

11/2 Edit: Okay, so this version has been looked at by Justlovereadin'! Again, he made me realize a few things: I'd gotten two characters confused with one another, and the fight against the Draconids was kind of messed up in various ways. These have been corrected, and I think the chapter's good enough to post complete with downloadable versions. Hiryo still has his copy, but while he sometimes points out more in the way of small mistakes, his corrections don't force larger changes to the story.

Edit 11/5: And now it has been seen by Hiryo! Hopefully that means there aren't as many small mistakes.

Chapter 36: Cities Come, Cities Go

As the others began to eat, Natsu excitedly explained what he, Jenny and Happy had seen as they flew to the east, further than they had ever gone before in that direction. That kind of exploration would have bothered and annoyed Ranma when they first arrived in the Blasted Lands, but by this point, all of them were old hats at spotting the fields of wild magic, and Natsu, like all of them, had grown far, far stronger in the months since they had arrived. "Okay, so first, the land heading east is sort of like what we saw around here, not quite as hilly, but the hills that are there are really sudden-like you know?"

"Like buttes, almost but grass covered. The ones we saw most closely, the ones directly below our flight path, looked like waves. Like waves of dirt had exploded upwards from some ancient impact and then been frozen there," Jenny elaborated.

"And like I said before, we saw companies of Draconids moving towards the shiny thing Jenny spotted, which turned out to be a city. They moved like a real army!" Natsu exclaimed excitedly waving his hands to either side.

A boom of thunder interrupted the conversation for a moment, and Ranma turned slightly to stare out the visor, shaking his head. Summer storms here were horrendous, and not just because of the amount of rain that came down, but the impact all those raindrops passing through the Wild Magic zones, just like what they had seen in the first rainstorm they'd dealt with in the Blasted Lands. *Only with a hell of a lot more wind, lightning and thunder enough to deafen a Dragon Slayer*, he thought with wry amusement.

That had happened to him and Gajeel once, when they were caught out in the rain. Trying to speak to each other when they could barely see three feet in any direction and couldn't hear at all had not been fun. *On the other hand, Gajeel learned that his copperite form rusts like blazes, so we did learn something that day.* That was the name of one of Gajeel's new metal forms, which had... certain properties that made it really interesting to play with.

“Before you describe the city, please tell us what you mean by an army,” Juvia requested. “We’ve not seen more than fifteen of the Draconids at any one time.”

“Aye sir!” Happy spoke up before either human did, thrusting one tiny paw up in the air. Much to his chagrin, he hadn’t grown much over the past year, a certain sign that Happy had reached his majority, although he was quite a bit stronger magically speaking. “We’re not just talking about it in terms of sheer numbers, though. There were at least a few hundred Draconids, but stranger than seeing so many in one place, they all moved like they were units in an army, like this old picture book Natsu used to teach me how to read. Each group was in their own column, separated from the rest, and a few of the Draconids among them looked a bit weirder and seemed to be the leaders.”

“Weirder as normal weird, or weird as in Blasted Lands weird?” Jenny asked, causing laughter. But the question was a good one.

“They weren’t just bigger than the others, they were glowing. We didn’t get close enough, but I think they might have had lacrima embedded in them,” Jenny stated. “Remember, we were well in the sky, and using our binoculars to see what was happening.”

“And one of our rules of thumb when interacting with stuff like that here is that lacrima embedded into animals is a bad sign.” Ranma nodded. “And the city they’re attacking?”

Here Natsu took up the tale, while Jenny turned her attention back to her meal, leaning lightly against Juvia, the other woman putting an arm around Jenny’s waist. “There is this huge city out there, with what looks like a few lacrima-topped buildings interspersed with copper clad buildings for some reason. Most of its security wall is still intact, and for some reason, the Draconids can’t seem to smash through it. So they’re kind of funneled into the city where that wall has already fallen. And once in the city, something starts killing them. Like Jenny told ya, we weren’t close enough to see a lot of the action, but we did see some of the magical attacks going off.”

“But it isn’t a city as in one with actual people living there, is it?” Juvia asked worriedly, rubbing Juvia’s arms and side to help her warm up as the stew did the rest. She was worried because if a city had been that close, and they had been forced to rough it in the massive robot rather than continue, she would be somewhat annoyed, and on more than one level. “If they were fighting the Draconids for the last nine months, and we were sitting out here, only fighting them occasionally, that would not make Juvia feel good.”

“I don’t think so. Wouldn’t human defenders be on the wall? Even around the breaks in the wall it would be a good idea, right?” Everyone nodded with Natsu’s point, and he went on. “I didn’t see anything moving throughout the rest of the city, so I don’t know what’s attacking them.”

“Long-range magical strikes from someone hiding so well has to be invisible.” Gajeel grunted a bit. “Seems a little unfair, but I suppose if they’re trying to protect an entire city, hitting your enemies before they can hit you is a good strategy.”

“That’s always a good strategy, regardless of the nature of the fight,” Ranma drawled, shaking his head and putting down his now empty bowl. “Anything else you noticed?”

Jenny snorted. “Lots. The city is kind of amazing, and the size of it is... well beyond anything I’ve ever seen. I have seen both the capital of Fiore and Minstrel in my time and it’s not even close, frankly it’s so big it looks like it would cover half of Buckler.” Buckler was the island off Minstrel’s coast that Jenny had been born on. “I’m not going to spoil it more than that, you have to see this place to believe it. Although, one thing I will say is we saw guns on the walls. Not many, and they were well spread out, but they fired on their own against flying monsters well away from the main battle.”

Gajeel whistled admiringly. “Automated defenses, still working so long after the fact? I’ll say it again, our ancestors really had a major knack with magical engineering.”

That this would mean they would have to enter the city on foot wasn’t something any of them had to say aloud. Regardless of what kind of guns they were, everyone had taken to heart Ranma’s first rule of combat: ‘if you can dodge, don’t get hit’.

Juvia frowned thoughtfully. “Are we going to assume that this person in the city is friendly to us and just enter and try to find him? Juvia thinks that would be a remarkably foolish thing to do considering everything we have run into in the Blasted Lands. First, who is to say whatever is in the city is intelligent enough to recognize friend from foe anyway?”

At that, Jenny began to laugh, snickering as she remembered a line from a book that she had once read, leaning away from Juvia into Ranma’s side. “To quote the survival tactics of a truly experienced pirate. ‘The enemy of my enemy is my enemy’s enemy, no more, no less.’”

“Both good points. But whatever is in the city hasn’t been spreading its influence like whatever is behind the Draconids seems to want to,” Ranma pointed out, shaking his head. “And if whatever is behind them has been pushing towards that city rather than us, well... we would have had a much harder time of it here if not for that. I’m not saying that whatever it is, is a friend of ours, but that’s something to keep in mind. And...” Ranma suddenly grinned, holding up his hand and clenching it into a fist, “I would wager that attacking the Draconids, helping to beat them back, might give us some credit with whatever it is, if it is in fact something that can think.”

The girls looked at him suspiciously, and Gajeel snorted. “And besides, we’ve all been itching to try out our wide-angle attacks on the Draconids. It’s been months since we had our last run in with them, and when we did, we were the ones walking away. It will be good to see how much progress we’ve made.”

The chuckles that ran around the fire were decidedly wolfish, with Juvia nodding firmly in agreement.

Running her hand up through the wild main of hair that had slowly replaced her normal, well-kept for hair since coming to the Blasted Lands, Jenny sighed, lowering her hand and staring at the scars on her forearms and hands. *God, if even Mira could see me now she would flip! Ugh, sometimes I can't even believe I'm here. And for what, love? Following your lover out into the wilderness sounds like something out of a fantasy novel. A bad fantasy novel. No one who knew me back with Lamia Scale would recognize me now.*

But despite the scars, despite the hair (although I still would murder someone for some hair products) I... I honestly don't know if I've ever been happier. Oh, the pain of training and the exhaustion isn't fun. I'll never be like Ranma, who enjoys training for its own sake. She smiled fondly as she looked at Ranma and Juvia on her other side, the two of them talking excitedly with Natsu and Gajeel about the attacks they most wanted to try out, which ones they would need to use outside the city and the ones that could be used in its environs without doing any damage to the city.

Being around Ranma has never been boring, and his strange mix of wild child, tender lover and doting papa pushes a lot of buttons. Not a week had gone by without Ranma mentioning Wendy and hoping she was doing well, and Jenny knew that he and Juvia had talked several times about having kids in the future after they killed Acnologia. *More power to her. I am not Momma material. Auntie, hell yes. But I am not dealing with getting pregnant and nine months of my body changing and everything else. Mind you, I do like one change my body's gone through recently.*

Jenny looked down at her chest, smirking slightly. *Yep, I'm at least a size bigger than I was before. I might be equal to Erza now. That will be nice.* The thought of their redheaded lover brought a familiar pang to Jenny but she shook it off quickly. There had been many a moment where she, Juvia or Ranma had turned around as if talk to the redhead only to remember she wasn't there. They'd had months over the winter before the Tenrou Island debacle to settle into their group dynamic and at first the trip was somewhat jarring without her here. Now it was merely a dull ache, and a lot of longing, which Jenny knew Ranma and Juvia both felt.

Shaking off her somewhat maudlin thoughts, Jenny decided she wanted to cheer herself up. *And engage in my favorite kind of cardio,* Jenny giggled internally. With that, she leaned up kissing Ranma's cheek, getting his attention, causing the conversation to stutter to a halt as she stood up. "Well boys and my fellow lady, I believe that heading to this city sounds like fun, but not now. We'll need to wait for the rain to pass. And I am going to bed. We'll set out when the rain subsides. Unless anyone wants to deal with the weirdness of Wild Magic and this storm?"

She didn't say anything else, simply turning and heading up toward the officer's observation area. That room was behind soundproofing buffers on all sides and which had their

tent set up there as well. Ranma saw this, and shook his head. *Well she's not exactly being subtle, but I suppose she still falls short of the 'rubbing it in their faces' level we've been careful to stay away from.* "Jenny's got a point. We need to wait for this storm to move on. Whoever's fighting the Draconids in that city will have to hold out without us until we arrive."

Ranma's words were interrupted by a lightning bolt slamming into the giant robot, sending what looked like rainbow colored electricity cascading down the visor, accompanied by a furious thunderclap. Everyone laughed at that, the meal broke up quickly, with Juvia heading after Jenny, as Ranma helped the boys clean up after the meal before following.

OOOOOOO

At the same time that Ranma was prepared to head to bed, although not to sleep... Wendy was waking up after a very tiring night. She had worked throughout the day before and well into the evening, all while continually casting Anomaly Resistance Enchant: Re-Raise on every member of King Toma's cabinet and the king himself, along with numerous members of the royal household. Even those that hadn't reported anything unusual going on in their dreams or those without any magic.

This proved to be a good move on Toma's part. All of the ministers had been infected by the same kind of strange 'shadow mind magic', as Minerva put it, along with many members of the household. This, despite the fact that none of King Toma's ministers had magic. And even Minerva and the others who did have magic, cook, a butler, and several Garou Knights, couldn't see the same images Hisui could.

"I believe that the operation this mind magic was spread out in such a way to make its victims more susceptible to believing in the visions of the Princess. In that manner, they could force her or the kingdom to take certain actions regardless of what kind of actions those might be," Seilah had murmured after the second minister had been cleared. Then she had smirked, and asked the man why he was pawing at his ears.

In return, the man had shouted, "What did you say! I can't hear anything!"

That was actually quite a mild reaction to the various issues that Anomaly Resistance Enchant: Re-Raise created. Two members of the Garou Knights, including Arcadios, fell into a deep dreamless sleep. In Arcadios' case, it was so heavy that even as he fell to the ground, he had been one of the few people who insist on standing during the procedure, the clanging of his armor against the floor hadn't woken him up. The king was still glowing a bright fuchsia when he ordered them to start examining his ministers. And the prime minister...

"Why is my hair growing so much? And why is it acting as if it's got a will of its own!" Dalton shrieked in shock as hair began to sprout from his head and within his ears in such a profusion that it looked as if he had grown a forest up there.

The tentacle hairs grabbed at one of the maids who had been standing by his side ready to help if the elderly man fell asleep, and quickly began to bind her in such a manner that Carla gasped, covering Wendy's eyes. "Don't look, child!"

"This is a sword and slashed job," Seilah intoned, grabbing up both of her short companions talking to each of them under her arms and heading towards the door rapidly. "I have read enough stories to know where any story where something can be described as a tentacle goes."

Regardless of the various mishaps with her not quite yet mastered magic, the trio of mages were woken up quite pleasantly by the aroma of breakfast the next day. Wendy was the first to hop out of bed, still clad in her nightclothes, and having somehow found herself being the 'big spoon' during the night. How that came about, she didn't know, but she had woken up basically hugging Seilah from behind around the waist, her head not even reaching up to the woman's shoulders.

Shrugging off the minor mystery of where the covers had gone, Wendy eagerly opened the door, only to stare as four maids quickly pushed in carts of food. "Compliments of the King, Miss," one of the maids said with a smile at the wide-eyed girl, accompanied by a wink. "It is well-known that magic users have to eat a lot to keep up their magical power. And little girls need their daily sweet intake."

Pancakes, hash browns, waffles, and all manner of breakfast foods was arrayed before them, including donuts, tarts and more as Wendy thanked them all, her eyes going wide as she thought what to try first. She had already pulled a Ranma and eaten two plates of custards and cakes before Seilah and Carla pushed out of bed, joining Wendy at the table. The two of them, neither willing morning people, had barely time to take a few bites and start on their morning tea by the time the princess arrived.

Hisui walked through the door wearing what could be counted as a princess's day off outfit, a loose skirt and a blouse without any adornment or even looking all that fashionable. She smiled at them all somewhat wanly, before sliding into the last remaining chair at the table, and digging in with a will of her own. "I haven't been eating much lately, anxiety can do strange things to you," she confided. "On that note, let me thank you for what you have done for us here. I am still somewhat bemused by the fact that my visions were not true visions, but having the first real night's sleep in weeks has helped to clear my mind in a way that I cannot truly describe."

Hisui had actually slept for far longer than a single night, but not even Seilah was willing to point that out right now.

"It was a most insidious plot," Seilah noted, her tone somewhat admiring, causing the princess to shoot her a dark look for a moment, before subsiding. While Seilah hadn't directly helped rid the Princess and the rest of the ruling government of Fiore from whatever dark

manipulation was trying to use them for its own ends, her use of logic and iron-headed pragmatism, and her disdain for royalty, had helped to force Hisui to understand that there was a problem in the first place. If that hadn't occurred, Hisui might well have not allowed Wendy to even try the young girl's imperfect spell on her.

"It was, and yet, we are still missing two prominent facts. One, who could have done it?" Carla began.

"Those creatures were a strange mix of mind manipulation and shadow magic. I would estimate that such a spell could have been cast at long range, but if someone is a Shadow Magic user, it also stands to reason that they could be incredibly good at espionage and infiltration," Seilah supplied, before biting into a waffle lathered with so much whipped cream as to be almost unrecognizable, a low hum of delight coming from the voluptuous woman. The sound and the motion of her chest made Hisui very happy that her father, and indeed any male, wasn't with them at present.

"It looks as if we've found Seilah's favorite food," Wendy teased, reaching up and wiping some of the cream away that had gotten on Seilah's nose.

Seilah spluttered, then quickly responded by pointing at Wendy's plate, which was piled high with pancakes and syrup. "I am not the only one here with a sweet tooth. Besides, this is research. Putting so much cinnamon into these waffles is an amazing concept, one I will have to report to Charlotte when we return."

Wendy giggled at that, seeing through Seilah easily. Seilah scowled back at her, but the scowl quickly turned into a smile, and when Wendy hugged her from the side, she put an arm around the shorter girl.

Hisui smiled at that, before turning and asking Carla politely to continue. "We've already put the castle on high alert, but again someone using shadow magic, I'm uncertain what kind of defense we could mount. Perhaps asking a mage like Draculos or a runic mage to stop by and put down runes around the palace? But if our existing magical defenses hasn't stopped it, I'm uncertain how they could be upgraded to do so. I will leave that however in the hands of my father... Once he stops glowing bright fuchsia anyway."

Wendy had the grace to look a little embarrassed at that, but Carla took the invitation to continue to do so, saying, "And second, what was the purpose? Was the purpose to make you fear dragons? Any sensible person fears dragons. Indeed, any sensible person fears Dragon Slayers, even if for only how boorish they all seem to be bar Wendy. So why place these particular visions in your mind? Simply as a long-term means of breaking your mental faculties? I regret to inform you, princess, if someone could get into your mind like this, there are far, far faster ways of doing that."

Shivering a little at that calm statement from the felinoid, Hisui still had to nod in agreement. "I believe that the dreams were meant to push me in such a way as to make me think I had a chance of preventing them from occurring. It's the only thing that makes sense, and was the reason why I called Wendy in as I did."

"And how do you think you could do that?" Seilah asked, turning away from her fun with Wendy for a moment. The no-longer so young girl stayed where she was nuzzling into the taller woman, a faint blush appearing on her face but looking like she didn't want to move for a moment.

"I do not know. But some of my dreams showed the Eclipse Gate, reconstructed on the surface. It pulled the dragons into it, as if it was supposed to be some kind of defensive mechanism," Hisui answered pensively.

"Eclipse Gate?" three voices questioned.

Hisui winced, then shrugged her shoulders. "I suppose at this point it doesn't matter, but it is the secret of the royal family, and I would like you all to keep it so if you don't mind?" Although worded politely and coming from a young woman who barely stood much taller than Wendy or Carla, they were also cored with steel, and even Seilah nodded a bit at that, if only because she didn't particularly care one way or the other about whatever secret this was. "Good. I was going to trust you with it yesterday anyway, show you the reason why dragons would be coming here. You see, underneath Crocus there is a vast warren, the remnants of an ancient city buried underground in some cataclysm. Within, there are areas, which are completely filled with dragon bones."

Wendy started at that, and Seilah's eyes narrowed. "That would place it quite a long while ago indeed. And would still go against everything I know about dragonkind. They do not routinely come together in any kind of community that we mere two legged people would understand. Although perhaps, in days past, when Erza's Belserion still flew around that could have been different. Or perhaps it could have been the dragons that were attacking the isthmus at the time."

Now it was Hisui's turn to look confused at the mentions of Belserion and Erza both, but Wendy nodded slowly thinking about it. "But would dragons have built a city? You're sure it was a city, princess?"

"Quite certain. Indeed, it had an extremely advanced sewage system, one my grandfather connected Crocus to as soon as we discovered it. It's been used throughout the capital ever since," Hisui nodded.

"Perhaps it could have been a city conquered by those dragons that were attacking, and the bones were those of their fellows who died in the battle. And those dragons who helped to try to defend the city as well," Carla mused, before bringing them back on point with a gentle

tap of two fingers on the table. "But it does not matter currently. I'm sorry your Majesty, we were getting off topic yet again."

"Quite. As we told you, significant portions of the city, although buried, are still intact, like the sewage system, the giant theaters where the dragon bones were stored and one other area. An area around an ancient magical device. We call it the Eclipse Gate. Although no one alive today knows what its true purpose was, the writings we discovered nearby claim it to be a weapon of last resort, a translation of even older words written long before that."

"The kind that would perhaps wipe out life in a pre-determined area?" Seilah shook her head. "Like the dragons attacking the city and all the people within?"

"That still leaves the question of why someone would gather up the Dragon bones," Wendy hummed, a thoughtful, almost excited look on her face. She had recently gotten into the mystery genre, and Carla could see both Wendy and Seilah looking interested in the mystery of what had happened to that ancient city.

"I do not know. But the dreams were certainly pointing me to use the Eclipse Gate in some fashion. They hadn't yet gotten to the point of telling me how to use it, so don't ask me to see if I could figure that out," Hisui said dryly.

"Nevertheless, I believe I would like to examine this Eclipse Gate," Seilah frowned thoughtfully. "If it is something ancient, then..." she fell silent, adding mentally, *Then it might have something to do with Acnologia, or Zeref. Either would spell trouble.* "Yet setting that aside, we still come back to who could be behind this plot, how to defend against his powers, and what his ultimate goal was. If this Eclipse Gate has something to do with those goals, then examining it might give us a clue."

Wendy scrunched up her face, but then answered with extreme reluctance, "I think I'd like to look at the dragon bones."

The others all heard the odd tone in her voice, and Wendy sighed. "There is a spell that my mother taught me, one I never saw the point of or even wanted to use really. It... it allows me to call forth the spirits of dead dragons. If I do that, we might be able to figure out why the bones are there at least and maybe even what the Eclipse Gate is for. If the spirit of the dragon is still connected to its bones anyway. It might have ascended."

As a user of both Sky Dragon magic and healing magic, Grandeeney had a certain power over the souls of other dragons, which Wendy had inherited. While admittedly she had thought the spell was just creepy and wondered why her mother had taught her, after Grandeeney had disappeared, the need for a physical object to concentrate the spell on was why Wendy had never tried to use it to see if her mother was dead. That, and a childish belief that so long as she didn't know for a fact that her mother passed on, there was still hope that Grandeeney was

somewhere out there. Just because Wendy had stopped looking for her didn't mean she was without hope that the Sky Dragon Queen would eventually return.

Hisui made quite paranoid by the recent mental manipulation she'd been put through, thought that it might be a little too perfect for a moment before shaking that thought off quickly. *What would Wendy have to gain from lying about it or coming up with such a thing?* "That sounds like an excellent idea," Hisui answered instead, wondering what else they could learn from an ancient dragon spirit.

Carla and Seilah exchanged glances, then sighed in unison. While neither of them was questioning whether or not Wendy could use the spell or even pull forth a draconic spirit, it remained to be seen if the dragon spirit would be at all helpful, willing or not.

It turned out that trekking through underground caverns was kind of fun, at least for someone like Wendy who had been raised by Ranma. She kept on peering into shadows regardless of how dark they were as the torchbearers moved along. Wendy was completely unafraid of the darkness in a way that caused Hisui to look at her and shake her head more than once. "She is truly fearless, isn't she?"

"Not really," Carla demurred. "I would say she is extremely brave, but not altogether fearless. It comes from having faced a lot of strange, unusual and above all violent situations before this."

Seilah too was highly interested in the underground. Although there were obviously not going to be any books remaining, writings of any sort interested her, of which there were numerous bits and pieces throughout the underground caverns. And she wondered idly if they should perhaps call for Levy to join them. "So long as she doesn't bring along those two wastes of space that continue to try to invade her story anyway."

Hidden underneath the city, a lot of this ancient city had been buried by dirt and earth, but a significant portion had not been, protected by walls of magic perhaps, magic, which had since dissipated. Thankfully, since then, the earth had not moved to fill in the blank spaces. Thus, just like a natural cave, this immense series of caverns had remained undisturbed until the humans once more built a city above it. The underground complex was vast, as big as the city above for certain, according to Hisui. There were roads, buildings that scraped the stone ceiling above, columns of random stonework, even a fountain without water. The torch reflected back on them from the greenish stonework that was used in the construction here, which somehow seemed to light the area around them far more than their simple torches could have.

Of further interest to Seilah, there were numerous signs around the place, plaques of copper or some other similar metal that did not show any sign of age. Each of them were marked by different words, ancient script sometimes accompanied by pictures depicting this or that store but mostly just words.

One of them even had an image for what looked like a book, and Seilah spent several moments trying to use her magic to turn back time in that building to trying to recover any of the books there. Alas, while the earth might have left this underground city behind, mold and mildew had not, and any books there had been had long since been so much fertilizer.

Wendy, Hisui and the group with her, all Garou Knights answering to Minerva at the moment, led the group to what looked like a concert venue of some kind, made by a large dip in the ground, the seats of the watchers lining it from the bottom up. But all that could barely be seen as the entire area was filled with Dragon bones. Bones of all sizes, bones from their wings, from their hands, even a few skulls were in among the jumbled mass.

Seeing all the dead bones was enough to make Wendy flinch back, especially when she looked at one skull. Imagining it as the skull of her mother was all too easy for the young teen.

Seeing that, Carla quickly pulled her charge into a hug, whispering soothingly, "It can't be your mother, this happened a long, long time ago, remember? Your mother might have been alive back then but she certainly hadn't had you yet."

That caused Wendy to nod, and she looked towards Hisui. "Do you want me to try to use my spell now, or after we examine the Eclipse Gate?"

Seilah frowned, turning away from the conversation for a second as she thought she saw a movement out of the corner of arrive. As a demonesess, she had far better night-vision than any human, and did not suffer from the glare they did going from the light of a torch to the light being reflected back at them from the nearby columns of the greenish stone. But staring into the darkness, she could not see anything moving, simply shadows flickering as people walked around, the torches in the Knights' hands causing it.

She tuned back into the conversation after Hisui gave Wendy permission to go ahead, and she watched as Wendy began to draw out an intricate circle of runes, having to pause and rack her memory for several moments at nearly every rune but eventually finishing. She then turned her attention to the bones, and, standing within the circle of the array she had put down, Wendy began to call upon her Sky Dragon Slayer magic, pulling it into herself from all the air around her in great big gulps. Soon, Wendy glowed so white that none of the onlookers could look at her, before the whiteness from around her body sped out to crash into one of the skulls left among the pile. "Milky Way!"

For a moment nothing happened, and then a light greenish glow began to suffuse the skull and several other bones throughout the pile. Then with a suddenness that had Hisui and Carla shrieking in surprise and the rest pulling back rapidly with shouts of shock, a green-scaled dragon spirit suddenly burst out of the skull, shooting towards them almost as if it was about to eat them, jaw gaping open.

Only Wendy and Seilah stood their ground, one completely unafraid of the Dragon, the other one knowing that it was a spirit and thus couldn't interact with the real world.

True to that thought, the spirit passed through them, then lounged in place, pretend chewing on them for a moment, before laughing. "I do enjoy scaring humans! And that was particularly fun! Indeed, I can't remember the last time I laughed like that, oh wait, it was when I was alive."

The dragon spirit guffawed at his own joke, and then began to pull away from them, sitting almost on its haunches to stare down at them from at least six or seven stories in the air. Indeed for a moment, the top of his head passed through the top of the cavern, before grumbling, he knelt down a little, bending down his long neck to stare at them. "Humans, so many of you too. Which is going to be the sacrifice? Which should I eat now, so that the rest of you may run away and gather more of you for later?"

The Garou Knights made to grab the princess and flee, but Wendy held up a hand. "Don't! He is a spirit and he knows it. He can't eat anyone."

The spirit seemed to ignore them for a moment, looking around speculatively. "But where is the queen of the skies? If she's going to summon me like this, the least she can do is let my spirit gaze upon her beauty again!" He seemed to almost fade out as he sighed dreamily, his eyes closed and he nearly swooned. "Ah Grandeeney, the most beautiful Dragon aloft! I hope that brute didn't get her too."

"What brute?" Seilah asked, standing forward from the others, most of whom had clustered together behind the mages. The knights were brave for certain, but the Dragon Spirit emitted an aura of domination and fear that was quickly working its way into their minds. Seilah, Carla and Wendy were practically immune to it after having faced so many life and death situations and Minerva was pushing through it too. "Who do you speak of? And what is the name of your story?"

The Dragon seemed to snap out of it at that point, and leaned down, roaring into Seilah's face. "Why should I answer anything from you?" Then, as if a light bulb had been switched, he laughed. "Oh, but ask away. As for who I was talking about, you don't know the originator of the magic you're using?"

"I know my mother, and I know she was popular," Wendy stated, not stepping forward from the circle she had drawn on the ground. By this point, she'd honestly gotten the impression that her mother would have been something of a well... a dragon idol among dragonkind. It was weird to think about, so she didn't, demanding instead, "I used the magic she taught me to summon you here, so that you can answer some questions. After that, if you have any requests for what to do with your bones we will see that it is done."

“Trying to bargain? You really are human, despite what you might say about your magic. Dragons don’t bargain with one another, and especially not with humans. Well, I suppose the wet behind the ears lot that wanted to live alongside you humans did all the time, but I wouldn’t call them true dragons, not even Grandeeney!” The Jade Dragon roared in laughter. “Still, ask your questions little Sky Dragon Slayer. And this Jade Dragon, Zirconis will answer them.”

“Were you one of the dragons who tried to invade the peninsula?” Wendy asked quickly. “You mentioned someone who might have gotten my mother. Was that Acnologia?”

Instantly Zirconis lost much of his amusement with the situation, becoming serious. “Yes, Acnologia. The foolish mistake of the dragons who wanted to live alongside humans. They did not know what they were creating, no one did! That foul creature slew dozens of our kind here in this one battle. He didn’t do it because he was on the side of the humans. No, he did it because he enjoyed it! Because only dragons could face him in a fight.”

Hisui frowned at that, wondering how long ago that was, but knew that the dragon spirit would have no way of knowing. “Why were you here, dragon? Why were you attacking this city?”

At that, Zirconis laughed again. “We were attacking it because it was there! Because it was full of tasty humans. Because we were having a Festival of Dragons. The one who killed the most opposing dragons, who ate the most humans, would get to become the king of dragons for a time. It was glorious... until Acnologia joined the fun. After that, it wasn’t fun at all.”

For a few moments, the humans fell silent, contemplating and then Minerva spoke up. “Do you know why your bones would have been collected here?”

“Wait what?” Zirconis blinked, then seemed to realize all at once where he was, causing all of the humans to sweatdrop as they stared at him. “Wait, where is this? Why are we underground?” Zirconis’ spirit turned entirely around, and stared at the bones. “And what the heck is this?! I’ve heard of elephant graveyards, but dragons surely don’t make as good eating as them, and I refuse to think we have anything to do with those annoying pachyderms! My bones, why, my bones...” Here again he seemed to switch personalities for a moment, turning back to the others and shrugging. “Oh well, why should I care? I’m dead!”

Another roar of laughter shook the cavern for a moment, despite the creature letting loose with the guffaws not actually being physical.

Oh dear, he’s a ditz, Hisui thought, a belief shared by everyone else around her.

“Well, I suppose that’s all the questions we have for you, unless you know something about the Eclipse Gate?” Wendy said politely trying hard not to shake her head at the dragon’s attitude.

“The Eclipse Gate? Is it tasty?”

At that, everyone bar Wendy facefaulted. The youngest Dragon Slayer shook her head, and was about to cancel the spell when Zirconis went on. “Oh, that thing, that’s why we were holding the festival here. There were rumors it was some kind of huge cannon or something, something that could kill multiple dragons with the same spell. I don’t know where that rumor came from, I was simply interested in the sport to be had here chasing humans. Scaring or eating, you make for great entertainment. I know that it was never used, so whatever it was, it certainly didn’t have anything to do with us.”

At that, Wendy canceled the spell, simply wiping out several of the rooms on the ground with her foot. The spirit disappeared with a pop, and she sighed shaking her head. “Well, that was interesting. Although, I still think we need to do something about these bones. Bury them properly, or dump them in the ocean maybe? I don’t want them to be used or put on display. Even if most of them belong to the dragons who were enemies of mankind that seems a little wrong.”

“While I can’t guarantee anything, I agree that seems strange to me as well. I will speak to my father about it.”

“But we know now that the Eclipse Gate was here before this so-called Festival of Dragons when Acnologia began its rampage. The dragons thought it was a weapon that could be used against them. But it wasn’t as far as Zirconis knew. Acnologia was the one to cause the most death in the battle for the ancient city,” Minerva spoke up as the princess frowned, becoming lost in thought for a second. “That... honestly if not for Seilah’s point about there not being that many dragons any longer and the fact we know our dreams were pushed onto you, I’d... well, I would still possibly believe your dreams, your highness.”

Hisui shook her head firmly. “I cannot say the same. While a part of me still wishes my prophetic skills had been real, the rest of me is far more annoyed to have been used so.” The tone she used filled her words with a nigh bottomless wrath, but then she shook herself, going on in a milder tone. “In fact, I don’t think I want to be anywhere near the Eclipse Gate, even if it is some kind of anti-dragon weapon. Minerva, escort me back to the surface please. My Knights, if you could show these three to the gate? They are not to touch it, or come within two yards of it, but they can examine it at a distance.”

The knights all nodded, and the group broke up. Wendy, her group and the guides headed to the left of where they had arrived at the pile of bones, while Hisui and Minerva turned right around, heading back the way they had come.

In the shadows, an unseen watcher paused, his form completely molded into the shadow he was currently inhabiting. For a moment, the watcher was torn. Go after his old target, try again to influence her only more subtly this time, or go after the unknown mages

who had ruined his plans. *Well, the figure amended mentally. Mostly unknown mages. One of them I know very well. How delicious. This could be an opportunity...*

Around forty minutes later, Seilah, Carla and Wendy stood side-by-side staring up at a massive gate set into the center of a place where several roads came together.

The Gate was a large door, about two stories, which looked like one that could be found on a castle somewhere complete with two pillars on either side of the door connected by an arch above, marked by an emblem of an eclipsed sun, giving the gate its name. Coming out of the pillars was a leg that stuck out and down into the ground. At the center of the door, a metal sun stood out from the rest of the metallic door, with a dark-painted moon below it. The lower section of the door from the sun down past the moon was dark blue, marked with golden lines while the upper section above the sun was green. Around it there were twelve segments marked out like pieces from a pie. In each segment was a hole near where they met at the moon.

A set of steps lead up to the door. By the steps was a large raw granite slab, on which a series of runes were marked. Those runes were the same as the rest that could be found down here. On the other side of the rock was what looked like a very rough translation of a few of the original words.

“Do not let the differently collared metal or even the stone arches fool you. Nearly the whole thing is made out of maginium. I’ve had God Serena down here, and even he couldn’t put a scratch on it despite his best efforts.”

This comment came from King Toma, who strode along one of the passageways towards them, looking between the gate and the three mages, a pensive look on his face. “It is also super heavy, which is why we have made no attempt to move it from its resting spot. We have been studying it, but any magic used around it is sucked into the gate itself... and let me tell you, that is something, which infuriated God Serena. The sun segment will separate into two, a tiny crack only which will suck in your magic, before closing. That is why my daughter felt as if it was a weapon to use against dragons. If we could but empower it, it could have perhaps gathered and then drained all the dragons’ magic.”

Toma smiled at the trio of Fairy Tail mages. Which is what he thought Seilah was as well. Her ability to get into trouble with his nobles was certainly like that of a Fairy Tail mage. *I’ve had five demands for her head and seven demands for material reparations from the soirée so far, and I wager I will add at least two more to that list today,* he thought amusement. *I wonder how many of those nobles would be so quick to demand reparations or ‘formal apologies given at my chateau’ for her actions if they knew Seilah was a demon?*

Still, that was neither here nor there. “I’ve spoken with my daughter about what you have discovered, and I agree with your assessment. Whoever was behind this mental assault on myself, my daughter and my kingdom wanted us to activate this thing. The question is why, and

what is it for. If we can find the answer to at least one of those questions, we might be on our way to figuring out how to find whoever is behind the mental manipulation of myself my daughter and my cabinet.”

Although smiling and seeming quite calm, King Toma was actually incredibly furious, just as his daughter was. Not only had this attack seemingly gotten past all of their magical defenses, of which there was a considerable amount, you did not become the king of a country specializing in mages without developing defenses against those very same mages but it had messed with his and his heiress’ minds. The idea of someone violating his self, let alone his daughter in such a manner was enough to make Toma’s skin crawl and mentally wright out execution orders. *Who knew what they could have done if they were after more than whatever grand scheme whoever it is has concocted?*

“I cannot tell you much about this gate. I am afraid that no knowledge of this gate appears in my own story. However, from here I can see one thing clearly...” Seilah murmured, tapping the fingers of one of her hands against her thigh thoughtfully.

“And that is?”

“Twelve symbols around the circle. And from here, I believe I can see the sign of one of them. One I am almost certain matches that of one of Lucy’s golden keys.”

Wendy frowned, staring at the image, then moved forward. When she was at the distance they had been told to not let the mages past, the guards that had shown them to the gate moved to stop her, but the king raised a hand, signaling them to stop. Moving closer, Wendy peered up at the gate, then at several of the images. “It’s really faint, but I can still make out a few of them. Seilah’s right, whatever this gate is, it has something to do with Celestial Spirits. The 12 Zodiac for certain.”

Carla shivered a bit, wondering if this was some means to actually gain access to the celestial realm. If so, that would be a very bad thing, considering Virgo and Ranma had trapped Zeref there between them. *Could someone use this gate to bring Zeref back!? But if so, how would he know of the need to build it in the first place?! No, no I... that’s far too paranoid to think about. No, it must have some other purpose.*

“That still doesn’t answer what it does. Or why someone would want it opened,” Toma murmured.

“Your Majesty, if it... if can possibly be made to, to open a doorway to the Celestial Spirit realm...” Carla began.

“It would need all twelve keys to activate,” Toma soothed, although he had to fight back a jolt of fear at Zeref coming back like that. *I had barely a few moments to get used to the idea*

he was real before he was dealt with, a reality I find far more pleasing than the initial thought.
“Although, it could perhaps open up another line of inquiry.”

The others all looked at him in confusion, and the king shrugged his shoulders. “As you pointed out, this gate has something to do with celestial spirits. So why don’t we call your guild to send Lucy Heartfilia here? Perhaps one of her spirits knows what it is.”

“Maybe...” Carla was manifestly reluctant to agree with that proposal. “But I think we should keep Lucy or any Celestial Spirit Mage well away from the gate. Let us take some pictures or drawings instead and have Lucy summon her spirits to ask about it up in the palace rather than down here near the gate itself. As **you** pointed out before, this gate sucks away magic. If that’s the case, I don’t think we need to feed it what could be its favorite meal.”

That seemed more than sensible to the king, who nodded. A request would be sent to Fairy Tail for Lucy to join Wendy and the others in the capital on an Information Quest as soon as the king got back to the palace. Seilah quickly added that Levy should join Lucy as well. “After all, she could perhaps help us decipher many of the script being used down here more than that one stone there by the gate.”

Toma agreed that was a good idea, as they had been trying to find someone to put on their permanent payroll to do that kind of work. However, since that idea had failed, calling on a mage that specialized in runes was a viable solution. At that point, Toma led the others away from the gate and back up towards the castle, leaving behind six guards whose unenviable position would be to guard the relic.

Unbeknownst to the Royal Knights or the mages, there was one other who had heard everything that is going on. And in the darkness of a shadow, a wide, almost sadistic grin began to form.

OOOOOOO

The storm lasted more than two days nonstop before ending with all the suddenness of a guillotine. When it did, Natsu led the others eastward on the ground while Happy and Jenny provided overwatch. When those on the ground had to skirt south away from some Wild Magic zones, the two flyers were the first to report that whatever was going on around the city was still ongoing as they came into view of it after several hours of flying.

“It almost looks as if the Draconids actually stopped attacking at some point during the storm, and then just sort of... stayed where they were around the city. They might’ve spread further out around it, but that’s the only change we can see. I didn’t want to dare the anti-air guns by getting closer and see what was going on down in the streets.”

“Huh... I guess the Wild Magic aspect of the storm might have bothered them. But if they did stop that’s more intelligence than we normally see from even the Draconids. Working

together we've seen, but thinking in terms of strategy, of a larger battlefield, that's a bit more than that," Ranma murmured. "Let's skirt further south, then come up towards the city from that angle."

The group moved forward as fast as they could, still skirting around the various Wild Magic zones. They were only caught once, when Ranma and Gajeel fell into a kind of quicksand that looked exactly like the rest of the grassy plain they were passing through. Afterward, both of them looked like they had been dipped into a rainbow, causing Natsu and Juvia to laugh at them. Worse were attacks from beasts, but by this point all of them were old hats at recognizing when an attack was coming.

With Jenny leading them, the group came to a small butte, the same kind she had described when talking about the terrain around the city. Eager to get a lay of the land ahead of them, the earthbound group climbed up, and there in the distance, the city they were here to see spread out from mid-range and out over the horizon. "Okay... yeah, that's a huge city, to be that large from this far away?" Ranma shook his head. "Woo..." *Hell, it's got to be the same size of Tokyo!*

The city was set in a large crater of some kind, or rather, half in and half out of the large basin in the ground. It did not fill up the entire basin, and Ranma could see that the rest of the massive crater-shaped indent was full of trees, although thankfully, this looked like any other forest in the Blasted Lands. The forest abutted the walls there, but didn't seem to have broken it down, unlike the area where the walls went up the side of the bowl facing northward, where they had been shattered by some long-ago impact. Similarly, Ranma could make out a few breaks along the wall down in the crater facing that direction, and maybe more facing further east, it was hard to tell even through the binoculars.

Regardless, Ranma could make out the Draconids trying to storm through into the city, only to be bunched up, and slain by bursts of some kind of magic. Even through the binocular's couldn't Ranma make out what kind. *Though it's undoubtedly strong, to tear through so many Draconids at once. We'd have to use some of our newer, more powerful attacks to do the same thing.*

The city continued up onto the lip and beyond away from their line of sight. There again were a few breaks in the outer wall, not visible themselves but Ranma could see dozens of Draconids moving into the city, although they seemed slow to spread out around the city at first.

As for the city itself, it took even Gajeel's breath away, and he wasn't the kind to enjoy architecture or painting. However, this city was gorgeous.

Within the city, the watchers could make out at least two rivers moving through the city, creating waterfalls from where they came down from the lip of the basin into the rest of the city. A few of the city's roofs seemed to be made of the metal Gajeel had decided to call near-

bronze, as it didn't seem to color, but absorbed electricity and sunlight like nobody's business. It gleamed in the light from the sun, along with a few other buildings. Some were twenty story tall thin ziggurats capped with crystal or lacrima, it was impossible to tell which from here, while others were obvious defensive towers.

Ranma couldn't make out much detail on the guns themselves even through his binocular, but at least two of the towers looked to be built out of lacrima, an astonishing thought, until Ranma remembered that the Tower of Heaven had been made similarly. "I really don't want to know how powerful those guns were when they were first emplaced. It might have been enough to deal with even a dragon."

There seemed to be some kind of coliseum set near the center of the city. Further back, nearly blocked from view by the other tall buildings looked to be one far broader building.

The combination of the various buildings, the flashes of color coming from crystal, lacrima, water and near-bronze created an amazing scene of beauty, despite the violence going on around and now within the city's outskirts.

"Maybe, but then you'd have to replace most of the lacrima, unless you had a power source feeding into them," Gajeel shrugged his shoulders even as he too stared towards the city in awe. "Take out a dragon with one of those and you would drain the charge."

With a twitch of his head, Ranma turned his attention away from the city to the Draconid army trying to pour in through the broken remains of the walls. There were still a tremendous number of them waiting outside the city, around five hundred or so, though it was impossible to estimate any better than that. Most were not pressing in, seemingly knowing that whatever was in the city could destroy them if they bunched up, no matter how many of them there were.

"All right, Jenny, Happy, we're going to need you two to set us down to the west of those Draconids still bunched up outside the city. We'll start the party there, but keep well away from the city. I don't want those anti-air guns to start seeing us as enemies. I think we can pull those Draconids into a killing ground, sort of like we did with the orcs months back, but with way more dangerous prey."

He looked at them all seriously. "We've all been practicing our long-range and wide angle attacks. This is the perfect time to try them out on the Draconids, just like Gajeel told us." He gave Gajeel a nod before going on. "That means we don't want to close until we see the results of our training from a distance. And if we have to fight up close, I expect us all to stay within sight of one another, okay? Happy, you stay out of the fighting unless you see someone who's in trouble. Then you can bail them out."

Happy nodded, more than pleased with that plan. While he had gotten stronger during their stay in the Blasted Lands, he still wasn't a frontline fighter. "Aye sir!"

Ranma smirked at that. "In that case, let's go."

The group was able to set down just out of smelling range from the Draconids, which was well beyond sight range for the dragon-like creatures. That was something they had learned over the past few months in their clashes with the creatures: they had far better noses than eyes. Regardless, the group set down in what had once been a tiny pond. The surrounding area was somewhat flat, but there were numerous small ponds and dried up creek beds. In the distance, the Draconids remained unaware of their presence for now. Through the binoculars, Ranma could see several groups of around seventy, if they were all the same size as the closest ones to their position, or more spread out in a half-moon around the shattered holes in the city's outer wall, still waiting for their turn to rush into the city. Why they were spread out like that into small groups, he didn't know, but it was a sign of better organization than he would expect to see from even the dragon-like creatures.

There, Ranma pulled out a large leather bag tossing it to Gajeel. "Rub it on, get close and keep to the sides for now. I doubt we'll get lucky enough for them all to charge straight at us, but if they do, having you two to their sides will be a nasty shock."

"GEHEHE, right," Gajeel answered, pulling out the greenish gunk within the bag. It was something Ranma had come up with that hid their scent, making them smell like a group of herbivores from the north of their giant robot home. At one point, Ranma and Jenny had been nearly overwhelmed after dealing with what turned out to be the first half of a Draconid patrol when the other half showed up. Nevertheless, once Ranma had gotten them out of sight, the pair had hitched a ride among a group of herbivores, and noticed that the Draconids avoided them.

It turned out the things were so poisonous that they poisoned the ground they died on. Not a fine thing to find out when hunting for some meat for dinner, but even Ranma hadn't felt his stomach was up to that challenge.

"Damn I love this, we really are like ninjas using stuff like this!" Natsu enthused, doing the same once the bag was handed to him. The pair looked like they had been a mud fight, but it would work.

With Happy pouting about being left out of the ninja-style fun, Natsu and Gajeel spread out to either side, while Ranma and Juvia first filled up the pond. Meanwhile, Jenny maintained a position behind them on a tiny rise, not even a hill really, more like a mound. But it was enough to give her just a bit more range, something she wanted to exploit.

"Take Over: Mecha Soul: Sniper!" Jenny whispered. Her body flashed with Take Over magic, and a moment later, she stood in a new mecha form that she had connected with just this past month. It was green and dark green from head to toe, and in form looked somewhat like a mix between her Gundam form around the head, chest and shoulders, and her Bubblegum form around the legs. One arm was normal looking for a robot, the other was

connected to a sniper rifle that was longer in the barrel than the new form was tall. It had a large barrel and connected to the rest of the suit, allowing Jenny to use the onboard targeting system to work in conjunction with the sniper scope at the top of the rifle. In form, the rifle looked like a mix between an anti-tank rifle from before WW2 and a sci-fi antimaterial laser.

The gun was so heavy that the Sniper form couldn't move very fast, but it was silent, and had other tricks. When she crouched down, Jenny felt the form pulling on her magical reserves a bit more as one such trick activated, a shimmering web of filaments popping out of her back, transforming into the same colors as the background, making her almost blend in completely, with the tip of the small mound. "Sniper ready to go!"

Ranma and Juvia looked at one another, then when Juvia nodded, Ranma launched a ball of water into the air, which exploded a moment later. It wasn't an attack, rather it was a signal, and one that Natsu and Gajeel both saw. Twin grins appeared on the flankers' faces, who had moved forward. Now the group was set up something like a Y, with the open end of the Y being toward the Draconids.

Some of whom were already reacting to the explosion of water in the sky, turning and looking around themselves. At that point, Jenny started the party. While she lacked the raw magical power to throw out old large-scale attacks like the others, she had perfected the control of what magical reserves she did have, and her new takeover forms included quite a few that could do a tremendous amount of damage to a single target. This she did so now, lining up a shot on one of the Draconids in the distance, well outside of their own range. Ranma had estimated that Jenny could fire around two miles away, maybe a little more before the energy of the shot started to quickly dissipate.

The aiming reticle settled onto the creature's head, and a second later, she pulled the trigger.

A bolt of magical energy, condensed to the point it was practically solid, flashed out from the rifle, zooming down range. Within a millisecond, it crashed into the side of the target's head, exploding it and sending blood and viscera everywhere. The victim fell headless, and only then did the sound of the attack arrive, causing the Draconids to look around, wondering where the *ZZFSSH* sound was coming from, not even noticing their dead companion.

"Target down. Switching to another," Jenny intoned, warning Juvia and Ranma, were between her and their targets to keep their heads down still. Behind Jenny, from her feet and the back of her legs, vents opened, releasing large amounts of heat from the shot she had just released.

Another three shots rang out in quick succession, each of them hitting a different Draconid, and only once did she miss, hitting the creature in its shoulder as it rapidly stood up from where it had been crouched. Even so, it lost the shoulder and limb.

The Draconids were now fully aware that they were being attacked from their southernmost flank and here, one of the ways the Draconids were dangerous became obvious. Instead of all of them stampeding towards Jenny, only one group charged directly towards where her fire seemed to be coming from. Two of the other columns spread out, one each to either side, matching the ambush formation that Ranma and his friends had taken. Meanwhile in the distance, three other columns that have been moving into the city paused, turning around and moving back, forming an overwhelming wing to the ambusher's right side of at least a hundred and fifty spread out over more than a mile. Behind them came two more columns, moving around the edge of the outer wall of the city towards this new threat.

Far above them, Happy saw all this and shouted it down towards the others. The Draconids had not proven to be able to understand spoken speech, so there was no need for them to try to remain quiet, although Happy was quick to retreat higher into the air just in case any of the Draconids could fire further than the others.

It had turned out that a certain small species of rodent did actually understand human speech, or perhaps had some latent empathic ability, which let the rodents understand the plan to get rid of them. Dealing with a massive clan of the creatures, which had moved into the robot, had not been fun. Thankfully, such abilities seemed to be in very short supply here in the Blasted Lands.

"Natsu, start the party, then pull back straight across towards Gajeel's position," Ranma ordered, his voice a bellow heard for nearly a league or more around them. That would put any of the right flank, which followed Natsu in the center just like the group still charging towards them.

Grinning, Natsu began to concentrate on one of the first attacks he had created on this trip. A second later that aura began to concentrate into one of his hands, the color and density of the flame pulsing every few seconds until the attack was ready. "Dragon's Secret Art: Hidden Armageddon Mode: Crimson Lotus: Avenging Crescendo Flaming Wave!"

With the last word, Natsu hurled the fireball, now glowing blue-white, towards the attacking Draconids on his side of the battle. It instantly began to expand the moment it left his hands and continued to do so as it flashed away.

By the time it was a hundred feet away, it had grown to be the size of a two-story house. By the time it was two hundred feet away, it had grown to the size of a hippodillo. Moreover, as it flashed forward, the fireball continued to expand, searing the land underneath into ash until it hit the lead most Draconid. At which point the fireball exploded, sending fire in every direction but back towards Natsu, a big difference from the first time that Natsu had used this attack. This one was just as powerful, but all the power of the fire was forward this time.

The first Draconid that the attack hit simply ceased to exist, disappearing into the expanding fireball with nary a sound. The same happened to the rest of the front most column

of Draconids at the center of the attack, showing how much more powerful the attack was from when they first fought the Draconids. Back then, that attack would have had trouble killing ten in the same area.

But beyond that, some of the Draconids still managed to survive the strike. The Draconids were remarkably magically resistant, and even against overwhelming attacks like that, they had a chance of surviving so long as they weren't in the area directly around where the attack struck.

However, that didn't mean none of them were wounded. Most of that first group of a hundred plus were and began to slow down. This in turn allowed the other portions of the wave of enemies coming at them from that side to bunch up.

Natsu took the opportunity to launch another attack, although this one didn't do nearly as much damage. Several Draconids stepped forwards from the others, larger, or as Ranma and the others thought of it, older than the others. They had more armor laying over their gray scales, the armor a darkish green. Their heads were larger, and from their shoulders and backs six or more lacrima jutted. As Natsu's attack hit them, those lacrima glowed briefly, and they seemingly absorbed it, pulling the blast radius apart and away from the other Draconids so that only another eighteen or so died.

One of them opened his mouth, roared and a yellow beam of power came out. This attack was far larger than the normal such strikes and going much further too, heading straight towards Natsu, well beyond the younger Draconids' range.

But Natsu stood his ground, smashing it disdainfully to one side with a fist still glowing with his fiery aura, then he pulled out an oldie but a goodie. "Fire Dragon's Roar!"

Although much smaller than his previous attack, he was able to aim it better away from the crystal carrying Draconids. With this attack he killed ten more of the younger set, before he retreated, racing directly away from the incoming attackers on that flank. "Well, I think we've proven our magic's stronger than their resistance!"

During all this, Jenny had not ceased to attack the group charging at them from the open end of their former Y-shaped formation, targeting the larger Draconids within that formation. So long as she shot at their chests, even the magic absorbing lacrima couldn't save them from her rifle. Now, as the still larger group of attackers racing after Natsu began to follow, her attacks stopped briefly and Ranma rose entirely from within the pond.

Around him, Juvia's watery body took shape, hugging him tightly from behind, her own arms appearing snaking around his as he readied his attack, adding her magic to Ranma's assault in a way that the two lovers had perfected by this point. Where others would struggle to create a Unison Raid, the two of them could now do so on command, something Jenny was just a little bit jealous of. Still, she watched with glee as the attack formed a massive swirling plate

of water, as they sucked up the water they had poured into the lake a moment ago, going over a mile in diameter to cover the whole right flank, as the Draconids had also spread out more by this point, separated into far smaller groups.

“Unison Fusion: Dragon’s Watery Cascade!” the two water users shouted as one.

The water flashed forward, encompassing a far wider area than Natsu’s original attack. And this time, the crystal carrying Draconids still alive from Natsu’s flank couldn’t absorb enough of it to prevent tremendous damage to their muddled ‘formation.’ More than two-thirds of the remaining creatures died within that attack as it struck, the water going so fast as to make a tsunami look slow, tearing into, or rather disintegrating each Draconid that it struck, which couldn’t take cover behind one of the crystal using Draconids.

Juvia’s near corporeal water form flowed back down Ranma’s body, shaking her head woozily. “That still takes a lot out of Juvia.”

“Recover with this, love.” Ranma held out her hand, and from the hand, a spout of steaming water once more began to fill the little pond, which Juvia’s water form rapidly joined, soaking in both water and power from Ranma, before he hopped out of the warm water, smirking as he took in the shattered remains of the wave.

There were still a few more Draconids on that side of their original ambush formation then were moving and try to flank them on Gajeel’s side, but they were all broken up, scattered from the trio of monster attacks from here to where they had begun to respond to the attack. Even better, when Ranma shouted a question up to Happy, the answer he got back was, “Nope! I see at least a few more groups of Draconids out there, but they’re all entering the city and don’t seem interested in coming towards us.”

By this point, the attacks so far had wiped out at least three hundred or so, and of the rest, only the one column facing Gajeel was still close enough together for the moment. Wanting to finish that group off before the scattered groups could close with them, Ranma ordered, “Natsu, Gajeel, deal with the Draconids on your side. Jenny, keep on targeting any of those larger Draconids that you can see.”

The second Ranma finished, he heard a shout from his left as Gajeel released his own attack into the flankers on that side. He had hidden himself in a small ditch, covering himself with one of their Gilly cloaks completely invisible, right up until he began to move. “Iron Dragon Slayer’s Death Rain!”

While this was still considered a breath assault as it came from Gajeel’s mouth, where before there had been thousands of tiny projectiles coming out of his mouth before driving down like so many hand-sized metal spikes, now each projectile grew the moment they left his mouth into the kind of spear that wouldn’t have been out of place in a phalanx. They slammed down into the attacking Draconids, although against a purely physical assault like this, the

Draconids' durability came into even greater play than before. While it did kill a lot of them with direct strikes to the head eye or neck, around a third of their number simply came on. They looked like pincushions, and pincushions that someone had particularly wanted to hurt, but they did come on.

"Oh come on!" Gajeel grumbled. "I seriously need to work more on making those things move faster, not just making them bigger and covering a wider area. Damn it."

"Hah! You lose, Metalhead!" Natsu crowed.

"Oh fuck you, I bet I kill more up close and personal than you will!" Gajeel shot back.

"You're on!" With that, the two younger Dragon Slayers decided to ignore Ranma's earlier orders and charged in, shouting further attacks as they went claw to fist with the Draconids.

Happy reported this from on high, his voice high-pitched but still carrying, and Ranma, who was waiting for the remnants of the force coming straight at them from their 'front,' such as it was, that Jenny had been pounding to reach his position, shook his head with a sigh. "Well, we seem to have cut down on their numbers well enough already. I count only around ninety or so left alive," a shot rang out, and he smirked, "and dropping."

From one hand, Ranma began to exude ki claws, each of them a foot wide, looking more like short stabbing swords than claws. His other hand became covered with water up to the shoulder, changing shape under his direction until it looked like that of a dragon's forepaw, almost like the creatures they were facing. This technique could both be used to attack and defend, which was shown a moment later as Ranma twisted around, as a few came into range bringing up his arm to protect his head from one of the laser shots coming their way from the Draconids. The water around his forearm absorbed the beam of magical energy, heating up noticeably for a brief second before cooling down, and Ranma roared, charging forward.

The breath attacks of the Draconids were still a semi-serious threat even for the Dragon Slayers, and Jenny stayed where she was, taking out most of the remaining larger Draconids in sight. In this way, she also made certain that the groups on Natsu's former side of their formation didn't try to reform and come at them as a group. Instead, they joined the snarl of hand-to-hand combat in drips and dribbles over time.

Juvia also joined her in this action, using long-range sniping type attacks that she had developed pretty much, while Jenny was getting used to her new armor. Rising out of the pond, her hands pressed together, their fingers pointing towards her target, she intoned, "Water Diamond Drill!"

An intensely concentrated stream of water only about an inch wide shot out from her, crossing the intervening mile without losing its form, before slamming into the chest of one of

the Draconids. It didn't penetrate very far, but the impact was enough to knock the creature back into several more, upending them in turn. The stream then continued on to hit one of the other Draconids in the face. There, their armor wasn't nearly as tough as on their chest, and that creature died as the water drilled into his head as easily as a knife through butter. Then Juvia was ducking back into the water, avoiding the laser strikes coming her way.

More and more of the Draconids finally (from their perspective) entered the range to use their breath weapon by this point, thanks to Natsu and Gajeel having charged forward into the group attacking from the left. Here, the battle began to be a more seesaw affair rather than the one-sided destruction it had been previously. The Draconids were truly tough, and only Ranma could deal with even the younger versions of the Draconids in these numbers with any ease once they got close enough. And there way more of them here than Ranma and Company had ever seen in one place before.

All three of the Dragon Slayer's began to take injuries from the laser breath or the powerful blows from the Draconids. Simultaneously, Jenny and Juvia's long-range sniping continued to push the battle in their favor, keeping the close in fighting far more even than it would have been, although Jenny could no longer shoot as quickly as she had at the beginning of the battle.

The battle continued through, a bloody, dangerous affair until the last Draconid fell.

Or rather, the last of the Draconids, which had rushed out to attack them. Through her sniper rifle, which she no longer had the energy to actually use, Jenny could see Happy had been right when he reported there were more out there. As she watched, the final Draconids in one of their attack groups entered the city from the nearest tear in the outer wall. Beyond them, Jenny could make out more movement, presumably more Draconids still entering the city.

She reported that to the others, then canceled her takeover form and stood up, wobbling a little and almost falling down the small mound that she had been laying on top of for so long. "Ooh, that is a rush when the final cost of that form hits you."

"Juvia believes you are also dehydrating. You look drenched with sweat. Here, have some water, Jenny." Juvia moved to support her.

"Mmm... but I like to take my water straight from the source." With that, Jenny stole a kiss from the blue haired girl, her tongue moving into Juvia's mouth. Juvia kissed back, allowing water to shift from the pond into her body and then into Jenny's for a few moments before she pulled back. Jenny smiled at Juvia, licked her lips, and then kissed down Juvia's neck, leaning into the crook of her arm and neck. "That was nice."

"You're welcome," Juvia smiled down at her hugging her tighter, as the boys moved to join them.

“One thing I think we might need to want to work on is some kind of throat lozenge or something. Shouting instructions over a battlefield is way harder than simply shouting in the first place,” Happy stated from where he was sitting on Natsu’s head like normal.

“Oh, like you were giving out any orders, ya furball,” Ranma snorted, smiling at the two women as they cuddled together, both of them badly drained from a fight. A fight, he was shocked to realize as he looked up at the sky that had lasted a goodly portion of the day. It had been around early afternoon when they started, but now the sun was setting in the distance.

Gajeel also saw this, and wiped some blood away from his mouth and cheek before speaking, his voice sounding a bit pain-filled, as he had lost a tooth in that fight. “I think we need to make a decision. Either head back to the roost and try to make it, which is really doubtful. Or head into the city and find someplace to fort up there for the night. I think we’re all a bit battered around the edges, and as much as I hate to admit it, we shouldn’t start looking for the Draconids that entered the city just yet. Or worse, whatever is fighting them within.”

He hadn’t actually been battered all that much from the Draconids, using the opportunity to try out different full metal transformations, seeing which ones gave him the best defense against the Draconids, while not hampering his mobility as much. But transforming from one metallic form to another still took it out of Gajeel, although he had built up his magical reserves to the point that he could do a few hundred such changes in a single day and still stand upright. Although, that was a far cry from being up for another fight.

Natsu had taken quite a bit of a pounding physically. The laser beams hadn’t been as much of a threat to him, based off heat, Natsu was able to tank most of their strikes easily. But physically, the Draconids have been able to hurt him in a way that many of the other creatures they fought in this land hadn’t really been able to for a while. No broken bones, but, a lot of cuts and bruises, whereas Ranma had come through with only a few dozen bruises, which his ki healing had healed within minutes.

Slowly, Jenny pulled away from Juvia, standing on her own feet and gesturing over Ranma’s shoulder towards the semi-distant city. “I think we need to head into the city. We need to meet with whoever is fighting the Draconids inside, while they know we helped them. This fight wasn’t exactly subtle after all.”

That was certainly true, as, like the battle they’d had against the orc creating trees, the entire landscape around them had changed drastically, several miles worth of land being torn, burned, or perforated, either by their attacks or the attacks of the Draconids. “I think it is best to get to know them right away, while that largess is still fresh in their minds.”

“I remember seeing an entryway to the south of the city from when we first observed it.” Ranma raised a hand to point towards a position to their east. “We’ll head there. Whatever we find in the city is going to be better than trying to fly at night in the Blasted Lands when we can’t see the distortions around Wild Magic zones. Happy, stay up in the sky, but keep well away

from us until we're right in front of that gate. That way, we'll have some warning if we run into anything right before we enter the city. But watch out for those guns. Let's get going guys and gals."

To everyone's surprise, the intrepid explorers were able to reach the gate leading into the massive city with only one issue: Despite the numerous warnings on this score, Happy discovered first that the anti-air-guns on the walls were indeed still operating and precisely how far they could reach in the most obvious but most worrisome way. From the ground they all watched in the darkening light as two of the anti-air guns on top of the wall opened fire on the little Exceed, forcing him away.

Tracking where the shots were coming from, Natsu crouched down, his hands bursting into flame and preparing to leap up onto the wall to destroy the guns. But Gajeel and Ranma both grabbed an arm, dragging him back to the ground. "Dammit, let me go! Those guns shot at my little buddy!"

"It wasn't personal, he just entered the city's airspace. And those guns might belong to whoever is within the city that is fighting off the Draconids. We're trying to make a good impression, remember?" Ranma said, before releasing Natsu's arm with one arm and reaching up around the fire user's neck, locking him in a chokehold. Natsu tried to fight back, tried to flip Ranma over his back, but Ranma simply rode the move, landing on his feet and flipping back over Natsu again, dragging him into a wrestling contest.

Staring at this, Jenny shook her head. "More than seven months out here, and I am still not quite used to the Ranma's method of solving problems. I'll just go pick up Happy, okay?" Jenny had recovered enough of her magical reserves by this point to use some of her takeover forms, and quickly changed into her SE motorcycle form, racing away.

Natsu was still grumbling about not being able to avenge Happy's near death experience when Jenny and Happy returned. "I mean come on, it's just two measly guns. No one would miss them..."

Gajeel was much more philosophical about things, staring up at the guns cocking his head thoughtfully to one side. "Two questions occur to me. One, where does the power come from for the guns that are on the walls? The crystal towers inside the city can obviously store their own energy, although if they have any left after all these centuries is anyone's guess. Unless they can absorb the background Ethernano, anyway. But the guns on the walls? They don't seem connected to any massive bank of lacrima or something similar."

All of them nodded in understanding of his point, and Ranma asked what his second question was to which Gajeel grinned. "Are those things alive? We've run into a few things that shouldn't be sentient that are here in the Blasted Lands before. We haven't run into any kind of weapon system that's gained sentience, and before you ask, no, those orc creating trees do not count. But I swear I heard something like a happy squeal when those guns were firing."

“I didn’t hear it, but you’ve got a point,” Ranma mused, but he was doing so as he grinned, staring up the guns. “I suppose we’ll find out when we enter the city if that kind of things common here.”

Natsu snorted, gesturing to towards the large gate. “Considering you didn’t want me to destroy the guns, does that mean we can’t knock down this gate to get inside?”

“No, it just means we have to be a little more subtle. Which means we first try to push them open normally,” Ranma laughed. “I’ve seen way too many comedy gags where someone tries to knock down a door only to realize it was unlocked the entire time.”

“And you really think we’ll get that lucky?” Jenny asked, shaking her head.

However, Juvia was already moving over to the door, holding her hand up to the crack between the two portions of the gate, her hand transforming into water as she sent some further water through the crack. Soon there was a loud *TSING* sound, and she began pushing at one side of the gate. It opened easily despite the loud creaking groans of whatever gears were moving the thing. “These doors are remarkably light for their thickness. And there was a bar across them, rather old-fashioned in Juvia’s opinion for a place that was almost undoubtedly highly magically advanced.”

“It could have been merely ceremonial. I’d wager anything that the main defenses for that door were magical in nature, and they broke down over time,” Ranma answered, moving forward and looping his arm through Juvia’s as the two of them stepped through, making certain to look around them for any Wild Magic spaces.

Instantly they saw a few scattered to one side where a portion of the interior of the wall that was obviously a series of staircases had been partially shattered in some ancient battle. Four of the things, causing the typical heat haze, on right near the bottom of the rubble, others visible above that going up.

Ranma quipped, “Well, I’m not going that way. And I would wager there are more Wild Magic zones scattered around the walls. So go ahead Natsu. It’ll tell us what kind of Wild Magic Zones are around here.”

Not even Natsu was willing to take Ranma up on his challenge, and, with sunlight quickly fading, the group continued further into the city, noticing the lengthening shadows cast by all the buildings. Yet even so, the city was even more beautiful up close than it had appeared from a distance.

In many aspects, despite the city being so ancient, everyone could figure out what they were seeing in the various different building types they passed. There were shops of all sorts, those that had windows to show off their wares and not. There were private buildings, their

fronts on the ground floor being just a doorway, while above, there were several windows facing out into the city. A few public places, like what looked like an outdoor sitting area.

All of that was to be expected. But the city seemed oddly clean, and it was easily the most colorful scene any of them had seen since coming to the Blasted Lands, because whoever had lived here had evidently believed both painting to last, and painting in bright colors. While a lot of the colors had faded, there were still hints to be seen, visible even in the fading light.

Here a few buildings would be painted what was now a very light green. Across the way, several equally sun-bleached aquamarine houses. There, a single red building stood out from a row of dark yellow shops, the red having withstood the passage of time more for some reason.

But the winners hands down of the colorful competition were the ziggurats. Ranma didn't know what they were, and wasn't interested in entering them just yet, although for some reason, many of their entrances were open, as if inviting people inside. And the two they passed as they pushed deeper into the city up were painted with each floor to the last two levels of the ziggurat looking as if it was a different painting.

Ranma was not the only one to stop and stare at them for a few seconds as they passed. Some of those paintings were simply gorgeous vistas, places of immense natural beauty. Others, indeed most, looked to be paintings made of someone crafting something in a forge or workshop. Still more were of children, sitting in rows in front of teachers.

"The life of the city painted here in miniature. That's amazing, yet also incredibly sad at the same time considering what probably happened to the people here," Jenny murmured, her voice low. For some reason she almost felt like she was in a mausoleum, raising her voice seemed disrespectful.

Gajeel grunted, not being very at home with art or feeling awed by it. "Come to think of it, I'm not seeing nearly as many piles of clothing as I expected. Admittedly, any outside would be long gone, but I've looked through some of the buildings, and I'm still not seeing anything. Either it's been so long that bones and stuff even inside have rotted, which I think is probably accurate considering we've passed several empty clothing shops, or this city wasn't nearly as full as its size would suggest when the Blasted Lands became the Blasted Lands."

No one left alive understood how or why that war began. All they knew was that it had been utterly devastating, and the result of using so many different magical weapons where there was already a lot of magic to begin with, had backfired on whoever was doing the fighting. There were some stories that Pergrande and Enca had taken in refugees from that war, but it was so long ago, long, long before either those modern nations existed, let alone any other nation on the peninsula, that no one knew the truth.

Even as more questions piled up about the people who lived here, the group came upon the first sight of that ancient war. Rounding around one building, they came to a stop, staring at

a long swath of terrain going from one side of the city to another that had been burnt and slagged down to the ground by some ancient beam of destruction, leaving nothing but molten black rock.

Natsu whistled as he stared along it, then twisted his head to stare along the path of destruction in the other direction. "I think I could do something like this, but I don't think I could make it near as wide or as long."

"That's what he said," Gajeel grunted, trying to make a joke of it, yet also somewhat stunned at seeing such a sudden example of the devastation they'd been seeing since entering the Blasted Lands out of nowhere. Before this, the city had been so interesting, that the war, which had destroyed it, had been pushed to the back of their minds.

Passing over that area carefully, avoiding two more Wild Magic zones, they pushed towards where the city reached the edge of the basin and climbed again. The northern edge of that area was where the Draconids have been pushing inward, and Ranma supposed that they would find whoever was behind the destruction they had seen of the creatures from a long-range somewhere nearby.

But it quickly became apparent that they weren't going to get there before night fell. Night was especially dangerous in the Blasted Lands. Not because more predators came out. They did, but probably not in a place like this. Rather, it became almost impossible to see Wild Magic Zones, and with the plethora of them in the city, moving forward would be even more dangerous than flying around at night around the giant robot had proven.

Thankfully for the group, the city itself provided some relief from the coming darkness. The tops of the ziggurats, of which they'd passed four by this point, began to glow. It was a nice glow, not sharp, almost like the light of the magic lamp Ranma used in the tent he shared with the girls. The beams of light flowed down into the city, beams of light aiming towards... well, rubble most of the time. While the light let them continue, it was obvious that some other portion of the lighting system was simply gone. Ranma and Gajeel examined the area where one such beam hit, and found some bits of rock sticking out of the ground, but that was all. Still, it did let them continue on.

However, before they could make it more than two more blocks, they were traveling by road rather than by rooftop, thanks to Ranma not wanting to be shot at by the anti-air guns if they could depress that far. They ran into the first example of living creatures they'd seen since entering the city. Which, as Jenny later pointed out, was even stranger than the city itself.

This came in the form of small hand-sized creatures that stood a few inches off the ground on a dozen tiny feet. In form, they almost resembled scarab beetles, but painted white and dark blue, with big strangely humorous looking eyeballs at their front. They also looked decidedly artificial, almost like small stone creatures, and each had a small lacrima embedded into their backs right behind where the googly eyes appeared.

They looked almost childish... even as several dozen of them swarmed over what Ranma and the others recognized as the carcass of a subterranean driller monster. Smaller than the mole creature they'd dealt with in the first few weeks of entering the Blasted Lands, drill-tards, a name that Natsu had come up with, had a bad attitude, and were ubiquitous wherever you went so long as there was stone to chomp. And as the scarab things swarmed, chunks of the monster disappeared, bone, armor, flesh, it didn't seem to matter to however the little creatures were doing it.

"Cute, but for some reason, I want to back away from them," Jenny drawled, suiting action to word as she quickly backed away, with Juvia following a second later.

"Juvia quite agrees. They actually look quite disturbing. Juvia believes that retracing our steps to find a defensible position seems like a much better idea than moving forward."

The group was about to back away out of sight, when the creatures seemed to become aware of them. As one, the entire swarm turned in their direction, their googly eyes blinked, and then each of them spoke, creating a strange chorus. Individually their voices were penetrating and almost tinny, but in total, they made a loud susurrant noise that was quite disturbing. "Intruders, invaders! Kill? Mame? Humiliate? Enjoyment subroutine activated."

"Inanimate things becoming alive. You just had to mention the idea!" Juvia grumbled, smacking Gajeel upside the head. *Just set aside the fact that they are speaking a tongue that we can all understand*, she thought, deciding to put it down to some inherent magic in the creature, or maybe an ancient enchantment woven into the bedrock of the city? Regardless, she wanted no part of these things.

The swarm charged forward, spreading out as they came, with more pouring out of a few buildings to one side of the road. The others all readied themselves for a fight, but Ranma, still not wanting to fight or destroy anything in the city, held up his hand, stepping forward from the group and shouting, "We're tourists!"

Amazingly, that brought the creatures up short for a second. And then they spoke as one again, making Ranma wonder if they had a hive mind kind of thing going, or if they were all simply clones of one another, and had no differences between them. "Tourism has been disallowed in the city of Ven'aniel for over two thousand five hundred sixty-six years. Please return to the entrance to the city and obtain proper documentation from the tourist authority office. This will be your only warning. Enjoyment subroutines have been activated; gleeful humiliation will be your punishment in the future for a second infraction."

For a moment, Ranma and the others just stared, watching as the creatures repeated themselves twice more and then scattered. Groups of them returned to finish off the carcass of the drill beast, and others zoomed away through the city or back into the small houses, they had come from in the first place.

As the danger passed, Natsu was the first to speak, staring at Ranma in shock. "How the heck did you know that would work?"

"I didn't. I honestly was just giving you all an opportunity to ready some attacks," Ranma admitted, tugging at his ponytail sheepishly. "Who knew that actually talking could solve a problem?"

While the other two Dragon Slayer's laughed, Jenny and Juvia rolled their eyes, before moving up to Ranma's sides, each of them taking an arm. "Come on, let's head back the way that we came, and maybe skirt around the edge of the city. I can't imagine there are many of those things around. And I don't think they're the ones dealing with the Draconids either."

Gajeel had another idea. "Let's follow the river. We saw one of them a little bit ago a few streets over, right? Nevertheless, it was heading eastward, and we were trying to head more north than east. I'd wager water is something those bug things aren't going to want to mess with."

Ranma nodded, and the group headed in that way, continuing to pass examples of the war in the form of a few shattered buildings here, a crystal tower whose top had seemingly exploded there. And twice the carcasses of long dead flying creatures, which must have been shot down directly over the city to crash where they lay. They all took heart in the fact that those carcasses still lay there, not having been removed by the tiny scarab things, which meant they definitely did seem to be confined to certain segments of the city.

The river wasn't a wide one, only about 12 feet across, and it wasn't very deep, but the water was running quickly. When Ranma dipped a hand in, he quickly pulled it out, shaking his head. "Damn! Its overflowing with Ethernano! If I had more than a palm full, I'd probably get drunk on it, or... it might be enough to actually force me to transform as if I had given into my dragonification. Not good."

"That's good and all, but the light's nearly gone, and there aren't enough of those ziggurats around to light up the city. We need to fort up somewhere," Jenny reminded them all. "And I don't not know about any of you, but wandering this city with torches seems like a really bad idea to me."

"Juvia agrees fervently with Jenny. Juvia can also see multiple Wild Magic zones that we have just barely missed behind us. Juvia would very much like to have sunlight to see such by, if you all please."

The others all nodded, and deciding that looking for a place that was particularly defensible was a losing proposition, Ranma pointed to a house nearby that at least still had its door. The roof had been torn apart at some point, but Ranma didn't think they'd face any flying enemies while within the city's environs. *And I brought along our tents anyway.* "Let's head in there then. That will give us cover for the night."

OOOOOOO

Acnologia looked down on the foolish mage who had found him, even now wondering how the man had done so in the first place. Regardless of how the man had found him though, here on a high cliff sticking out of the nearly frozen ocean below that marks the northern edge of the human nation of Iceberg, didn't really matter. *It is still called Iceberg, right? Human nations change names so quickly.*

The buffoon had been spouting off about his rank in the Wizard Saints, a group of wizards Acnologia knew of only vaguely, as none, bar this fool apparently, were Dragon Slayers. About how he was named God Serena for a reason and would defeat Acnologia. How, "If some no name water Dragon Slayer can take your arm I can certainly defeat you and make the name God Serena even better known than before!"

At that point, Acnologia had lost his temper. Not five minutes later, the battle ended in Acnologia's overwhelming victory, as he knew it would.

"No, no!" God Serena babbled, trying hard to gather his magic again, staring between the tanned man standing across from him and where his leg had once been. Now there was nothing but a gore-streaked stump. Acnologia had burst through God Serena's last attack and torn his leg off at the knee as easily as a man could pull apart a chicken leg.

God Serena's magic didn't respond. He had exhausted himself in pushing his body to keep up with Acnologia and in his attacks, and now he didn't even have enough left to spark a match, let alone do anything else. *He, he took my greatest attacks, my most powerful strikes, tore through them, tore through me! N, this, this is impossible! A nightmare! How can such a creature be so strong!* God Serena's thoughts were almost as disjointed and fearful as his voice, such was his fall from grace. "Th, this can't be happening I am, I am the strongest! Stronger than all the other wizard saints combined! I am a..."

That was as far as he got before a tiny pinprick of magical power appeared on Acnologia's finger. The light of it, purple and dark blue grabbed God Serena's attention before it zipped away from Acnologia's finger, racing toward the man.

"NO!" God Serena tried to dodge, but his battered, bleeding, broken body betrayed him, His arms, broken couldn't let him crawl away. The strike went through his heart, killing God Serena, strongest of the Wizard Saints before he could even scream.

"Finally some peace and quiet," Acnologia grumbled, shaking his head, the words coming out as if he had gargled gravel.

He had been eating in his human form, which he tended to do when using this place as his temporary home. Say what you would about the inherent weakness of Acnologia's former

species in comparison to dragons, but when it came to actual food, human taste buds beat out draconic easily.

Then along came God Serena, bringing down the entrance to his home on top of Acnologia, which had put Acnologia in a bad mood to begin with. This had only been exasperated by the man's constant talking, and the smell of so many dragon-type lacrima from the man. **"And for all his talk, he didn't put up nearly as much of a fight as those mages I fought on the island. I should never have let him keep talking, but I wanted to know how he found me, blast it. Could he not have mentioned that in his egotistical tirade?"**

Still, Acnologia had to admit that having such a ready source of new power was nice. With a thought, he transformed into his dragon form, the vast bulk of it taking up most of the cliff around him, dwarfing the dead mage's body despite the lack of a forearm, which still threw off Acnologia's balance for a second as he transformed. Righting himself, Acnologia sent out a tiny puff of flame, charbroiling the mage's body.

A second later Acnologia's tongue licked out, picking up the body and pulling it into his mouth. As the lacrima encased in the charred corpse reached his stomach, the black-scaled, blue-marked dragon twitched, lightning and fire flickered out from his eyes as a drizzle of dirt and water drooled down from between clenched teeth. Normally a dragon eating an element not his own would have severe consequences, even in lacrima form. But Acnologia was special. He had killed so many dragons, bathed in their blood and stolen their power, when he was younger that his 'element' if such a word still applied, was simply magic itself. Or so he supposed, Acnologia had been a healer when he was human, before he began his crusade, not a magical theorist. Whatever the case actually was, Acnologia had proven that he could eat any element or even any regular magic if he wished for a quick power up, just like any other Dragon Slayer, regardless of his form.

Lacrima like this would give him a bit more in terms of magical reserve. It was but the equivalent of a few barrels of water in comparison to a river, but it was still nice. More importantly, he would be able to use spells of the elements the lacrimas represented for a day or so before they were fully ingested.

With a grimace, Acnologia transformed back into his human form. A wave of his hands, and an application of Earth Magic later, the debris and rubble from his cave began to climb into the air over itself reforming until the cave marking the top of the butte was back to where it had been before God Serena attacked him.

Inside the cave, Acnologia walked down a flight of steps that he had carved himself using brute force centuries ago. Now, with the Earth dragon lacrima empowering his abilities, Acnologia made a few changes, enlarging the tunnel as he went, making the steps smoother, and generally speaking making the place look a little better. Acnologia didn't particularly care about fripperies but there was such a thing as style.

At the bottom of the stairwell, the tunnel split. On one side, it opened up immediately into a primitive kitchen. Here, Acnologia enlarged the larder area, then used the water dragon lacrima to create a pool of water. The water would soon solidify into ice, the better to store meat with.

On the other side of the tunnel, Acnologia came out onto the floor of a large cavern, large enough to house his dragon form. Which indeed was the purpose of this cave, which he had created centuries ago with his first earth dragon kill. Acnologia much preferred to sleep in his dragon form if he could but not outside. The noise of rain hitting his scales always annoyed him, although not as much as some of the dreams he had when sleeping in his human form.

That wasn't its only purpose, though, for lining the walls almost from top to bottom in places were keepsakes of old fights. Trophies that Acnologia had taken late in his crusade against dragonkind. The scales or defeated dragons mostly, they were interspersed with a horn here, a claw over there. Every kill he'd made after becoming King of the Dragons during the Festival, after he began to enjoy his work of wiping out dragonkind.

He took in the sight of his trophies for a moment before transforming back into his dragon form only to growl with annoyance as the stump of his arm caused him to stumble forward again before he could right himself. The loss of his arm from the elbow down to the Water Dragon Slayer still bothered him when he transformed from one form to the other. It was the first time Acnologia had ever lost a limb obviously, and it had taken him the better part of a year now to get used to it.

But now he felt that he was used to the loss of his arm outside when transforming from one form to another. And with that, Acnologia wondered if it was time to go hunting again.

Yet even as he thought that, a nagging... not concern, not precisely. It had been centuries since Acnologia had any concerns, really. More like a nagging feeling of something incomplete, perhaps. The fact that he hadn't been able to take any trophy from the Water Dragon Slayer was the cause, of course. The fact that, being so badly battered, Acnologia hadn't bothered to stay around after destroying the island.

Now looking back on it, Acnologia had to acknowledge that this might mean that the Water Dragon Slayer had found some means of surviving. Worse, looking through his memories of the battle, couldn't discern if the other three Dragon Slayers had died as well. That was more than annoying, that was **infuriating**. *And unless they stay together in a region without much background magic, I will never be able to sense them from a distance. Not like I can that sleeping idiot down in Alvarez. And... hmm... could there be a Dragon Slayer there too?*

Turning his head in that direction, Acnologia reached out to the world with his senses. He could feel places where the background Ethernano blotted out his senses. Since that was most of Ishgar, he couldn't even use knowing that to know where his prey could be hiding. The

last time he had gone hunting, that had also been true for the Alvarez Empire on the southern continent.

Now, though, that was not the case. The background magic there had been originally far less than in Ishgar or the Blasted Lands, although, comparing even Ishgar to the Blasted Lands, was like comparing a bonfire to a tree that had been set alight from root to tip. Frankly, looking toward the Blasted Lands made Acnologia's head hurt, and even though he knew at least a few dragons still hid there, he did not care and try to search for them. *Perhaps once I am certain no more Dragon Slayers can come into existence but not before.*

The Alvarez Empire had been blotted out similarly to Ishgar by Zeref's on-and-off presence, and the man's own spellwork blocking out clairvoyance or other scrying type magic. Those types of magic worked just as well on Acnologia's senses. With those gone for some reason, the lesser background magic let Acnologia feel out the lands of the Empire from much further away and to a greater degree than ever before. And now... *That is a Dragon Slayer... one I have never sensed before. And of course, there is the sleeping fool too.*

A wicked grin crossed the massive dragon's face and he let loose a rumble of delight. *This could be some kind of trap. Zeref has tried in the past to defeat me, or to aid others in doing so. He could be trying to trick me into attacking. But even so, bringing down his largest creation will almost force him out of hiding, to where I can finally do away with him. I've not wanted to do so before this because I doubted the sleeping idiot would be able to put up much of a fight, but now? Three birds with one stone? That is too good to ignore.*

No sooner had Acnologia thought that than he transformed back into his human form, making for the stairs leading up to the entrance once more, pausing a moment to stared down at where his arm should be. Despite his healing magic, Acnologia couldn't regrow limbs, and the Water Dragon Slayer had come astonishingly close to defeating him. Mind you, that was while they were fighting in the water Dragon Slayer's element, but even so. Losing a limb like that had been a debilitating experience, worse than losing an ear in that same battle.

The ear annoyed him as well, of course, considering how it hampered his hearing. But to look down at his arm and see the sign of how close he'd been to losing a fight was far worse. It was why Acnologia had to retrain himself to the point where the missing limb didn't bother him. He had then gone beyond that, training himself further to fight in both forms against those who could actually hurt him. That was why, even if this was a trap from Zeref, Acnologia felt he could win through. *And for the blood of an unknown Dragon Slayer, I will take that chance.*

Within twenty minutes, Acnologia, the Dragon of the Apocalypse was awing once more, heading southwest.

OOOOOO

At first, Lucy didn't really know what to expect when she accepted a special request from the King to come to Crocus and join Wendy and her group on a quest there. From the look on his face when he handed her the personal quest paper, Makarov didn't know what to make of it either, nor, when they consulted him, did Laxus. And when both acting and emeritus Grand Master didn't know what to make of a quest, even if that was just an information gathering quest, a wise Fairy Tail mage became suspicious. Luckily for Lucy, these days she barely went anywhere on her own, with Cana and Virgo her near-constant companions.

This, however? A pleasant tea time in the gardens of the palace? Meeting the Princess and the king, and then being shown pictures and images of some strange gate with the markings of the twelve zodiac celestial spirits on it? This all was not something any of the three had ever anticipated and served to put them at ease.

Lucy sighed, putting down the images and pushing them back across the table. "Well, your majesties, I'm afraid I don't know what this is. These are the twelve zodiac signs, yes, but I don't have all of those keys myself. Not yet anyway." *Still two short of the full 12. But I'm getting there, Mama.*

"We've contacted a Mermaid Heel mage as well. Yukino is known to be a celestial Spirit mage like yourself. But she was already out on assignment. We will have to wait for her to get back to us," Toma answered with a shrug. "And in actuality, we don't really care to have all twelve keys on site. We're not trying to open the darn thing, we're just trying to figure out why someone would want it to be opened. That is a big difference."

Lucy nodded, biting down on a donut and inwardly going down the same line of thought Seilah had the day before: that returning to Charlotte with some of these recipes would be a very good thing. *Although not for my waistline, darn it.* Shaking that thought off, Lucy put the donut down and turned to Virgo. The pink-haired maid spirit had insisted on waiting on the table for them instead of taking part in the actual conversation. The glares she and one of the palace maids were sending one another from behind their owners worried Lucy a bit, but there were more important things to talk about. "Virgo?"

Breaking off her staring contest with the other maid, Virgo shook her head. "Mistress, I am sorry, but I do not know what it is either. It looks vaguely familiar to me, as if I had seen it once at a distance, but that is all. Please, feel free to punish me."

"How many times do we have to tell you, Virgo, we don't want to. At this point I'm thinking that withholding spankings, or giving them out to one another while you watch might be a better punishment for you," Cana teased.

Toma guffawed, while Hisui blushed rosily along with Wendy and Carla. "Mage Cana!"

"Filter on, please love!" Lucy grumbled, blushing herself but not willing to let Cana drag them all along with her into debauchery, Lucy frowned pensively thinking about the gate and

what it could be, then smiled suddenly. "Wait, I've got an idea. He might not be one of the twelve zodiac, but I do have access to a celestial spirit that has quite a lot of knowledge about stuff connected to the Celestial Spirit Realm."

When the King gave his permission, Lucy hopped to her feet, taking several steps back and away from the table, before holding out one of her celestial spirit keys to the side. "Open, Gate of the Southern Cross! Crux!"

A moment later, a large... well, Cana and the others would simply have called him a normal celestial spirit. After all, only Virgo looked anywhere near normal, and she made up for it with her personality. The others though were undoubtedly shocked and Toma, his daughter and Minerva all stared.

This celestial spirit was shorter than most, only around the size of Hisui, his body much smaller than his large, cross-shaped head and neck, which looked like a silver cross. On that cross, facial features could be seen, mustaches that looked like smaller crosses pointing down at an angle, a small mouth, ears and eyes. He was dressed quite nicely in clothing that wouldn't have looked out of place on a nobleman.

Crux's voice, when he spoke, was elderly, almost creaky. "Mistress Lucy, what information can I provide for you?"

Lucy quickly showed Harlequin the images, then asked what the gate was. The ancient spirit took it in for a moment, then to the chagrin of the king and the Princess, seemed to fall asleep. Lucy saw this and waved her hands quickly. "Don't worry, that's how Crux searches his memory for information."

A moment later, the cross-faced celestial spirit seemed to come awake, nodding his head in some strange fashion that Hisui just couldn't understand. *How in the world is he supporting his own head? It looks like it would weigh at least twice as much as the rest of his body.*

The celestial spirit's words quickly drove such thoughts out of her mind, however. "Mistress, this is what is called an Eclipse Gate. Utilizing the dimensional powers of the 12 Celestial Spirits and a tremendous amount of absorbed magical power, it can open a tunnel through time, forward or backward."

That blunt sentence silenced the group of wizards and nobility, and all of them remained so until the king leaned forward. "I'm sorry, could you explain that further? It is not a weapon of some kind?"

"No. It is merely a gateway from one place to another. It could perhaps be used as a weapon. Sending someone through time is a very good way to get rid of them, after all. But that would not be the Gate's primary purpose," the ancient celestial spirit answered pedantically.

“Who would build something like that, and why?” Hisui asked, staring from her father to the celestial spirit and consternation. “Why would someone try to force me to believe that we had to somehow use the gate in order to fight a horde of Dragons?”

“I cannot speculate on the last question. That is well beyond my purview. As to who built the gate, the mage Zeref did so in conjunction with an ancient Celestial Spirit Mage.”

Seilah frowned pensively, staring at the celestial spirit. She sensed that had been a prevarication, as if Crux could have told them more if he was willing or able to. But she decided to set that aside for now. And while perhaps not the entire truth, it was more than enough to concern the humans around her.

“Why would Zeref, the blackest and most evil of ancient wizards, want to travel through time?! That is a horrifying thought!” Toma shouted, pushing to his feet and beginning to pace in anger.

Hisui got to her own feet, moving to take her father’s hand in both of hers. “Father, calm down, please. I realize knowing that we were being manipulated to activate the gate is dreadful to contemplate. But we can’t let our anger blind us to the fact that we have already succeeded in possibly stopping this plot in the first place.” She then leaned forward, whispering into her father’s ear, looking over at the spirit Virgo. “And remember what you told me about Ranger Ranma’s reports about what happened on Tenrou Island. Zeref has been dealt with already.”

This time, the ancient celestial spirits stayed silent. Wendy pointed at him. “Does that mean he’s searching for more information?”

Lucy barely glanced at Crux, scowling down at the images of the gate. “Oh, no. He’s just fallen asleep.”

After recovering from her face vault, Minerva spoke up for the first time. “I think we’ve figured out what we need to do to open the gate. And none of us are stupid enough to think about doing so. So who cares why it was built. Let’s figure out a way to destroy the thing.”

That won some nods of approval, but then, the calm atmosphere of the discussion was interrupted.

From the shadow underneath the table, a magical attack lashed out at everyone sitting at the table without any warning whatsoever. The shadows underneath the table congealed into solid objects, darting out and slicing into Minerva, Lucy, Cana and Carla. Each blade was targeted to incapacitate or kill but the one targeted at Lucy, which really raked her side.

The strike to Minerva was the worst, a long gash across her stomach without any time to defend herself. Indeed, even if she had possibly seen the attack coming, she might not have been able to it was so fast. One moment she was sitting there, then her stomach and lower

body was wet with blood. Instinct kicked in then and Minerva fell back and away, rolling on the ground and trying hard to hold her stomach in place, a scream of pain erupting from her. "ARGGGHH!!"

At the same time, Carla also took a bad hit, slicing into her thigh and up from her thigh into her side which caused the Exceed to collapse sideways. Currently in her favored human form, her hands went to her wounds as she shouted in pain equal to that of Minerva.

Cana was luckier, as was Lucy. The attack on Lucy was more to grab at the pouch she kept her Celestial Spirit Keys in. It was bad, but the strike on her more resembled thin gashes from a clawed animal than the stabs or deep cuts that were threatening to dump Minerva's innards onto the grass of the royal garden.

Cana had been getting up to move around the table for a plate of bacon, pushing her chair back, and standing back from the table. So instead of opening her up as it had Minerva, the attack took her in the thighs. Both thighs were cut badly enough for blood to start flowing down Cana's pants, but she was still alive and pushed away from the table, quickly using one of her special Healing Cards for a quick boost.

In contrast, Wendy saw the attack coming. She'd never trained with Ranma-nii at mealtimes like he had with his father, but her other training had more than made up for that lack. Wendy was quick enough that when the shadows seemed to move near her feet, she was already moving. The attack cut at her clothing as she flipped up and over her chair from a sitting start. Putting her hands on the back of the chair Wendy pushed off into the air, landing nearby in a crouch snarling as she glared at the table.

Similarly, Seilah's body was tough enough to allow her to take the strike, blunting the cutting edge of it although it did send her backward, her chair disintegrating beneath her from the force of the blow as she rolled for a few seconds before coming to her feet. "Macro: Reveal yourself!" she snarled, reaching towards the shadows of the table.

Her curse reached out, but before it could reach the target area, a man burst out from underneath the table where he had been hiding in the shadows. A kick caught Seilah in the side of the head, while another attack flashed out towards Wendy. "Shadow Dragon's Haste!"

Shadows erupted from the man's hand in the form of a dragon claw, but Wendy twirled in place, her limbs glowing white and blue. "Sky Dragon's Claws!" The sky Dragon magic tore through the shadows, dissipating them.

Seilah took the opportunity to use Macro to bind the man for moment. "Macro: stop moving and remain still!"

The blue energy coalesced around the man an energy wave of white and black colored magic out from him, "White Shadow Dragon's Impervious Hide!"

But the demoness's attack held the man for just a second, opening him up for a blow from Wendy, which caught him in the center of his chest, hurling him backward and away from the table and the wounded towards the outer wall of the gardens. The blow was so strong it took him out of sight for a moment, and a second later, there was a distant crashing sound as he evidently hit the outer wall.

At this point, Cana had recovered from her wounds and began to bark out orders. "Princess, King Toma, retreat towards the castle, let us handle this. Seilah, with me. Wendy, heal Lucy and the others then follow after us."

Toma nodded, knowing this was a battle between mages, and he could be nothing but an obstacle here. He grabbed his daughter's arm pulling her towards the castle, where multiple knights were already pouring out, rushing towards them. Behind him, he heard Wendy shout a series of spells quickly "Enchant Magic: Vernier, Arms, Armor!"

This was followed by a thank you from Cana, and then Toma and Hisui reached the knights. "Knights, split up. Arcadios, help the mages, Levis, get us inside."

At that order, five soldiers formed around the royals under Levis, one of Arcadios' officers. With them around him, Toma kept on pushing Hisui away despite her continued protests, while the other five under Arcadios raced towards the sounds of battle.

By this point, the man had recovered and raced back towards the site of the luncheon, only to meet Seilah and Cana coming after him. Cana, empowered by all three of Wendy's enhancement spells just like Seilah, hurled her cards forward, a broad fan of various types, trying to feel out how the attacker would react.

Meanwhile, Seilah took a second to take in the man's appearance.

The man's hair was extremely long, tied in a high ponytail that reaches midway down his back, colored black on the right, and white on the left with bangs brushed over to the right side of his face, covering his eye and much of his cheek. Although, a long, jagged scar could be seen disappearing under the hair before travelling over the bridge of his nose. There was a curved tattoo around his left eye, an eye that was dark black, with a snake-like pupil.

He wore a long, light, high-collared vest adorned with three circles printed on the front, tucked into his belt along with an equally light-colored, long sleeved shirt, the cuffs of which were rolled up. Strapped boots and off-white pants completed the image.

All in all, Seilah felt he looked somewhat like a strange version of the type of writers that Cana and Catherine had astonishingly agreed as being too emo for their own good crossed with a sadist.

“Is that really Wendy? She is surprisingly strong,” the man mused aloud, sending out a series of white beams of power. Each beam intercepted a different card as he flew into the air, shadowy wings sprouting from his back. “Still, it makes no difference. Fight all you wish; I have killed many of you like before this. If someone like Natsu or Gajeel could not match me, none of you will! I will open the Eclipse Gate! I will go through, and I will slay enough dragons, gather enough power into myself to become the next true King of Dragons. Power enough to slay Acnologia!”

“Your backstory does not matter to me! You attacked my friends, that is all I need to know,” Seilah snarled, as she tried to use her Macro powers directly on the man only for him to use the same technique as before.

Nevertheless, the man covered his body with the same light based magic as he had used to destroy Cana’s cards before dashing forward. “You, you are the weakest here, and thus will be the first to die. Just like always, Alberona!” so saying he smashed several cards from Cana out of the air as he closed.

Cana leaped to the side, rolling under his attack, bringing up another card at the same time. “I don’t know why you’re talking like I should know you, you emo prick, but have a Hurricane!”

The hurricane that erupted from her card took the attacker in the center of his chest. It didn’t seem to hurt, but it did push him back. This was enough for Seilah to close, and while he dodged her first strike, the Demoness’s kick took him in the thigh.

At that, the attacker grunted on the impact but moved with it, a punch coming up toward her side, which Seilah dodged again. *Blast it, it is only because of Wendy’s Vernier that I am able to keep up with him. I doubt he would even feel my punches! Where did such a wizard come from?!*

The two of them exchanged blows for a few moments forgetting the use of magic until the man roared, “White Shadow Dragon’s Vestment!”

Multiple beams of white and shadow magic came from his hands at almost point-blank range, and even with Vernier buoying her, Seilah couldn’t dodge. “ARGH!!” she cried out in pain as the hits struck, hurling her back down into the ground, the impact causing a crater several times her own body. Yet despite that, the beams of Light Magic didn’t penetrate her, making her very thankful for Wendy’s enhancement spell. *Without it, my durability as a demon would not have been enough against Light Magic like that.* There were some hard and fast rules of magic, and it was a fact that Light Magic hurt demons and devils both.

The man tried to follow-up, but the knights arrived then, with Arcadios in the lead. The large, armored man, furious at this attack and having been completely unable to protect the

royal family from the mental attacks, they'd been enduring launching himself up and at the man sword point first. "Vile cur! I will have your head!"

Unfortunately, Wendy was too busy with the horribly wounded Minerva and Lucy to take the time to enchant the royal guard.

"Away, weakling!" The attacker grabbed the edge of Arcadios' sword, shattering it by simply clenching his fist, before bringing around his other fist encased in shadow. The blow struck Arcadios so hard, it hurled him through the air back the way he had come to smash into one of the castle towers. The entire tower collapsed inwards on the man, burying him alive and causing a tremendous amount of damage to the castle below.

Yet the man had stayed put for too long. Cana's next few cards caused lightning to slam into the man from above and the side, as a punch from Seilah forced him to land for a second. "Did you feel that, you asshole!?" Cana shouted.

The attacker grabbed Seilah's next punch, his body covered with the same Light Magic armor dissipating her Macros spell once more, causing Seilah to flinch away for a second. "No, I didn't. Now if you could just stand over there and wait for your turn, Alberona, I have this horned bitch to deal with first." Twirling, he sent Seilah through a nearby tree, then turned, lashing out with a Light Magic towards the guards. "White Shadow Dragon's Claw!"

This single magical attack cut through every guard charging forward, sending their body parts flying in various directions. Although the man was surprised when one of them just didn't seem to be there any longer. For just a second, the attacker ignored Cana's next card-based assault to whirl around, wondering where the armored knight had gone.

A second later, multicolored balls of odd magic appeared around the attacker, causing his eyes to narrow right before they exploded as a female voice, still racked with pain called out, "Territory Explosion!"

Minerva stood, her form glowing light blue from an Armor Enhancement spell in front of where one guard had been, the man having been teleported back to where the table had been. Her magic was already flowing out from her to encapsulate most of the gardens as she snarled at the man. "Territory Magic. Come on you bastard, I know that wasn't enough to finish you off!"

"It didn't even sting," the man snickered for some reason as he waved his hand idly, dissipating the smoke from the explosions before floating into the air. "Hehehe, get it, Sting? Wait, no I suppose you wouldn't. Now, does anyone else wish to join this little party, or can I finally kill you all? Dealing with weaklings all at once is much more efficient."

"Sky Dragon's Hammering Tail Swipe!" a voice intoned from above the man, and he looked up hurriedly. However, he couldn't dodge before twin fists, encased in Sky Dragon Slayer

magic crashed into the top of his head, driven by both her regular Dragon Slayer magic and her own Enhancement, in her case Armor and Arms.

For the second time in the fight, the man felt pain, and he gritted his teeth as he found himself being flung down towards the ground once more. But the man used this to his advantage, shouting out a new attack, molding his magic around him as his body began to turn into shadow in midair. "White Shadow Dragon's Sword Horn!"

The shadows the man had turned into raced towards Seilah, who blasted away at it with her Macro Curse, trying to force the shadow away. This worked to some extent, and the man growled angrily as he reformed nearby, unable to complete his attack. But even so, he showed a remarkable amount of experience by going with the flow of the battle switching to another attack smoothly. "Shadow Dragon's Eruption!"

From the ground underneath Minerva, Seilah and the descending Wendy their shadows came alive, bursting up like volcanoes going off, impacting all of them and hurling them away like the shadows had become solid objects.

At the same time, Cana struck once more, her cards magic flowing through the air towards the man from multiple angles as she ran around him as fast as Vernier could carry him. This time, her attack was what Cana called her Dragon Slayer Special. From each card burst out clouds of noxious fumes and finely ground hot pepper into the man's face. So much so that even someone normally not so would have been in agony.

"GRAHHH!" the man shouted, pulling back and clamping one hand over his mouth. "You bitch!" Blindly he attacked all around him with thin beams of light and shadow, flying in every direction from him like so many arrows, his shadow wings distorting like a living creature pulsing out bolts of solid darkness.

Seilah grunted as several hit her, while Wendy ducked and dodged, keeping her distance until the fumes faded. "Good grief Cana, don't use that when I'm in close with him, please!"

"Got it gKKK!!" Cana wasn't quite fast enough and took a bolt of Light Magic through one shoulder. Before more could hit, Virgo quickly grabbed Cana's legs from underneath, pulling her down into the ground as if it was water.

Seeing this through watery eyes, the attacker shook his head. "Dammit! These past-wizards are officially annoying me now!"

He kept up the attack for a few seconds, forcing everyone to dodge, and at one point nearly hitting Lucy as she tried to rise out of the ground, only to squeal and duck back into Virgo's tunnel. Minerva too was having trouble, as did Cana when she showed up again. But Wendy hit them both with Armor, the best armor-type enchantment she had. This cost them

their Arms Enhancement, as she could only stack three Enhancements on a person at a time, but it would keep them alive if they got hit at least.

As Cana's attack faded away, the attacker sensed something behind him and twisted around, catching Wendy's blow as it moved towards the back of his head, pushing her to the side, then raising his other hand to block her follow on kick, then again and again as Wendy bore in. But despite straining against the diminutive powerhouse and the ongoing tears from his eyes and the redness of his nose, the man spoke almost lazily. "Although I have to admit that you are the one that most surprises me. You were a wallflower, where did this combat ability come from?" I expected your support spells but hurling yourself into a fight like this?

"I've never been a wallflower!" Wendy shouted back, somewhat affronted. While Wendy knew that when she was younger she was quite shy and self-effacing, she never been what she thought of as a wallflower, someone who couldn't or wouldn't fight. Moreover, the man's was infuriating. "And I've never seen you before in my life!"

That startled the man into a laugh. "I suppose you haven't have you, it's a few years before the Grand Magic Games, even if you don't look as if you grew much before that. You were still as flat and short then, and as foolish!"

As Wendy scowled at that, an elbow slammed into the side of her head as she over-extended, her punch sailing over his shoulder. Grabbing at her leg before she could move with that blow, he turned, slamming her down into the ground. "I killed you once, I can do it again, girl!"

He attempted to hammer her down this a second time, but Wendy kicked out of his grip, her kick on his wrist nearly deadening his grip for a moment, causing him to wince. "You'll have to do better than that, you... you pretty boy!" Wendy shouted as she flipped away, battering a series of shadow spears away.

And then, Minerva's territory hit, and suddenly, the man's sneer faded as the celestial spirit keys on his waist were no longer there. Instead, they were in Minerva's hands, and she smirked even as they disappeared once more to elsewhere, hiding them in a nearby bush as she couldn't see where Lucy was right now. Even with Territory magic, Minerva still needed line of sight for most of her magic. "Missing something, you checker-colored pile of garbage?"

This was solved a second later as Lucy's upper body appeared out of the ground. "Minerva, pass!"

Snarling, the man launched himself forward, only for Minerva to disappear from where she had been standing, reappearing elsewhere. Just like how she stole Lucy's keys back, Minerva could teleport herself away using her Territory magic. In her place a simulacrum, a copy of Minerva made of condensed Ethernano and air, remained, exploding as the man hit it. "Territory Explosion: Mark Two, Simulacrum!"

She scowled angrily however as the man simply rocked backwards, his clothing a little frayed, but his skin not marked at all by the explosions. "Dammit! He really does seem like a Dragon Slayer. He's durable enough for one anyway."

"I know, I saw how Cana's tricks worked on him," Wendy pushed herself to her feet growling angrily. "But Ranma-nii and I never heard of anyone using light or shadow Dragon Slayer magic before, not like we did with Gajeel, Laxus or Natsu."

At that, the man paused, scratching at his chin thoughtfully his sneer reappearing on his face, taking in the three mages currently surrounding him. Cana had disappeared underground again along with Lucy, and Carla, who had yet to take part in the fight even though Wendy had healed her.

Wendy knew that her friend was waiting for a moment to get in a good strike. But when the man spoke, his words drove that thought out of her mind. "At this point in the timeline, I suppose I was far too young and unskilled to garner much attention. But in seven years time, I grew enough in power to kill Laxus, Gray and Natsu all!"

At that, the Fairy Tail mages all hissed, while Wendy snarled and Seilah frowned pensively, unmoved by this bit of psychological warfare. *So, whoever this is, he does not know Fullbuster is dead. Nor does he seem to know Ranma or me.*

"Indeed, I sometimes think I should perhaps thank you Fairy Tail mages. After all, it was Gray who showed me that power was all that matters. I killed him for it, of course, but it was a valuable lesson, and drawing power from killing Laxus and Natsu was just as tasty as it was to kill Sting when he tried to stop me from growing stronger. As for the name of your killer, my name is Rogue, and I am a light and Shadow Dragon Slayer," Rogue mocked.

"Still doesn't ring a bell, although does that mean that you had two parents? Light and shadow is a weird pairing..." Wendy mused, her tone light even as she shifted to the side so that the three mages were surrounding Rogue, forcing him to turn his head continually to keep his eyes on them.

Seilah was about to speak up, telling the man it was impossible for Gray to have taught him anything as Fullbuster was dead, but she paused as Rogue's sneering expression changed to one of deep anger and hatred as he glared at Wendy. "Struggle all you want, weakling, you will fall! I will become the next Dragon King and..."

That was as far as he got in his monologue before Seilah attacked. *Enough posturing!* "I told you; your backstory does not interest me! Macro: Earth barrage."

The ground around him came alive. Already torn up by the battle to a point it would take a legion of gardeners to put right, large clumps of rock floated into the air and came at the man from every direction. Of course, the man dealt with this easily, shattering mud balls, boulders

and trees alike. But it took his attention away for a brief moment, which Minerva and Wendy both capitalized on.

Minerva captured the man in her territory again, shouting out "Territory Drain!" which instantly began to pull magical power from the man, feeding it into her. As it did, Minerva gasped, then nearly fell to her knees in agony. "GUHHH..." The magic Rogue had within his body was almost too powerful for Minerva to contain, and a bare second passed before she had to cancel the spell.

"Hah! Stupid B-GUU!" Rogue snarled, but that was as far as he got before, Wendy was in his face again. A blow took him in the stomach that caused the air to whuff out of him, his eyes bulging in both pain and startled surprise. The next strike to the side of his head had Rogue reeling, even as he released a burst of light from his palm slammed into Wendy, hurling her away once more.

Twirling around in place, he thrust out his hands in every direction, short sharp jabs like he was punching the air, only to send magic out each time he did so. "White Shadow Dragon's Rough Silk!"

From his hands thin beams of light and shadows raced out, the same attack, each tried to use on Cana a moment ago. They struck with punishing force, causing Minerva to cry out in agony as both of her arms were perforated as she covered herself, unable for a moment to use her teleportation power, still reeling from the amount of magical energy she'd absorbed from the man.

The attack forced Virgo back as well. In a moment of bad timing, she had just appeared to one side, flowing out of the ground with Lucy and Cana behind her. But the attack caused her to retreat underground instantly, taking them with her.

Seilah and Wendy on the other hand were not perforated like Minerva, simply hurled backwards from the multiple impacts, which left bruises but didn't penetrate. And a moment later, another hole appeared in the ground directly behind Rogue, and Carla leaped out. "Neko-Ken Ki Claws!" she snarled, furious at having been injured earlier.

Rogue turned, and the ki claws sliced his chin open, also cutting his bangs off, tearing at a preexisting scar over his previously hidden eye. "ARGH!!" he shrieked followed by a wave of shadow magic hammering Carla away like she was a volleyball. She went flying back towards the castle, where she struck, blasting through the outer wall, only coming to a halt in the same ballroom she, Seilah and Wendy had been in during the soiree several nights back.

A claw of white magical energy carved through the ground just as Lucy popped out from one of Virgo's holes, causing her to scream in shock. A second later, a kick caught Wendy just as she launched her own strike, the girl having forgotten her defense for a costly second. She was sent through the air to smash into the outer wall of the garden.

“Macro: Remove Limiter!” Seilah shouted, furious at the sight of Wendy being hit like that. The blue energy around her that appeared whenever she was using her curse seemed to suddenly become absorbed into her skin, which glowed blue. Little whirls of blue color began going up from her hands, underneath her clothing and up to her face.

This was Seilah’s special technique, the ability to use her powers on herself to remove the internal limiters that as a demoness of the book, a creation of Zeref, Seilah had on her normally. In doing so, she would expand a significant amount of her curse power, but with so many allies around, she felt that she could get away with it.

Seeing this transformation, Rogue laughed flicking his head around, blood flying from his clawed face. “Yes, yes! Fight more, fight harder!” He shot out a beam of shadow magic towards Lucy and Cana who both retreated again, and then concentrated entirely on Seilah, shouting out, “But if you want to fight transformation against transformation, let me show you true power! White Shadow Dragon Force!”

From the side of his head where the eye had previously been covered, black colored magic began to appear, flowing out from his ruined eyes socket down his body, covering half of his body in shadow while the other half remained normal looking. His other side though, the one now covered with shadow, more than made up for it, looking almost like a cross between demonic, with numerous solid-looking shadow constructs poking out from his side and arm, and a dragon’s forearm, his hand now covered in a large construct of shadow. At the same time, wisps of less solid shadow magic rose like a miasma around him.

That miasma hit Minerva, who collapsed to her knees, feeling like someone had just used gravity magic on her, her wounds overcoming her now. A second later, Minerva was pulled underground by Virgo, and found herself in a small temporary cave in the ground, where Lucy, recovered from her earlier wounds, held out a fluttering bird spirit towards her. “We’ll get you back in the fight in the moment Minerva!”

“Hah! Well, I have one card up my sleeve that can help put the fucker down, but landing it is going to be tough. Even with Wendy’s enhancement I can’t move fast enough to keep up with them and since they’re in the air, Virgo can’t do her whack-a-mole trick,” Cana grouched.

Lucy looked at her lover, then gritted her teeth, her hands clenched on her recently retrieved pouch of Celestial spirit keys. She was honestly terrified of how close she’d come to death a moment before, and while she had her keys back, Lucy still shivered at how close she had been to just... dying... her guts falling out of her side her blood soaking the ground. When she had been facing Acnologia or Grimoire Heart, she’d never had time to feel fear, but the suddenness of how her death had come at her so suddenly was horrifying.

However, here Cana was, who had missed being gutted similarly by sheer luck, wanting to get back into the fight. And looking at her girlfriend, Lucy knew she could not just hunker down and wait the fight out. *No, I, I can’t just sit back and hide. I’m a Fairy Tail Mage, damn it!*

She breathed in deeply, then growled out, "Virgo, enlarge your tunnel. It's time I start doing more here!"

Looking at her master in the light of Cana's card, Virgo smiled. "Yes, mistress."

A second later, and Capricorn, one of Lucy's three most offensively capable Celestial Spirits appeared. The tall goat-like man's horns scrapped the top of Virgo's temporary tunnel, and he seemed to be somewhat surprised, but Lucy quickly filled him in. "We're going to let you and Minerva out at the same time, hit the long haired asshole with the white and black color motif as hard as you can. I'll provide you with as much magic as you need."

"Of course mistress. But I have to protest your language. Regardless of circumstances, a lady should always deport themselves appropriately to her station," the butler-like Celestial Spirit remonstrated gently, one hand coming up to push at the bridge of his glasses.

"Really?" Minerva chuckled wanly as the bird settled on her forearms, the injuries there beginning to heal up as she watched. "I actually think she's understating it, big guy."

Above them, seeing the man use Dragon Force had startled Wendy out of her own next attack as she returned to the fight and she watched as Seilah and the man exchanged blows so fast that most normal people, or indeed most mages wouldn't have been able to follow. She could, but was startled to realize that Seilah was getting the worst of it. While more of Seilah's attacks were getting through Rogue's defenses, her strikes weren't hurting Rogue enough to matter. Whereas every blow that got through Seilah's defenses sent her reeling.

That was enough to get Wendy over her surprise, and she set aside both surprise and the sadness that they were fighting another Dragon Slayer for some reason to activate her own Dragon Force. "Dragon Force!"

Rogue finally batted Seilah aside only to turn and stare, shock visible on his bleeding face as magic erupted around Wendy, far more magic than he had ever anticipated she could have. He was further astonished when her appearance changed. Wendy grew another inch in height and width across the shoulders and her hair shifted from its normal blue color into purple. "W, wait, what! How can you have Dragon Force!? You were a weakling, the weakest of Dragon Slayers, a, a fucking **healer!**"

"I was the first to reach it! And it looks as if you haven't perfected it, Half-n-Half," Wendy taunted, launching herself forward, the change messing with her normal attitude more than a bit. She launched herself forward, a taunt on her lips that would have made Ranma smile proudly. "You called the tune, but I'm the one who leads this dance!"

"I killed both Natsu and Gajeel when I achieved Dragon Force! If you think your puny power up can match mine, you won't live to regret it!" Rogue roared.

Watching this via a small hole in the ground just big enough for her to look through, Virgo reported this to her mistress, and an instant later, the ground behind Rogue erupted. He stumbled, twisting around and dodging a kick from Wendy, who slammed into the ground at his feet, hopping up and into a roundhouse kick. This the man blocked, but then Capricorn was on him. "Fist of the Ram, Mountain Shattering Blow!"

Capricorn's attack missed as Rogue ducked under it, and from his back, the shadow wings he had sported throughout the fight launched a dozen spear of shadow towards the spirit. But Minerva teleported Capricorn away, then back in as Wendy attacked at the same time. For a few seconds, Rogue held his own against both of them, but Wendy's speed and striking power started to overwhelm him in conjunction with Capricorn and Minerva's attacks. She was keeping her Territory Explosions small now, but aiming them very effectively, teleporting them into crack into his elbow, knees or face, and his reaction time was only up to keeping his face from taking further damage.

However, this proved to be a trap. Suddenly a kick crashed through Wendy's defenses into her chin, sending the younger girl flying upward. This opened him up to a hit from Capricorn, but Rogue caught it, and then from underneath the two men, their conjoined shadow came alive, as did the shadows around Minerva and Lucy. Rogue had been concentrating on that even as Capricorn and Wendy had pressed in on him. "White Shadow Dragon's Subtle Fang!"

Acting to save her Mistress, Virgo grabbed Lucy once more from below, pulling her into the ground, avoiding the two Shadow spears that would have hit her in the head and chest if she had remained where she was. Minerva too was able to dodge thanks to her Territory teleportation.

Capricorn knew that he couldn't dodge, and so didn't even try. His body was purely magical in any event, if he died, he would simply return to the Celestial Spirit Realm. So instead of dodging, Capricorn moved into the attack, smashing a blow into Rogue's chest, his hand glowing dark pink and yellow. "Celestial Ram Strike!"

Rogue grunted as he felt himself lifted off his feet, then Wendy was there, zooming along the ground and upwards, catching him in an uppercut even as Capricorn's form dissipated below him. Rogue quickly regained control of his flight, but continued higher into the air, staring down at the rapidly rising Wendy and the blonde form of Lucy, who had just reappeared from under the ground. "DAMN you! What does it take to kill you people!? And you, Heartfilia I will--!"

"More than you've got, weakling!" Wendy interrupted Rogue with a shout, trying to put into action some of the Make 'em Mad, Make 'em Stupid™ technique that Ranma had used around her so often.

This time it worked, and ignoring his sudden fury at Lucy's survival, he charged down to meet her.

The two Dragon Slayer's met in midair, with Rogue attempting his attacks once more at point blank range to go with his Dragon Force powers. Beams of white light appeared from one hand, while a twirling mass of shadow shot forward from the eye on the side of his body that was covered in shadow. But in the air, Wendy was far more maneuverable. She dodged most of his attacks, and those she couldn't she smashed, punching out hard in turn.

Rogue blocked it with difficulty, and then the pair of them were off, bouncing around and into one another as they flew from one side of the castle to the other. Each punch flung out enough magic to shatter the outer wall and the towers further, and one attack from Rogue sped downward into the city below the manmade hill the royal castle sat on. Luckily, it didn't hit anything but the top of a house, which was smashed to pieces.

The next second, Wendy's greater maneuverability proved decisive. Rogue accidentally opened his defenses when Wendy dodged a blow he was certain would hit and Wendy's next blow hammered into his shadowy side. The strike dissipated some of the miasma there, hurling him back down into the ground at an angle, smashing him through the outer wall with so much force he didn't even slow down. His impact with the veranda that marked the back of the castle caused a massive crater that finished the job of wrecking the nearby garden area, causing a large portion of the castle wall to shimmer as, **finally**, the magical defenses woven into the castle activated to keep it from further damage.

Seilah was not the only one watching the two Dragon Slayers whose comment at that point was, "About time!"

Before Rogue could get to his feet, Wendy zoomed in, her feet slamming down into his chest with bone breaking force even to a Dragon Slayer. Blood burst from his mouth, but he slashed at her legs with his Light Magic covered hand, forcing her up and off of him, then as she was in the midair and flipping away, roared, "White Shadow Dragon's Roar!"

The large burst of light and shadow magic crashed into and over Wendy, but she moved with it, letting it fling her higher into the air, grimacing in pain from the strike. But it wasn't enough to put her down for the count, and while still being hurled into the air from the magical blast, Wendy thrust out her hands to either side then brought them together in front of her mouth, forcing out her own attack into the teeth of Rogue's. "**Sky Dragon's Roar!**"

From all around her, a torrent of magical power came together coalescing into a tornado of force that battered down into Rogue's ongoing attack, flattening it and him in turn within seconds. He tried to fight back, tried to will more power into his own roar, but Wendy overwhelmed him, slamming him back into the ground with a cry of agony as his attack cut off, and her attack went on to rake his body with beyond hurricane-force winds and magical power.

Wendy's attack slowly cut off, and she landed nearby, crouching down, one fist in front of the other ready to continue to the fight if need be.

But even though Rogue was in one piece, he was not looking too good. His clothing was shredded, one arm, the arm that had previously been covered in shadow magic was missing from the elbow down, entirely shredded by Wendy's attack, along with hundreds of bleeding cuts scattered over his body. He pushed himself loosely to his feet, staring at her with hatred blazing in his remaining eye. "No! No. I will, I will open the gate, I will go through to the past, I will..."

"You will shut up!" Seilah growled, encapsulating the man with her macro magic, right before her fist caught him in the center of the chest, breaking every rib that hadn't already been broken and hurling him up into the air, while to one side, Lucy summoned Leo, ready to do her part again if need be.

Rogue barely had a moment to glare at Lucy before Cana struck him from behind, teleported there thanks to a boost from Minerva, where she finished the last of the incantation, "Fairy GLITTER!!!"

The enormous blast of Light and Fairy magic blasted into the man, hurling him back down towards the ground, almost eating into the man's body such was its strength as he slammed into the ground again, his body and the area around him being crushed under the impact of the blow. And this time, when Cana's attack faded, Rogue didn't get up again.

For a moment, Cana stood over the body of their opponent but just as she was about to check if he was alive or not, Rogue seemed to fade out of existence, his form becoming immaterial and blurry before disappearing entirely. "What the hell?! Please don't tell me that was some kind of emergency teleport!"

"No chance!" Minerva said, her own eyes just as wide, but shaking her head even so. "I have my Territory Magic up around both of you at the moment, there's no way he could have teleported without me feeling it. That was... something else. It was almost as if he just simply ceased to exist somehow."

Lucy sighed, shaking her head and falling back onto her rear, leaning her head against an ornamental bowl set near the entrance into the place before slumping onto her back staring up at the sky above. "I don't care what happened. I just care that it's over. Damn, but that was worse than most of the other fights I've been in, if only because of the suddenness of it! You do not expect to be killed over tea and crumpets."

Hisui's face appeared over her and a hand reached down to help the far taller, and, the Princess had to admit much, **much** bustier woman to her feet. The princess had been in the palace, but hadn't gone much further than the entryway, which might have cost Hisui her life if not for the magical defenses built into the castle. *I think we desperately need to have those renewed and replaced.*

Aloud, Hisui said, "True, and if we had thought the man behind this incident would be able to attack so brazenly, we would have been prepared. But I believe we can still give you some tea and crumpets, and anything else any of you need."

Even as she spoke though, she was looking over at Minerva for an explanation as to where Rogue's body had gone. She and her father had seen the entire battle from the castle. Toma was still inside, organizing men to come out and help the battered mages if they needed it, as well as seeing to Arcadios and Carla. While Carla was already up and moving, if slowly, her whole body one big bruise, Arcadios had been nearly slain by a single blow from the man when he slammed into the tallest tower of the castle. Every other guard who tried to intervene in the fight was also dead bar the one Minerva had switched with, and even he had his arm nearly ripped off from a piece of tree from one of the numerous magical clashes. And as for the mages, only Wendy and Lucy's presence had kept any of the mages from dying.

Seeing the battle was over, Wendy calmed down, letting her Dragon Force fade. As it did, she began to fall forward, only to be caught by Seilah, who smiled at the girl, pulling her towards the others even as her own transformation form ended. "More tea and crumpets does sound nice. I find myself hungry again," Seilah said, to which the exhausted Wendy mumbled agreement.

"I don't know how much of that is the fact that you are a growing girl, or your exertions over the last few moments, but I am certain that whichever it is, the king and his castle will provide," Hisui answered drolly.

After putting everything the man had spouted out in his madness together, they still didn't know what had happened to him, until Wendy remembered something. "Wait! I remember, doesn't Ultear use some kind of forbidden magic or some kind that deals with time? Maybe she could tell us something about what happened to Rogue? If he really came from the future I mean."+

Thanks to the damage done to the castle, it took them some time to contact the Magic Council, and when they did, Ultear was quite incensed that they haven't been brought in on this issue immediately. "I understand we're still under a cloud of suspicion because of, well, gross incompetence really, but still! We are sitting on the largest library of magical knowledge in the Peninsula!" the woman began, building up to a tirade on a similar vein, which went on for several moments, as the Princess and Kings simply took it.

Eventually however, the woman actually began to listen, and hearing Minerva's testimony that it wasn't a teleportation of any kind, she had a theory. "That almost sounds as if one of two things occurred. One, the man was so magically augmented that when he began to lose his magic, the Shadow and Light Dragon Slayer magic within him rebelled against one another and his body, tearing him apart. There's a reason why Ranma can't use fire magic and why Natsu can't use water magic. Complete opposite magics like that cannot truly survive in equilibrium."

Everyone there grimaced at that, but Ultear went on shaking her head. “But that would’ve been a slow process, I think. What you’re describing was quick. In that case, the most likely scenario is that it was a Temporal Refraction Point.”

“A what?” many people asked, although Seilah looked as if she’d heard the term before, frowning pensively and tapping her finger against her lips.

“Temporal Refraction Point,” Ultear repeated. “It’s what happens when the world basically reacts to stop a paradox from happening. The universe does not like paradoxes, and it has some... we’ll call them inbuilt defenses against them. You mentioned that Rogue mentioned he already exists somewhere in our timeframe, regardless of his age or whatever else. If Rogue is not from our time, he cannot technically exist here. While he was a living sentient person, his own sense of self and magical power would’ve kept that at bay. But once those were gone, and he became simply a corpse, the universe would act to remove the problem.”

Toma frowned. “I wish we had been able to take him captive. We might have been able to learn more about Acnologia, and about our own past if he somehow felt that he could travel there and gain the power Acnologia did. Not to mention the future, which would’ve been fascinating.”

“It would have, although I don’t think he would’ve given us straight answers,” Hisui stated dryly.

“Or even the right ones,” Ultear spoke up, drawing their attention back to her image in the lacrima for a moment. She pointed at Wendy. “You said he recognized you, but thought you were a wallflower, a weakling, the weakest of Dragon Slayers, right? Those were his exact words? When everyone knows that you’re actually stronger than Gajeel or Natsu. With that, I would wager that he’s from some kind of future where that was the case.”

Carla’s eyes widened and she gasped so loud everyone in Toma’s office turned to her. And then, as they watched, the Exceed began to laugh, first a light chortle then and almost out of control before, almost falling out of her chair. “Ranma,” she gasped between laughs, “the Ranma Effect, hehehe, just like me!”

It took her a while to regain control of herself, to explain, but that explanation was enough for Wendy to start giggling, and for Seilah to also smile. Lucy and the other Fairy Tail mages got it a moment later, having heard this story before. But eventually, Carla did have to explain what she meant to the king.

“As you know your Majesty, I am a princess among my people, the daughter of the ruling Queen of the Exceeds in Edolas. Our lineage goes back quite a long while, and has always ruled our people because we have the gift of clairvoyance. But my gift your Majesty, while initially quite strong, instantly began to fade the moment I started to travel with Wendy and Ranma. The same thing happened when we were in Edolas to my mother. She completely lost the ability

to see the future, and in fact suffered tremendously because of Ranma's presence, which gave her something like a migraine inserted into her mind with all the subtlety of a warhammer. If Ranma's mere presence affects the future like that, then it stands to reason that someone who traveled from the future would find his so-called past changed, even if he travelled back in time before those changes could get to the point he traveled back from."

Toma worked that out for himself for a few moments, looking over at the Princess Minerva, the now recovered Arcadios and Darton, who all nodded, understanding what Carla was saying. "Very well then. I believe we can accept this premise as truth for now. I still would like you Ultear, to come to Crocus and examine everything. But I think we can put a period to this incident now."

"Actually, I don't know we can quite yet," Wendy bowed her head in apology toward the king. "I think the dangers over, but if this future Rogue is here already, that means that he and his friend that he killed for power is still out there. I think we need to try to find them, and maybe keep an eye on them from now on."

Seilah looked down at her, shaking her head slightly. "And that has nothing to do with your secret desire to find yourself in the big sister position? I would have thought Erza's pregnancy would be enough."

"I never said that!" Wendy retorted with a wide grin on her face, and laughter once more cascaded through the room. "Although if this Rogue is younger than me, I'm certainly going to become his and this Sting guy's big sister. Just like Ranma did me. And I'll train them the same way too. Just like Erza-san and I will train her baby."

Lucy and Cana began to pray for the two young Dragon Slayers' souls, while Toma thought it was a magnificent idea, and Seilah left the room to raid the castle's library, having no desire to speak of babies or training. However, Wendy's plans for a trip to find the young Rogue was curtailed almost instantly. Not an hour later, as the Fairy Tail mages were still helping repair the royal castle and help the wounded, a message had arrived from Magnolia: Erza's baby was on the way, and would be arriving within the day. Far too quickly, much to Wendy's chagrin, to get back in time to help.

OOOOOO

At the same time that Acnologia flew out from his lair to bring death and destruction, in Magnolia, new lives were coming into the world. The hospital of Magnolia wasn't used to having multiple births, the town wasn't big enough for that to be normal. But with Porlyusica in attendance on one of the three births, the other hospital workers were capable of handling two of them, in this case Anna and Lisanna Strauss. This left the pink haired healer to handle the most difficult patient of all: Erza Belserion.

“When I get a hold of Ranma I am going to remove what makes him a man with a dull spoon! And then make him eat them, sausage and egg style!” Erza screeched, her eyes clamped tightly shut, as one hand clenched around a metal ball. Previously, Mirajane and Laxus had been standing by her side as Erza began to have contractions, helping her recall her breathing exercises, and letting her squeeze their hands. But with the twins going into labor, Mira had skipped out, and Laxus had used the excuse of needing to check in with a few of the guild members to do the same. *Traitors!*

To say that Erza was not taking the birthing process well was an understatement. Indeed, Erza had proven all along that she was not one of nature’s mothers. While her body seemed able to easily handle everything up to this point, her spirit had been a different story. The fact she’d had to have a set of armor purposefully made to expand with her stomach had infuriated Erza, and so had the fact she couldn’t go out on missions or even exercise much before Makarov or Mira came by to yell at her. It infuriated Erza, even if a part of her was interested to see what the baby would be like.

Hearing the crunch of metal being squeezed to the point where it began to deform, Porlyusica shook her head, before concentrating on her own task. “You say that now, but when you see him again, I rather doubt that your monkey mind will be able to stop yourself from thinking of all the fun those boy bits have given you. Just remember in the future that boy bits plus girl bits equals future baby and future baby equals pain for the mother and you’ll be fine.”

Despite her caustic words and tone, there was something almost gentle about the way she delivered that line.

Despite that, Erza stared between her legs at the woman as if she was mad. “If you think I will ever forget this, this pain, you are greatly mistaken. I have been stabbed through the stomach, had my eye removed, and put up with Gajeel’s idea of singing, and none of them have bothered me as much as this! If Ranma wants to have more children, Juvia or Jenny can do the deed from now on!”

“I’ll wait to see how you take to actual motherhood before I place a wager on either side of that bet,” the older woman announced, then smiled faintly. “By the way, have you thought of names for the baby?”

“GRAHH...” Erza grunted out through a particularly hard contraction. “I, I talked about it with Laxus and Master Makarov. W, we decided on a combination of my and Ranma’s name for a boy, Irene for a girl.”

“Ho? That’s nice.” Then without warning, she smacked Erza’s thigh lightly. “And now for the final stretch my dear!”

Not thirty minutes later, the cries of a newborn baby rang around the room. After the baby was washed the umbilical cord cut, and everything else done to make certain that the

baby was healthy, Porlyusica sat in the chair that had been vacated by Mira and Laxus, placing the small bundle next to Erza's head.

"Well, congratulations, Erza." Once more, the healer was trying to sound brusque and offensive, but it just didn't work. Not with the kind smile on her face, or the gentle way she placed the baby down and then folded the blanket covering Erza back so she could raise a hand to touch him. "It's a boy."

Erza turned her head to look at the little life she had brought into the world, her arm on the opposite side coming over to gently stroke down the baby's cheek, trying to think of what she actually felt right now. Relief that it was over, stunned amazement that this little creature had come out of her, was a part of her, astonishment at how soft his skin felt. Joy? Fear, maybe? Concern about the future? She didn't know.

In the end, all Erza could say aloud was, "Hello, Enma. Welcome to the world."

OOOOOO

The night passed uneventfully, which was extremely strange to consider how much activity they'd seen the day before. But the strangest thing to occur to them before they left their current domicile was Ranma suddenly crying as they ate breakfast, before shivering so violently he accidentally crushed his utensils in his hand and banged his head against the wall he was leaning against in lieu of a chair so hard it left a dent.

"What the heck man, what's going on with you?" Natsu asked, staring at Ranma, then down at the food. "There isn't something wrong with the food is there!?"

"These are tears of joy, you ass!" Ranma grunted, wiping at his eyes with one hand. "I just suddenly felt as if Wendy had said or done something that would make me extremely proud of her."

The others all stared at him, and he shrugged. "What? It's a thing! I've told you before about how many different types of shivers there are. There's not that big a difference between that and knowing why I'm suddenly crying and feeling proud of Wendy."

Deciding to leave that bit of Ranma-specialized insanity alone, the group returned to their meal. Later, they took Gajeel's suggestion of the night before and followed the river upstream towards where it became a waterfall in the distance as it flowed from the upper zone of the city. All the Dragon Slayers were spread out, with Ranma on the rooftops to one side, willing to chance being shot with better light to see by. Gajeel was on the street below with Jenny and Juvia, and Natsu was on the street across them from Ranma with Happy on his shoulders.

All of them were straining their senses, trying to figure out if there was anyone else alive in the city and warily watching for the scarab creatures. For some reason those little things had given them all shivers the other night, even if they were probably no real threat. In this manner, they were also able to dodge most of the Wild Magic zones, with only Jenny and Natsu accidentally brushing against one each.

Jenny was more than pleased to continue to walk away with what looked like a bunny tail and fox ears catching Ranma's gaze down on her more than once as she did.

On the other hand, Natsu wasn't so pleased with half of his body being turned into cubes. "I don't want to turn into that Wally guy!"

Thankfully for Natsu, the few moments they spent explaining that adventure to Gajeel, who hadn't heard of it before, was enough time for the magic to fade from Natsu's body. Jenny's new animal parts stayed with them for more than a few hours after, showing both how potent the Wild Magic zones in the city were, and the difference in magical resistance between a Dragon Slayer and a normal mage.

In this manner, they eventually made their way to the point they could make out more details of the large, sprawling rectangular complex that they had seen from outside, the one that almost matched the ziggurats for height, but was much, much wider. This closely, Ranma could see it too had lacrima embedded at each corner of the roof, which probably meant that this building too had been part of whatever lighting system the city had once had.

And it was here that Natsu first noticed a smell on the wind. He hissed, moving towards Gajeel and the others at the center of their little group, waving his hand wildly to grab Ranma's attention.

Once they were all gathered, he whispered, "I'm smelling dragon. Not like the Draconids, this guy smells almost like you, Iron Face. There's something metallic to his stench."

"I'm not the only one who has gone several days without a bath Flame Brain!" Gajeel shot back automatically, even as he frowned, finger tapping at some of his new studs thoughtfully with the rings he wore on one hand. "A metal type Dragon? I... I really don't want to get my hopes up, but could it be..."

"Best not to even say it. Besides, did your father ever seem to take human form?" Gajeel scowled, and shook his head, and Ranma went on. "Because I don't see how a dragon could hide in even that massive building," Ranma said, patting Gajeel on the shoulder. He knew that their parents' leaving was still a major point of trauma for both Natsu Gajeel and Wendy, regardless of their ages. "Still, speak up if you can notice anything when you're in range of the dragon's scent."

By this point, all of them had gotten used to the fact Natsu's nose was better than either Ranma or Gajeel's.

"But you are certain this is a different smell than of the Draconids, Natsu?" Juvia asked.

Natsu nodded. "Positive. I haven't smelled a hint of them since we entered the city."

"I've actually been looking for them as well as whatever else is living in the city from the rooftops," Ranma supplied. "And before anyone asks, we're actually quite near the northern most break in the outer wall, the place where the Draconids were pushing into the city hardest. I still haven't seen any of them. I don't think that their invasion of the city ended last night, and I think this dragon, that Natsu smelled, dealt with them all. So, I suggest we all be on our best behavior as we move forward. I don't want to start something with a random dragon unless he starts it first."

"Or she," Jenny added primly while nodding in firm agreement.

"Heh, right. The female of the species is often more dangerous than the male," Ranma snickered, winking at his girlfriends. "I should know that better than most."

With that, Ranma led the way forward, heading first to where Natsu had first caught the scent. Soon after, Gajeel also caught the scent, and quickly shook his head. "That's not Metalicana. I'd still recognize it no matter how long it's been. This guy's got some metal to him, but it's... sharper? The scent isn't more, but the scent itself is sharper? Weird. And fire too, as if the metal's been in the forge."

The others all looked a little confused by the description, but that was fine by Gajeel. He was a little confused himself. Regardless, with Natsu and Gajeel in the lead, the group moved towards what looked like an entrance into the large building.

There, Ranma stared up at the archway above, shaking his head slightly and pointing to two images in particular. One was a book set in the center of the arch, and the other was what looked like a hand holding a library card set on either side. "Are you telling me this entire place is a library!? It's as wide as three city blocks!"

"Seilah must never know of this, she'd never leave," Juvia quipped, causing a round of chuckles.

However, the explorers became serious as they slowly opened the door. Thankfully, unlike the gate they'd entered Ven'aniel by, someone seemed to have taken care of the mechanisms for the door. It slid open smoothly allowing them entrance into what was undoubtedly a library.

Dozens of bookcases were visible just from the entrance, rising up to the ceiling in some places, while others were shorter. Indeed, to one side, Ranma could see what looked like a play area for kids lined with smaller bookshelves, under a kind of light that looked like a giant version of the ladybug light Wendy had adored for so many years, but in the shape of some fluffy looking flying creature. *Huh, come to think of it, that looks kind of like Wendy's description of... no it couldn't be. That would be weird.*

To the other side there was a desk, very obviously where the librarian waited to help people find what they were looking for or checkout books. Behind the desk were a series of weird tubes stuck into the wall, the purpose of which Ranma couldn't figure out at a glance. A series of metallic plaques was set above each, and rows of more plaques covered the wall on every side of the tubes.

Looking deeper into the library, the group could see several places where light shone through where holes had been made in the roof. Nevertheless even there, someone had moved all the mobile bookcases away so that the books didn't take any harm from wind or weather. And Ranma could even see that someone had put up tarps which hung loosely at the moment but which could be tied into place to block out rain or snow.

That wasn't to say that the rest of the library was fully intact of course. Even with someone looking out for the place, the passage of time would have damaged the books within. One example was what looked like a pond set to one side, the water within moving from a tiny waterfall falling from above down into the pond, then out via a crack in the back wall of the library. *The riverbank further upstream must have taken some damage, letting a constant trickle out to somehow make its way here,* Ranma mused.

As they moved deeper into the library, Juvia found out that simply the passage of time was enough to damage the books when she picked up a book from one side, only to watch in dismay as it disintegrated in her fingers. On the other side of the row however, Jenny had picked out another book, holding it up and flicking it through the pages without damaging it at all, even though she couldn't read the language. It was clear from that that some of the books had magic on them, which had helped to preserve them, although looking around, Ranma decided that most of the books didn't have that protection. He could see closer to the holes in the roof several small piles among the books where specific ones had already decomposed.

They stayed silent, staring around them. Even Natsu and Happy fell under the normal spell of so many books, a certain reverence coming over them, causing the pair to keep their voices to a whisper as they excitedly spoke to one another, wondering if they could find ancient adventure books here.

Because of the lack of noise they were making, or perhaps the individual living here's own level of concentration, they came out into an open area near the center of the library without warning to the individual they were here to meet.

The creature in question was currently human, a man, reclining at his ease in a large, padded chair. But he certainly did not smell like one to any of the Dragon Slayers. He didn't smell like a Dragon Slayer either. They smelled of their element, their own humanity and a hint of scales. This creature smelled of steel, fire and scales. So whatever he looked like, he was most decidedly a dragon, one who had apparently somehow learned how to transform himself in a way that none of the Dragon Slayers' parents (teacher, in Ranma's case) had.

In appearance, the man was somewhat striking. First, the man was tall, towering over all of the group by at least a foot and a half. His shoulders were slightly broad, but not overly much, his body instead leaning towards thinness, speed rather than brute power, much like Ranma's own. He had a short but well-kept goatee and short, slicked back hair. Both of which was lined in two different colors, steel gray and bright almost flame-like red. He looked around thirty or so judging by his face, without any wrinkles there, rather a small smile as he read his book, little incongruous glasses perched at the end of his nose.

The man wasn't naked or anything like that either, thankfully. Instead, he wore what Ranma would call a haori, the traditional clothing a samurai wore while at home, the colors white with red highlights and, for some reason, the image of a quarter moon on the back beside a sword that was accompanied by marks going out from it as if to signify it was glowing.

At his side, he wore a falchion. This kind of sword was a little shorter than that of a long sword, with a slightly thicker blade and a curve to it, with the blade thicker in width towards the tip. The grip was a basket hilt, worked in fine filigree, but Gajeel instantly recognized the metal of that basket as the same type that made up the outer shell of their robotic home.

The transformed dragon's forearms, visible from here, were littered with small tattoos of swords. Each of them was different from one another, a different sword type. His eyes, as could be seen through the small glasses, were yellow, and quite reptilian looking even as they locked on the book in his hands, the intensity of the look matching the small smile on his face.

Seeing the man was not paying them any attention, Ranma gestured to the others to back away for a moment. When they did, he stepped forward, deliberately letting his footfall be a little louder than normal. "Hey, we come in--"

That was as far as he got before the man was out of his chair, the sword having teleported almost into his hand, slicing towards Ranma's head. Ranma however was ready, and could track the attack coming despite how fast was. He raised his hand, covered with the same armor technique he'd used earlier that day.

The sword struck his water shield and barely slowed, biting into his skin despite Ranma's durability, which was even higher now than it had been before they entered the Blasted Lands. Ranma had made a special point of training his durability so that he could laugh off even the strongest of Natsu's blows. When it hit Ranma's bone, it stuck, seeming to shock the man.

Grimacing, Ranma's other hand came up so fast it would have made his Amaguriken speed seem slow, grabbing at the man's wrist before he could pull it the sword away as he shouted, "We came here in peace! We helped destroy the Draconids yesterday outside the city, you had to have seen it! If you don't want company, we can go, but if you attack me again..."

Ranma's attempts at diplomacy once more seemed to work, and the man frowned, then pulled the sword back, flicking the blade away to wipe water and blood off before sheathing it. And when he spoke, it was obvious that, like the scrabs, not only did he understand their language, but he could speak it too. "I... apologize I suppose. I tend to get lost in the written word quite easily. I saw your actions yesterday, and I must thank you for cutting down on my latest package of nuisances from the north before they could enter my city. I could have dealt with them all in time, but it would have been annoying. Watching your battle from afar was not. But who are you? You have the scent of a Dragon Slayer, water warrior, a scent I might have known at one point. But the others? Are they also all Dragon Slayers? I can tell at least two are. Why have you come here?"

My name's Ranma, these are my companions. Gajeel and Natsu, both Dragon Slayers. Happy is Natsu's friend, and Jenny and Juvia are with us because they wanted to get stronger too."

At first, the man stared at the Exceed, as he stood on his hind legs and waved as if the man had never seen a cat that could stand on his hind feet before. But after a moment, the rest of what Ranma said registered, and he scowled. "Is that why you have sought me out? To eat my heart and take my power? If so, you will pay dearly for it!"

The man raised his blade once more, but Ranma quickly shook his head. *Damn, two days and two fights I've used words to get out of. I must be coming down with something. Still, that's a disgusting image.* "No! I didn't even know that was a thing. We're in the Blasted Lands to work on our wide angle attacks in a way that we couldn't in civilized lands so that we can take the fight to Acnologia in the future."

At that, the Draconid stared at Ranma, then looking around at the others. "The Blasted Lands... it is as good as any for the continent. But I will need your oath that that is the case, please. You mentioned the reason for my wariness, although if it is true that you wish to do battle with that creature, I will not stand in your way."

All of them swore that Ranma was telling the truth, even Happy, causing the dragon in disguise to start and stare at the Exceed again as he spoke like any normal person would. A gleam entered the creature's gaze at that, and he looked at the mall thoughtfully. "Well, if you were all angry or desperate as to think coming to the Blasted Lands to train was a smart idea, it seems as if you have a tale to tell. Share it, and I will tell you about the city. And perhaps after, if we become better acquainted with one another, I might have a little deal for you."

“That’s sounds fine, but normally when you’re trying to make friends you introduce yourself,” Ranma noted, showing no worry of the man.

The tall man guffawed that, shaking his head, the guffaw far louder than a human voice should have made, rattling the nearby bookshelves and Happy where he stood. “True! But I am a few thousand years out of practice of talking to anyone, let alone making friends. Yet I am called Kurnugi, the sword Saint, son of Selene, Queen of the moon. Be welcome to the city of waters and forgers, Ven’aniel, strangers. Now, tell me your tale please, and leave nothing out! I do love a good story.”

OOOOOOO

There was a debate in Alvarez among the average citizens as to which of the nine Spriggan were the most powerful. Was it Lady Dimaria, who it was known could control time itself? Or maybe young Ajeel Rami, one of the three newest inductees, he had been a king in his own right before the Empire conquered his desert kingdom. That would certainly be fitting given how bravely he fought before submitting after only a single battle in order to save his people. Or could it be Larcade Dragneel? Although Lazy, somewhat irresponsible, and laid back, those who saw the ‘White Dragneel’ in action knew he was immensely powerful.

But those who actually worked with the Spriggan or had ever seen them ‘spar’ readily acknowledged that Irene Belserion was the most powerful of them all. The tall, statuesque woman, who was seemingly around middle-aged, was known as the Scarlet Despair to those who made trouble within the Empire, as well as one of the empire’s greatest beauties. Her crimson locks terrified and enticed at the same time all those who met her, despite Irene normally wearing a large witch’s hat.

Or it could be because Irene’s normal outfit showed off a tremendous amount of under-boob to go along with acres of glorious thigh. Men were simple creatures at heart.

Luckily, Irene was also the gentlest of the Spriggan with her subordinates, the Irene Squad, seeing them almost as daughters. She was also one of the most intelligent members of the Spriggan. All of the Spriggan held offices in the government, even though Larcade frequently foisted his workload on others, and each had their duties to perform throughout the Empire. Irene was chief transportation minister, and it had her constantly traveling across the Empire from one side to the other. She was never in one place for very long, but she always left a positive impression on people.

But for the past few months, Irene had begun to feel... out of sorts. Not so much as if something was wrong with Irene herself, but as if she could vaguely sense something was wrong with the world. And when Irene’s mind bent towards finding Zeref, instead Irene found... nothing. A void. It was not like Zeref was hiding himself even from her scrying, but as if he wasn’t there to be found at all. Moreover, that had... changed something inside Irene, not

something negative, but it was as if her entire mind was freed of some great obligation or thought that had been consuming much of her mental faculties before this.

At first, Irene had tried to shake the feeling off, throwing herself into her work even more than normal, going out of her way to help her little helpers grow stronger. But then the latest report of Ishgar's war potential had hit her desk.

Over the past decade, as the Empire ramped up its plans to truly invade the peninsula, their spies and secret agents had gathered a lot of information on every nation in Ishgar's military, along with making a study of the strongest mages on the peninsula. While Pergrande's military was the only one that truly concerned the Empire, (despite Mistral's new militarism and Midi's technological advancements,) the mages found elsewhere in Ishgar were a different matter.

The Wizard Saints were a known factor, but a dangerous one. Those like Gildarts and the strange Ranger Oceana were harder to predict, but equally as dangerous, and to a lesser extent so were the various powerful mages from Fiore's magic guilds. One of whom was named Erza Belserion.

With her mind now opened to more than simple loyalty to Zeref and his dream for the future, Irene had not needed her follower Juliet to tell her, "Good grief, my lady, she looks like she could be related to you!" to know that for the truth. Staring at the picture, that certainty had risen in Irene's mind. Somehow, somehow, Erza Scarlett was related to Irene.

Ever since, Irene had dealt with a few dreams and thoughts on that score. Irene had even found herself looking towards the Ishgar, more and more, wondering if she felt any real loyalty to the Empire as a whole. Certain people she knew she did, her followers for instance. Juliet and Heine were like daughters. But to the Empire? An empire made to battle Acnologia, then abandoned by that same man to let him wander the world for some reason?

Am I the only one who feels as if this past year has been... dull? Pointless? As if everything we do now is pointless. Why I feel that way I cannot figure out, but it is there. A light removed from our life, a driving force removed from our minds, leaving me to wonder what I really wish to do with this life of mine. I knew before, I had devoted my life to Zeref after he reversed my dragonification. But with the man gone... somehow, I do not...

Irene's thoughts cut off as the door to her current office opened, and one of her followers, the ninja-like Heine, rushed in, holding a message in one hand. The message she held was marked by both the seal of the King, and the urgent color, black with a single star at each corner. "Mistress! This just arrived. The messenger was told that he is to wait for a reply."

That meant it was even more serious than the color of the envelope would denote, and Irene nodded, holding out her hand for the note. As she held it, the note tugged at her magic for a moment, and Irene had to smile briefly at the feel of one of the enchantments she had

developed that was now used by many within the Empire. This particular enchantment allowed only those with the proper magical signal to open it.

Reading through the message quickly, she stood up, a thrill of excitement going through her as well as trepidation. "Call Juliet and the foot soldiers. Irene Squad leaves within the hour. We are heading to the Empire's easternmost border. Acnologia has been spotted, and it is time for we Spriggan to do what our order was created for."

End Chapter