenderly, causing her to blush, and with a quick wink, Ranma stole a quick kiss before leading her away from the quarry. "Come on, I think Gajeel is making good progress on meditation and I don't want to disturb him just yet."

Nodding agreeably and leaning into Ranma's side, Juvia sighed happily as she took his hand in her own. A part of her wanted to suggest they take the day off and have some 'we' time, but she knew Ranma wouldn't go for it on top of the time already spent with Flare. "What do you wish us to work on?"

"I want to start working on our Unison Raid attacks. When we've used them, they've been pretty damn powerful, but it's always been a spur of the moment thing. So, I want to see if we can do better with a bit of thought. And..." Ranma twisted, pulling Juvia to a halt, looking into her eyes seriously. "I want you to be the one who directs the attack. Every other time we've done this, you simply create the magical water, while I direct it. But what happens if I can't do that, but we still need the power of a Unison Raid?"

Her lips quirking in humor as she wondered what kind of battlefield Ranma was thinking of, which would make him unable to direct a spell but still able to take part in one. Juvia shrugged. "If Ranma wishes to work on that with Juvia, Juvia is certainly not going to object. Although Juvia will tell you now that Jenny will not be joining us this evening as you hoped. We discovered that Flare cannot read, and Jenny is unwilling to allow that to stand for any longer than she must."

Ranma whistled at that, not having foreseen that lack in Flare. "The giants weren't able to teach her how to read?"

“The giants do not seem to believe in writing anything down and have no books of their own. They know numbers, and one or two of them know enough words to be able to read prices when they trade with local villages but that is all.”

“Then I guess I see Jenny’s point. But I’m not going to let her get out of training entirely while we stay here you now. You two are going to have to switch off.” Ranma paused, humming thoughtfully, “And I know I have some of Wendy’s earlier books in my Requip space. Those should help.”

Juvia giggled, leaning forward and kissing Ranma lightly on the lips. “And Ranma still has issues with the idea of Ranma as a father?”

“How many times do I have to tell say it? Much of my skill with raising Wendy was down to her own personality,” Ranma retorted as per normal. Then he shook himself, leaning forward in turned to capture Juvia’s lips, pulling her into a brief but quite ardent make-out session, before pulling away, leaving Juvia breathless and flushed. “Now come on, let’s get to work.”

Gajeel came out of his meditation as the sun started to set, his stomach grumbling at him in annoyance for forgetting to feed it. Blinking, he stared up at the sun, then around, not having been aware of the passage of time until his stomach reminded him of it. *Bah, that was still time well-spent. Although, why the heck did my mind insist on fixating on Metalicana?*

As Gajeel had meditated, his thoughts had drifted back to his foster father, Metalicana. But for some reason, they were not actual memories, just impressions, impressions of his personality. Gajeel found himself wondering what Metalicana with think of Levy and their relationship and how it had begun so oddly. He wondered how Metalicana would view this idea of heading into the blasted lands. Would he see it as an adventure worthy of a Dragon Slayer, or would he think of it as a damn fool idea? And what about the idea of attempting to eat other various metals, especially after how often Metalicana had lectured him about not doing that very thing?

As his meditations had continued, it almost seemed as if Gajeel had somehow imagined his foster father’s reactions to those questions, as if he was there giving them to him. Indeed, the giant metallic dragon’s words of, “If you let any girl go who can actually put up with your fool singing and punk ass in the first place, you are a bigger idiot than I thought!” were still ringing in his ears as he came out of his meditation thanks to his stomach’s demands.

Looking around, Gajeel realized for the first time that Ranma had left him there. Shrugging his shoulders, he turned towards the giant-sized trail that led back to town. His mind now on getting a good meal, Gajeel set aside how oddly his meditation had gone and was about halfway to town when there came a loud rumble and the sound of gushing water. It was so loud that Gajeel tensed, staring around him, waiting for an incoming tidal wave before realizing that it was coming from a distance away.

Turning in that direction, Gajeel raced through the forest, quickly joined by the others, including Flare and a few giants, with Natsu and Jenny both flying down from out of the sky to race along beside him. When they came to a smashed and battered forest clearing, all of them stopped staring. Ahead of them, a series of new canyons had been torn into the ground, all of them at least a hundred yards across and far, **far** deeper.

Ranma, standing to one side of one such canyon, stared into it in shock. *It, it's got to be at least three hundred yards straight down!* Ranma almost likened it to pictures he had seen pictures of the American Grand Canyon, but the sides were sheer. Granite, rock, mineral deposits, none of it had slowed the Unison Raid attack that he and Juvia had come up with. The depth and cutting power were well beyond what Juvia could ever have done alone and even beyond what Ranma would normally be able to do without a lot more buildup than they had here.

But while Ranma wasn't feeling tired at all afterward, Juvia, who had provided only a quarter of the power, but all of the concentration on this attack, looked as if she was about to collapse as she too stared down into the canyon, her eyes locked on the water filling the bottom. "...Juvia believes that we should only use that attack as a last resort, or when we are certain there are no allies in the area."

"Yeah, that would not exactly be a crowd-friendly attack," Ranma said with a chuckle, shaking his head as he pulled her into a hug. "Damn good work regardless, Juvia!"

His hug quickly became the only thing keeping her upright as Juvia's legs went out from under her, and she slumped against his shoulder, shaking her head. Her voice fell into an exhausted whimper, "Oh my, Juvia is feeling exhausted now."

"Right, magical endurance is another area we're going to work on, Juvia. Maybe even waking up your Second Origin." Then Ranma smirked, one hand going under her legs as he lifted Juvia into a bridal carry, settling her head against his chest as he kissed her forehead. "Luckily for you, you have your own knight in silk shirt willing to look after ya."

To one side, Jenny chuckled at that, then looked back at the damage her two lovers had done. "Yeah, Second Origin really does help. But looking at this, I think you and I should do some Unison Raid training too. I'm certain that I have a Mecha Form, which could work synergistically with your magic."

"You used a big word there, but what's it really mean?" Happy asked, from where he was still being carried like a teddy bear by Flare. The blue-furred Exceed had resigned himself to this treatment by this point, although that was not to say that he was very happy about it.

Leaving Jenny to explain, what they had been doing to the giants, Ranma headed back to the town, where Ranma first set Juvia down and then began to make a fire pit. The meal he

cooked was chicken and vegetables on skewers with a special spicy sauce along with bowls of fruit and nuts.

Flare enjoyed it a lot, making 'nom, nom' noises that reminded Ranma of Wendy eating particularly tasty air. It wasn't like the giants hadn't let her eat whatever she'd wanted though. Flare even had her own knife, fork, spoon and everything, purchased when the giants went to trade with nearby villages. But the giants, thanks to their huge size, tended to like simple things. And their idea of spicy was waaaay too much for her.

Natsu and Gajeel started to talk about what they had been doing today, with Natsu dominating the discussion as he talked about Atlas Flame. Atlas Flame seemed to have known Igneel very well, and much of their discussion between Natsu's assaults had been about Igneel. Surprisingly, Natsu also had the presence of mind to ask after Metalicana and Wendy's Grandeeney. Unfortunately for Gajeel, the fire dragon hadn't interacted with any dragons other than his fellow fire dragons. He knew of the two other dragons, and had said that many a dragon seems to believe that Grandeeney was **the** beauty of their age but that was about it.

To one side, Ranma didn't bother listening in on this conversation, being too busy helping Juvia eat. Not that he minded, not in the slightest. For one thing, but Juvia's body pressing against his side was a sensation that Ranma could never get enough of. For another, she had really performed very well today, after several hours of trying, failing and using up her magical reserves before they got Unison Raid attack right deserved some pampering.

Jenny smiled over at the two of them occasionally but wasn't in any hurry to get involved, letting Juvia monopolize Ranma's time. In turn, she and Happy talked with Flare, going over what she had started to teach the younger girl that day. The former model was utterly appalled that Flare couldn't read and was determined to change that state of affairs.

Although, as she worked with the girl throughout the day, the idea of inviting Flare along with them had begun to grow in Jenny's mind alongside that goal. Not to the Blasted Lands, of course. But the idea of setting Flare on the road to Fairy Tale had a certain appeal. It was obvious to Jenny that despite their best efforts, the giants were not equipped socially or physically to look after Flare as she should be.

After dinner, the boys set up their own tents, with Flare heading back to her hut nearby. Jenny went with her, interested to see if the inside of her hut matched the shabby exterior. Thankfully, it kind of didn't. The interior was dominated by a massive blanket, which had been rolled up several times to create a floor that doubled as a massive bed. It also showed that the giants indeed cared for Flare despite her wounds and lack of education. The blanket, which must have been cut down to at least half of its normal size before being rolled up and stuffed inside the shack, showed little hearts and images of rabbits and things on it and was extremely soft to the touch, being very well made.

But for all of that, the mixed blanket/carpet was the only piece of furniture in the hut. There wasn't even a bed, let alone a pillow or anything else.

Flare shyly showed Jenny a few bowls and a toothbrush that she had carved herself, imitating the giants but carved to her own size. But Flare had been unable to make chairs or anything more difficult without nails her size. Jenny praised her, then hopped forward, motioning Flare to join her as she held up a book that Ranma had given her a moment before.

Meanwhile, Ranma had lifted Juvia once more into his arms. Then, leaving Happy, Gajeel and Natsu to clean up the fire pit between them, Ranma heading into their tent.

Lime start:

Inside, Ranma laid Juvia out on the group sleeping bag and slowly undressed her. As each article of clothing came off, Ranma's fingers trailed lightly over the skin it had covered, caressing, pulling out breathy little sighs from Juvia. When it was time, Ranma took great delight in running his fingers one after another over Juvia's heavy, doughy breasts, then around her nipples, until they were hardened and pointing to the ceiling of the tent.

Juvia started to moan under his touch and her eyes were locked on Ranma like twin lodestones full of love and desire. But Juvia still made no move to move and participate in events, which caused Ranma to smile. Juvia was also the most submissive of his lovers at the best of times, and judging by the small smile on her face, she wanted him to do all the work this time.

But that was all right. Ranma was fully prepared to pamper her.

Now Ranma leaned down, licking at Juvia's nipples with his tongue one after another then sucking on one nipple lightly, as his hands continued their work of undressing her, pulling her skirt off and setting it to one side. Leaving Juvia's nipple, Ranma worked up her body until he started to rain little kisses all along her neck. A nibble at her ear caused Juvia to buck underneath him, a breathy "Ranma-sama!" coming from her lips.

But instead of staying there, Ranma moved back down to her neck, biting lightly at intervals to leave scattered hickies across her pale skin. Juvia quivered under him, humping up against one of Ranma's hands which he had left lying on her stomach just below her navel.

Smirking, Ranma pulled back. Moving back down her body further, Ranma removed her panties, then her silk stockings, stopping there, running his hands up and down her legs as he nibbled on her toes. While not someone who enjoyed much foot play, he knew that feet were extremely sensitive. And judging by Juvia's continually rising moans and how she was slowly moving her legs wider, this was having an effect. Juvia's now pulsing, blood-engorged pussy lips gleamed with arousal, enticing him, and Ranma reached forward with two fingers, lightly

brushing across them. As Juvia's moan became louder, Ranma slid a single finger into Juvia's tight warmth, penetrating Juvia slowly before pulling it out, then pushing it in again.

A few moments passed as Juvia whimpered and bucked. "Ranma-sama, more, please! Don't tease your Juvia any longer!"

At her words, Ranma sucked harder than before at Juvia's large toe while slipping a second finger into her pussy, running them in and out slowly. Then after Juvia began to buck and beg for more, Ranma's fingers curled within her.

That did it for Juvia. The Water mage came with a cry, her back arcing, her eyes crashing open wide before she slumped back, her chest heaving. But as much as a part of Juvia wanted to continue, she could feel herself now drifting off to sleep, and her eyes slowly started to close again.

Seeing this, Ranma laughed quietly, pulling his fingers out of her, licking her juices off them, delighting as always in Juvia's taste. Then he leaned down, kissing her lightly on the lips. "Sleep tight, love."

"Love you, Ranma-sama," Juvia breathed back before falling asleep with a smile on her lips.

"Damn, that was hot as hell!" Jenny laughed throatily from behind Ranma, where she had entered the tent unseen and silent.

She had shown Flare the first book Jenny and Juvia would be using to teach her how to read before putting the tired Flare to bed. Luckily, Flare understood her lack of reading ability was a major issue and was more than willing to go along with whatever Jenny wanted her to do. She had also greatly enjoyed their earlier session of trying on clothing and just talking about women stuff, although obviously nothing that the two older women had would fit her without a lot of work. But Jenny had already begun to resize one of her dresses for the young girl and was looking forward to teaching her more.

That had been on Jenny's mind right up until she had entered the tent that she shared with her two lovers and seen Ranma treating Juvia to a bit of orgasmic pampering. Now she slowly danced in place, her arms moving up into her hair and then above her head, then back down as she undressed, winking at Ranma. "I don't suppose you wouldn't mind continuing with me, would you?"

Ranma chuckled, standing up and moving towards her, lifting Jenny up off of her feet. Her legs quickly wrapped around his waist, where she felt his arousal grinding into her core as he growled into her ear, "What do you think?"

End lime

The next morning Ranma and Jenny's fun times had an unforeseen downside...

Rubbing at her eyes, Flare joined them for breakfast, sitting down with a groan next to the giant dog, who had apparently decided to join them as well. She leaned against his side, while Happy, finally released that morning from her grasp, hid on Natsu's other side as far away from the large dog as possible.

"Didn't sleep well?" Gajeel asked quizzically.

"No," the young girl muttered, shaking her head. She looked over to where Jenny and Juvia were sitting on either side of Ranma, eating a breakfast that Jenny had cooked for them all. Unfortunately, none of the trio caught her look.

Ranma handed her a bowl of apple and cinnamon oatmeal and a plate of sausages, which Flare took gratefully, before asking, "What were you all doing last night in your tent? There were a lot of weird noises coming from inside. I thought something was attacking you at first, but I didn't think that anymore after listening for a bit. But after a while, the noises you were making made me feel... Weird, and my body sort of acted strange too."

Ranma's eyes widened, and he stumbled back slightly, while behind him, Juvia instantly awoke, staring past him at the little girl in horror, before exchanging a glance with an equally horrified Jenny. "Er, well, have you had the talks about where little boys and girls come from?"

"The forest?" Flare replied quizzically. "That's where the giants found me anyway. Why would I have to have a talk about that?"

With a sinking feeling, Ranma realized that without any female giants around, the giants might not have realized that Flare would eventually need to be given the talk. "What about...um, the monthly monster? You certainly look old enough to know about that."

"Well yeah, you mean when I bleed down there," Flare guessed, gesturing to her nether regions with a shudder. "Wait, you mean that's normal!?"

"For women, yes. Er, I'm certain that Jenny or Juvia would explain it better than..." As he spoke, Ranma turned, but when he did, he saw that both of the women and his fellow Dragon Slayers had all raced away. Even Happy had escaped, wining his way up into the sky as fast as he could go. This left Ranma alone with the young girl and the giant dog. *Traitors!*

"What is it?! Is it because I'm a girl? Dram and the others always tell me I'm a girl, and I know I'm like Jenny and Juvia, but what's that really mean other than I've got boobies? And what does it have to do with what you and Jenny and Juvia were doing last night?" Flare asked insistently, using her Crimson Hair to tug lightly on Ranma's arm even as she dug into her meal.

Vowing vengeance on all four of his supposed friends, Ranma sighed and sat down on the ground in front of Flare, pulling a bottle of cold water towards him. "I am **not** going to be in my male form for this. Besides, you might want some visuals," Ranma muttered before he transformed into his female form as Flare stumbled back, her mouth opening and closing in shock. Before she could say anything Ranma launched into her normal spiel about her curse, mentally fortifying herself for what would undoubtedly be the most awkward conversation she'd had in several years.

OOOOOO

At the same time that Ranma was going through awkward hell once more, Elfman and Mira arrived in Minstrel. To their surprise, as they exited the docks, a local held them by name. "Miss Strauss, Mr. Strauss, over here, please."

Turning in that direction, Mira found herself looking at a somewhat good-looking if mousy sort of woman, who could easily have been a relation to Levy. Her face was almost exactly the same, as was her body type beyond her height and black hair. She was almost as tall as Elfman. The woman herself seemed to dislike her height and was hunched over in place, trying to seem smaller even as she called out to the two siblings.

"Please don't call us that. It makes us sound married. Just Elfman and Mira will do. And what can we do for you, Miss?" Mira smiled, taking some of the sting from her words, but not all. That wouldn't have been the first time someone had made that mistake when she and Elfman went abroad, and it never ceased to embarrass. Especially when they were given a single bed hotel room when they wanted two beds. *I swear I'm never going back to that resort, ever!*

"Er, I'm Eliza, and I'm with the International relations Offic*e," the woman replied, holding out her hand and shaking Mira's hand firmly, then Elfman, blushing a little as she took in his bulging muscles with what looked like interest to Mira. "Master Laxus called ahead and told the government we should be expecting you. I've arranged transportation to the site of the Battle of the Demons for the both of you, and I have been assigned to work as a liaison between you and the local mages Guild and Minstrel's government."

"You have a name for that battle now?" Mira was somewhat amused by that and the idea that they would need a liaison here. But if it simplified their travel, she was all for it.

"Yes, we have. You'll understand why when you get there and why we were interested in learning that Demon Eater Mirajane was going to be coming down to look at the site."

Mira blinked, but Eliza turned away before she could ask further questions, gesturing them to follow her. Soon all three of them were in a SE car and heading out of the small port they had landed in.

Once she sat down in across from them, Eliza began to explain. "We, that is the Minstrel government, believe there is some kind of miasma on the battlefield or perhaps a haunting going on. The ground of the area has not even begun to recover. There are places on it where nothing grows, and the ground is blackened and diseased, and whenever anyone comes close to the crash site of the Tartarus Guild's headquarters, there are noises from within, almost as if someone was still alive. On the other hand, we have seen neither hide nor hair of anything of that nature, and Draculos and Wolfheim both stayed in the vicinity to make certain of that. So, whatever is going on is something they can't sense and thus can't deal with. Hence why we are happy that you are going to be investigating for your own purposes, Ms. Strauss."

"Would you mind if we stopped along the way? I realize that this is a problem and that my sister might be able to help. But as you pointed out, we're both here for our own reasons. And my reasons have to do with finding strange and powerful monsters to incorporate into my own magical style. A man must do what a man must do after all," Elfman interjected, lifting his arms into a muscle pose.

"Ah, um, I can see that," Eliza muttered, looking away with a blush on her face. "And er, since the battlefield has kept for this long, we can certainly stop along the way. Do you have any idea what kind of monsters you're looking for in Minstrel in particular?"

Leaning back, Mira pulled out a book and began to read. She glanced up occasionally at her brother and this woman as they engaged in the most awkward flirting ever of all time, but Mira tried not to laugh, instead turning her attention on the idea of what could be waiting for her at this cursed battlefield.

OOOOOO

Ranma and his merry band (the name was up for debate) stayed in Sun Village for two weeks. Natsu improved daily with his battles against Atlas Flame, and because of Natsu's continuous use of Fire Dragon Slayer magic, Atlas Flame also grew stronger. The spirit wasn't coming alive again. He couldn't move from the 'well' where the sacred fire resided. But beyond that, the spirit of the Dragon was still there, much like the spirit of Belserion was in Erza's sword. And now he had a lot more strength to interact with the world around him.

Whatever else could be said for the race, dragon spirits were immensely powerful.

Meanwhile, Ranma and Gajeel spent every morning sparring against one another or against the giants occasionally. Several of them were hunters and guards for the village, and seemed to enjoy fighting against new people, despite the small size of said new people.

But the mages didn't get much out of this, really. As Natsu, Gajeel and Ranma had noticed on that first day, the giants had some extremely good weapons. Yet, they had little to no tactics or style. Their combat style came down to hit something, then hit it again, and if that doesn't work, hit it a third time. Which was fine if all of those hits actually landed on your

opponent. In the Dragon Slayers and even Jenny's case when she joined in, this was most decidedly not the case.

In the afternoons, while Gajeel continued to meditate or practice eating other metals beyond iron, Ranma would spar with Jenny or Juvia. Sometimes they would work on tandem techniques, not just creating a Unison Raid but actually talking through how to work together in different battle scenarios.

This was something that none of the other mages had ever done before. Natsu routinely fought alongside Happy, and the two of them had trained to take advantage of that but had never done the same with anyone else in the guild. Jenny and Juvia had fought side-by-side several times, but it always been an impromptu thing. And Gajeel, much like Ranma himself, was the quintessential loner. But with the dangers of the blasted lands had of them, Ranma wanted to make certain that they all understood how to work together and not just on a magical level.

Beyond training, young Flare became a priority to the two women in the group. Physically, they convinced her to join them in some exercises to help her dodging ability and started to work with Flare's Crimson Hair to a far greater degree than Flare had been able to do on her own. Even Atlas Flame hadn't known enough about Crimson Hair to help her develop it, but Jenny had run into a few models who had similar if far less extensive magics and knew the kind of thing that Flare should be able to do.

Of course, this was on top of everything else they were doing with Flare: resewing some of their own clothing to her, using some salves and herbs to help her various scars shrink, and teaching her how to read, among other things.

"Given the size disparity and the fact they don't have any women, the giants have done an okay job of looking out for her, but looking out for her, isn't the same as raising her really," Jenny opined, looking worried before she tossed aside her good manners to slurp at the chowder that Ranma had made for them that evening.

Juvia took over from the now busy Jenny. "Juvia agrees and thinks that at this point, their ability to help her grow further and to become a young woman, rather than some kind of village mascot or wild young thing, is at an end. Indeed, at first, Juvia and Jenny thought that perhaps we should convince Flare to try to head to the Fairy Tale. But a young girl on the road on her own would act like a magnet for trouble regardless of her magical abilities."

"I take offense at the idea of being a wild young thing is such a bad thing," Ranma quipped, glancing over at Natsu, who laughed and gave him a thumbs up. "But I can see your point. Still, you seem to have missed the simplest solution. If Flare wants to leave the village, we can take Flare with us to Pergrande. We could turn her over to one of the mage guilds there, or even my two friends, William and Laitha."

“Are you certain they would take her in? Your friends, not the mage guilds,” Gajeel asked, knowing full well that mage guilds across Ishgar routinely took in foundlings. Like the girls, and Ranma himself, Gajeel had also noted that Flare was suffering from a mix of benign neglect and over strong affection from the giants. He didn’t see it as big of a problem as the girls but could understand their concerns.

“Yep. They’re good people, and if William and Laitha weren’t willing to look after her for a while, they’d certainly be more than willing to help her get to Fairy Tale. Heck, if they have access to the new network of teleportation arrays that the King’s Council are trying to set up, they could probably just send her there in a few days.”

“So, we have a plan. Now, all we need to do is convince Flare that it’s the right thing to her,” Natsu interjected, looking a little skeptical. In her place, Natsu knew he certainly wouldn’t want to leave. This place was fun, and who wouldn’t want to have Giants around to fight with?

Contrary to what Natsu had thought, Flare was more than willing to come with them when they left. “As much as I love my family, I know I’m different from them. I’ve known that for a long while, and I know that they sometimes... well, make mistakes when they look after me. Like last summer, I broke my legs. They gave me pain medicine, sure. But they gave me the same amount of medicine that they would’ve given one of their own.”

Ranma laughed, rinsing the girl’s hair out, before working a comb through her hair, while Juvia and Jenny rested nearby, completely worn out by a five-way spar. Natsu and Gajeel were still going at it nearby, but in a very different manner, one hand wrapped behind them, and no magic allowed.

This left Ranma to look after Flare, who had come into the clearing where they were all fighting looking as if she had been dumped into a mud pit. Which was quite close to what it happened: one of the piglets of Farmer Mag had gotten away, and she and Fang had gone after it, having to wrestle it into submission and drag it back to the village. “Let me guess, it made you loopy?”

“Loopy, yeah, I like that word!” Flare laughed, kicking her feet out. “It was really weird! I was so out of it, I couldn’t really move my body all that much. I saw colors and wanted to just sort of dance around, but all of my, er, what’s that word that you all used yesterday when you were training my hair to grab sticks out of the air?”

“Coordination,” Ranma supplied.

“Right, I didn’t have any of that, so I fell whenever I tried to get up, then tried to kind of wiggle on the floor and started to giggle for no reason. And I know I’m missing a lot out about not reading or having books, or well other people around my own size. Especially other girls! The only time I’ve ever seen another girl is when I once went with Dram to one of the nearby villages when he was on a trading mission. And I didn’t exactly talk to any of them,” Flare began

with a giggle before sobering. "So, yeah. I think, I think I want to see the rest of the world, you know? Maybe learn what all else is out there."

"I'll talk to Dram later then. But, for now, would you like your hair in braids, a ponytail, or just straight down your back?"

With the now heavily braided Flare hopping away to wrap her arms around Happy once more, Juvia rolled over from where she had been collapsed on the floor of the forest, winking at Ranma. "Again, Juvia finds it impossible to forgo pointing this out: you would make a most excellent father."

"Oh please, you thirsty wench!" Ranma answered, winking at her as Juvia began to giggle. "Just because I'm good with her hair and was able to talk to Flare doesn't mean I'd be a good father to her. I still say the majority of my success with Wendy was down to Wendy herself rather than me."

Despite that, Ranma didn't entirely shut down the idea of becoming a father in the future this time. On the contrary, the discussions they'd had had on that score before leaving Fiore had opened his mind to the possibility of doing so in the future. When he could set aside his duties as a Ranger and had thoroughly fed his own wanderlust, anyway.

But Natsu had improved the most out of all of them. His fire was hotter, his ability to create and manipulate different types of fire far better. He even whipped out a few tricks that took Ranma by surprise.

Having spent the morning with Atlas Flame, Natsu insisted on sparring with Ranma that afternoon, barging into his and Gajeel's meditation time, quite rudely, in Ranma's opinion. Grumbling angrily, Ranma pushed Gajeel's shoulder back down to the ground. "You keep meditating. I've got this."

"Give him the Shoobity doo!" Gajeel grumbled, annoyed beyond all reason. It had almost felt as if he was onto something. Or perhaps pushing through something, recalling some memory, an important memory he had forgotten? Or maybe some aspect of the Dragon Slayer power Metalicana had given him? But now that progress was all gone, burned away by Natsu's boisterous presence.

"I don't even know what that is, but you can keep your piss poor singing to yourself!" Natsu growled out. "I want to fight both of you."

"While I agree that Gajeel's singing is awful, the last time you tried to sing, it was even worse. You really can't attack him on that score," Ranma taunted, even as he hopped forward, lashing out with a kick that would have taken Natsu's head off as close as a month ago.

Natsu blocked it, raising a hand covered in fire, which had grown to about half the size of his own body. Moreover, the fire was solid, like Atlas Flame's body. "Dragons Slayer's Shielding Paw!"

Ranma used the momentum of that block to flip over Natsu, kicking off the ground coming back in with another roundhouse kick, which ended abruptly, all of his momentum-shifting backward and into a series of punches. Again, the large solid-state flame hand blocked him, then Natsu's other hand came up in his own punch. Ranma blocked this in turn, redirecting the blow to one side, only to blink as purple flame erupted from Natsu's hand, spreading out onto Ranma's forearm.

"Macao's Special Sticky Flame, er, Sticky Handcuff!" With that, he dragged Ranma forward, eating a foot to the stomach for his trouble, which slid past his other hand's defense. But the sticky fire didn't relent until Ranma began to use his own magic. Fire and water met, creating steam, releasing Ranma and quenching Natsu's defenses, letting Ranma get in a few shots in turn, but Natsu battered them aside as much as he could, trying to close.

Ranma leaped back into the air, Natsu stomped on the ground, and from his foot, another bolt of purplish fire rose, grabbing at Ranma's legs, which he hadn't covered with his watery aura, holding him still in midair for just a second. Then, with the two of them now connected by a bungee cord of fire, Natsu pushed off the ground with his other foot. "Fire Dragon's Ignition!"

Still roaring, Natsu rammed into Ranma with a punch that would've caved in the ribs of most mages. Ranma simply took it, grunting. He then grabbed Natsu's arm in turn, pulling him into an elbow blow to the face, then grabbed him by the head and brought his head down to meet Ranma's knee as it came up.

The blows to the head broke Natsu's concentration on the several different types of fire magic that he was using, and his magic guttered out for a second. Now freed, Ranma flipped up and over Natsu, sinking down behind Natsu in midair and locking in a chokehold before flipping them both headfirst down towards the ground, releasing Natsu to crash into the ground while Ranma jumped clear.

Even so, Ranma was feeling it. That blow to the chest had knocked the wind out of even him, and Natsu's earlier attacks had stung something fierce. Straightening up, he looked at Natsu in respect. "That was pretty good, Natsu!"

"Wasn't enough to win, though," Natsu grumbled as he pulled his head out from where Ranma had embedded it in the ground.

"It might have been if you'd been able to keep me on the ground, rather than using that last trick to simply catch me in the air. You mistimed that, but that was your only real mistake. I suppose you could have not used it at first to try to pull me in, but I still hadn't adapted to your

being able to use both Atlas Flame's solid-state fire, and your own, and Macao's all at the same time," Ranma answered critically, scratching at his pigtail thoughtfully. "Being able to use three different types of magic at once, even if they are related, is an incredible achievement, Natsu."

At that, Natsu's grumbles subsided, and he grinned, letting Ranma pull him to his feet before turning to glare at Gajeel. "You hear that Rusty, I'm incredible."

Gajeel huffed at that, but having watched the spar, he couldn't disagree with Ranma's assessment. If Natsu had tried that trick on him, Gajeel didn't know if he would've been able to recover from the surprise like Ranma had.

"In fact, I think this call calls for something special. Let's find the girls, and we can have ourselves a bit of a king of the mountain competition. I'll sit out, and I'll want to see how you do against the two of them and Gajeel here."

It turned out that Natsu did very well indeed. Juvia's water magic performed decently well enough against Natsu's simple attacks and the sticky flame, but not against the solid-state fire of Atlas Flame, where she found her magical power unable to fight against Natsu's. Jenny's adaptability with her dozens upon dozens of different forms performed better, but neither woman was able to overcome Natsu's brute power and his now far more varied skill set. Gajeel did slightly better at first than the two women, not having been taken by surprise but even he eventually fell.

Thus, Natsu was declared king of the mountain for the day, with Flare going so far as to actually make him a crown of flowers. Which, thankfully for Natsu, Happy promptly took, placing on his own head, as Happy sat on Natsu's.

Looking across at Natsu that evening, Ranma cocked his head to one side quizzically. "So, do you think you have anything more to learn from Atlas Flame?"

Brows furrowing, Natsu slowly shook his head. I don't think so. He's helped me out a lot, and I mean a **lot**, but I think we can move on now. I'd love to stay longer just to hear more stories about him and Igneel, but we can always come back for that kind of thing."

Ranma and Jenny exchanged a glance at that, both of them wondering if Atlas Flame would be here if they did come back. The draconic spirit had been extremely weak when they first arrived, and Ranma didn't know how long Natsu's recharge of Atlas Flame's magical reserves would last. "Maybe we could." Ranma looked over at Flare, one eyebrow rising in question. "Do you still want to leave with us, Flare?"

For a moment, Flare looked a little afraid of the idea of leaving the Sun Village now that it came to it. Sun Village was the only home she had ever known after all, and she had only left its environs once to go to a nearby village. But after a moment, she nodded her head firmly. "Yes! I, I think I do want to leave with you."

“In that case, Juvia will help you prepare.” She pulled Flare to her feet, the young girl currently wearing a dress that Ranma had found in his reequip space which Wendy had outgrown but which could be enlarged to fit the slightly older Flare. “We will decide what you will be taking with you and then Ranma can put it all in his Requip space.”

“Ouch, you’re using me like a suitcase now?” Ranma quipped.

“Juvia prefers to think of you as a multitool. After all, you are good for so many different things,” Juvia answered back, looking over her shoulder at Ranma coquettishly.

Understanding some of that, Flare poked her fingers together and looked away with an intense blush almost as red as her hair. The talk with Ranma the night of their arrival had been horrifying and embarrassing beyond all belief, although she was very thankful that the two older women at least had pads and other things to help with what Ranma had called her monthly monster. And Ranma’s curse had fascinated her.

The next day, Natsu approached the sacred fire, which burst into the normal head of Atlas Flame, as it peered down at him. “Back again, Natsu?”

“Kind of, although do you think you have anything specifically you can teach me still?” Those words might have sounded arrogant, but Natsu’s tone was more respectful than that. Indeed, if Makarov or Gildarts had been there to hear that tone, they would’ve been checking to see if Natsu had been possessed. But in the past two weeks, Atlas Flame had become something of an uncle to Natsu almost, thanks to the fiery dragon spirit’s connection to Igneel and the stories he could share.

Atlas Flame paused, rearing back slightly, tilting his head to one side as he stared at Natsu. “No, I don’t believe I have anything more specific to teach you. You could still learn from sparring with me, but I’d wager you get enough of that from your companions, and really, sparring in our case would be just you trying your various attacks out on me.” Ranma and Natsu had occasionally fought in the village’s main square to help Atlas Flame understand where Natsu stood in terms of his combat strength beyond his magical power and abilities. “So, is this goodbye?”

Natsu shrugged uncomfortably. “Yeah. I mean, I’ve had a lot of fun listening to your stories about you and Igneel, especially the ones when you two were youngsters yourselves! When I find my old man, I am **so** going to hold that story about the apple tree not tasting of apples and the adventure with the bear and his den over his head. Those kinds of stories are like the equivalent of baby pictures among humans.”

But then Natsu shook his head sadly. “But staying around just to hear about stories about my old man isn’t enough reason for my friends to stay here. They’re getting restless, and we’ve got our plans going forward.”

“Yes, you’ve told me: you’re going to explore the Blasted Lands! Even in my time, the Blasted Lands were a very weird place! And given how magic spells and enchantments decay over time and flow together, I have no doubt that it’s become even stranger since.” Atlas Flame seemed to grin then, winking at Natsu. “It should be fun. Go out and conquer young dragon, and then give Acnologia the pounding he so richly deserves when you see him next.”

“You know it! Woo, I’m getting all fired up again!” Natsu whooped before turning on and racing off to meet with his friends and tell them he was ready to leave.

Atlas Flame watched him go, shaking its head for a moment, then subsiding back into his normal pillar of flame, his voice a crackling whisper on the wind. “Such an interesting young man you found, Igneel. I rather think he really will do what none of us could and put that mad beast down for good. Although his confrontation with you will be just as interesting...hohohoh...”

When Flare told them that she was leaving with the humans that morning, a few of the giants objected, but the others simply nodded sadly. Most of them had realized that while they had done an alright job looking after Flare when it came to raising a young woman rather than a tiny, human-sized toy, they had come to the end of the rope. There were just too many things that separated humans from giants, and perhaps more importantly, ‘girl’ from ‘giant’ that they just didn’t know about.

“You’ve our blessing wherever you go or whatever you do, Flare. You know that. But you’ve got our village’s mark on you,” Dram said, kneeling down and pressing into Flare’s chest with a large finger, right over the tattoo she had as a member of Sun Village. From the one time Ranma had seen it, it was a spiral sun image with beams of triangle-shaped sunlight coming off half of it placed on one of Flare’s breasts. “So, if the world out there becomes a little too big or you discover you just don’t like it, you’ll always have a home here among us.”

Flare hugged Dram’s finger to her for a moment, nodding her head wildly, and then looked around at the others, tears in her eyes. “Thank you for understanding! I’m like, like a puppy in a kennel! No matter how large the kennel, it’s still not as interesting as the world beyond it, and like Fang, I want out! But I’ll never forget any of you. I’ll never forget that I’m a native of sun village!”

The giants raised a cheer that rattled the humans’ bones at that. They were still cheering as Ranma led the others off once more through the forest.

Even with Flare with them, traveling had stopped being difficult. Ranma had worked with Gajeel on his endurance whenever they sparred, and he could now run for much longer. He and Natsu switched off using Happy to fly through the air, while the other ran alongside Ranma, while Juvia used the horses and showed Flare how to ride. Jenny, of course, used her various Mecha Take Over forms. The forest here was dense and thick, with no roads through it,

but that hardly slowed them down much until they came to the escarpment that led up to Iceberg.

For most of its length, the escarpment was a massively tall flat wall of stone, jutting up from the land as if a mountain had suddenly risen from the earth with almost no warning. Standing at the bottom of it looking up was like looking up at the side of a skyscraper, only even more imposing, taller and wider.

Staring up at it, Juvia shook her head. "Juvia believes that we should go around this. Surely there is a road nearby that will eventually take us eastward towards Pergrande?"

"There isn't," Ranma cheerfully answered. "There are only a few places around the escarpment where you can get up and down it easily, and there isn't one in Stella. If we went and followed it to our right, we'd head into the mountains of Joya, which is way harder to move around than here. If we went the other way, we'd have to go all the way back into Seven before we could find a way up. Besides, you're not looking at this obstacle properly."

Juvia looked at Ranma blankly, while Jenny groaned, rubbing her eyes as if she was suddenly tired despite it being just a few hours past dawn. "Let me guess, everything is training, right?"

"Right!" Ranma laughed, then his hand flashed out to either side. The horses, their bridles held by Juvia at the moment, collapsed, pressure point strikes sending them into la-la land.

With that done, Ranma raced forward and, between one step in the next, whispered out, "Water Dragon's Boosted Step!" A column of water appeared under his feet, launching him upwards, where he grabbed onto a handhold that had been invisible from the ground. There, he flipped himself up further, grabbing another handhold. There, he shouted down, "Use your magic powers, whatever they are and let's climb this bad boy!"

Flare stared after him while Gajeel and Natsu whooped. Happy leaped off of Natsu's head and simply flew up words, shouting out, "Aye sir! It's times like this when you all envy me for my wings... riiight?"

"Ha! As if anyone would envy those pitiful little wings of yours. Mecha Take Over: Gundam!" Jenny retorted, and a moment later, she was zooming past Happy as if he was standing still.

She was halted in place by Ranma's voice shouting up, "Don't forget the horses!"

Jenny moved back down to him, scowling under her visor. "What, you can't carry them up? I would have thought that would be simple for you, you big martial artist you."

“Heh, maybe it would be, but if you’re just going to fly straight up to the top, how’re you getting any exercise? Carry the horses up one at a time, use a different Take Over form each time. That sounds way more like exercise, doesn’t it?” Ranma teased.

Grumbling, Jenny almost wanted to point out that Juvia should be the one to take care of the horses since she and Flare were the only ones using them. But it was a very low-key grumble, as Jenny had also availed herself of the horses occasionally, and she knew Flare needed them to keep up with even Gajeel. With a midair flounce of her hips – and how she did that Ranma had no idea – Jenny turned back, landing beside one of the horses lifting it into her arms with difficulty before flying upwards once more.

Gajeel and Natsu had already begun their climb as she left, shouting out challenges to one another. Their styles of tackling this challenge were very different. Gajeel went straight up, his hands and feet transformed into iron dragon paws that dug handholds into the rock. In contrast, Natsu used his magic to fly from one handhold or tiny ledge to another, occasionally using his Sticky fire to hold on or grab at a distant handhold like a certain spider-based comic book hero.

This left Juvia and Flare on the floor of the forest, staring up at the others. Flare looked at the older woman, whose outfit she was wearing a smaller version of at the moment, in preparation for how cold it would be on the escarpment. “I know I’m not exactly the best at this whole human thing, but that isn’t normal, is it?”

“Do you mean their response to the challenge of the escarpment isn’t normal, or our companions themselves?” Juvia question pedantically as she moved towards the escarpment as well, while Jenny came back down for the second horse, sweat trickling down from underneath her helmet.

Flare hurried forward to catch up to her. “Both.”

“In that case, yes. It isn’t normal. Now let us see what you can do with your Crimson Hair.”

At that reminder, Flare suddenly smiled, stopped at the bottom of the cliff face, and shouted out, “Crimson Hair, swinging vines!” With that, her hair grew several dozen times over, and one long tendril shot up towards a distant handhold, grabbing it and then pulling her upward, while another tendril shot out to the next. In this manner, she quickly caught up with Natsu, who was having trouble finding handholds, passing by him with a loud “Nyeee!” accompanied by her sticking her tongue out at him.

“Do you want me to come back down for you, Juvia?” Jenny asked as she lifted the second horse up in her arms, grateful that Ranma had had the wherewithal to knock them out earlier.

“Juvia is thankful for your concern, but Juvia has this.” With that, from her feet, water spouted, throwing her upward like it had Ranma earlier. Her other hand reached forward, carving out a tiny handhold with a blast of water before her hand grabbed at the handhold, holding her there against the escarpment.

The trip up the wall of the escarpment took most of them quite a while. Jenny had time to scout out around and came back down several times to shout encouragement, grabbing at Flare as the younger girl faltered, Ranma having caught her before she could slide further than a few feet. Flying with another person like that gave Jenny some good exercise just as it had earlier, although not to the extent the horses had.

But eventually, as the sun was high above them, all of them reached the top, with Gajeel having surprisingly beaten out Natsu, who had lost his grip at one point and fallen back but refused Jenny’s help. The group now found themselves within a forest, its foliage far more spread out than the dense forests below, but still noticeably a forest. Here and there, the trees gathered together in clumps, creating denser woods, and high above them, the sun gleamed through heavy cloud cover. And everywhere you looked was snow. Snow piled on the ground and the pine trees.

And with it came the cold. Despite dressing in a smaller version of Juvia’s fur stole, Flare shivered, torn between delight at the view and confusion at feeling cold. Since Sun Village was protected by Atlas Flame’s spirit, Flare had rarely felt winter’s breath before and never as powerful as this. The horses, too, revived now, shivered, not having been bred for conditions like this.

Ranma rectified this by pulling out one of his sleeping bags and bundling Flare into it, sticking her and Juvia on top of one horse while ordering Natsu to walk with the horses. “Keep ‘em warm, Natsu.”

“Right!” Natsu replied, imitating Happy, who had retreated into his vest several hundred yards down the escarpment when it started to get colder. Now he concentrated, bringing out a heat haze around himself, warming Happy and the horses. He also began to melt the snow around them, making it easier going for them,

Unfortunately, even this was not enough. By the time Ranma was looking around for a place to stop, the day’s exertions, her sweat, and the cold had the natural effect: Flare became sick, sneezing, with a heavy fever, and chills. The horses were suffering too. As was Happy despite Natsu’s efforts, although that had more to do with the fact, he’d been flying around earlier in the cold than anything.

“Juvia thinks we should stop and take care of her,” Juvia said, shaking her head as she held the sleeping-bag clad Flare against her chest. “Traveling like this is not doing her any favors.”

“Agreed. Besides, that looks to be a storm,” Ranma said, staring up at the clouds above them, which were darkening noticeably. “Traveling with a sick person is no fun and traveling through a snowstorm is even worse.”

Jenny, in her motorcycle form, could only agree. In this form, she wasn't feeling the cold as she would normally.

“So what should we do? Are our tents going to be able to see us through a snowstorm?” Gajeel asked.

Ranma shook his head. “The spells on them would keep them warm inside, but the snow piling on them might cause them to collapse.”

He looked around the area they were in, thinking. They had just entered one of the heavier wooded areas, and that had them out of the wind for now. And it gives me a lot of material too. Decision made, he looked over at Jenny. “Jenny, can you see how far this forest goes?”

At that, Jenny shifted from her motorcycle form to her body, then back into her Gundam form, flying upwards quickly. From several dozen stories above the tree line, she looked around them, then came back and reported that there didn't seem to be any sign of life nearby, although she could see something in the distance that could be smoke of some kind.

“Lead us in that direction, we'll continue for another hour, and then we'll stop,” Ranma decided.

Ranma had read the forest correctly. By that point, they were deep underneath the pine foliage, shielding them from the worst of the winds and even the snowfall. The snow underneath them, which had been deep enough that the others had been having problems getting through, ebbed away here, going from knee-deep to only ankle-deep, and the wind was no longer cutting into them like so many fleeing knives.

Here Ranma went to work, ordering Juvia and Jenny to look after Flare and the horses while he quickly chose several trees that looked older and less healthy than the others, knocking them down. That done, he pulled Gajeel and Natsu into helping him put up a log cabin.

“Why a cabin?” Jenny questioned as she moved to help. A saw appeared, replacing one of her arms as she used Take over Electric Buzzsaw. It was one of her least energy-intensive forms and honestly didn't have much combat ability on its own since it only covered one arm.

“Warmth, and the horses,” Ranma replied instantly. “An igloo would do for us, but not for the horses. We should have thought about grabbing extra blankets, darn it.”

“You think the storms going to be that bad?” Natsu questioned. Since he didn’t really feel the cold or the heat, Natsu had never learned how to read the weather beyond the ‘that cloud looks dark’ level.

“Yep,” was Ranma’s laconic reply.

With a sigh Natsu turned away, muttering, “Better make time to have a snowball fight later, what the heck is the point of winter without one?” before he burned off several branches of the larger bough that Ranma had cut off earlier. Working together, the mages quickly erected a crude but well-made log cabin, complete with a crude iron chimney courtesy of Gajeel and a fireplace. They led the horses inside, and Natsu started up the fire. Then, while the two boys were setting up their tents, Ranma went out and got Flare out of his, transferring their tent into the cabin.

Flare looked a little better, having spent that time inside the tent where it was warm and cozy. But they still lacked medicine, something Ranma had completely neglected to think of. But Juvia too was now looking quite hot, as if she had caught Flare’s cold while looking after her.

With the horses in the cabin, the tents set up and Flare and Juvia bundled into the combined sleeping bag, Jenny and Ranma cooked everyone a hearty meal. Then leaving Gajeel in charge, much to Natsu’s chagrin, they left the cabin. Ranma wanted to see if that smoke in the distance was a village or something similar where they might find medicine.

As they stepped outside, the snow had just begun to fall, as Ranma had predicted, and Jenny shook her head, staring around her. “A real winter wonderland. I wonder should I be looking out for talking animals or dwarves coming out of a mineshaft?”

Chuckling, Ranma looked at Jenny but, seeing her standing there amidst swirling snow, his breath hitched in his throat, his initial response disappearing replaced by a heartfelt and whispered, “...Beautiful.”

Jenny heard him and turned, wondering what he was looking at, only to blush rosily as she realized that his eyes were locked on her. And while Jenny knew she was good-looking and was used to compliments like that, she wasn’t actually feeling all that beautiful right now. Jenny was wearing a heavy woolen coat, made to be warm rather than look good. Also, she felt kind of sweaty from cooking and the heat of the interior of the cabin on top of the day’s exertions, and she knew her shoulders were drooping with a bit of exhaustion from the base exertions. She hadn’t even bothered to put makeup on for days, and her hair was a mess.

Yet the look in Ranma’s eyes told her that Ranma didn’t care about all that, and for some reason, that threw her off balance. She laughed, shaking her head and turning away, trying to orient herself towards where she had seen the smoke in the distance. “Come on, Romeo, let’s get going. We have a pair of sick people we need to help.”

Ranma nodded and, orienting himself far easier than Jenny had been able to, pointing through the woods in the direction of the smoke she had reported. "That way, I think."

With one in the air and one of the ground, the two of them raced off towards the source of the smoke in the distance. As they went, Jenny was reminded once more that Iceberg was one of the nations that didn't have a large population compared to its size. Most of its population was concentrated in a few cities or in towns along the roads. Farming was only possible in a few places, with mining and forestry dominating the nation's industry. Those operations were spread out, yes, but not all that much when you took in the size of Iceberg as a whole.

A case in point, the source of the smoke turned out to be a logging camp. It was small, constructed of only five large log cabins, all of them dwarfing their own. A smithy, and scattered saws here and there, around which work was being done as the two of them approached, added to the image. The whole area was also surrounded by a wooden palisade. And there was a tiny track kept clear of snow with quite a bit of difficulty leading out further towards the northeast.

There was a guard on the one watchtower situated next to the gate leading through the palisade. He spotted Jenny above them and began called out a warning. Soon, several of the loggers, who turned out to be mages, were on the wall, holding what looked like magical axes or saw blades in their hands.

They lowered them though when Jenny's voice reached them as she shouted down, "We're just travelers, nothing serious."

"We?" one of them shouted back up at her.

Ranma came out of the woods then, waving his arms. "Me!" He smacked an arrow out of the air as it came towards them automatically, smirking up at the man in the tower. "Nice shot. Should I respond, or are ya going to let us talk?"

Once the loggers got over the shock at Ranma appearing out of the forest so quickly and his batting aside a lacrima infused arrow, he and Jenny were able to explain what they wanted to the camp foreman. "Well, as long as you have money to pay for it, we've got flu medicine. Although I'm still wondering where you came from, you certainly didn't follow the trails here, or else we would have seen you for this."

"Ranma shrugged, looking back at the older man, a burly, middle-aged fellow with a beard that was wild and shaggy to either side but had a rather neatly cared for end for some reason. Ranma had no idea why anyone would grow a beard at all, let alone one like that, but it was clear that beards were definitely in fashion around here since Ranma had yet to spot a single logger who didn't have one. "We're mages, and as a sort of training exercise, we climbed

up the escarpment. But when we got up here, one of our companions started to fall sick almost immediately. I don't know if any of you have noticed but it's cold out here."

All of the loggers still in hearing range laughed at that, while the foreman merely shook his head. "I don't know if you're telling us the truth about coming up the escarpment stranger, but it certainly makes for a good story. Still, you can pay, right? We'd prefer money rather than trade."

"I can pay," Ranma replied while Jenny was already pulling out her money pouch. "How much?"

The site of the gold in both of the stranger's hands seems to dissipate the last of the concerns of the loggers, and beyond their spokesman, the rest of them went back to work. The foreman led the two strangers to the smallest log house in the camp, which turned out to be a mix between commissary, office, hospice and storage area.

Several beds were also set up along one wall, separated from the rest of the cabin by a screen, currently open to show the individuals laying there had various injuries. An older man, the first white-bearded person in the camp they had seen, was tending to them and came over to talk to the foreman quietly before heading to a series of shelves against the far wall, grabbing up mortar and pestle as he began to put a concoction together. "How much does the patient weigh? Does she have any allergies?"

"None that we know about and considering how much she eats at every meal regardless of what the meal is, I doubt it. As for how much she weighs..." Ranma frowned, thinking. "Ninety-five pounds minimum and no more than a hundred. If you could give us enough medicine for three days for her, and then a double dose for someone who weighs a hundred and forty pounds or so? I'm kind of afraid that one of our other traveling companions is also getting sick but I wager she'll be able to kick it easy."

Jenny looked at Ranma in some confusion. "How can you tell that so precisely?"

"What, you mean you can't?" Ranma looked at Jenny just as quizzically, then smirked, hopping towards her. Before Jenny could do anything, he lifted her up, one hand on either of her biceps as he lifted her straight up, then held her there for a moment before setting her down. "You weigh..."

Without even a flash of magic or the need for a verbal command, the arm of her Bubblegum suit appeared on Jenny's hand. She pressed it forward into Ranma's face before he could move out of range, her words hissing out of clenched teeth. "Finish that sentence and lose your jaw."

The loggers, even those on the beds nearby, laughed at that, and Ranma nodded obediently, his eyes flashing with good humor at Jenny who, after, making certain he wouldn't

spout out anything he shouldn't, joined him, delighting in the simple joy of being around Ranma once more. Then she spotted something against the other wall and pointed. "Is that what I think it is?"

The foreman looked in the same direction and nodded. "If you think that's mead, then it is indeed."

"Nice rhyme, but how much for a jug of that?" Ranma looked at Jenny confused, but Jenny ignored him for now, looking back at the foreman who gave his reply. She then pulled out the money necessary, handed it over, and took possession of a jug of mead about the size of four fists placed one on top of the other.

Soon, the two travelers were on their way once more, with a bit more information about the area around them, including the way to the nearest main road. Ranma was still chuckling about that as they moved through the forest, with Jenny in her Bubblegum form, zipping through the trees next to him instead of flying. "That's seriously ironic, that for all of the traveling I've done, the nearest main road is the Wayward Path, the same road I followed when I was exploring Ishgar for all those years before meeting you and semi-settling down with Fairy Tail."

"Tell me about it," Jenny suggested, as she leaped up over a downed tree, then grabbed an overhanging branch, flipping herself forward and through several more to land next to Ranma and continue to skate along above the snow next to them.

Ranma obliged, telling her about the time he spent staying in Iceberg, first at the small village surrounding the lake, whose name he couldn't remember, and then the battle with Deliora in the capital, followed by his traveling through Iceberg via the Wayward Path and down into Stella. The lake village sounded nice, like one of the resorts she had once stayed at as a model, but Jenny doubted that they would be able to stop there this time.

The two of them were soon back at the temporary log cabin where they found Natsu and Gajeel arm wrestling on the ground, with Happy to one side, acting as a referee. Both younger Dragon Slayers looked up, but Gajeel took advantage of the moment to slam Natsu's hand down on the ground, whooping in victory. "Ha! I win."

"That's cheating!" Natsu growled, getting his legs under him in preparation of charging forward with Gajeel mimicking the motion.

But Jenny got between the two boys, smacking them upside the head, pushing them back until they both fell on their rears. "If you two are going to fight, take it outside. I don't suppose either of you have seen Flare or Juvia?"

“Nope.” Happy answered for the three of them. “I entered your tent, but both of them are still in bed, and Juvia’s all red and coughing like Flare now. She called me a hot water bottle, and I got out of there quick!”

“Damn, I was afraid of that,” Ranma muttered. “Still, we expected it given how she looked before.”

“Yup, I guess there’s a difference between catching a cold yourself and being given it by another person,” Jenny shrugged the shrug of a woman who hadn’t been sick a day in her life, setting down the mead before giving Gajeel a glare as he looked at it in interest. “I’ll be getting out a few mugs, but the first mug is going to go to Juvia with a tiny bit going to Flare. Got it?”

Gajeel nodded, completely understanding and not even arguing. Despite his prickly exterior, Gajeel did actually care for his companions and had oddly formed a soft spot for Flare. “Not a problem. Anyway, while you were gone, we gathered enough wood to see us through the storm and hunted down a bear. We left that outside after Natsu here actually proved useful for once when he started to cut it down to size.”

Ranma nodded and looked over at the horses, who were happily munching on barrels full of oats and grass at the moment. Neither of them was shivering any longer, which was a good sign, but they would have to get them some blankets or something before moving on, and Ranma cursed himself for not thinking about buying some from the loggers. *Still, if there are bears nearby we can make our own, I guess.* “Did you keep the hide of the bear, Natsu?”

Natsu nodded. “It’s hanging out there with the rest of it.”

Looking at Jenny, Ranma indicate handed her the medicine, jerking his head towards their tent. “I’ll get to preparing the bear skin. You give the two sickies their medicine.”

Jenny nodded and entered the tent, where she found Flare laid out supine on one side of the magically joined sleeping bags, with Jenny on the other, clutching the edge of a beanbag as if it was a body pillow. By the time she had given the two of them their medicine, Ranma had butchered the remainder of the bear carcass, finding that, like Gajeel said, Natsu had already made a good start on it. They had bear steak that night, with the two sick folk getting bear stew, while the rest were made into strips.

The mead was a treat as well, even Happy and Natsu taking some, although Happy quickly conked out, snoring away like someone many times his own size, while Gajeel pulled out his guitar, and he and Natsu started to argue about what kind of music this or that member of Fairy Tail would prefer. Seeing this, Jenny nudged Ranma in the side, her head jerking towards the door.

Divining what she wanted, Ranma picked up the remaining jug of mead, refilling the other two Dragon Slayers mugs, before taking the rest with him as he stood up, pulling Jenny to

her feet and wordlessly heading towards the doorway. He ignored Gajeel's catcall, while Jenny simply smirked and sashayed a bit as she followed, linking her arm with his as they stepped out into the dark.

Outside, the night was beautiful. The stars were out, along with the moon, shining down from on high through the pine forest, while the snow continued to fall heavily, obscuring but not hiding the lights from above. Their feet crunching in the snow, the two lovers walked arm-in-arm through the forest, exchanging the bottle of mead and kisses as they went.

"You do know that we won't be able to use our tent tonight, right? Not with Flare with us, and both her and Juvia sick?"

"I know, but I'm certain we're both inventive enough to come up with a solution~," Jenny trilled, before taking a swig of the mead, then kissing Ranma ardently, opening her mouth and letting her tongue slide out, pushing some of the mead into Ranma's mouth, where their tongues began to duel. Jenny felt Ranma's arms go around her, lifting her up and giggled as he carried her on through the trees.

Soon, Ranma found an old pine tree, with its boughs dipped down, creating an area at the base where the snow had been blocked from entering. Ranma set Jenny down and pulled out a spare heater that he had bought back in Seven when they had bought the boys their tents. At the time, he had figured that if one of their tents was destroyed somehow, the heater would be the most important part. It came in handy now, warming the area up, not enough to melt the snow on the tree branches all around them, but enough to make them a little more comfortable.

While he had been doing that, Jenny had shimmied out of her leggings. Not all the way, just enough to get access to the treasures within and when he turned, Jenny pounced, slamming into Ranma and baring him down to the ground. "It's too cold for taking our clothes off," she mumbled between kisses. "But that doesn't mean we can't have fun~, does it?"

Understanding what she wanted, Ranma pulled down his pants just enough to let his cock pop out. A moment later, he groaned as Jenny easily slid him into her already weeping flower, his groan turning into a growl as she began to bounce on his waist.

Later, as Jenny was recovering, Ranma covered her with a cloak from his Requip space, then looked around the little area at the bottom of the tree and went to work.

Looking at this blearily, Jenny shook herself, reaching down and running one finger down her somewhat abused cleft. *Note to self, don't let Ranma take the term quickie to heart. That was a little too much. I'm going to be sore for hours.* "Wha're ya doin'?" she slurred, her mind foggy from lust and the mead.

“Well, I figure we’ll be staying here until Flare and Juvia are good to travel again, that means they’ll keep using our tent. And I don’t like the idea of Gajeel and Natsu or Happy just wondering out of their own tents to find us using the cabin for moments like this. So, we could do with a little place for ourselves.”

Jenny laughed at that but made no efforts to get to her feet, still not feeling anything below her waist at the moment. Instead, she watched Ranma work, backing up the outer layer of drooping branches with packed down snow, creating a small igloo.

But by the time he had finished his work, the feeling had returned to Jenny’s legs, and unknown to Ranma, she finished changing, shivering only slightly in the cool air of the igloo. Now she moved over, hugging Ranma behind, utterly naked. “Well,” she whispered throatily into his ear, “Now that you’ve created our little love shack, perhaps we should put it to use again?”

Why this sent Ranma into gales of laughter, Jenny didn’t know. But considering how the next few hours went, she didn’t care enough to ask.

The group did indeed stay in their makeshift cabin for a few days, not just because they wanted to let Flare and Juvia (with Ranma playing nursemaid, something that Jenny and Juvia both found hilarious) recover their health but also because the snowstorm continued throughout that time unabated. The snow eventually piled so high that the entrance to the cabin became buried. Although thanks to their having a living flamethrower with them, that was no trouble.

Outside and now clad in several more layers than before, Flare stared at all the snow around them. “How are we supposed to move on this?”

In reply, Natsu picked up Happy and tossed him out into the snow. Happy spread himself out, landing on all fours and only sinking in a little bit. “Very, very carefully. The heavier you are, the more likely you are to sink. You humans are going to have a lot of trouble again.”

Flare frowned at that, then hopped out onto the snow, following Happy. Flare instantly sunk down to around chest height, but then Flare’s Crimson Hair activated, and she pulled herself back out, her hair grabbing at nearby trees and Natsu. Once she was back in the cleared area around the doorway, she looked at the fire Dragon Slayer sheepishly. “I see what you meanNNN!”

Her words cut off as a snowball thrown by Juvia hit her, followed by a much larger one smacking Natsu in the face. “Juvia thinks we deserve some fun first. What say you all?”

The snowball fight that followed would have gone down in history if not for the fact there was no one but the participants to see it. It also slowed them down so much that they didn’t start until the next day but no one complained.

Travel at this point relied on Natsu and Jenny. Natsu would burn them a path for half the day, while the other half, Jenny would carry the horses while Ranma carried Juvia and Flare rotated between Happy and the two other Dragon Slayers.

In this manner, the group reached the track leading to the logging camp within a day. Following it took them another three before they reached the Wayward Path, and once on the main road, travel became much easier, with the horses coming in handy once more, covered now by several crude blankets. Thus, with them and the endurance training that Gajeel had gone through, in barely a week and a half after leaving their makeshift cabin, they were leaving Iceberg behind and following the Wayward Path as it wound down the escarpment into Pergrande.

From there, the going became much much easier, and Flare cheerfully flung aside her winter garments, using her hair to skip along merrily alongside the others. Pergrande was far more settled than Iceberg, and they started to see people soon after leaving the border behind. Many of the civilians looked taken aback at the young woman using her hair to move along like that, but no one said anything. And a few days later, they were arriving in Appledore, the capital city.

William and Laitha had moved up in the world since Ranma and Wendy had last passed through Pergrande, and had moved entirely into the noble quarter. Asking directions at that point gained all of them looks, although Jenny, being a world-famous model, served them well. They eventually got directions to the right house, a four-story affair with its own back garden and front gate.

As they moved through the city, Ranma and the others overheard bits and pieces of conversation, and Flare frowned, her brows furrowing as she sidled up to Natsu, who looked excited. "What are orcs?"

That was the big topic on everyone's lips as they passed through the city. The orcs had once more invaded. The army had answered instantly and had stopped them in the Trident, quite unlike the first time Ranma had dealt with them.

That was good, and it sounded as if the army was really pounding them, but a lot of the citizens were still concerned because a large portion of the army wasn't there. Two brigades were still down in Sin and Esca. And a full army corps, six brigades, was still serving as an occupation force in Midi. This left Pergrande with only about half of its forces and its mage guilds, of course.

"Orcs are these weird plantlike creatures, which apparently sometimes overgrow their own area in the Blasted Lands, and come west, trying to travel through the passes in the mountains. They're not very tough one-on-one, but they've got some weird tricks, and there is a **lot** of them," Ranma explained simply. He looked at the others, one eyebrow rising. "I don't think I need to ask, but does anyone think this should change our plans?"

There was an inherent challenge in the way Ranma said that, and even Juvia and Jenny bristled. "Hell no! I heard from Laxus about these things a lot. But to me, they just sound like mobile trees. And trees are **flammable!**" Natsu whooped, slamming one fist into his other palm as flames ignited around both hands.

"Pinky is right. I've never met the tree yet, walking or no, which doesn't go down to an iron axe," Gajeel agreed with his fellow Dragon Slayer in his own way.

While Natsu growled about his hair not being pink as per usual, Juvia and Jenny both just nodded. "Besides, it could allow us to put some of our team tactics into motion," Juvia added.

While Ranma shook his head at that, Happy looked a little unhappy, but then muttered, "Er, I've never seen a mobile scratching post before. That could be interesting."

"That's the spirit, little buddy!" Natsu said with a laugh, reaching up to pat Happy on the head.

When Ranma rang the doorbell to his blacksmith friend's house, he was pleased to have the door answered by his wife. She looked astonished at his presence, but quickly pulled Ranma into a friendly hug, then looked around at the others. "Ranma! I swear to God you always show up out of nowhere. But who are all these folks?"

Ranma made introductions, then pushed Flare forward. The little girl had not stopped taking in everything around them since they'd entered the city but now appeared slightly shy, understanding that this was one of the people that was going to take her in at Ranma's behest.

"What the hell, you've replaced Wendy?" Laitha exclaimed in mock shock, smiling down at the younger girl, but her eyes were serious as she looked back up at Ranma.

"This is Flare. We found her in a village that... Let's just say that they couldn't look after a growing girl and leave it at that. Explaining why would take all day, and I don't think you'd believe us anyway. Flare's a mage and will need some training, and I was hoping to ask you to look after her while she trains with the local guilds, or barring that, get her some help to get to Fairy Tail in Fiore."

"Of course, although why aren't you willing to take her around with you? She's older than Wendy was when you traveled with her" Laitha questioned.

"Three reasons. One, Flare doesn't like traveling much, and two, her magic isn't one that I'm as familiar with as I am Dragon Slayer magic. And three, we're not going to be just traveling around Ishgar. We've got bigger plans than that."

Before Laitha could question that, Flare spoke up for herself. "It's, it's true, I don't really like traveling. I've liked being around Jenny, Juvia and the others, but I... well, being on the road is a little annoying. I like to wake up in the same spot, you know? And I promise I won't be any trouble! I'll help around the house or whatever, and I'm certain that the mage guild, which will take me in after a bit."

"Nonsense! I don't have a problem taking you in Flare. That wasn't my question to this wandering ass." Laitha pulled Flare into a hug, then looked back at Ranma, her expression demanding an explanation.

But Ranma ignored that look, shaking his head. "You don't need to know, and you'd be obliged to object if you did. Trust me."

Laitha scowled at that, but looking down at the young what girl, shrugged her shoulders. "Well, all right. You know your business best." It was evident that she thought it was Ranger business that was taking Ranma and this strange crew to wherever they were going, but also just as obvious that she seemed to like the idea of having Flare around. "But come inside, have some teas, and explain more about how you met young Flare. That I'm not letting you get out of."

Ranma chuckled, and a group of them entered the house. Laitha showed them around, and Juvia slowly started to realize that one reason why Laitha was not objecting to taking Flare in was that perhaps she and her husband might have been attempting for a child of their own. One of the rooms was clearly a nursery, but there didn't seem to be much actual furniture around, as if they had prepared, then the event itself had not occurred.

Explaining Flare's issues took a while, by which point Flare had decided on one of the guestrooms and had come back to talk to Laitha more. When she learned that her new host was a blacksmith, Flare excitedly asked questions about the trade, having watched the blacksmith back in Sun Village and having always been fascinated by it. This proved to be a very good conversation starter, and by the time everyone had their tea, Laitha was not only willing but quite happy to have Flare in their home. Indeed, Jenny and Juvia felt that the woman might actually want to try to make it permanent, although it was early days for that.

The group stayed there the rest of that day. When William came home, he instantly got along with Flare, the three of them bonding over the married couple's work as blacksmiths and the two adults delighting in Flare's magic. The next morning, when Ranma and the others woke up, they found Flare helping William in the kitchen. It was evident that Flare and the married couple were going to get along just fine.

Later that morning, the group said their farewells to Flare, with the young girl becoming quite emotional, hugging all of them tightly before letting them go, using her hair to pull them into a group hug that even Ranma had trouble getting out of. But soon enough, they were on the road once more, heading to the borders.

Reaching the mountains took them only a few days, at which point they started to see signs of the army in the area. Several outposts had been left on the side of the mountain, and when they reached it, a supply train was entering the Tine of the Trident, which had Ranma led them towards.

Looking around, Gajeel remembered what Ranma had told them about the geography, summarizing, "So essentially, this fortress in the center of the Trident acts like a cork in the bottle. When you and Laxus were fighting them, the orcs had already bypassed it and had spread down the Three Tines?"

"Right. If Pergrande gets some warning, as they should have back then, the fortress can hold the orcs off almost indefinitely, wiping them out by the thousands. And that was back then. Pergrande's military has gotten even more dangerous since then," Ranma agreed. Although he did not detail on why Pergrande's military was so much more dangerous these days.

Halfway down the Tine, they started to see scouts moving along the area with along with supplies. These soldiers spotted the mages in turn. One of them must have felt very officious because he shouted out, "Hold and identify yourselves, strangers!"

"I'm Ranma Oceana. With me are mages of Fairy Tail. Is the King or Roland here?" Ranma announced, moving past the guy before he could do anything, moving on his way even as he asked the question, ignoring the guy reaching for his sword.

He didn't ignore two other soldiers raising their rifles at the man's orders and paused, looking at the weapons closely. Not because they were a threat, but because he hadn't seen them before.

They looked almost like pictures Ranma had seen of the British Rifle from World War I, except with a side stock or magazine connected to them. But nearby, more advanced-looking guns were in evidence. A crew-served machine gun that looked like a lacrima-infused gatling was being touted around by two men. And on the back of one of the larger carts, a cart which, furthermore, had several dozen lacrima visible around the bottom, the end of a large cannon stuck out. The look of it reminded Ranma of a WW2 howitzer.

Done with his perusal Ranma's hand disappeared to the soldier's view, grabbing the guns out of the two soldiers' hands, pulling them off of their feet and nearly tossing them into the air along with their rifles. "Geez, are all of you guys that trigger-happy? Hell, it isn't as if you can be so concerned about spies in this war. Orcs can't even communicate, let alone spy!"

Several other soldiers moved forward, but Juvia gestured, her arms disappearing as she created a wall of water around the soldiers, slowly closing in. "Water Magic, Water Cage. Please stop this silliness. While Ranma is not the most diplomatic of fellows, and Juvia can fully

understand why our coming here of the blue like this is concerning, you are the ones who tried to threaten him, rather than the other way around.”

A sergeant from nearby slowly raised his hand from where he had been grabbing at a grenade on his belt. “Er, that’s true, LT. And um, I seem to remember the name Ranma from somewhere before.”

“You freaking well should. Me and Laxus Dreyar were here fighting against the orcs the last time they invaded before Gildarts arrived to help end the war. Does that ring any bells?”

An older soldier missing a goodly portion of a leg had turned around and watched all this from where he had been leading the team of mules pulling the cannon forward. Now he cackled, nodding his head. “I remember Ranma had this stupid ponytail which sort of matches this guy. But I remember something else to do. A certain curse he had?”

Ranma tsked but nodded over to Juvia, who diverted a bit of her water wall towards him. Ranma took it, allowing the transformation to happen, then ran a hand through her hair, slowly pulling the water away from her body into her hand, where she began to warm it up via her ki. “Will that do?”

To Ranma’s great annoyance, many of the soldiers around him nodded, and one of them even said, “Damn! You know I never believed that tale about a young brat with a strange gender-changing curse who fought on the front lines against the orcs before. Now I suppose I have to.”

“HAHAHA, yeah, that’s him, er, her!” The old man cackled. “Damn, but puberty’s been kind to ya, ain’t it, Ranma.”

“Wait, my actual description never made the rounds of the army, just my curse? What the hell, dude?” Ranma growled, flashing the older soldier the finger, causing him to laugh even harder.

Ranma splashed herself with the hot water now, then looked back at the sergeant. “Still, I suppose that proves I am who I said I was and that I’m no enemy of Pergrande, right?”

“Er, yes, I suppose it does, sir,” the sergeant replied. “Are you here to help us fight the orcs again?”

“Sure, let’s go with that,” Ranma replied dryly.

With the now thoroughly embarrassed Lieutenant sending word ahead, the group of mages was not stopped again as they moved parallel with the supplies, racing along past them until they started to see tents set up throughout the gorge. The gorge slowly began to widen

ahead of them, at which point they were hailed once more. But soon an officer escorted them through the camp to the largest tent there, the flag of Pergrande flying outside on a tall pole.

While Jenny was worrying about whether or not they were really about to meet at King and pulling at Natsu's ear, ordering him in a whisper to be on his best behavior, Gajeel and Juvia were staring out past the camp to the large stone wall that they could see in the distance and the sounds of battle beyond. There was a booming then the chatter of machine guns and the single shots of rifles, so many that they blended in together. As calm as it was here near the center of the Army camp, it was very clear that elsewhere, the battle was a furious one.

Natsu looked in that direction too, and after exchanging an excited glance with Gajeel, looked over at Ranma. "Do you think we could skip meeting the King and just get it stuck in right away?"

"I want to know how long this has been going on, but if you want to, sure. Just don't get any of the Pergrande troops caught up in any of your attacks," Ranma warned.

"If you wish to head to the fortress, I will show you the way," a female voice added, and Ranma turned to see Ikaruga coming out of the tent. The swordswoman almost looked exactly as he remembered her from the first time they'd met. She was wearing the same outfit from that time, although it hung even looser on her frame, as she had added at least an inch to her bust line and hips since then. Ikaruga also, unlike the last time Ranma had seen her, wasn't pregnant.

"Hey, Ikaruga, how're the kids?"

"Doing quite well and being looked after by their governess right now. Or did you really think I would allow my husband to go to war without me beside him?"

While Ranma snorted at that, Gajeel elbowing Natsu in the arm. "Look, it's your long-lost sister. I mean, you have to be related with that hair, right?"

"Shut up you asshat!" Natsu barked back, elbowing Gajeel in the side even harder. "No way am I related to this old woman!"

"Excuse me? What did you just call me?" Ikaruga asked, her voice melodic yet tinged with danger as she took a step forward, one hand falling to her blade as she crouched down lightly, ready to spring forward.

"You'll have to excuse them. These two are Dragon Slayers like Ranma, only while Ranma can at least spell the word tact, Natsu wouldn't know what it was if it reared up and tried to bite his head off," Jenny interjected, moving forward. "While Gajeel has a very odd sense of humor."

“Jenny Realight?” Ikaruga stopped, staring at her for a moment before smiling and straightening up, setting aside her desire to do violence on Natsu for a moment. “I have no idea what you are doing here, but I have to thank you. That last line of Witchy Witch swimwear you modeled is among my favorite outfits.”

Jenny smiled politely at that, wincing internally as she remembered that particular company was among the first to kick her to the curve when her face had become scarred. Not able to read Jenny’s thoughts, the swordswoman turned back to the two Dragon Slayers. “I will expect an apology at some point, or else I will be taking it out of your hides. But for now, follow me.”

As the woman led Gajeel and Natsu off, Juvia sidled up to Ranma, whispering in his ear, “Kids? Are you telling me that that woman has had children?”

“At least two as far as I know,” Ranma said with a nod. “She already had one kid, and the last time I was passing through Pergrande, she was pregnant again.”

“It’s three kids, actually. Our second birth was twins, a boy and girl,” Tristan said as he came out of the tent. “But can I ask what you’re doing here, Ranma? Business or pleasure?”

“Martial arts type pleasure,” Ranma said, moving forward and shaking Tristan’s hand, then introducing him to Jenny, Juvia and Happy, who had not followed the Dragon Slayers for some reason. “We’re going on an... journey, shall we say?”

Tristan was no fool and understood what Ranma was implying instantly. His eyes went wide as he opened his mouth to shout that Ranma was even more of an idiot now than he had been when he, all of eleven-years-old had thrown himself into an orc invasion. But he controlled himself, staring hard at Ranma and his two companions, then over to where the other two Dragon Slayers were following his wife through the army. “I’m not going to say are you insane because I’ve known for years the answer is yes. I’m simply going to ask if your companions know what they’re getting into.”

Ranma laughed quietly, then looked over at Jenny and Juvia. “You two want to answer that?”

“While Juvia is not enthused to explore the Blasted Lands, Juvia believes that we will be up to the challenge because Juvia knows what manner of people we will be traveling with. Further, the upshot is too large to ignore.”

Tristan fell silent, gesturing them into the tent, where they found King Victor sitting in a chair with the air of a man unwilling to move from its depths at present. This was not a regular camp chair. Rather this was a padded, extremely comfortable looking and very heavy chair. And King Victor himself looked even older than the last time Ranma had seen through the magical communications array. Yet his eyes were still shrewd as he gazed at Ranma.

When Tristan explained what Ranma had said outside, Victor also understood almost instantly. But he also deduced a possible reason behind such a move. "Does this have anything to do with your battle against Acnologia?"

"Yep," Ranma sighed. "We need combat experience. We think we might be able to find something that can help us hurt him there, and frankly, myself and the other Dragon Slayers need a lot more territory to go wild in than we could easily find in most of Ishgar."

"And what about that Zeref business?"

Ranma glanced at Tristan, but Victor waved one hand, indicating he should speak. It was only now that Ranma noticed that Victor wasn't wearing his crown. The King caught his look and explained. "I have stepped down as King in favor of Tristan. He is now Acting Regent for my son. This will be my last campaign. Now answer my question."

"Zeref's stuck in the Celestial Spirit realm and can't escape. That's about all there is to it on that score, your highness," Ranma said, giving Victor his title for the first time in practically ever, respecting the fact he had willingly stepped down before his faculties started to be impaired. "Our interest in the Blasted Lands has everything to do with training to fight Acnologia, nothing more. Although, we probably will search out wherever the orcs are coming from and destroy whatever is creating them."

"You would not be the first to attempt that, nor even the first group of mages to do so. Still, none of them were as tenacious as I know you to be, and I have enough respect for your general intelligence to believe that you would not bring along anyone who couldn't pull their own weight," Tristan said, scratching his chin thoughtfully as he looked at Ranma. "But you will stay and help us against these orcs?"

"Your Majesty, our friends are already doing that very thing," Juvia answered for them, as a loud roar was heard from the front lines.

OOOOOO

The horde of orcs was unending, brutes normally tall as Laxus, and as wide, although there were a few scattered through the horde that looked even larger. Dozens of eyes protruded from every direction, making them hella ugly in Natsu's opinion. Their legs also looked like tree trunks, and their weapons, as they charged forward to try and scale the walls of the fort or towards the lines of the army, looked like they were wooden too.

Among the horde were slower, even more tree-like things which Natsu knew were the Shamblers. These creatures were the ones who apparently could suck the magic out of the area they were in. Nearby, several local mages were falling back from where they had summoned up a wall of rock, slowing the orcs and creating a killing ground for the dug in troopers, the anti-magic of the Shamblers reaching out toward them even as they retreated.

But the defenders were laying down an insane hail of gunfire. Every man on the wall or dug in to either side of the fort in the center of the gorge had either a rifle which fired faster and with longer range than any gun Natsu had seen before, or worked a crew served gun that Natsu had heard call a machine gun. Behind the lines and in particular in the fort, were heavier guns, like the one they had seen when they started down the Tine of the Trident. They made huge explosions, Natsu was impressed, and they fired fast too, tearing into the horde.

But it was still a horde. Natsu could see from where he stood at the back of a trench where dozens of other trenches had been before. Even he could figure out that the human army fell back or pressed forward as they could, always keeping the horde of orcs at range. That made sense since he could only see one bow and arrow for every six or seven orcs out there. The Shamblers though might have made it a more even match if not for the Pergrande army now being entirely long-range.

There were so many of those critters Natsu could feel the drain from here, a bit. *Meh, it's like I've sparred with Ranma or one of the others for forty minutes. Bleurgh. Nothing I can't deal with.* He turned back to Gajeel, for once not wanting to fight him. Rather, Natsu wanted to compete indirectly. "You want to make a bet on which of us kills more orcs?"

Gajeel snorted, looking across the horde with some disdain. "Please, as if you could even count them all afterward."

"Boys, you're both pretty, but if you could please get on with it? I rather would like to see if you have enough power to back up having such mouths on you," Ikaruga began from behind them, before smirking. "Or are you having performance issues with me watching?"

Natsu flushed, getting that joke now that he had been with the twins so often, while Gajeel just cackled and stepped forward. "I'll go first, Flame Brain."

Pouting Natsu agreed, watching as Gajeel pulled out a large ball of iron, biting into it. He cracked his neck, magic gathering throughout his body before he held up his hands towards his face and shouted out, "Iron Dragon's Raging Starfall!"

From his mouth tinier balls of iron shot out into the air, which exploded in midair into clouds of shrapnel, the bits of which multiplied as they fell. The copies were made of the green magic of Gajeel's Dragon Slayer power and seemed to be moving even faster, reproducing further as they fell. The attack was so spread out it covered almost the entire front of the charging horde.

This was Gajeel's attempt to create a long range, wide angle attack. This was difficult for Gajeel, since more of his attacks were mid-range and didn't really have that wide an avenue of assault. The best he had was the Dragon Slayer Roar, which wasn't all that good an attack on this scale. Even now as strong as he had become there was a limit to how wide a single Roar could be.

His new attack was different, spreading far further, but was insanely power intensive, and he stumbled backward. Yet he kept to his feet, staring as the attack struck.

As it did, Ikaruga nodded in approval. The deadly rain sliced through the orcs and Shamblers like they were bushes rather than trees as they looked to be. And then the original bits of iron exploded upon impact with the individual orcs. "Not bad."

For a moment, the horde of orcs stumbled, having lost several hundred, perhaps more than a thousand orcs at once. The defenders fire also didn't let up, adding to the impact of this sudden loss.

However, a second later, the horde came on, undaunted, and Natsu grinned, stamping one foot and did not gesturing to either side of him with his hands. "You all might want to stay down!" he roared, as an aura of fire burst out from him in every direction. This included straight up, as Natsu used his new magic, Fire Forming, to create the image of a huge dragon's head directly above him. "Fire Dragon's Aura Fire!"

The image of the dragon above Natsu's head roared, and from its mouth a tongue of flame several yards wide and tall flashed out, moving as the head turned from one side to another. Once more the front of the horde felt the brunt of the magical assault, and several thousand orcs from one edge of the gorge to another barely had seconds to scream before they went up like so many bales of hay. Natsu's attack also spread further back than Gajeel's had, and at the far back, those survivors lit their fellows on fire as they tried to escape the fire.

"Woo! Burn fuckers!" Natsu shouted, as he directed the Fire Formed head above him with his arms, whooping and hollering as for once, the orc horde stopped coming forward, and began to fall back.

Alas, the orc horde only fell back from the fire attack for a bare hour. Then, when the humans had moved forward into more forward trenches and had time to bring up more ammunition for the cannons and machine guns, they once more began to invade/migrate from wherever they were situated in the Blasted Lands and into Pergrande. And the mages with Ranma learned the same lesson he and Laxus had: fighting orcs was like fighting a mix between a large pack of lemmings, an army and the tide. They just kept coming.

But that was all right for all of the mages, even Jenny. They gleefully broke out several new attack spells and techniques to try on them, as Gajeel and Natsu had done that first day. To no one's surprise, given their plantlike nature, fire magic worked best on the orcs. Natsu had a field day every time it was his turn on the front line, doing almost as much damage as the rest of the defenders could all on his own.

But eventually, the orc invasion or migration, whichever you wanted to call it, started to end. Elements of the army then started to move back into Pergrande, and Ranma, with a final farewell to Tristan and his wife, led his band forward. They still had to deal with small, scattered

forces of orcs, but that was easy enough. The going was rough too, and only a few hours after leaving the wall behind, Jenny and Juvia were forced to admit that Ranma had been correct to leave the horses back with the army, a decision he'd made their second day with the army. There was just no way they would've gotten pack horses through this territory except by carrying them in turn.

This side of the Trident, which was called 'The Shaft,' was also much longer than Ranma had expected. It took them three days moving at the best speed Juvia and Gajeel could to reach the end of it, occasionally slowed by orc bands they ran into. Finally, the end of the gorge came out high up in the mountainside, much higher than it was on the other side, and instantly the group stopped and stared, for it was as if they had walked out onto some alien planet.

The sky above them had changed from its normal blue with white clouds to an odd gold and purple affair in places as if it was sunset, but it wasn't. Little plumes of smoke were also visible in the distance, getting Natsu somewhat excited as he wondered what kind of fires made them. High above, birds whose sheer size defied description flew through weirdly spiraling clouds, literally spiraling, not just moving in a spire, but shaped like spirals. In the distance, lightning boomed as energy crackled across the sky from one place to another, creating an aurora of colors.

Closer to hand, the area all around them was pockmarked, reminding Ranma of the craters caused by cannons when they hit the ground, only many times larger. Several of them looked as if they had come from a single attack radiating outwards in a circle, whereas elsewhere, hundreds of thousands of tiny minuscule holes had been drilled through everything in sight, with some kind of lightning arcing up from them occasionally in the energy equivalent of Whack-a-Mole.

Even stranger was what below them at the foot of the mountains. It should've been a regular forest, and it was a forest, but it wasn't made of trees. Instead of trees, it was dominated by what looked like mushrooms, as large as five or six stories high, each of them as large around as oak tree.

As the group moved down the mountainside and into this odd forest, they saw what looked like long fronds of grass sticking out in every direction from the bottom of the mushroom caps. Ranma wondered if perhaps these mushrooms were what created the Orcs somehow, but he didn't see any shape of an orc or whatever among them, while his friends were simply confused and just amused at this instant sign that the Blasted Lands were just as weird as rumors said.

They didn't know the half of it yet but were about to learn.

About ten minutes into the forest, Ranma paused between one step in the next, looking down at himself in confusion. "Is anyone else feeling lighter on their feet all of a sudden?"

As the others paused, the fronds of grass all around them shifted upwards and simultaneously, gravity went goodbye. They all began to float into the air, bouncing into and off the bottom of the mushroom caps above them.

For most of them, this was no real hardship. Ranma used the momentum of that bounce to move to one side, grabbing Juvia out of the air and letting her cling to him as he used his magic to shift himself further away, scowling as he looked around. Gajeel pulled out a grapnel from his camping equipment and used that to tie himself to one mushroom. Happy instantly flew over to Natsu, and the two of them and Jenny were able to fly easily.

Until the gravity returned with a vengeance. While most of the group were in the air fifty times normal gravity or perhaps more pressed down on them suddenly, smashing them all into the ground.

“Are we, are we under attack!” Gajeel snarled as he tried to push himself to his feet. But none of them, not even Ranma at first, could get to his feet right away.

“I don’t think so! I think there’s some kind of gravity spell or enchantment on the ground here going haywire, and it’s just activating randomly!” Jenny said. She had the most ‘magic sense’ of all of them, and she couldn’t detect any spell from the mushrooms or anything else around.

“I’m still going to destroy these mushrooms! They have to be involved with this attack somehow. right?” Natsu roared.

Ranma raised a hand, stopping Natsu from activating his magic, staring at the fronds from one of the mushrooms to one side as they slowly began to rise from where they had been originally playing straight down. “Wait, gravity is going to change back.... Now!”

As he spoke, the gravity around them shifted again, becoming lighter. All of them scrambled to their feet, and Ranma barked out orders. “Keep an eye on those fronds from the mushroom trees. They start to react before the change hits. Use the time when there’s light gravity or regular gravity to move, then fort up right before the heavy gravity hits!”

“Which way!?” Jenny retorted.

“North Northwest!” Happy barked. “If this gravity thing doesn’t push out past this weird mushroom forest, that’s the closest edge to it I saw.” He had floated well above the mushrooms the first time before returning to Natsu.

That was all he could get out before the gravity went sideways this time, hurling everyone off their feet, plowing into several mushroom trees where they were nearly sucked into the fungi. But luckily for the group, they didn’t have to face too many more gravity changes. Only four more changes occurred before they were out from the area affected by it,

which was not, as Happy thought, marked by the edge of the mushrooms. Rather, the gravity issue seemed to just... fade away.

By that point, all of them, bar Ranma and Natsu, were groaning. Human organs, particularly the stomach and brains and couldn't deal with the sudden shifts in gravity.

Happy had it worse by far. He was not only the smallest but physically the weakest of the group. Indeed, he looked like he was in so much pain that Ranma, despite a desire to not split the party, tossed him as far into the air as he could when the gravity went back to normal. Recovering, Happy was able to fly even higher, but was only just able to get outside the gravity changing field, before it shifted again, a calculated risk that paid off for the Exceed. Later, after desperately dodging, a wired five headed eagle thing that thought I looked tasty, he was able to meet up with them at the edge of strange magical field, although not without looking like death warmed over.

Ranma's head was also throbbing, although, once more, his past life dealing with Akane's cooking came in handy, allowing his stomach at least to handle it. He helped the others along until they were sitting at what appeared to be the bank of a river to put even the Yangtze to shame.

There, Ranma began to brew up some savory broth for them all, something to help soothe the nerves and their stomachs. As they ate, Ranma grinned at them all, cracking his back and stretching. While his head hadn't exactly liked the experience of shifting from one gravity to another, the heavy gravity had proved to be a tremendous challenge reminding him of something he had read in a manga once. "Well, that was fun, wasn't it? A good introduction to the craziness we might be facing here."

The groans from his companions caused Ranma to laugh, shaking his head as he turned to stare out over the expanse of water, wondering what else the Blasted Lands would throw at them.

End Chapter

So I hope you had fun with this segue chapter guys. It's silliness and romance helped rejuvenate me before going into FILFy once more. And I would also like to remind people that Gray's father was killed in the battles against Tartarus before he could go to Sun Village as he had in canon.

Anyway, let me know what you think in general and if you'd want to see the next chapter of FILFy without it being edited, and I may post it here before the end of the month. That would not be my preference, but I'm feeling kind of guilty about not getting the chapter out in the regular manner as it is.