

I am not Japanese and cannot draw. Ergo the originals ain't mine.

Here at last is the next chapter of MW, folks. Sorry it took so long, but first not only did I have to do major rewrites after Justlovereadin' got it back to me, but Hiryo had RL issues. I think however, as always, their help makes the chapter better.

In other news, Stallion is finished and off to the editors. I will be closing the HP poll and starting work on it tomorrow.

Chapter 39: A Dragon's Feast

Since dragons didn't believe in burying their dead, Ranma and the others left Motherglare's corpse where it fell, along with all her so-called children. The Blasted Lands' scavengers would eventually see to the corpses. Ranma had a thought or two about maybe harvesting something from Motherglare's body, but the memory of Typhon restrained him. That, and the fact Kurnugi might object to it, seeing as while she was his enemy, they were both dragons and thinking creatures would normally object to the idea of harvesting things from one another's dead bodies. Ranma knew he would object to someone trying to grave rob or use the bones of dead humans.

Turning their feet south back down towards Ven'ael, the group took their time as they went that first day. Not only were all save Kurnugi battered and exhausted from the campaign, but the mood of the two Dragon Slayers that had fought Motherglare was somewhat somber and far more introspective than any of the others would've given the two credit for most of the time. Those who knew Natsu well enough knew that he did have hidden depths, but it was very clear that both he and Gajeel had been profoundly impacted by the necessity of putting down Motherglare.

That was the way Gajeel put it that night as they camped on a large rock outcropping. "We were putting her down, like you would have to if someone was bit by a rabid dog. There's no cure for that kind of thing, and Motherglare, she was **crazy**. I know we were making jokes about it at the time, but something really had broken in her head when she tried to fight Acnologia. Dealing with her was hard, but also kind of sad, to see someone so amazing as a dragon so hurt in the head."

"Truly, Motherglare was but one such victim," Kurnugi said, his eyes far away. "I personally never tried, but I met several who did. Even dragons cannot face Acnologia and not come out harmed in some fashion, even if their flesh does not feel the touch of his claws or magic. There is... something to facing that beast, something that eats away at your essence, drains your strength even as you try to fight it, that can wear on even the strongest of us."

Ranma's ear perked up at that for some reason, but he couldn't put a finger on why. He tried to think back to the fight against Acnologia, to put Kurnugi's words into perspective but it eluded him for now.

"Enough of that." Turning from where she had been cooking a heavy stew over the fire, Jenny interrupted Kurnugi's grim tone and Ranma's musings alike, wagging a ladle at Natsu, Kurnugi and Gajeel, who were all sitting on the other side of the campfire. "It's done. It had to be done. But we shouldn't dwell on it long or worry about Acnologia's effect on our minds. We've all fought him once already, and he overwhelmed us as surely as he probably overwhelmed Motherglare back in the day. But we're fine, we will be fine in the future, all right? Enough of this maudlin talk, or else I'm going to smack you upside the head with my ladle."

Kurnugi snorted at that, rolling his eyes, his entire body language saying that he didn't take that threat seriously, as he began to speak of another dragon whose mind had broken from fighting Acnologia. However, before the first two words were out of his mouth, he felt a smack upside his head. It didn't hurt, but it certainly got his attention, and Kurnugi flicked his eyes up towards where Jenny was standing, her ladle upright in her hand as if she had just caught it from having thrown at him. "You, you really smacked me with a ladle. Really?"

In his shock, Kurnugi missed the sight of Happy flying behind his head, holding an exact replica of the ladle in Jenny's hand, one hand stuffed over his mouth. While the two of them hadn't worked it out before, Happy was not an Exceed to let a good trolling moment pass him by.

"Did you think I wouldn't? Just because you aren't a part of our actual party doesn't mean you're immune to my rules!" Jenny growled, her modeling skills coming to the fore to let her keep a straight face. Well, that and her time with Blue Pegasus in general. Keeping an act up when you were in the club dealing with customers was a necessity, after all.

From where he was laid out, his head in Juvia's lap for some reason, he had laid down on his own, but Juvia had insisted on offering him a lap pillow. Ranma shook his head. "Just go along with her, my dude. When Jenny gets into that kind of mood, you really don't want to mess with her. Or do dragons not have the equivalent of feminine fury?"

"Oh, they do... my mother was a Grandmaster at that skill," Kurnugi said slowly, while Gajeel chuckled. "I will follow your words of wisdom in this case."

Natsu's grin at Happy's trick turned into a shudder at a memory brought on by the conversation. Over the winter, one day Natsu hadn't been able to find Ranma to spar with him and had found Wendy instead. Wendy, for some reason, had been in a very bad mood, and instead of trying to get out of it or just using it as dodging practice like normal, the little Dragon Slayer had gone full Erza on him.

Behind Kurnugi, Happy lowered himself to the ground, quickly putting the ladle away in his pouch, then moving forward into the firelight, pointing out past his shoulder. "I finished digging a latrine if anyone else needs to use one," he said, snickering internally.

"So, what are our plans going forward?" Ranma asked, taking a bowl of stew from Jenny. He sat up, and Jenny instantly leaned into his side across from Juvia as the others all served themselves. "Are we heading straight back to the city, or do you all think we should take some time to hunt up some meat for our supplies?"

"We could use some more meat and herbs," Jenny agreed. "We go through a lot of it, and we've got Kurnugi to feed, too."

Kurnugi had the grace to look embarrassed, but he bowed floridly from the waist towards Ranma, Juvia and Jenny. "I would apologize for my appetite, but perhaps you should all take it as a complement to how amazing your food is? Truly, while the ingredients are beyond bizarre, the meals you prepare match most of the ones that I can remember having, while living among humans here among the city-states."

"I'm all for adding some more meat too, maybe enough so that we don't have to rely on jerky? I mean, we found a few working fridges, right?" Gajeel asked. Of all of them, he had the least to do with cooking if he could get away with it. He was fine with prepping food, but the moment it became time to try and actually cook, things started to go wrong.

"We found a few working appliances," Ranma agreed. "We tested most of them out during the meals we had before Ranma and Jenny went on our scouting mission. I don't like making assumptions in this place, but they all let us produce regular food, so maybe other fridges will be good to use."

Jenny and Juvia exchanged a glance around Ranma's chest but didn't add anything to the conversation. In point of fact, the pair of them was wondering if they should maybe start thinking about leaving the Blasted Lands. By the girls' reckoning, it was coming up on two years since they had entered it, and that had been the initial cutoff point for their training journey. However, they both knew that there was still a good bit to learn from Kurnugi, especially if they started to spare with him in his dragon form, so both girls remained quiet for now.

"I might actually know of a store inside the city that might sell such refrigerators. An appliance store. They... might have a far better chance of working once we do so," Kurnugi admitted. "Or at least be in one piece."

Everyone shook their heads at that, remembering some of the things they had seen the insane level of background magic do to magical appliances.

Kurnugi then shook his head. "However, beyond meat, I have another request. I presume that you all noticed that Ven'ael does not get nearly as much water as it should?"

Ranma was the first to nod that, while the others had to think about it for a second. To Ranma, it had been obvious that the riverbanks within the city had been designed to deal with a lot more water coming through them than was currently the case. "Yeah, there's only about a foot of water or something along the entire length, right? But the riverbanks and everything are built to take at least six feet or more."

"Exactly. I wish us to take a detour before heading back to the city. The rivers both come from the east, and I would like us to see what we can do about repairing the damage or correcting the course of those rivers so that the water flows into Ven'ael as it did in the ancient days."

"Is there a reason? Other than thinking deeper water'd make the rivers look nice, I mean?" Natsu asked with a shrug. He didn't care one way or another, although exploring more of the Blasted Lands was always fun.

"Two. One, the water will help a few of the other inhabitants of the cities, barring the Blacksmith's Assistants, anyway. The water is also still connected to several of the manufactories. I am very interested in seeing if the water will let me get one of those factories in specific running. It was supposed to create super-sized Acmees (Automatic Cleaning Magical Entities) that could even repair some of the city's buildings. I never saw it in action, but the library does contain several books about how to direct the 'Super Acmees', so it is possible to get them running again. Well..." Kurnugi flushed a bit. "With someone who actually can understand those manuals anyway. I can translate them easily, but understanding what they are actually talking about? I get lost in the first three pages."

Natsu gulped suddenly, which had nothing to do with the stew, instead remembering his run in with the critters. They were somehow just a bit on the scary side. The others all looked a little pensive as well, but Kurnugi was quick to reassure them. "Remember, friends, you have all been read into the city's infrastructure as guests. They will not harm you any longer. The 'Autonomic Cleaning Magical Entities' programming, despite a few glitches in their general attitude, remains largely intact, or else they would've attacked me hundreds of times over. Or the jelly generator. Not that they could hurt it much."

At that, Natsu's attitude shifted, remembering the large turtle creature that he had made friends with. "You got a point there."

"So not nostalgia, but something practical for your own living quarters, I suppose. Sure, we can do that," Ranma said with a shrug. "If you take the first watch tonight and all the nights until we're back at Ven'ael."

"Done," he answered before digging into his food again.

With the fact that they were also going to be hunting along the way, Jenny went back and made more of the stew, and all of them had enough that they were feeling fit to burst

before heading to bed. The feeling of being full helped Natsu and Gajeel push through any residual issues their subconscious minds tried to bring up during their dreams after the fight against the crazy Motherglare, and the next morning, the group was off quickly.

With Jenny and Happy flying above them as per usual, the group headed further eastward. Within a few days, they pushed further southeast than Ranma, Jenny and Juvia had gone during their disparate sojourns northward. As they went, they started to see several small herds of herbivore-like creatures in the distance, a few dozen birds, and hundreds of wild magic zones that Happy and Jenny, having gotten **very** good at spotting the telltale shiver, warned them off before they hit them.

A few WMZs were still troublesome, especially when they stopped to spar for a bit at lunch one day. The spar got out of hand, and Ranma found himself flung through the air by a combined blow from Natsu and Gajeel. Gajeel had joined in on the punch at the last second, something that had Ranma nodding his head, pleased that the man, who had really worked hard on his balance and overall speed, had been able to recover and shift around fast enough to punch him again. The combined blow had more momentum than actual harm to it, of course, but Ranma still found himself flying above rather than into a rock, he had instinctively planned to use as a springboard back into the pair.

Above him, Happy shouted, "Ranma, look out!"

Before Ranma could do anything, he felt one of his legs tingle, a feeling all of them had felt many times since entering the Blasted Lands. "Well, damn!"

Looking down, Ranma didn't see anything wrong, and his leg was still obeying his commands. Yet when he landed a second later and tried to push off with both of his legs, he could get some strength only from one leg. The other had obeyed, but instead of bending lightly and then letting Ranma jump away, the leg collapsed. It had been turned into what looked like foam or maybe rubber, the collapse sending Ranma flopping on the ground. "What the heck. Seriously, what the heck?!"

He reached down and tapped his leg, finding the feel of it almost like a swimming noodle from his original world. And just as bendable. "Huh. So, no strength, but I can move it at least."

He was then forced to dodge as Gajeel's fist slammed down into where his head had been a moment ago. "You know the rules, Ranma! If it doesn't affect your entire body, you're still fair gaCCK!"

His words were cut off as the foam of Ranma's leg slapped him across the mouth. "The fuck?!"

Ranma grinned at him as he balanced on one leg, the pool noodle leg poised to one side. "Come on then! Let's see if I can make this work for me. It's like a built-in whip!"

The spar ended with Ranma having indeed used his leg like a whip, something that neither of his opponents could get used to fast enough. Eventually, the whip wrapped around Natsu's throat, choking him at the same time Ranma locked in a chokehold on Gajeel. The three of them all rolled on the ground as Natsu's fingers scrambled at the pool noodle, which Ranma had somehow tied into a knot around his neck. At the same time, Gajeel couldn't break Ranma's chokehold around his neck despite his best efforts.

Even when Natsu tried to burn the foam of Ranma's leg, it resisted mightily. Eventually, both of the younger Dragon Slayers were forced to tap out. At which point, Ranma had to scramble to get the knots in his noodle leg out before it could return to normal. By the time he did, Ranma could feel the tingle of the magic fading, and was only a second away from having his leg return to flesh and blood with a knot in it.

This was the sight Jenny returned to, as she settled down, running in a straight line for a second to bleed off her momentum, before she canceled her Glider Form. "What are... you know what, I don't want to know. Anyway, if you want to know, I found a few of those herbivores we've been seeing nearby. I don't know about the rest of you, but steaks sound great for dinner.

The herbivores were strange-looking creatures like most in the Blasted Lands. They looked like miniature giraffes almost, with long legs and long necks not quite the size of a regular full-grown giraffe. The build of their bodies and heads resembled that of cows, complete with udders.

Happy was eager to learn if they produced actual milk. So eager, he ignored the fact they all had to test things before eating them for the first time. The Exceed darted in, hoping to take a pull before the female animal noticed he was there, a small tin cup in one hand.

However, as big as those legs were, they folded quickly. As soon as the blue-furred Exceed's hand touched her udder, the female belly flopped so fast that it caught the little Exceed before he could fly back out of range.

Pushing up from where they had been hiding nearby, Gajeel and Ranma stared at this, while Natsu fell out of another hiding spot, laughing wildly at his little buddy's misfortune. So loud was he that most of the giraffe-cow things bolted, but the one currently crushing their companion remained where it was.

"Do we think we should help them? He really did do this to himself. I mean, we've seen Happy and Natsu do some stupid things, but that took the cake, man," Gajeel grunted.

"Proper comeuppance, I'd say. Speaking as a guy who can turn into a girl, if someone tried to come along and milk **me** like that, I for damn sure wouldn't like it all that much either," Ranma drawled. Without looking, he reached over and slapped Gajeel upside the head,

although the metal Dragon Slayer's eyes had already begun to cross for some reason. "And whatever you just thought you'd best forget."

"Yeah, that's going right into the brain bleach drawer," Gajeel nodded, his tone one who had suddenly found himself staring into the face of true horror.

"Aren't you all gonna help me?! My ribs, my ribs, they're breaking, my spine!" Happy's muffled voice came, one paw feebly flopping to one side of the cow giraffe creature.

He was extremely unhappy to learn that the creatures did not make good eating later that night. The group had isolated one of the herd as it tried to run away from them, and after a decent amount of time spent skinning, checking the meat and preparing it, the fresh steak looked and smelled great.

Yet it tasted, in Juvia's words, "Like someone had decided to fill up a perfectly acceptable steak with bits and pieces of chalk. Juvia will decline, thank you."

The others all agreed, and Ranma was worried. They had several things among the supplies they had gathered before coming to the Blasted Lands to use to test meat or any other kind of food for that kind of thing, and it had passed, but those kinds of tests weren't perfect. The group decided to take it easy the next day, staying around their camp, but there didn't seem to be any adverse effects.

Late the next day, they found the riverbeds they were looking for. As they had known previously, both riverbeds were almost dry, barely a foot of water in each of them, although the two of them were relatively close so that the Dragon Slayers and dragon could hear one another and stay in contact. Coming together once more, they decided to follow the northernmost river as Kurnugi said that the other one shifted dramatically southward. "If memory serves, the northernmost one was fed from a series of mountains to the east, and I think those mountains are far closer than the source for the southern river. And really, we only need to change the course of one of the rivers back to what it was, not both."

Ranma nodded at that, reflecting that he was grateful that Kurnugi hadn't demanded that Ranma and Juvia somehow become living batteries for the city's water supply in return for his sparring or training with them. They probably could have, and maybe after a few weeks of constant work, it might turn into good endurance training, but Ranma doubted it. This way was much better.

At the speed the group could set, which was pretty darn high, even for Gajeel, it barely took a day and a half from the time they reached the river to trace it back into the mountains, which, at first, looked like normal mountains. However, as they got close, Ranma and the others began to slow down. Then, as they arrived at the foot of the mountains, they just stared.

For one thing, this mountain range was huge. It had filled up the horizon from one edge to the other almost from the moment the two flyers spotted it as a gray mass in the distance. However, that wasn't the strangest thing. For one thing, Ranma and the others had gotten used to the idea that most of the land in the Blasted Lands was kind of spartan, with few copses of trees scattered around, mostly rocky or grassland.

However, the mountainside was a veritable forest. Large trees grew from where they stood all the way up the mountainside, almost to the top of the mountains from Happy's report. And then there was the shape of those mountains themselves. They looked as if someone had decided to take a mountain of clay and then molded it into a series of new-age art pieces before sticking them all together, letting moss grow on it, moss, being the forest, and then setting the entire thing on top of a fountain. Hundreds, perhaps even as many as a thousand large gaping holes or small apertures spurted out water and a constant cascade of fast flowing highly magical water, some of it so fast that it looked as if it was coming out like a geyser, others, almost resembled more the water you would get at the bottom of a waterslide.

"You know, we've seen a lot of things since coming into the Blasted Lands. But that's got to take the cake. And did you notice? I'm not seeing any signs of Wild Magic Zones around here, either. It's almost as if the water and the trees work together to somehow ground the ambient magic," Jenny mused.

"Wait, does that mean it's actually safe to swim in? Because let me tell you, when I look up at that mountain, I don't see a natural wonder. I see a waterpark!" Natsu said, shouting excitedly.

"Aye, sir! It looks like a lot of fun, although most of those rides look a little too small for you to get the most out of Natsu. You should all be fun size like me," Happy said, both eager to needle his friend and agree with them at the same time.

Looking at one another, Ranma and Juvia exchanged shrugs, and then moved over into the water, touching it lightly. Juvia reported instantly, "The waters here are highly magical, but there isn't any embedded spell. Juvia thinks that it might be safe for all of you to go into, as it is only a bit worse than most of the running water we've seen so far. Magical overexposure might be an issue for Happy and Jenny, though."

One of the main ways that Juvia had grown her magical reserves since coming to the Blasted Lands was to simply soak in the magic within the various sources of water. Her ability to turn into water allowed Juvia to convert a decent portion of the absorbed magic into her own reserves. Given how much larger his reserves were in comparison Ranma didn't get as much out of it, but Ranma sensed, these waters might help even him a bit.

Happy pouted at that, but Natsu patted him on the head. "Don't worry, little guy, you can sit on my head, and I'll ride some of those slides. If you want to get wet, you can try a few of them yourself. Just make certain you're not feeling nauseous or weak."

At that, Happy's general good humor returned, and the group split up, the two girls heading into the tent the Ranma hastily put up to change, while the boys went beside some nearby bushes. This included Kurnugi, who was interested in experiencing these water rides as the others described. He had seen them occasionally, while living among the humans of the continent before but had never actually partaken back then.

As the boys were changing, an animal poked itself up out of one of the nearby bushes, sniffing the air before seeming to glare at them for a bit. With a huff, it twitched around, trundling away, seeming without any concern, rather showing disdain for the two legs. To Ranma, it looked almost like a cross between a raccoon and a monkey. It had the ears of a monkey, as well as the front hands of one, but the body and the back legs were all raccoon. It was also green, blending into the background remarkably well.

Gajeel had spotted it too, and now stared after the little critter thoughtfully. "I wonder if those make better eating than the cow giraffes."

"Anything would make better eating in the cow giraffes. I'll set up a few traps around the area. Maybe by the time we're done playing, we might've caught a few," Ranma answered.

The others all nodded in agreement, but Kurnugi was quick to remind them, "Just remember, we're not doing this entirely for fun. We want to figure out how to divert the water into the riverbed leading back to Ven'ael instead of into some of the other rivers around here."

Ranma nodded at that, reflecting that a magnificent part about being here in this world, in general, was that they didn't have to deal with anyone complaining about them harming the environment, as he had heard several times back in his old world. Here in the Blasted Lands, the environment had already been harmed long ago. As far as Kurnugi knew, there was no sign of actual civilization anywhere on this side of the monstrous river that he had mentioned previously.

For the rest of the day, the group used the natural water slides to have fun, with even the three Dragon Slayers feeling no desire to try to turn this into a water fight or anything like that. Even Ranma didn't have any urge to turn this into some kind of training, although he was more dutiful than the other two Dragon Slayers when it came to figuring out how to divert water into the river they had tracked here. This took a while, but by the time evening was done, the foot-deep water that had previously filled the river had been enhanced to the point that it was slowly filling up the riverbed. It would never match the river that had gone through the city centuries ago, but it would supply more than what had been there previously.

When they returned to the camp, Ranma was pleased to find that his various traps had worked. "Whatever these creatures looked like, they certainly aren't as smart as monkeys," Ranma said as he entered the camp. Two long poles were on his shoulders, each of them containing the bodies of three of the raccoon monkeys. "I figure we can skin and test two of these, cook them, and then store the others in my ki space until we get back to the city."

The others all agreed with this, and soon, after the meat had passed a barrage of tests, Ranma had several raccoon monkey stakes simmering on the grill. And once more when they tasted the meat, their reactions were both immediate and similar. Although, this time, it was also positive. "Oh my God, it's so good!" Gajeel mumbled around a bit of the meat.

"That is the softest meat I've had since we've entered the Blasted Lands!" Jenny exclaimed.

"It's really good, yeah!" Natsu shouted, gobbling his down. "Could be better if was on fire, though."

"That's what you always say, dude. But not all of us like to eat fire," Ranma answered with a snort.

"This is indeed quite tasty, even in comparison to your normal meals," Kurnugi said, shaking his head. "When you all have gone, I might have to make this part of my hunting range. In my dragon form, I would need to eat an entire house full of these creatures to be full, but as a human, one of them would feed me for at least two days or more."

It's all mumbled agreement, eating the meat happily and asking for seconds. This became thirds for Kurnugi, Ranma and Gajeel, the three biggest eaters of the group.

However, the revenge of the monkey raccoons would come a few hours later, saving their fellows from the future predations of the sword element Dragon...

That night, Ranma woke abruptly, not because of his danger sense going on or anything trying to attack him or splashing with water. Rather, he heard someone gagging.

As he set up, Juvia excavated herself from his side, rolling over off the bed, Her hands grasping at her stomach. "Ugh, Juvia, Juvia's stomach, it is revolting! What have we done?!"

For a few moments, Ranma panicked, hopping to his feet. After trying to make Juvia comfortable, he headed towards the small kitchenette, finding the source of the gagging noise there. Jenny had been retching into the sink, barely able to keep on her feet, and Ranma hastily grabbed a trashcan. With it in one hand, he raced back to Juvia, setting her up so she could throw up into the can if need be.

With one girlfriend seen to, he shifted to taking care of Jenny, pulling her hair back away from her face with one hand while holding her up with a hand on her rear. Normally, the feel of those amazing glutes under his hand would have Ranma thinking of certain activities, but right now, that thought could not be further from his mind. Nothing came up as Jenny heaved, but Ranma could hear Juvia throwing up, and there was nothing dry about that.

Moments later, during a break between Jenny's dry heaving, Ranma heard a loud moan from outside, one of extreme uncomfortableness rather than pain or anything else. Situating Jenny next to Juvia enough so that she too could throw up into the bucket, Ranma stuck his head out of the tent, looking towards where the boys had set up their tent a ways away. While he, Juvia and Jenny had been too tired and too full of good food to have wanted to have fun last night, it had become a habit that the pair of younger Dragon Slayers set up their tent a little ways away from Ranma and the girls tent, still within range of the same camp, but distant enough they didn't become immediately aware of any goings on between the three lovers.

Between the two tents near the fire, Kurnugi had kipped out on the ground, disdaining any need for a sleeping bag or tent. Currently, Kurnugi was also holding his stomach, rolling from side to side, shouting, "Oh, Dragon Gods who watch from above! Why have you forsaken me! Blessed magic, take away this pain!"

With the girls in no position to move and having helped them as much as he could, Ranma headed to check on Kurnugi, then the other men, finding both of them groaning and moaning. Even Happy was curled up into a little ball, reminding Ranma strongly of how he had reacted to over-exposure to the background magic of the Blasted Lands for the first few weeks. "Why, why?! The raccoon monkey meat, it's fighting back! And it's winning!"

Shaking his head at that, Ranma gently guided each of the youngsters out of the tent, then the two girls, setting each of them up separately around the campsite with something to throw up into. This proved to be necessary, as everyone else soon joined Juvia in hurling up everything inside their stomachs.

By the time the sun rose to the midday position of the day after, all of them were gaunt and pale but had thrown up enough to get whatever it was in their system out of it. Their stomachs were still churning and broiling in a way that had them all unable to move, but that was a marked improvement from the night before.

"So I think we all forgot about one defense mechanism we hadn't yet run into here in the Blasted Lands before. Being so nasty to deal with once in a person's stomach to make eating ya not worth it," Ranma mused. "But at least we know that what you all are going through isn't actually poisonous."

"How, how are you unaffected?" Kurnugi gasped as he stared up at Ranma in wonder. "You ate just as much as Gajeel and I did, and you are not suffering at all!"

"The famous Saotome Stomach™ ain't just famous for how much you can eat or how quickly. It's famous for being able to eat anything, no matter how bad it is," Ranma answered with a snort. That, and by training from being Akane's taste dummy for so long.

Ranma was kept busy for the rest of that day caring for the group, as, after throwing up everything they could, all of them remained lethargic. He got some broth down into them, but they only recovered slowly.

“So, I think we can all agree that trying to eat more of those green raccoon monkey creatures is a bad idea, right?” Ranma quipped as they began to finally leave the mountains behind, following the river back to the city. Loud groans of affirmation were his only reply, and the trip continued.

Yet the Blasted Lands wasn't quite done throwing them curveballs. The group on the ground wasn't quite yet within sight of the city when Happy returned from on high, landing in front of the others. “The city looks as if it's pretty much the same way we left it, except there seems to be a lot of strange birds in the air above it.”

Kurnugi froze, staring at the little creature, then slowly placed a hand on his face, rubbing it up and down, while Ranma, Gajeel and Natsu looked at Happy quizzically, with Natsu putting their thoughts into words. “So what? There are always birds around.”

“Yeah, but these are weird. These birds look like floating slimes. There were a lot of them, thousands in the air over the city. Jenny took the spyglass, and she says she saw them attacking some of the Acmees.”

“Are these birds that are made of slime or slimes that have grown wings or something?” Gajeel questioned, shaking his head with a laugh as two very different images came to mind. “Well, at least we know they'll be easy to squish. Although part of me is wondering which side would win that battle, those little weird cleaning droids things or a horde of slime birds?”

“That kind of thing does sound interesting, but remember, we're going to be living in Ven'auel for a bit. I don't know about you, but bird droppings smell like hell to me.” Ranma shook his head, getting grunts of agreement from the other Dragon Slayers, although Kurnugi remained quiet. “I really don't want to think of what the bird droppings of birds that look like slimes would be like.”

That caused them all to gag, and Ranma and Juvia hopped into the river. “The two of us will go on ahead, you lot...” He paused as Happy hopped onto Natsu's back, and Natsu used his afterburner attack to zoom up into the air and away toward the city. “Gajeel, you and Kurnugi come after the rest of us. We'll try to leave you some of them.”

“Oh, please don't wait on my account,” Kurnugi said, having recovered somewhat, and he stared after the others as they raced off, his lips twitching into a smirk.

Gajeel turned to him, one eyebrow rising in surprise. He had sensed something in Kurnugi's voice that Ranma and Juvia hadn't. “What's up with the birds?”

“... Let’s just say that fighting them at range is most decidedly the best option. And I’ve noticed that only Jenny seems to prefer fighting at range among you lot,” Kurnugi said slowly, shaking his head. “I had forgotten that the slimebird’s migration was due around this time. Normally, I just hunker down and wait. Oh, and to answer your previous question, the Acmees normally win.”

Near the city, Jenny had already begun her attack. She landed near the outskirts of the city and changed into one of her power armors that allowed her to fly, the Gundam. Once that was done, Jenny went on the attack at once, zooming up into the midst of the largest group of slime birds that Jenny could see as the blonde fired into the crowd of birds. She wasn’t trying to kill all of the birds. That would be both taxing and annoying. Instead, Jenny hoped that her attack would scare the slime birds into leaving the area.

True to Happy’s words, they truly did look like birds made out of slime. Tiny thin filaments were visible working inside the slime like they were bones, with full bird eyes and beaks and claws, but with feathers of solid slime and bodies of extremely soft-looking gel, all of it blue or purple but still, see-through like a slime’s would be.

They exploded as she took them under fire. Disdaining using any of her more powerful forms, Jenny simply used simple machine guns, small bursts to destroy each slime bird, wincing a little as the remains plummeted down. “Oh, that’s going to make a mess of the city. Hope those Acmees can clean it up like they can everything else.”

Then, she blinked. “Um...” Even as she attacked the rest of the group, Jenny watched as several of those remains paused and flew up towards her as if gravity had suddenly reversed. The filaments within seemed to come apart even more than they already had under the impact of Jenny’s bullets. Glowing white within the interior of the slimes, the remains of more than a dozen slimes were propelled toward their attacker. “How the heck?!” Even for the Blasted Lands, this was weird, and Jenny had to suppress a shudder at what would have happened if some of the other creatures they’d fought had that kind of magic.

While Jenny tried to dodge, a few of the slime birds slammed into her chest, head and legs, doing no damage but sticking to her armored form. The weight was negligible, as was the weight of the next few dozen, but she quickly got into the habit of raising her hands to mask her face so that she wasn’t blinded. She was still shooting them out of the sky and getting slimed for her troubles when Natsu arrived, plummeting down in and through the horde.

The pink-haired man aimed to land on one of the roofs, then zoomed back upwards to come back through the horde of slime birds from above. As he and Happy blasted through, his flames burnt dozens of the slimes into ash, but not all of them completely. Those that weren’t burned to ash still died, but the same thing happened to him as happened to Jenny.

Only unlike Jenny, Natsu and Happy didn't have any kind of suits between them and the slimes. "Oh, yuck! What the heckKGGRBBL!?" Natsu shouted before being smacked in the face by one of the slime corpses.

"UGHHH, this is worse than those slime eel things," Happy gagged, flinching away from the splash of slime that almost got onto his head. "I'm just glad they don't smell."

"Get off me Happy!" Natsu barked. The moment Happy did, Natsu roared, and an aura of flame surrounded him from head to foot. But while the fire seemed to burn a lot of the slimes on him away, large swaths of sticky gunk was left behind, making it look as if he someone had dabbed at his body everywhere with superglue. "What the heck?! This stuff becomes harder to burn after they've stuck to someone!?"

"Attack them from long-range. Happy, put your dodging skills to good use and try to burn any that comes near you," Jenny advised before landing on a roof. There, she quickly transformed into one of her other Take Over forms, her favorite Bubblegum Armor. This form would allow Jenny to shift from roof to roof easily and gave her some long-range firepower in the machine gun in one arm. Not very powerful, but Jenny could still throw a lot of lead.

However, as she transformed back into her regular body, the slimes that had struck her armored form didn't simply drop to the ground. Instead, they appeared on her normal body the instant her former Mecha Take Over Form dissipated. "Gross! It's in my hair, it's in my hair!"

Ranma and Juvia soon found themselves in the same predicament. Ranma burst up from the water, with Jenny reappearing around him, then flashing out into a water-slicker attack that decimated the horde of birds while Ranma dropped down onto a rooftop full of them. When Juvia tried to retreat under the water to avoid the sudden slime projectiles coming her way, the slime infected her water, crawling back up to her or shooting into her head when she appeared. "Disgusting, disgusting! Get it off, get it off!"

By the time Gajeel and Kurnugi arrived at the city, the majority of the slime birds had been dispatched or fled. Despite their sliminess, they did have some measure of self-preservation, and Kurnugi doubted that their migration would take them over the city again. When he and Gajeel got back to the area around the library, which was the center of their occupation within the city, Ranma and the others were slimed almost to their eyeballs, with Ranma and Juvia trying desperately to use their water powers to clean it off. Unfortunately, their water attacks could barely work on whatever kind of sticky residue was in the slimes, to the point where Jenny and Natsu were asking them to use actual attacks, at low power, admittedly, to get it off.

Even Juvia's attempts to turn into water failed. While they had been 'fighting' she had realized that slime somehow was so sticky that it mixed into her body. Whatever substance lined the slime, it acted almost like an infection, spreading into the water like dye. Luckily, she

had tried that with her hand first, and feeling the unusual sensation had caused her to stop, or she would have been dealing with the sticky feeling throughout her body not just on it.

“Why do I get the impression that you knew this was going to happen?”

“I do not know why?”

The smirk was a mistake, Kurnugi realized almost instantly. Ranma launched himself forward, forcing Kurnugi to dodge to one side, flicking around a grab that moved faster than most humans could track. Then Ranma was trying to charge at him, his arms spread wide. And like the others, he was still slimed. “Oh, hell no! Keep that gunk away from me.”

“That’s a great idea. Let’s share the wealth!” Natsu shouted, trying to catch Gajeel with a flying tackle of his own.

“Fuck that!” he barked, almost dodging before Jenny and Juvia piled in.

OOOOOOO

“Hmmm...”

Looking up from where she had been reading a report, Irene cocked her head as she looked over at one of her subordinates. “Juliet, is something the matter?”

“No, Mistress, I’m just getting a vague impression that I’m missing out on something fun.” The woman who spoke was young, with an almost childlike figure, unlike her partner. To emphasize her cutesy looks, she wore a very girly outfit, with a skirt and blouse combo in white and gold with lacy golden frills, with white fur-lined snow boots with golden straps to go along with matching pants. All of which worked to set off her orange hair, which she kept in short pigtails held in place by brown bows, with straight-cut bangs hanging slightly over her face.

From one of her hands, some slime slowly fell, bouncing back up into her hand like a yo-yo, as Juliet stared at where her Mistress was floating more than an inch off the train’s exceedingly well-padded chair. The girl allowed a bit of awe to enter her face as she stared at Irene’s normal meditation practice. Her mistress always did this whenever they had to travel together, saying it was a way to train her magical reserves a tiny bit and her mind to concentrate on several things at once, keeping the hover spell in place, while also reading a book and enjoying the trip by train.

This... was honestly a bald faced lie, and a tiny part of Irene wailed like a child shouting *‘Don’t look at me with those adoring eyes, ahhh!’* as Juliet looked at her now. The fact was, despite having left behind actually practicing Dragon Slayer magic, some things still remained of it within Irene’s body even after Zeref had transformed her back to her human body after several centuries of being stuck in her dragon form. In addition, one such thing was being

allergic to traveling via mechanical means. Luckily, coming up with a spell that would let her hover over a surface and move with it had been relatively easy for the Enchantress. But even so, seeing how well Juliet and Heina had swallowed her story about why she had done so caused Irene some emotional damage occasionally.

Turning away, Juliet looked out of a window. "Ah, never mind me, Mistress. That's the train station where we're supposed to meet Brandish-sama."

Smiling at that, Irene nodded and turned to watch the scenery pass by until the train started to slow. She waited until the train stopped before canceling the spell, and, after a second spent ostensibly flicking some lint off her coat, but which was really her waiting to be certain the train had come to a complete stop, grabbing up her staff and making for the door. While she could easily fly wherever she wanted within the Empire, carrying Juliet and Heine was always somewhat annoying, and Irene had developed the hover spell fifteen years ago for just this purpose. Well, that, and she quite enjoyed the elegant style of train travel, particularly in first-class carts like this one. Traveling in style, being served good drinks and being comfortable while watching the world pass by appealed to her. "In that case, let us go out and greet her."

Similar to the train, the train station had a VIP waiting room situated on the second floor, overlooking the streets beyond the station. There, Irene and her two followers found Brandish waiting for them.

Brandish was young, around twenty or so, with green hair that fell to just above her shoulders in a relatively simple bowl cut. She was dressed far more provocatively than was normal in the Empire, wearing what looked like a two-piece bikini with a heavy fur coat. This showed off a rather magnificent body, with curves women of all ages throughout the Empire envied. Her legs were also long, and Brandish's face, dominated by green eyes a little darker than her hair, was striking. Although Irene was always amused more by her fashion sense than the jealous looks Brandish got wherever she went. The sight of gold chains seemingly connected to her jacket just above her breasts to a choker around her neck always made Irene wonder if Brandish was just that fashion-unconscious, or really liked to advertise her fetish.

The younger girl's eyes lit up as she saw Irene, and she moved towards her, smiling happily. "Invel and Yajeel got this pairing right, at least! It's good to see you, Irene-sama."

"I take it you're worried about some of our pairings as well? Bloodman and Ajeel are going to almost undoubtedly have issues working together. I advised against it, but..." Irene shrugged her shoulders, and then enfolded the young girl in a hug. "It's good to see you two Bran Bran."

Brandish's perky nose wrinkled. "You know I hate that nickname, Irene-sama!"

“And you also know that you are a Spriggan as well. You don’t need to use formalities with me,” Irene retorted, a teasing smile on her face. “Until you drop that, I’m going to keep using your nickname, Bran Bran. Put it down as a foible allowed to all teachers.”

Brandish had been a young child when she came to the Alvarez Empire with her mother, although her mother had been murdered when she was young by a Dark Mage named Zoldeo who had subsequently escaped the Empire back to Ishgar. Taken in by the Military Upbringing Reserve System, the Empire’s network of orphanages, Brandish had been tested for magical potential, and it was quickly discovered that not only did Brandish have magical potential but that her magical reserves put her among the highest in the Empire.

Irene had taken her under her wing when Brandish was a teen, training her as she had many others over the years as part of the Irene Squad. Eventually, Brandish became strong enough to become a Spriggan two years ago. Since then, their various duties had kept the two of them apart.

Brandish pouted at Irene’s words, but after a second, Brandish shook her head. “Yes, that’s the pairing I am concerned with. I’m also a little worried about Dimaria and Neinhart. While they routinely grate on one another’s nerves when they are in the same room for any appreciable time, they are both headstrong and arrogant. I’m also somewhat... ambivalent about this plan in general. And don’t tell me you’re not, Irene-sama. You can fly, meaning that you can probably get to wherever Acnologia is far faster than the rest of us. But the rest of us might be left too far away to do anything if he attacks somewhere else.”

“True enough, but with a nation the size of the Empire, that will always be the case. We have to try our best to get ahead of Acnologia, rather than follow after him,” Irene replied with a slight shrug.

The first report that had roused Irene from her thoughts on Erza Scarlet weeks ago had not been verified for a few days after, although that first report had done wonders to make the Spriggan and the rest of the government of the Empire turn away from their concerns on where their emperor had got to. A week and a half passed before the next reported sighting of the Dragon of the Apocalypse had arrived. This time, he was not near the border but deep into the Empire, but by the time Irene could arrive, he was long gone. This was quickly followed by two more sightings over the next four days, then five, all on one day, with each report coming from a different segment of the Empire.

The implication was clear. Acnologia was searching the Empire for something. What that could be, Irene had speculated on, but none of the others agreed with her idea that there could be a dragon hiding somewhere within the Empire. Surely, they would know if that was the case. The Prime Minister and the other Spriggan all felt that Acnologia was searching for their emperor, just as their own agents were outside the Empire. To Irene, that made little sense, but considering how Irene didn’t have anything but her instincts to back up her own theory, she hadn’t argued.

The response by the Empire had been immediate. The Air Force of the Empire had been turned inward, broken into smaller wings and assigned to the various armies set up throughout the Empire. Meanwhile, the Spriggan had found themselves broken up into teams of two, situated at the Empire's borders so that they could respond whenever the dragon appeared again from whichever direction. That was the plan of Prime Minister Yajeel and the Chief of Staff, Invel, anyway. Irene figured that she would simply fly to wherever the dragon attacked first, regardless of orders, although these days, she found that she felt little loyalty to the Empire. Indeed, her overall motivation these days was quite murky.

The empire as a whole held little interest for Irene, other than having some very nice views and food. She had been a queen in the past and disdained any position of authority now. She had been finding even her position of Spriggan burdensome, which was why she had not joined the slowly boiling conflict between Invel and the ambitious Ajeel. While the Empire had been her home for decades, ever since Irene had been able to regain her human body, that did not mean she loved its people or Empire. Especially without Zeref around, the man who had been the source of her salvation and thus had her loyalty. With him gone, though that loyalty had faded very quickly, as if a pressure on her mind had been removed, and Irene was happy for it. She still felt responsible for Heine and Juliet, and... oddly..., there was a part of Irene that wanted to challenge the so-called Dragon King.

Irene knew that was blind arrogance on her part, perhaps fed during the last few decades as a Spriggan, to think she could fight the creature that had devastated dozens, perhaps as many as a hundred dragons in the ancient past, the being that had killed Belserion and forced Irene herself to flee. Perhaps there was also an aspect of shame at that flight driving her thoughts, having been defeated so soundly, Irene wanted to get some of her own back. Perhaps it was some deep, draconic part of her psyche that demanded Irene fight the other dragon, prove her strength. Whatever it was, Irene could not deny that a part of her wanted to confront the monster, just as she knew Dimaria and a few of the others did.

The redhead did not allow her thoughts on that score to show on her face. She had no idea if Brandish too was beginning to question things, if she could feel her mind working differently now that the strange focus Zeref's mere existence had created was gone, or indeed, if Irene herself was the only one who felt that change. If it was not, Irene had no desire whatsoever to fight her former pupil, if she felt Irene was thinking traitorous thoughts. Much like her current pair of subordinates, Brandish was something like a daughter to Irene. "Come, tell me what you've been up to, and then, I believe the train that we are supposed to take to the westernmost border is due in a few hours. Perhaps we can have something for lunch? I haven't been in this train station before, but I believe most VIP lounge's kitchens are quite good."

Brandish smiled and nodded, having much the same appreciation for the first-class transportation as the older woman did, although, unlike the other woman, she couldn't fly. She said so now, and at the questioning tone in the other woman's voice, Irene shrugged. "For me, it does not matter where I am stationed. You are right, Bran Bran. Wherever Acnologia shows up, I will get myself to, one way or the other."

At that, Brandish shook her head with a laugh. “Well, I can always shrink myself down to pocket size. That way, at least two of us will be able to arrive wherever within the Empire within an hour to back up whoever else is already fighting the beast. Frankly, that might be the best plan.”

Irene nodded at that, and the two of them sat down at a nearby table. There, servants raced forward to take their orders for food, and the pair of women started to get caught up with one another.

OOOOOOO

Eventually, Ranma and Juvia were able to get the slimes off by using small, intense water attacks to clean off the majority of the slime. Which, Ranma was quick to point out, “Was actually pretty good for precision training I guess, annoying as hell, but good training.”

“Juvia thinks Ranma should shut up right now!” Juvia ground out, shaking her head. “Ranma is far too cheerful for someone who has been slimed.”

“Agreed, lovey. Your idea of everything being training can be taken too far, too many extremes, Ranma,” Jenny grumbled, trying to pull out bits of slime from her hair. There had been a limit to even Ranma’s ability to create small superpowered water attacks, but he and Juvia had at least removed most of it. “Dammit, this is going to take forever to get out!”

“We know, blast it. You shared the fucking wealth, bitch,” Gajeel growled out from nearby, where he was trying to use brute force to try to pull the last of the actual slime out.

Natsu laughed, although he did so without his little buddy. Happy had dunked himself in the river, only to scream and wail that the river did nothing to remove the slime. “Hahaha! That’s right, guys! Fire rules! Germs, bad breath, cold, flus, and now slimes, my fire is the best!”

“Natsu, rub it in any more and the next time I knock you out in on of our spars, you’ll find yourself waking up bald!” Ranma growled. “I’ll freaking remove your hair by the handful!”

“And I’ll help,” Jenny added.

Natsu’s laughter trailed off into an uncertain chuckle. While Ranma wasn’t the type to keep a grudge, and as another guy probably wouldn’t go through with that threat Jenny was another matter entirely. Especially now that Ranma had put the idea in her head. *And Ranma for sure won’t stop her.* “Um, now let’s all calm down here...”

Nearby, Kurnugi sat stoically on the bottom of the river, only his head above water as he too lamented of that fact. He apparently felt waiting for the slime corpses to simply be pulled apart by the river was a far more elegant solution than letting Ranma and Juvia experiment on him.

“This is why I never tried to fight the damn slimes!” he growled angrily, shaking his head. “I tried that the very first time they came through, and even traveling through storm clouds didn’t help me to get it off. I will remember this, you all, and I will have my vengeance!”

None of them was in the mood to cook anything that night, and all of them went to bed hungry, irritated and still feeling slimy. Even Kurnugi’s idea of using a slower method hadn’t really worked all that well without soap or any other kind of cleaner.

The entire morning was spent trying to get rid of the feeling, but thankfully, by the time it was lunchtime, everyone was feeling much cleaner, because Natsu had come up with an idea that actually worked. Possibly fueled by terror at Jenny’s vengeance for his taunting. Regardless, he found some of the Acmes, then spent a few hours convincing them to come by and help them all get cleaned. The feeling of the little magical cleaners working over their bodies was weird as all get out, a cross between being tickled and being rubbed down with sandpaper, but it worked. Only Juvia and Jenny were unhappy, as the cleaning droids weren’t nearly as gentle to hair as the two girls would have preferred.

After that, Gajeel and Natsu surprised all of the others by sitting down on one of the rooftops near where they were staying, beginning to meditate. Staring up at them, Ranma shook his head. “Huh, I’ve been trying to get those two into meditation for months, hell, more than that, at least two years now! I started back when we were in Edolas, for goodness sake, after we thrashed that king guy. And now they take to it? Just because they want to talk to their old man? Weird.”

Ranma couldn’t imagine wanting to talk to his pops like that. In his case, absence would not make the heart grow fonder, it would just make him question more of his father’s decisions.

Jenny cheerfully pushed him in the side, and Juvia did the same on his other side, bouncing Ranma lightly between them for a moment. “Oh please, you’re not that obtuse, Ranma.”

At that, Ranma grinned, caught her hand and pulled Jenny into a hug, followed by doing the same to Juvia. “No, I suppose I’m not any longer. Although there really was a time when the idea of having any kind of conversation with my old man that didn’t involve the martial arts would seem weird, and the idea of missing him, while he was gone would seem **way** weirder.”

Looking over his girlfriends’ heads toward Kurnugi, Ranma cocked his head inquisitively. “So if those two have already learned the most important thing you wanted to teach them, does that mean it’s my turn now?”

Slowly Kurnugi pushed himself to his feet, staring at Ranma thoughtfully. “I believe it is. I will meet you outside the city. When we spar, I think we will want wide open areas around us.”

At that, Ranma's grin turned toothsome, and he quickly pulled away from the group hug, saying that he would see his girlfriends that night. "Seems as if I've got a challenge ahead of me."

Ranma didn't know the half of it. By the time he exited the city, Kurnugi had transformed. This was the first time any of them had seen him in full dragon form, and he was very impressive, although looked almost as metallic as Gajeel had described Metalicana was.

Kurnugi was large, almost as large as Acnologia, but thinner overall, with less mass to his center or his limbs, and he had four smaller wings instead of two large ones. His head was shaped almost like a marlin's snout, coming to a single point coming down from his snout, making his nose look like the tip of a spear. His claws were larger than the size of his paws than you would think, while at the edges of his wings, sword-like blades extended. The same could be said for his tail, and a series of ridges rose from the rest of his scales, looking like swords of various sizes.

Flapping his four wings once, Kurnugi rose into the air, where he flew around in a series of figures of eights, showing a remarkable turn of speed and dexterity to match. "I am not insane like Motherglare, nor did I specialize in long-range or hit-and-run tactics. I am an in-your-face sort of dragon!" Kurnugi roared. "The same kind of fight you will face with Acnologia. And I will not pull my punches much at all here. You're the strongest of your fellows, Ranma. Come, see if you can overcome me!"

Ranma's fierce grin hadn't left his face since leaving the girls, and now it widened to the point where Natsu, the most combative of the others, would have felt a little scary. A Boosted Step spell instantly formed under his feet, and he shot into the air, his forelimbs covered in water in the forms of claws as he shouted, "That's what I'm talking about! Bring it on!"

With that, the battle was joined.

OOOOOO

As Ranma and Kurnugi squared off outside Ven'auel, Irene, her two aides and Brandish arrived at the Imperial city of Vesta. This was one of the larger cities near the southern border of Alvarez, a major refinement hub, taking raw goods from nearby mines and forests and creating finished goods to send deeper into the Empire. Thankfully for the four women, this didn't mean that the city was without luxury itself. The hotel that they had taken over was a sign of this.

Built on the side and top of a large spire of rock, the hotel had been the keep portion of a castle centuries ago. It had been the center of the local barbaric fiefdom or some such before this area was brought into the imperial fold. That was well before any of the present Spriggan had been alive bar Irene and Bloodman. It had been Bloodman who had actually been the one that conquered this area for the Empire.

Naturally, the pair of Spriggan was given the best room in the hotel. Built into the rooms that had previously been for the lord of the keep, Brandish had to admit they had a great view of the city and the area around them. After taking in the view for a moment, the green-haired young woman sat down at a small table set against the window. Irene sat across from her, also looking out the window. "For all that it is a magnificent view, the city leaves much to be desired."

Brandish nodded. "At least those factories aren't sending up too much smoke." With a city that refined metal and other raw resources, which was all they could ask.

Frowning suddenly, Irene turned away from the view. "By the way, I had forgotten to bring it up before this, but what happened to that Marin fellow? I thought he had been assigned to you as your aide?"

Twitching Brandish allowed a scowl to appear on her face. "He was. But I took one of your lessons to heart and dismissed him." Irene looked at her quizzically, and Brandish shrugged. "You told me once that you only learn a person's true character when you see how they treat their subordinates."

"Or those less fortunate, yes." Irene smiled at Heine and Juliet for a moment as they came in, a silent question about if the two Spriggan needing anything visible on both their faces. She shook her head and turned back to Brandish. "I take it you witnessed Marin doing something he should not have?"

"Well, not quite. I was simply appalled by how he treated some of the accountants after that incident in Southern Elessia I was involved in stopping." Southern Elessia was a county built around a large port on the other side of Alikatasia from the ports nearest Ishgar. The incident Brandish had dealt with had been a local governor trying to hold back taxes and trying to suborn the local military units, succeeding in doing so for several of them. He had been building up to a full-scale rebellion in his small district... right up until Brandish arrived and crushed any chance of an uprising by wiping out the suborned military units and executing the governor in question.

"After I finished off the messy part of things, we had to stay there to balance the books, help the next governor build up his cabinet, you know I had to execute both the governor and all his advisors and reassure the locals. Marin was supposed to be in charge of finding out where the appropriated funds had been sent. However, I found Marin cajoling the local accountants with shouts, threats and outright assaults, shouting about how non-magicals like them should be grateful to work themselves to their deaths for him to make up for not noticing their governor's actions."

"Ah." Irene nodded at that. Magi-superiority was a major social movement here in the Empire, as it had been centuries ago in Ishgar. Luckily, most people who believed it these days, believed also in benevolent dictatorship, the idea that those with magic, while having a right to

rule, should also rule those beneath kindly considering all they did for the Empire as a whole. “I take it that you decided to let him go then?”

“I shrunk him down on the spot and punted him like a ball out of the room,” Brandish said grimly, making Irene chuckle. “I imagine he’s still in the hospital there.”

For a moment, the conversation paused. There had been a few moments like this, when Irene could sense Brandish had something to ask her, something that she was having trouble getting out. Something far more serious than any comments on Irene’s so-called ‘meditation practice’ while on the train.

What it might be, she had no idea, but the feeling was there. She waited now, not filling the silence, letting Brandish gather herself as her two aides left the room heading down into the city. As the two Spriggan had already made the acquaintance of the local military commanders and appraised them of what to do if Acnologia showed up anywhere in the area (run, hide, help the civilians) the younger girls could have time for themselves. *I wonder if they will find any good bookstores.* If Irene could be said to have a vice, it was for ancient, beautiful looking books.

“Irene-sama, I, have you been feeling... odd lately?” Brandish began hesitantly. “I am not talking about something merely physical, but, but more in your mind. I, I confess I have not been feeling altogether myself. It’s been building up over the past year or so, or, or maybe longer, but I can’t tell where it’s coming from.”

At that, Irene’s silence shifted from convivial to sharp, her eyes narrowing. “You will have to be more specific, my dear.”

“I, I’ve been hearing a lot of rumors you know. I know the Spriggan have been forced to put down more rebellions in the past two years, more civilian unrest than in the past century.” Brandish seemed to change the subject when she answered, but Irene suddenly knew she had not. That in fact Irene knew what Brandish was thinking about. “I’ve heard about even some examples of violence between Larcade, Wall, Bloodman and Ajeel. Rumors even abound about nationalism growing in some of the provinces, former nations...”

“I have heard the same rumors. But you know that nothing will come of it. Ajeel, Invel and Larcade won’t let the Empire break apart like that. And I would say that such things come and go. Give it a few more years, and the nationalistic fervor will die down.”

“Maybe, but as I said, we’ve seen far more of that since the... since the Emperor disappeared so,” Brandish looked up from where she had been seemingly studying the table between them to stare into Irene’s face. “So precipitously. So completely. And as I said earlier, I have felt there has been a change in my mind, too. My thoughts, my devotion to my duties, my thoughts on the empire as a whole, something has changed with them. Ever since then as if the Emperor’s absence... not being gone, but **absence...**”

“Stop,” Irene said, the simple word cutting across Brandish’s slowly rising voice. “I understand your concerns, but please do understand that what you are saying could be seen as treason. Larcade, Bloodman, Invel and others will never waver in their support of Zeref’s empire.”

Irene waited a moment, staring back into Brandish’s eyes until the younger girl nodded. Then she continued. “I am happy, however, to hear how your world view has expanded recently. Young people should not be limited in what they choose to do with their lives.” Brandish brightened at the hidden message there, and Irene went on smoothly. “For my part, I also have found my mind lingering on things that I would normally not consider. But there is Acnologia to deal with before I can follow up on some of those thoughts.”

“Of course,” Brandish nodded, smiling, to which Irene responded with her own smile. The two women understood one another. No longer did either of them feel any real connection or loyalty to the Empire. What that could mean for the future for Brandish, Irene didn’t know. Personally, while a portion of Irene wanted to fight Acnologia for some reason, she was more interested in following up on her interest in the so-called Queen of Fairies and their possible connection.

Irene did know though that Brandish was also interested in Fairy Tail. She wanted to avenge her mother’s murder, which apparently had been ordered or done personally by Layla the mother of a Fairy Tail Mage, Lucy Heartfilia. So perhaps the two friends might continue moving forward after this crisis. *And together, fighting off the rest of the Spriggan, if need be, becomes far less difficult.*

Brandish’s thoughts were far simpler than Irene’s. *It wasn’t only me! Yes! The Emperor, his very presence, he kept us all pointing in the same direction, working together, thinking only about what the Empire as a whole and his goals. But now, now, I can truly understand I don’t care about the Empire. I don’t want this position, this authority. I only wanted to get stronger as a mage to get my revenge on the Heartfilia family. I’ve got the strength, now I just need to go and do it. Getting there will be an issue, but I would far rather deal with that than keep working for an Empire I don’t have much loyalty for, especially not after realizing my former loyalty was more based around some kind of mental domination magic from the Emperor!*

Unfortunately, the good feelings and thoughts of the future the two women were having that evening did not last. Deep in the night, Heine banged on Irene and Brandish’s bedroom doors. “Irene-sama, Brandish-sama! Acnologia, he’s been sighted in Windholme! We just got the alarm!”

OOOOOO

“Hahaha, whichever armorer told you that wearing all-green armor would make you more manly didn’t really do you any favors with that outfit,” A blonde woman laughed, shaking her head as she stared at the man she was addressing, a large stein of ale in one hand.

She was a short but quite pretty young woman, only a few years older than Brandish, although she wasn't quite as tall or busty. Her hair was more dirty blonde than the 'golden' it was called in the Empire's newspapers, cut short in a haphazard, almost spiky manner, reaching to the base of her skull with a few bangs hanging down her forehead, curving away from her golden colored eyes.

And like Brandish and even Irene's outfits, Dimaria's everyday attire was quite revealing. Her breasts, of which she did not have a complex about in comparison to Irene or Brandish's, thank you, were wrapped in a red bandeau, with the upper edge embroidered with white lace. The red theme continued in her pinstriped red and black pants, the ends of which became tight around her calves. In terms of armor, her left forearm was covered by an armored bracer with a wing-like ornament beneath her elbow and her right arm was encased in golden armor up to her elbow, with a seam visible between the gauntlet and the plate of the rest of the arm. Her neck was also protected by a gorget with a golden border, although the majority of it was painted red. She had also been assigned a jacket to wear around her shoulders, but Dimaria had not agreed with that 'suggestion' from the Public Relations department and instead tied it around her waist.

The man she was speaking to was a somewhat effeminate-looking man with a long, thin face, long eyelashes, a perennial pout on his wide mouth, and purple hair pulled into a long ponytail. Currently, he wore a jointed suit of green armor, although normally, he wore frilly shirts that would've hearkened back to the Renaissance to anyone from Earth who would see them. Indeed, the frills of his current shirt could still be seen underneath the armor, and there was a V-shaped hole in the armor under the neck that showed a cravat at the front of the shirt. Purple flower earrings and four pairs of white fur balls, located on his shoulders and hips, completed the image.

The man took the blonde woman's comment with a snort, sneering at the beer in her hand before clicking his fingers. A servant hastily raced over to him, bringing a wineglass and a chilled bottle of wine, which he hastily poured into the glass for the man. "If I want to take critiques on my personal style of dress, I will go to someone whose opinion I would actually care about rather than an exhibitionist like you or Brandish, Dimaria. Honestly, do you girls think that the amount of magical output you can release is proportional to how much of your skin is showing?"

Dimaria, who had garnered the title Warrior Queen in her time as a Spriggan, shook her head. "And I'm supposed to believe that you and the other boys, well, natural boys anyway, don't like looking? We weren't the ones to come up with our outfits, you know."

The public Relations Department wanted to really push the sexy badass look for nearly everyone within the Spriggan. However, Dimaria had to admit that she also thought Brandish's outfit was a bit much. *The big-titted slut.*

“Then again, Larry goes around shirtless all the time, so I suppose there’s is some kind of equality between the sexes there,” she mused aloud. Then she became serious, looking up at the purple-haired man. “When I learned we were teaming up, I sent you a message. Are you going to go along with my plan?”

Neinhart waited until the servant had backed off, taking a sip of the wine, and nodding over his shoulder at the servant before turning back to Dimaria, holding the wineglass between two fingers, standing with his hips cocked, looking for all the world like some nobleman at a soiree rather than in the only in a small community where the two Spriggan had been ordered to meet up. Outside, the rumbles of shouted orders, passing magically propelled trucks and the marching of feet could be heard. Many, **many** more soldiers and far more trucks had begun to arrive in the small community, after Dimaria had been assigned here, than the locals had ever seen in probably the last twenty or thirty years.

The small town was situated near the eastern borders of the Empire, where a massive forest began, spreading both outward and into the Empire. A true frontier town, this place was home to loggers, hunters, trappers and people who didn’t really fit in with the more civilized society that could be found deeper into the Empire’s lands. Nothing at all like Dimaria’s own county of Mildian, which had been a part of the Empire almost since its inception.

Acnologia had been sighted in the air above this place several days ago, hence why Dimaria and Neinhart had been ordered here. Ostensibly, their orders had been to simply engage Acnologia only at need, and if so, to try to hold him in place while the other Spriggan arrived on the scene with hit-and-run attacks. Better would be simply to keep track of him. However, Dimaria’s scheme was quite a bit more ambitious than that. It relied on Acnologia coming to them, but even so, Dimaria felt the plan would work.

“Did you get Invel’s permission for this plan?” Neinhart questioned instead of answering just yet.

“Be serious,” Dimaria scoffed. “You know that Invel thinks we still need to follow the Emperor’s plans. He doesn’t want us to try to fight Acnologia and instead go to war with Ishgar, whatever the Dragon of the End is up to. Despite the fact that the Emperor hasn’t been seen in two years, and that, and I think you know this, he’s not around anymore.” The almost dismissive look on Dimaria’s face when she spoke of Invel Yura, the Spriggan who acted as the Empire’s Chief of Staff, disappeared at those words, becoming cold and biting as she stared at Neinhart.

“Those are dangerous words. Words that you would have to have a lot of courage to say aloud,” Neinhart mused, his own expression becoming serious in a way it hadn’t been when they had merely been talking about trying to fight Acnologia. “I’m not saying you’re wrong, but those are dangerous words.”

Words that Neinhart tacitly agreed with, Dimaria could see. All of them had felt it, an absence from their minds, a presence there in their heads, in the world that none of them could

feel any longer. The whole Empire felt it. Gone was the overriding monolithic feel, the will that had driven the Empire for so long. For months now, individualism, nationalism and rebellion had slowly started to grow, as had a general distaste for the militaristic structure of the Empire. Invel and Larcade had both clamped down on such things but that had not stopped the sentiment from growing.

None of the Spriggan had spoken of it before this with one another to Dimaria's knowledge, but it had to be said: With the Emperor gone, it had always fallen on the Spriggan to lead the Empire. Now, with him more than likely gone permanently, it would be their will that would direct the Empire going forward. There had been clashes behind the scenes between Ajeel and Invel's supporters, and those had been growing in intensity for a while. To the best of Dimaria's knowledge, she liked to think she would be one of the first either would approach, neither had felt out the rest of the Spriggan but it was only a matter of time. *Well, me or Irene, and she has shown no interest in politics or leadership for some time. And what the hell is Larcade playing at, not putting himself forward? He's the one that should be, not Ajeel.*

More importantly, right now, Dimaria wasn't altogether certain if the Emperor had been telling the truth about how big of a threat Acnologia was. She had no idea what happened to the Emperor. None of their spies in Ishgar had carried any reports of that to them, although they did know of the battle against Acnologia that the Fairy Tail guild of Fiore apparently partook in. The way they lost so badly had made Dimaria wonder about the existence of Fairy Heart at all, the ostensible reason why the Emperor had wanted to go to war with Ishgar, a weapon that he could use against Acnologia. Frankly, she was just questioning Zeref's thoughts on a lot of things these days.

"Very well," Neinhart said abruptly, moving forward in a languid, almost overdone manner as he sat in the seat across from her at the table. "I did look at your plan. It's risky. You're going to burn through a full air force corps worth of bombers."

"It can't be helped," Dimaria grumbled. "Neither of us can fight as well in the air as on the ground. We need to force Acnologia to the ground somehow."

While Dimaria had a technique that could let her fly for short distances, that was more like jumping with style. Neinhart didn't even have that. They could, of course, use one of the flyers, but while that would let them get into the air, it would also severely limit their mobility.

As for using so many bombers, that was true. The bombers were flying mechanical creations that had been molded after Lamia Scale's Pegasus, only a bit smaller. They were slower in a straight line, although the scout flyers were faster... and smaller again, only able to carry two people at a time. The Empire's Air Force was organized into several corps, each of them paired with an army of the same name.

"I agree that yours and my powers are among those that should be able to impact Acnologia without needing to first overcome his magical resistance," Neinhart continued. "But I

don't think you allowed for enough artillery or infantry support. You're relying too much on that new bomb that the research department came up with and our own powers. We know that dragons always have immense magical resistance and healing powers. We need to overcome both, that means attacking from as many angles as possible. Something that a lot of artillery units can help us do."

"I wasn't able to get any of the artillery officers in the Fourth Army to agree to join up with my plan, and their general refused to even talk to me without Invel's say-so. If you can do better..." Dimaria trailed off.

"Which means that you did get the air commanders to agree to their role in the plan, hmm? I'd wondered why I saw so many troops working on clearing landing areas out there," Neinhart answered flippantly.

There were at least three companies out there working on that as frantically as possible, with more arriving all the time.

Neinhart then winked at Dimaria, flicking his hair over his shoulder dramatically. "As for getting some of the artillery units to come and meet us here, it just so happens that I dropped off my Four Heraldry Knights to rustle up some of those units for us. They should be arriving a few hours behind me, regardless of what General Tikaruis wants. I also had them ransack the army depot for every single large-scale man-portable magical weapon."

Dimaria grinned, leaning forward. "In that case, let's get down to brass tacks. I haven't figured out how far to spread our scouts, and after looking over the forest, I'm wondering if we should split up into multiple bases or keep everything under our thumb here. Hell, given how overgrown that forest is, I don't know if it's even possible to set up separate camps quickly." She shouted for a map of the area, and one was hastily brought to her. The two Spriggan instantly began to pour over the map, and soon, orders flowed from both of them as they planned out their ambush should Acnologia appear in the skies above.

To make certain that they knew of that appearance, a flying cordon was soon set up across the entire county and then some in every direction. For whatever reason, most of the sightings of Acnologia had occurred over forests scattered across the Empire, and that was where Dimaria believed he would show himself once more. Whether he would appear in the distance or come from on high, able to fly higher than any of their flyers could reach, she didn't know, but she would be ready for either.

It was well that she thought that, because early the next morning, as dawn broke, so too did they get a report that Acnologia was coming.

OOOOOO

Acnologia had run into a somewhat annoying problem when it came to hunting Aldoron, the Wood-Dragon. Acnologia's ability to detect Dragon Slayer magic had been blocked from Alikatasia for centuries, but he had known that the sleepy wood-element dragon had been hiding on the western continent and would probably be hiding underground somewhere. However, he had neglected to consider what a dragon with access to wood-type magic could do with centuries to work with. When he arrived in Alikatasia, he couldn't pinpoint where precisely the stench of dragon magic was coming from.

Now, admittedly, detecting dragon-type magic was normally somewhat difficult at the best of times. It'd only been when so many Dragon Slayers had come together that he could smell them out on Tenrou Island. Yet from this close, he should've been able to localize something, even on a continent as large as this one for Aldoron. Instead, the scent of Aldoron was coming from literally every forest across Alikatasia. Not a single source was more powerful or more condensed than any other.

That almost infuriated Acnologia enough to give up the chase and shift his attention to the Dragon Slayer he could sense to his west right now. Surely, finding him would be easy enough. Yet when it came down to it, Acnologia refused to let the other dragon get the better of him. *If I have to destroy every woodland across this continent, I will do so.*

He ignored the small man-made flying devices nearby as he closed with the forest below. They were no threats to him, and if any of the humans got in his way, they would die. It was as simple as that. Most of the time, the humans knew this and avoided him, as was right and proper.

Acnologia slowed his flight, dipping down further towards the forest as he searched with his magical senses the forest below one last time, trying to determine if he could tell if this was his target, or a decoy. *I wonder what kind of magic he is using? Woodcraft magic certainly, but to be able to hide his presence, to spread it out not just in a single forest but to multiple forests? That is something different.*

His disdain for the humans would cost him. Magical energy built up nearby, causing Acnologia to shift his eyes in that direction lazily, the scales above one eye moving in the draconic equivalent of a sardonic expression. *So, some of these humans have a death wish? Far be it from me to not oblige them.*

Yet before he could move in that direction, a wide tornado of wind abruptly flew up from that position, slamming into his body and sending him higher in the air into the side of his previous course. Despite going several times faster than a normal tornado's winds would, the assault did little to Acnologia, simply causing him some discomfort around the snout and eyes.

This took his attention away from several of the flyers. These were larger than the scout vehicles that he had previously seen and had large bay doors on their undercarriage. These flew directly above him and began to drop bombs on Acnologia from on high.

These bombs were a brand-new type devised by the advanced Magical and Thaumaturgical Investigation Department. Smaller in payload than normal bombs, they were essentially anti-magic bombs, created around what the research department called null-crima, an entirely new type of lacrima that was almost vampiric in how it sucked in magic from the surrounding area. Almost like the devices used to run a lot of the technology across the world, instead of taking in a steady flow as long as contact was maintained, these bombs would first explode, sending the null-crima crystals everywhere, which would drag all of the ambient magic around them into themselves. When the physical matrix of the crystals began to overload, this would cause an even bigger secondary explosion fueled by the very magic of the enemy they were dropped on.

More than a dozen bombs hit Acnologia's back, wings and tail, doing no damage, barely causing Acnologia to notice them at all. As the smoke of those explosions cleared, a wide, glittering mass of crystals reflected the dawn's light, and the null-crima's anti-magic properties activated instantly on contact with the air.

Suddenly, Acnologia felt his magic being drawn upwards, large swaths of it torn out of his being, causing him true pain. "RAAHGGGGGHHH!!" he roared, twisting around, lashing out with a breath attack, the massive blast of near raw magic flashing up through the air.

The roar slammed into several of the bombers above him, although Acnologia did note that some of the magic attack had also been pulled away by the glittering mass of whatever they had hit him with. A second later, the crystals in the sky overloaded, causing the second explosion, hurling Acnologia down towards the ground. He roared and twisted, lashing out with his breath attack again and again, the bombers proving hard to strike more than one at a time. While his attack looked like it was light based, at first, it was more a simple battering ram of magic than a laser and couldn't travel nearly as fast.

All of them bore in, showing that, despite Dimaria's blatant disregard for how much they would influence this fight, there was no way anyone could doubt the courage of those bomber crews. Bomb after bomb flew down into Acnologia, and he soon crashed into the ground, angered and frustrated and in more pain than he had felt in his battle against God Serena. That wasn't saying much, but it was enough to infuriate him.

And then, the artillery strikes began. Acnologia's position was called in by one of the flyers, and the attacks came from three different areas. Neinhart had found two logging camps, disused but still extant, that provided areas where the artillery could set up. Large, truck-pulled guns, the guns could fire quickly but were not as large as the ones Midi had used in its war against Minstrel.

These were not nearly as accurate as the bombs from the bombers hitting the ground all around Acnologia as well as the dragon himself.

As the artillery shells slammed down, the two Spriggan raced forward. From small camps set throughout the forest the men from several infantry regiments, split down into squads, also raced towards the center of the ongoing artillery barrage, which had not stopped, daring the hail of shells.

From where he had just reflexively ducked under a shield one of his Four Heraldry Knights was holding above his head, Neinhart cursed. *Distance, distance, we thought about range, but we neglected to think how long it would take us to get into position once we downed Acnologia, God dammit!*

Neinhart could use three different types of magic: wind magic, which he had used to start this party a few moments ago. Blast magic, which allowed him to cast explosions on solid objects well beyond his line of sight. And third, his main magic, Historia of the Dead, a mental attack-based magic. Unfortunately, he couldn't use all of them in the same range.

For Historia, he needed to be within a few dozen yards and line of sight of the target's head. The artillery barrage that was keeping Acnologia pinned currently was also keeping him away. Only the fact that two of his personal squad had defensive-type magic and gear let him move forward at all.

Dimaria was facing much of the same trouble, although she disdained the need to duck and cover as they moved forward, trusting in her magically assisted durability and her magic, Age Seal. Brief bursts of her Time Freeze magic allowed her to simply walk through the artillery barrage, hitting the dragon, dodging around hurled trees and moving deeper into the forests. But even for Dimaria, it would take her a while to get there. Neither of them could fly, and judging by how she was simply walking through the woodland, like Neinhart, she was concerned about wearing herself out for what would undoubtedly be a long battle.

At the center of the ongoing artillery strikes, Acnologia roared, downing the last of the bombers above. And unfortunately, with them gone, the last of the anti-magic bombs had also been expended. In contrast to the bombs, which had actually hurt him as if he was being hit by a series of electrical discharges that bypassed his armor, the artillery strikes merely annoyed him. And while the artillery guns were well beyond the range of a normal mage's ability to strike back, they were not beyond Acnologia's.

Dimaria blinked as the mass of the dragon she had just barely begun to see glimpses of in the distance through the hurled-up debris twisted around and lashed out towards the distant artillery regiments with a wide-angle blast of magical power. Her eyes widened, and she hastily used Age Seal, enhancing her reflexes and diving down into a small crevice between two downed trees.

"Armor, Shield! Blast magic, continual explosive shield!" Neinhart shouted at the same time, thrusting both of his hands forward, the tips of his hands touching lightly as he created

what amounted to a wall of explosions beyond the coruscating light of his aide's magical shield, hoping to use them to absorb the incoming blast.

The first of Acnologia's targets had no such aid. The people of the town and the area around the hastily created main base barely had time to scream as the blast of magic carried out from several miles deeper into the forest, crashing into and through them, leaving nothing living behind above ground. Only a few of the civilians and one or two soldiers lucky enough to have been close enough to a cellar survived.

As the attack dissipated, Neinhart and Arnor appeared, both of them on their knees, gasping. "That was one attack!?"

Behind Neinhart, the only one of his four heraldry Knights that had been in a position to duck behind their commander hastily pulled out a small canteen, slapping it into his commander's hand. "Here, sir, take this!"

Within was another creation of the magical research group. It was the equivalent of a magical steroid in liquid form. It would allow Neinhart to keep on pumping out his magical attacks until his physical body gave out, but he would pay for it after he came down.

That was all right by Neinhart. The important thing to do was to keep in the fight and he charged forward now, a look of desperation and growing fear on his face. *Acnologia he, he isn't hurt nearly as much as we hoped he would be by this point. We're going to have to do the most fighting ourselves.*

Before either Spriggan could come within sight of the black-scaled dragon, Acnologia struck twice more. Disdaining any attempt to move until these gnats were dealt with, two more roars flashed out from the three-legged dragon. The only saving grace of these attacks was that they were pointed in a different direction from the two Spriggan and the now badly scattered infantry. Most of them had been coming from the same direction as the two of them and had died before even the town that had been Acnologia's first target.

Two beams of ravaging energy flashed out one after another in two different directions. Both of the artillery groups set up in the long-unused logging camps died one after another. Then Acnologia was pushing himself off the ground. A second later, his wings flapped as he began to rise into the air once more.

"Oh no, you don't! Age Seal!" Dimaria shouted, finally in range of her time-altering magic. Gifted to her by the God of time, Chronos himself, this was a wide-area attack that could cover around five hundred yards in every direction around her. It stopped time for everything in that area, bar Dimaria herself, letting her do whatever she wanted to do with those caught in the area.

It still barely caught Acnologia as he began to flap upwards into the air, and she breathed a sigh of relief, bringing up one hand to rub at the back of her neck. "Damn! I did not think it would be this hard to catch you, you big bastard."

Of course, Neinhart would not be immune to this area of effect. But he was well behind her at the moment, leaving Dimaria on her own to face Acnologia.

Dimaria didn't care about that. Now staring at the Dragon caught mid-air like a fly on flypaper, she grinned, her arrogance coming out for no one to see at the moment. "Ha, you see!" she said to the silent time-stopped world around her. "Even the strongest of dragons is nothing, **nothing** to the power of time itself!"

She stared up at the Dragon, then held out one hand, almost crooked like a claw, through which she stared at the dragon's head as she intoned, "Age Scratch!"

From all around her, clock hands appeared, glowing orange and red in the frozen light of Age Seal. They sped forward, slashing at Acnologia's body, which began to shutter, twitching this way and that. Like Dimaria herself, her attacks could affect the things caught within her power.

As she watched her attacks hit, though, Dimaria scowled, seeing the attack did nothing against Acnologia's scales. "Tough bastard, huh? Makes me wonder what the hell happened to that leg of yours. Well, let's see if your eyes are just as tough as your scales. Neinhart will just have to deal with being sidelined, heh."

A bare second passed as the hundreds of clock hands coalesced into two drill-like formations before diving down toward the dragon of the apocalypse.

Before they hit, there was a sound like glass shattering, and Acnologia moved. His wings folded in, and he fell down towards her, her attack bouncing off the back of his head as he moved. "RGAGGGG!!!"

Dimaria's eyes widened, and she hastily canceled Age Seal, bringing her power back into herself, allowing her to seem as if she had enhanced reflexes. This let her dodge to one side as the dragon clawed at her previous position, causing her to flinch at the ease with which his claws tore through the solid ground. "Fuck, he's got so much magical power I can't contain him, even with the power of Chronos behind me!"

She gasped then as Acnologia's tail caught her, slamming into her thigh with such force that she feared her bone had broken, the strike coming so fast that she barely saw it coming. Acnologia had been able to keep up with her movement even though she had been stopping time for herself and the immediate area around her.

Such was the power of the strike that it picked her up off of the ground and hurled her through the air. Thankfully for Dimaria, she was one of the more durable members of the

Spriggan, and the blow didn't actually break her thigh. Instead, she was able to roll with it as she landed in a crater caused by one of the artillery strikes earlier. Rolling down the side of it, she got her feet under her, kicking up and out of the crater even as Acnologia lashed out with his one remaining forepaw, trying to crush her.

With the destruction of their artillery, most of the infantry troops that had been brought along as support had also been devastated. But those that haven't had charged forward despite their losses deeper into the forest, showing once more that the troops of the Empire were more courageous than many others in the world. Unfortunately, there was no chance any kind of hand-held weapon, even weapons designed to destroy vehicles, would do anything but annoy Acnologia.

This happened now as the first group of ten troopers to get into range tried to take Acnologia under fire with rifles and the equivalent of magically powered shoulder-mounted bazookas. Streams of magical power slammed into Acnologia, doing nothing. They didn't even cause him to stumble. As she watched, he twisted around away from her, his mouth open to catch a blast from another group of troopers, eating the magical attack, something she hadn't ever seen before. *I know dragons eat their elements, or whatever, but can Acnologia eat any kind of magic? Scary, very scary.* A moment later, he lashed out with one wing, shattering trees and infantrymen alike.

This intervention had two immediate effects. First, was that it allowed Neinhart to arrive on the scene last. Blast magic slammed into Acnologia, a wide row of semi-solid purple gas appearing along Acnologia's flank before exploding, driving him sideways, skidding through the pockmarked and blasted terrain that had once been a forest. The purple bursts showed starkly against the black of his scales again and again.

Elsewhere on the battlefield, Dimaria was finally able to concentrate on her own magic. "Take Over: God Soul: Chronos!"

Energy flowed out of her, covering her body from head to toe and transforming her far more slowly than normal Take Overs would, starting from her feet and working its way up. She became covered in a black form from head to toe, including her hair, from which yellow bands of energy began to gleam.

And then, Neinhart thrust his fingers forward, the tips aiming towards Acnologia's head. "Let us see what skeletons live within your heart, Acnologia! Historia of the Dead!"

From his fingers, purple beams of magic lashed out so fast that even Acnologia couldn't dodge. They hit, creating a halo effect around his head for a moment. Then, from all around the three main combatants, motes of purple light coalesced. A moment later, the purple lights formed into two dragons and two men, set to create a pyramid formation around Acnologia in conjunction with Dimaria.

These were Memoria. Neinhart's magic invaded a person's mind, pulling out memories of former opponents, people who had left an impression on the victim. This was why Neinhart needed line of sight on his enemy's eyes. Neinhart's magic then pulled out and gave life to a set number of such Memoria, giving them all the power and strength they had in life.

The two dragons pulled out of Acnologia's mind were a study in contrasts.

One dragon was massive, wider and thicker around the body than even Acnologia. In fact, if any dragon could ever be called overweight, it was this monstrosity. He literally looked too fat to fly, his stomach trailing along the blasted, battered ground. It had a short, thick tail, a gullet that seemed to merge with its stomach, thin but wide black eyes and red and puke yellow scales in a mottled pattern.

In comparison to the dragon flying above Acnologia now, it looked almost like the draconic equivalent of a dullard. The dragon in the sky had a long elongated body, most of it covered in scales, although it had white fur near the back of its head and black fur from the joints of four limbs, something that would have almost made it look like a Chinese dragon to Ranma if he been there. Instead of one tail, her body ended in several long, whiplike tails, the ends of which were marked with fur. Its wings did not really look like wings, either. Instead, they looked like foxtails, wide and furry, causing Dimaria to wonder what a pillow made out of those would feel like. The head also had a small beard like a Chinese dragon, which made Dimaria think it was a male, but there were also black markings of some kind around the eyes that looked like long eyelashes, which made it look feminine. Pointy ears and large crescent-shaped horns protruding backward from the rest of the head completed the image.

Given the fact that Acnologia was known to have slaughtered hundreds of dragons in his time, the fact two of the Memorias summoned by Neinhart were dragons was not a surprise. One of the two humans was a tremendous surprise, since it was someone Dimaria recognized from intelligence reports about Ishgar's military potential. *God Serena of the Wizard Saints? Then he's dead? And Acnologia killed him, amazing!*

Even most of the other Spriggan would have been appalled at that, but Dimaria's arrogance was still in place despite Acnologia breaking out of her Age Seal. She also looked down on all of Ishgar as being backward and tiny in comparison to the Empire. *Well, he might have made an impression on Acnologia, I suppose, but I doubt that he's going to be as dangerous as the two dragons.*

However, a second later she had to question that notion. God Serena was the first of the four Memorias to realize what was going on, and he laughed a bellicose, arrogant laugh, although one with a harsh edge to it. "Acnologia! Well, whatever has created this second chance, I will not hesitate to take advantage of it!" His strange bunny ear-like hair bobbing, God Serena thrust both hands out palms open as he launched a monstrous attack towards Acnologia. "Gale Dragon's Tempest of Snow, Moon, and Flowers!"

From all around him several wind cyclones, which launched themselves forward toward Acnologia, crashing into him across his entire left side. As they hit, a shrieking noise filled the air to the point Dimaria winced and many of the infantrymen that had reached the battlefield fell to their faces, foam pouring from their mouths and blood from their ears.

This seemed to galvanize the other Memoria, with the obese dragon being the first to attack. Even as the cyclones of wind struck Acnologia's other side, the dragon opened his mouth, shooting out a great gout of flame shot out towards Acnologia. Though this was not a flame attack, like most fire mages would create. Instead, this looked almost like a liquid, a semi-magma like flood, which stuck to Acnologia as it hit him.

And for the first time in this fight, Acnologia roared in pain, causing Neinhart to laugh weakly, pushing away from his aide to pose for a moment in the center of a crater, caused by the earlier artillery barrage. "Yes, Yes!! Fall to the reflections of those whose stories you ended, monster!"

"Acnologia! I will have my share of your hide, living or dead, for the effrontery of your killing me!" the silver-scaled dragon shrieked, the dragon's tone distinctly feminine. It then roared, lashing down toward Acnologia with all four arms, creating crescent-shaped attacks made out of what looked strangely like moonlight given near-solid form.

Within another crater left behind by the earlier artillery barrage behind the black-scaled dragon. Bickslow scowled, leaping up into the air where two of his dolls zoomed down under his feet as three more formed a triangle over his head. Green energy grew within that triangle, blasting out towards Acnologia. "Round two, baby! From hell's heart, I stab at thee!"

"Really?" Dimaria blinked, shaking her head as she stared at that Memoria, recognizing him but only in conjunction to reports about his apparent death and previous connection to Laxus Dreyar. "Bic—something? The hell is he doing here? Although, I suppose with that weird mask and way of talking he might have made an impression that had nothing to do with his combat potential.

Neinhart was in no position to explain why that particular Memoria had appeared right now. Normally, he would have liked to see the expressions on his victim's faces when they saw images from their past, their history, come to life again. But considering Acnologia's nature, that was an impossibility. *Just like when Zeref dared me to use my magic on him, I could not reach far enough back to find any individuals from Acnologia's past that would bother him in that manner from back when he was human. I thought I saw a glimpse of several, but they were so far in the past that Acnologia himself has forgotten their features.*

Instead, he was retreating quickly from the battlefield, his aide dragging him along and shielding him from debris kicked up from the attacks of the Memoria as they went. The drain on his power was so bad, there was no way Neinhart could contribute to the battle personally and

keep the Memoria in place. The cost of pulling two-dragon shaped memories out into the world again had dwarfed every other time he'd ever used his Historia of the Dead.

For a moment as his scaled body continued to absorb attack after attack, Acnologia was stunned, shifting his head between the two dragons and then to the two mages all around him, including the one whose ridiculous face and odd mode of speech had made him stand out from the rest of the non-Dragon Slayer riffraff on Tenrou Island. *This is, these are memories from my past, memories of the people I've killed. The first dragon I killed and the last one I was able to run to ground after the surviving dragons started to go into hiding. Her name... I can actually remember it, such was her guile. Selene, the one who used mountain passes, underground tunnels and shifted so quickly from dragon to human female to dodge my attacks. Getting buried time after time was annoying even if I could easily break out and follow her. And then there is the fool who I killed last too.*

Even as he thought that, another series of attacks from God Serena rocked him, massive torrents of water picking Acnologia up and hurling him over the head of the fat slab of lard. It didn't hurt, but the impact was enough to lift Acnologia's bulk off the ground and toss him nearly a hundred yards away.

If Historia of the Dead had been used on a good person, someone who regretted killing, there might have been a psychological aspect of seeing their former opponents alive once more. As it was, there was no such thing. Indeed, despite the continued attacks on him, some of which actually hurt, most of what Acnologia felt was amusement and hunger. Seeing two dragons in front of him like this was like setting out a smorgasbord in front of a gourmand who had not had a truly good meal in months. *Let us see if you have any flesh to your bones. Magic or meat, I will have my fill!*

Then, even as he lashed out with a blow toward the far dragon as he turned ponderously towards his new position and the two humans who attacked from on high along with Selene, Acnologia realized something. *Wait, if that mage's magic can choose what memories to pull out of my head to create these constructs, why did he not use the most powerful enemy I've recently fought, that Water Dragon Slayer? Unless, unless it has a limitation... unless... could he be alive!?*

At that, he let loose a roar of frustration. "RAGGHGHGHHH!!!!!" *Damn that Dragon Slayer!! If I can ever sense his presence again, I will crush him, and this time make certain it sticks!*

The attacks on Acnologia continued to batter him around, doing no damage, but still tossing him away from the area where he had been bombarded by the artillery out into the rest of the forest. Which in turn began to be destroyed even faster as God Serena used multiple element attacks along with Selene's Moon based magic and the ugly, clinging fire of the fat one. Bickslow's attacks were more directed but lacked anything near enough power to even register, unless he hit a particularly sensitive point.

Something he realized quickly, whereupon he began to snipe at Acnologia's head and rear. "I'll get your ass or your eyes, Acnologia, one or the other, baby!"

Thankfully, once the spell was cast, distance meant nothing to Neinhart's ability to sustain the Memorias. He could even see through their senses vaguely, and when Acnologia tried to bite down on the fat one's side, it disappeared to reappear some distance away. Even as his Heraldry Knight left his side and began to use his own Ground Magic to create a hiding place for them, even as magic washed over the forest in fire, moon, lightning and raw force from the monsters behind him, Neinhart directed the Historia back into the attack.

Meanwhile, Dimaria used those attacks to cover her own from much closer in.

Pointing a finger at the dragon, an energy beam flashed out. Far too fast for anyone to dodge, the beam slammed into Acnologia's one remaining forearm near the elbow. He'd moved at just the last second as she had been powering up so that instead of hitting the elbow itself, it hit the thick forearm area.

Normally, such a beam would go through anything, living or inanimate. Dimaria had once used this power to drill a hole through a mountain for a train tunnel, and that had been a far wider, far less concentrated beam. Even Zeref had difficulty blocking God's soul Chronos' energy beams when they were this thin.

But instead of burning through, all it did was sear a segment of scale, smashing several loose. This caused Acnologia pain but was nowhere near the amount of damage Dimaria had hoped to see. "Blast it! This bastard is too damn durable! I need to make my beams even smaller, pump even more energy into them!"

"Dragon Gods Fang!" God Serena shouted.

Blinking, Dimaria saw what looked like a phantasmal dragon head of fire appear to one side, the heat so hot it caused her to flinch away before it shot toward Acnologia. Elsewhere through the forest other semi-solid dragon heads appeared, slamming through the forest, causing even more destruction as they barreled into Acnologia. Once more the black dragon roared in pain, but through the fire, steam and ongoing attacks, Dimaria could see a light green energy flare on Acnologia's body in places.

Shaking her head, Dimaria charged back into the fight. She seemed to blink about the battlefield as Acnologia turned roaring, slashing at the airborne dragon when she got too close with his claws, blasting at God Serena at the same time a white-colored attack from one of his back legs. A second later, his tail lashed out through the air at supersonic speeds, smashing into and through several frightened, fleeing infantrymen with all the impetus of an iron bar going at the speed of a whip.

It crashed into Bickslow who had just launched an attack at a certain sensitive spot directly under Acnologia's tail, hurling him through the air. A second later, the broken image of the Fairy Tail mage disappeared with a pop, reappearing elsewhere and attacking again under the direction of Neinhart. Despite the fact the Memorias acted independently, they were not. They were just ghosts from the past, and Neinhart could direct them as he wished.

The battle continued for what felt like a lifetime, but which was more likely just a half-hour. Dimaria was used to the time compression feeling found in battle, yet she felt like they were winning, wearing Acnologia down, giving the bastards the death of a thousand cuts. More beams flashed out from her fingers as she teleported around the battlefield, using her ability to manipulate time to make it seem as if she had simply appeared from one place to another. Soon, Acnologia was bleeding from more than a dozen wounds thanks to her alone, while other wounds caused from the Memoria were also visible.

Yet as the smoke and fire faded for a moment, Dimaria saw Acnologia's few wounds starting to close, his scales growing back, the few deeper cuts closing. *We aren't doing enough damage, and the fucker has healing magic!!*

She watched as he turned, his mouth gaping open to receive an attack from the female dragon. The attack faded instantly, its magic feeding the black-scaled dragon. A moment later, one of Dimaria's own attacks was pulled off course. Instead of hitting Acnologia's neck at an angle, it was pulled into his maw. A second later, Selene's next attack, some kind of gravity attack, maybe, Dimaria wasn't sure, hit, pulling Acnologia up off his feet until he lashed out with an attack of his own, overwhelming it.

When he landed back on his feet and whipped around to go claw to claw with the fat dragon, Dimaria had a plan. The next second several of her attacks slammed into his back leg on the same side Acnologia had lost his front most leg.

Seeing this, the image of Bickslow instantly joined in.

Even as Acnologia healed the scales and tiny bits of flesh her attacks caused to nearly explode away from the limb, he found his leg buckling, causing him to fall on his side. The fat dragon nearly fell on top of him but was knocked off by Acnologia's one forearm. Before Acnologia could bite down on the other dragon, though, the fat dragon disappeared only to coalesce a bit further away. It looked confused for a second before attacking once more with its sticky magma-like attack.

By the time that attack struck, Acnologia's leg was fully healed, and when Dimaria tried to do the same again, Acnologia was ready. His tail twitched around, blocking her attack, the harder back-scales of his tail take the strikes, and he lashed out at God Serena, his attack overwhelming another attack coming from the former Wizard Saint. The Augite Heavens attack shattered under the impact of the battering ram force of Acnologia's Dragon Roar, and Neinhart cancelled and restored that Historia too, God Serena seeming to teleport away.

Dimaria attacked again, this time aiming for the head, only to see Acnologia whip his head around, eating her attack again. *Damn it! And that magic is helping his reserves too muchHHH!* The brunette's thoughts broke off as an attack came her way from Acnologia, forcing her to use her powers to race away before the attack could catch her.

"Darkness Dragon Slayer's Sinful Eater!" God Serena howled. "I might never have gotten the chance to use this on you before but let us see how well you deal with the weight of your sins, Acnologia!"

Blackness enveloped Acnologia from one tip to the other. This spell was a very esoteric one from the most... bizarre draconic-type lacrima embedded in God Serena's body, a darkness type. Instead of simply being about night or darkness, though, the Darkness Dragon Lacrima also covered concepts like evil and sin.

Now as that darkness closed in around his body blasts of agony hammered his body. Every sin that Acnologia had done in his life, every death he had caused, every evil act now caused him pain.

Raw agony gripped Acnologia's mind and body as old fights, old evils flashed through his mind, pulled up by Sinful Eater and then converted into pain, crashing directly across his nerves. His resistance to magic was less than half against such an attack and he screamed in real, honest pain, a lot of pain, the most he had felt since his battle with the Water Dragon Slayer and the loss of his arm.

"Pour it on!" Dimaria shouted, her voice carrying across the battlefield. She suited action to words, lashing out repeatedly into the mass of blackness covering Acnologia, thankful that the attack from God Serena stayed in place as she and the others attacked, although it seemed that keeping it so meant that God Serena couldn't use another spell. Indeed, he seemed to be sweating, keeping it active through sheer force of will.

But Acnologia could attack too, and even as his body was wracked by pain, his roar flashed out. Selene gasped in pain as she was flung aside, and then Acnologia seemed to bite down on his attack before it ended. The attack's magic flared out from his closed mouth covering his body and suddenly God Serena's body shimmered as his spell burst. Acnologia was free and charging forward. He crossed the distance before Neinhart could transport the overweight dragon out of range and Acnologia bit down hard.

In his hiding place in a cave buried out of the ground elsewhere in the forest Neinhart gasped, his eyes bulging, and some blood coming from his nose as he kept providing magic to the Historias. *I, I can't keep this up much longer.*

At the same time, as the fat dragon disappeared, Acnologia lunged, lashing out toward Dimaria with his remaining forepaw.

She hastily used her time powers to shift sideways, but her eyes widened in horror in her God Soul form as, instead of striking where she had been, Acnologia seemed to actually be able to track her again. *Can he use time magic, too, or has he somehow figured out how to track me?! I don't know which would be more ridiculouSSSS...*

"AGGHH!" she screamed as another blow caught her, hurling her up into the air and away. Dimaria landed on her feet, but stumbled to one knee, rolling reflexively into cover behind a downed group of trees, groaning even as she pushed to her feet. *Damn it, even with my Take Over that broke a rib!*

She hid there for several minutes getting her breath back before rejoining the battle. Yet just a moment later, Acnologia was turning, his breath attack lashing out. Not toward any of the Historias or Dimaria, but toward where Neinhart was. *Found you*, the black-scaled dragon sneered internally.

Acnologia was the magic element Dragon Slayer. His magical senses were incredibly acute. Despite the fact that Aldoron was able to hide himself so well, Acnologia could sense the use of magic all around him. Neinhart was connected to each of his constructs by incredibly tiny, invisible threads of magic. As one dissipated, the thread flicked elsewhere under the direction of his hands or arms, recreating the Memoria. It had taken him some time to filter out the ambient magic and the attacks coming from the memory-constructs from the threads, but he could do so now. Worse for the purple-haired Spriggan, he was still well within Acnologia's range, even though he was trying to hide in a ditch well outside of the radius of the battle so far.

A blazing white-hot streak of magic flashed across the battlefield and beyond into the portions of the forest that were still intact, and Neinhart barely had time to scream as it washed over him and his last remaining aide, searing through to his hiding place. As the attack dissipated, the purple-haired Spriggan was no more. And instantly, the Memorias popped out of existence.

Dimaria hadn't been friends with Neinhart. In fact, she looked down on the man, as she did with most of the Spriggans. Dimaria thought Neinhart was a bit of a nitwit who had been gifted with magnificent magical power and at least one spell she had to be leery of. The only one of the rest of the Spriggan she had any respect for was Larcade, and that was based solely on his relationship with the Emperor. Dimaria thought even Irene was a bit too big for her britches. So when Neinhart fell, she kept up her attacks.

Yet without the cover of the others, Dimaria couldn't hide her position any longer. As she came out of an Age Seal-assisted run, Acnologia turned on her, lunging towards the brunette. She attempted once more to use her powers to seem to shift away, to make it so that Acnologia wasn't ready to fight her. Yet he followed her movements again, lashing out with another blast of raw magic from his mouth. Thanks to a last moment dodge, the attack didn't hit her head on, instead slamming into the ground nearby. This was enough to explode the ground under Dimaria, hurling her up into the air.

Before she could recover, Acnologia had grabbed her in one hand. Desperately, Dimaria shouted, "Overflow!" A blast of outpouring energy slammed into Acnologia's hand, causing him to release her.

She dropped towards the ground, but before she could land, Acnologia's head flashed forwards, and Dimaria had only a second for her eyes to widen before she felt something clamp momentarily around her middle. Then, there was a tearing noise, and she screamed as there was nothing but pain coming from everything below her stomach.

Dimaria was so tough that even though Acnologia had literally bitten away half of her body, she was still alive and screaming as her back slammed into the ground below. Dimaria's Take Over God Soul faded, her hair falling back down into its normal messy look as she screamed in agony.

Acnologia didn't even bother trying to finish her off, turning away, and a part of Dimaria's mind, cocooned away from the agony she was feeling, thought that perhaps that was the most insulting thing of all. The rest of her was too busy screaming.

Perhaps it was a mercy that the agony from her wounds and loss of blood had killed her by the time even more powerful Dragon Slayer's Roar slammed down into the forest. Certainly, Dimaria Yesta was well dead by the time the shock wave hit, burying her body in rubble with several hundred surviving infantrymen who had done nothing but provide momentary distractions died, joining the two Spriggan and their fellows on the journey to the afterlife.

High above them, Acnologia cracked his neck, highly amused. *That was fun.* For a moment, he thought about sparing the towns he could see, the line of trucks racing towards the burning forest and the battlefield within. The fight had, after all, been quite fun, and breaking down the magic within the lower portion of that woman was giving him a nice burst of magic for his reserves.

But only for a moment, the humans here apparently needed to be reminded of what happened when they angered him and Acnologia was more than willing to oblige.

OOOOOOO

With a tiny Brandish clasped in her bosom, Irene sped through the air as fast as she could, creating a bow wave behind her, uprooting dozens of trees and even flattening some houses below as she sped across the Empire, pushing her magic as hard as she could go with her High Enchanter skill. But the Empire was **large**. Many times larger than Ishgar, covering almost the entire continent of Alikatasia and unfortunately, the battle between Acnologia, Dimaria and Invel occurred nowhere near where she and Brandish had been. Not entirely across the Empire from them, but more than an hour's travel away, even at Irene's best speed. Despite being faster than even Larcade, the only other Spriggan who could fly.

They had started off the instant they'd heard a report of the battle but had no way of knowing when precisely that report had reached them in relation to the battle. For the last twenty minutes, they had been passing blasted, burning towns, and now they found themselves finally within in sight of the actual battlefield or what was left of it.

As they did, Irene and the tiny Brandish, most of her body obscured between Irene's breasts, scowled in unison. Hundreds of fires and the burning wreckage of more than a dozen flying ships sent smoke into the sky from one horizon to the other. Deep ditches had been gouged into the ground for dozens of miles, while a mountain's worth of dirt and shattered trees had been tossed everywhere, along with hundreds of visible corpses, scattered across several miles. Only a few scattered trees still stood from where a forest the size of Enka in Ishgar had once been and where a decent portion of the Empire's airborne military might had fought Acnologia.

Yet that wasn't what stopped the two Spriggan's pell-mell charge forward. Both of them had seen battlefields before this, if not quite on this scale in Brandish's case, and over the past twenty minutes, she had gotten over her shock at the loss of life that had occurred here in Windholme. No, it was the fact that nothing was moving down there bar the fires. If there was a survivor within the actual battlefield, neither Spriggan could see it, whereas the attacked towns and villages had shown at least a few survivors.

Luckily, perhaps, they were not the first on the scene. As they had seen elsewhere, aid from other areas within the county had begun to arrive. Here, just outside the outer edge of the battered, blasted area where the original fight had occurred, four Lacrima-powered trucks were moving. As Irene and Brandish watched, infantrymen bailed out of them, spreading out, their forms almost as tiny as ants from where Irene was currently flying as they started to look for survivors.

"We're too late," Brandish murmured, somewhat stunned at the destruction. "Dimaria and Neinhart, do you..."

Despite being a Spriggan, she'd never been part of a battle this large or devastating before. The unification wars of the Empire had been done well before she had earned her title, although there had been a brief flare up when Ajeel Raml attempted to lead his desert nation to secede, trusting in his amazing magical power to restore his realm's autonomy. It hadn't worked, as Ajeel's own grandfather had warned him it wouldn't, and Ajeel had found himself beaten down by Irene and Invel Yura, the Spriggan who acted as the Chief of Staff for the Empire.

Despite an urge to make fun of the younger girl's naiveté, Irene remained silent as she dove towards the ground, slowing and writing herself conjunction so that she landed feet first within the rubble of what had once been a town at the edge of the forest. Once her feet daintily touched down, she pulled Brandish out from between her breasts and let the young woman

jump off of her hand. Landing in a burnt patch of grass with all the gentleness of a spider, Brandish reverted to her original size in less than a blink.

Irene's sudden arrival startled several of the soldiers nearby, two of whom were actually quick enough to raise their guns before getting them smacked out of their hands by some of the others, who were faster to recognize the two women. After a second, the two would-be shooters, their battered clothes and their shell-shocked expressions showing they had might have survived the battle here, bowed their heads in supplication. "Sorry, Belserion-sama! We didn't realize it was..."

"Enough." Irene waved them to silence impatiently. "Are Dimaria and Neinhart alive?"

The silence and the thousand-mile stares she received in reply was enough of an answer, and Irene sighed, gesturing with one hand and instantly creating a new enchantment for herself, an enchantment on her finger to point out where Dimaria was first. Thus, seconds later, she and Brandish were standing over the half-eaten body of their fellow Spriggan as another spell pulled it out of the rubble of the forest. The body of Neinhart was nowhere to be found, but one of the most battered men still trying to sift through the rubble to find survivors reported that he had seen the purple-haired Spriggan be hit by a full power blast from Acnologia.

"So those two had a plan, and it worked about as well as catching a tiger by the tail," Brandish murmured, coming to stand beside Irene and looking down on Dimaria's body. The two of them had not been close, but Dimaria had been another woman in the Spriggan. To see her dead was horrifying, to say nothing of the utterly terrified expression forever locked onto her dead face. *The pain of being bitten in half must have overwhelmed her mind, even as the shock of it killed her.* "At least four regiments and a tremendous chunk of the empire's aerial forces are also gone."

"And they did not get the word out to us or any of the other Spriggan in time for us to back them up," Irene said harshly, shaking her head. "Fucking idiots," she barked, her voice cold. "Wear Acnologia down and have him concentrate on two Spriggan in close combat while bombarding him from a distance with simple artillery and aerial assault? Foolishness. Only strength matters against a beast like that. They got a lot of people killed here. Thousands of troops far more civilians, all dead because they didn't think what might happen if they lost."

"I would have said it was more arrogant than merely foolish, but that hardly matters," Brandish murmured, turning away from the dead woman. "I think we all made a mistake right off the bat. We should've been assigned a flyer each. As slow as they are over long distances, Larcade and Wall at least would've been able to get here in time to join in if they had. Instead, the Prime Minister left that to our discretion and only Bloodman and Ajeel decided to get one."

"Perhaps. Although what those two could have done against Acnologia, I don't know. I will admit that Neinhart and Dimaria's magic are among those I feel had the best chance of slowing Acnologia down. And look what happened to them," Irene answered, shaking her head.

Brandish decided not to respond to the inadvertent pun Irene had made. Talking about using Dimaria's time control powers to slow someone down was low comedy after all. "I can see that, but it seems as if Acnologia overcame them all the same. I for one will not be assuming my Command T magic would work on him."

Irene then shook her head and turned away from the body, looking around the area. Then she raised her hand and began to enchant a spell.

Instantly, the spell flashed over the entire area encompassed by the battlefield, and at first, nothing happened. Then, from underneath the rubble of a few of the houses within the town, groans could be heard as the rubble was pulled apart by her powers, revealing more than a dozen survivors within the town. Others found themselves suddenly pushed through the ground in small bubbles of air from hidden cellars or under massive drifts of dirt that had somehow not crushed them immediately. Throughout the battle, bodies of the dead began to rise to the surface as well as her Enchant Magic Universe One spell allowed her to control the entire area around them.

Watching this for a moment, Brandish nodded, and then gestured over to where the one surviving officer was laid out, his back against one of the few walls in the town that had remained upright. "Let us get some more details, and then we should probably head straight back to the capital. We need to rethink our strategy here."

As evening fell, Irene landed once more on terra firma, this time within the environs of the Royal Gardens in Vistarion, the capital of the Empire. A moment later, Brandish, again her full size joined Irene as they marched into the palace. Soon, a servant hastened to inform them that the other Spriggan and Chief Minister Yajeel were waiting for them in the royal conference room.

That was enough to tell Irene that something was going on. There were several conference rooms throughout the palace, but while the royal conference room was easily the grandest and most sumptuous, it was also supposed to be only used by the Emperor. *And Larcade and Yajeel, the only ones with authority to use it without Zeref around, wouldn't. So... Invel or Ajeel... no, that's not a question, is it? Ajeel, you might have jumped the gun here a bit. Pity.*

"Be ready. We might be walking into a minefield here," Irene murmured.

Brandish blinked, but nodded, her back straightening in such a way that it brought her large chest into even more prominence, something that Irene had to hold back a snort at. *Well, if any of the Spriggan have found libidos that might be one way to deescalate things.*

Entering the room in question, Irene was not surprised to find young Ajeel at the head of the table, the seat normally reserved for the Emperor, or, at worst, Yajeel. The Prime Minister instead sat next to his grandson, looking worried. Wall Eehto sat with them across from Yajeel.

Standing across from them was the united front of Invel and Bloodman. The Chief of Staff hands were clenched, and the room was as cold as it was tense, the Ice Make user seemingly ready to throw down right there and then. Frankly, it was probably the presence of Larcade, lounging on a sofa he had undoubtedly pulled into the room for just this purpose, at the table just bit down from Yajeel that was keeping him from attacking. Yet this also made it seem Larcade was allied more to Ajeel than Invel.

Taking all this in at a glance, Irene had to hold back a chuckle. *Such discord amongst us, it almost matches how diverse our group is. There is me and Brandish, as gorgeous a pair of women as could be, and then there is Ajeel and Larcade, both quite handsome. Even Invel is handsome if quite cold seeming. And then there is the bestial Bloodman and... well, at least Wall left his doll elsewhere for this meeting.*

Bloodman was not human. Anyone who had even a brief second's glimpse of the man could tell that. He was a very tall, muscular being, covered in a black and red demonic-looking breastplate. The metallic pauldrons of his armor seemed to merge into his extremely long cloak, which had a hood as a part of it. On his face he wore a red devil mask, the eyes around the area painted yellow all around extending to his chin to conceal his face. Underneath that mask was not a human face, but one almost as equally demonic as his mask. He was an Etherious, a creation of raw magic made by Zeref hundreds of years ago.

Not that he was alone in not being human. Technically Larcade was also an Etherious although few knew that beyond Irene and possibly Yajeel. He also looked human, and good-looking enough to have rated number one in the Empire's 'Wizard I'd want as a husband' ever since he became a Spriggan. Although Irene had always thought he was a bit too pretty, just like Invel was too cold and aloof.

However, when it came to nonhumans among the Spriggan, there was also Wall Eehto, although unlike the other two nonhumans, Wall had not been created by Zeref. Rather, he was a representative of an entire race of mechanical beings called Machias. The Machias had created their own society and nation before the Empire reached their borders several hundred years ago, but had joined up peacefully, seeing no logic in fighting against integration. Now they lived throughout the Empire with the same rights as any other citizen. Many of them took forms that looked far more mechanical than human, but in his normal body, Wall looked far more human than Bloodman.

While he was actually almost a hundred years old, Wall appeared to be a youthful-looking man with messy dark brown haired parted to the left, a bang hanging over his left eye. Even now, though, he wore a devilish grin that exposed his extremely sharp, pointed teeth not because he was feeling very daring or happy, but because that was his very metal face's default appearance. Around his jawline were small silver circles that looked like the heads of so many nails, and in his ears he had screws. His clothing too was a bit more normal, currently being a pair of coveralls with a harness buckled around his chest that merged into a tunic. On each of

his bare shoulders, the symbol of the Alvarez Empire could be seen, and he wore very long rubber black gloves and boots, which reached to his upper arm and upper thigh respectively.

“REMOVE yourself from that chair,” Invel was biting out as Irene and Brandish entered, telling Irene that he at least had also just arrived. Which made sense considering the large pile of reports he might have been going through from the battle and maybe before it too. After all, Dimaria had basically gone around his orders to bring in the troops she and Neinhart had lost against Acnologia.

“Hey now, I’m just sitting here to chair the meeting, Invel, don’t get your panties in a bunch,” Ajeel snorted, though he took a moment to look at Irene and Brandish as they entered. “I mean, someone needs to take charge, don’t they? We’re facing a crisis right now! Two Spriggan dead, and with us no closer to knowing what Acnologia is doing than before.”

“Those words would carry more weight if you had not begun to act as if you were the heir incumbent to our Lord Zeref’s throne,” Invel growled. “If I did not know you had been giving out orders to the government that should rightly come from the Emperor alone! You go too far!”

“The Emperor isn’t here! He isn’t here, and someone must lead! And that someone has to be someone the people will follow, which isn’t you. If it isn’t Larcade, then why not me?” Ajeel barked back, but before things could continue, Irene decided she’d had enough.

I am in no mood to deal with... well, scratch that, I am never in the mood for dealing with power politics, Irene thought, again fighting back a quite quixotic desire to smile. Instead, she held up a hand, and allowed her magical aura to flow out from her, causing the entire palace to shudder. Only now did Larcade look up from where he had seemingly been sleeping on the couch, while Bloodman, Invel and the others all grunted at the impact of her power. “Enough.”

Stalking forward she stared first at Ajeel, then Yajeel, who she had very carefully shielded from her powers. Ajeel met her eyes for a moment, then bowed his head, and she then switched to glaring at Invel. He tried to glare back, unlike Ajeel, but he caved quickly as Brandish moved to stand with her, looking all around them. “Now is not the time to have this conversation. Sit down, Invel, Bloodman. We will talk civilly, or else.”

As Invel reluctantly obeyed, she turned her attention to Ajeel. “And Ajeel, this is not the time for grandstanding. Move.”

Ajeel twitched, but eventually nodded, and he moved out of the chair, switching with his grandfather. That was acceptable to Irene. While it really should have been Irene herself, for seniority’s sake, or Larcade in terms of closeness to the Emperor, or, Invel for his position within the Empire’s military, Irene did not in any way, shape or form, wish to act as if she were the head of the government. The same could be said for Larcade, whose laziness was only matched by his magical power but at least he was awake now.

For his part, Invel twitched from where he had sat down at the far end of the table, but said nothing, simply staring at Ajeel as if trying to kill. *Ugh. We should have made this table circular, blast it. Still, what is done is done.* With a faint sigh, as if she were a woman dealing with recalcitrant children, she sat down with Brandish, smiling faintly at the younger woman for backing her up as she had.

“Irene. We got your report over the lacrima-comms,” Ajeel began, trying to take charge as was his wont despite what had happened a moment before, which only served to make Invel’s jaw clamp down so tight that Irene could almost hear his teeth grinding. “Tell me truthfully, after looking around the battlefield and hearing the reports, did Dimaria and Neinhart do **anything** to Acnologia?”

Irene stared at the younger man, then sighed, once more acting like a woman whose patience with young, rambunctious children was quickly running out. *FUCK me, but I hate being the mature voice of reason. Ugh.* “If you are asking a serious question, then I must in turn question what you’ve been doing since the emergency services began to respond to what Acnologia did in Windholme.”

Ajeel had the grace to look embarrassed, and Brandish spoke up, driving the point home. “From the survivors, wounding Acnologia was possible, but only to the equivalent of bad bruises and nasty cuts. His use of healing magic is not within our pre-contact information on him and will need to be taken into account going forward. He was missing an arm though. Given he showed up to the battle like that according to one of the few infantrymen who survived close contact with him, Acnologia must have lost it in the reported battle he had against Fairy Tail.”

Larcade spoke up now, his lazy eyes shifting from one woman to another. “Is it true that Acnologia deliberately destroyed the forest after the battle was almost over? I read that bit of your report, and it made no sense to me when I read it.”

“Positive,” Brandish answered, shaking her head and internally wondering how much of that report the admittedly sexy man had actually read. *So lazy! I know that Sloth is part of his power, or whatever, but... well, at least he’s willing to push past the awkward beginning.* “All of the survivors were quite adamant about that. After killing Dimaria, Acnologia launched a final massive attack into the center of the forest, followed by several more to finish off most of the trees there. It was those attacks that wiped out the majority of the survivors. Four regiments, three brigades of artillery, and the entirety of the Fourth Army’s air forces were practically wiped out. At least seventy thousand civilians died afterward. That number was growing as we left.”

Brandish’s tone was almost offhand, but her eyes drilled into Ajeel as she spoke, and he flinched a bit, understanding her hidden message. His attempts to seemingly take over was in bad taste, if nothing else.

“Why?” Wall asked, scowling. One hand began to tap on some of the rivets in his face, the staccato rhythm somewhat annoying to Irene, but she allowed it for now as it also seemed to irritate Larcade, who, honestly, Irene was more annoyed with than Ajeel and Invel. “Why go to the effort of destroying a woodland? I can understand his destroying the nearby population centers, but why the forest? Just to destroy what few infantrymen were left by that point?”

“Frankly, I am just pleased that he didn’t bother attacking the cities further away, instead slaughtering a few scattered towns and villages,” Irene admitted. “The death toll would have been in the hundreds of thousands by this point.”

All of her fellow Spriggan bar Bloodman grimaced at that, the admission making Invel lose some of his remaining anger at Ajeel. Not that Irene doubted his earlier words about Ajeel’s activities. Even in just sitting at the head of the table, Ajeel was clearly setting himself up as the next Emperor. According to Irene’s cute little ninja, Heine, Ajeel had been moving in the background for more than a year.

Putting such thoughts away for now, Irene looked at Invel. “Let us face facts. Our initial thought that two Spriggan would be at least able to pin Acnologia in place until the others arrived seems premature. Either you all need a way to get just as fast flying in the air as I can, or we need to try and rethink our overall strategy.”

“While the mystery of Acnologia’s attack on the forest and his previous appearances is worrisome, Irene’s right. We lost a significant chunk of our airpower in this assault thanks to Neinhart and Dimaria suborning the local military officers.” Invel scowled, angrily, the Ice Make user shaking his head. “I realize Dimaria thought that the new bomb the research department developed might’ve worked, but it evidently did not. As such, the 4th Army is going to be busy dealing with not just a humanitarian crisis, but the overall military has lost a significant chunk of its airborne units.”

That was all well and good and admitting that he had made a mistake in how he organized the Spriggan was a step in the right direction. But then he went on, ruining the moment with a glimpse into his own thoughts of what they should be doing. “There is no way the 4th will be ready for their role in Emperor Zeref’s plan of conquest for Ishgar.”

“You talk about that as if that is ever going to happen now without Zeref to give the orders,” Ajeel shot back instantly. The two men glared at one another, a visible spark almost appearing between the two and Irene sighed loudly.

“ENOUGH I said,” she growled. “I have no desire to play referee here. If the two of you are going to fight, take it somewhere else. Dealing with only one of you will be quite pleasant in comparison to this nonsense.”

In the silence her words caused, Larcade sighed, pushing himself up from where he had been lounging on his sofa. He then leaned back against it, his arms laying out on the back of the

sofa as he first looked across at Irene, then around at the others. "Irene is right. We were indeed too arrogant. We should've listened more deeply to my father's instructions as to what to do with Acnologia when he came. Dimaria and Invel did well to hurt him as much as they did, but even if more of us had been there, I am afraid the outcome would've still been the same. We need an edge..."

"We need the Emperor!" Bloodman barked as he interrupted Larcade, almost sounding like an animal for a moment as he slammed a fist down on the table, causing it to jump into the air a few inches. "Where is he!?"

Irene glanced around, keeping her eyes in particular on Bloodman and Larcade for a moment. While Invel was almost fanatical in his loyalty to Zeref, he was still human, and thus could perhaps be convinced to see the truth: that the Emperor was not coming back.

Both Bloodman and Larcade, however, were artificial creations created by Zeref. Irene had once spoken of the Etherious with Zeref, asking about any other such creations, but he had clammed up quickly on that. She had wondered at the time how many such creations the man had made in an effort to combat the death curse he labored under. Whatever the answer to that, these two were as different as night and day in many ways.

For Bloodman he knew his existence was solely due to the Emperor, while Larcade had actually been raised within the palace by servants and occasionally by Irene since his creation and had developed a mindset that the Emperor, despite being so often absent, was his father rather than his creator. Indeed, Irene knew she was the only one who knew Larcade wasn't related in some fashion to Zeref.

While Bloodman had been showing more and more signs of his mind breaking down over the past few months, and now looked a mixture of furious and despairing, Larcade remained much the same in terms of his mental faculties. He had become even lazier, almost morose, but that was all. *And at least he's speaking up now.*

"He will be back, blast it!" Invel barked, his cool very definitely gone now as he spoke before Larcade could. The Chief of Staff's office had been the one dealing with a lot of the flare-ups throughout the empire and he was also the main proponent of the invasion of Ishgar, on top of his devotion to Zeref.

The feeling of his absence is freeing to me and Brandish. To Invel, Bloodman and Larcade, it must be terrifying, Irene mused.

Ajeel shrugged laconically. "Maybe, but whatever Zeref's up to, he's not here. And I can't be the only one who is afraid that something has happened to him, can I?" Irene very much doubted that Ajeel was actually afraid of that. Rather, he was hoping Zeref would not return.

Invel made to speak again, but Ajeel continued, overriding him. "We've had no reports of his whereabouts for almost going on two years now. Normally, we would be able to at least track some of his movements, if only by the reactions of those creepy cults that worship the ground he walks over in Ishgar. So unless any of you think he might've wandered into the Blasted Lands like he did in my grandfather's day?"

"Oy, your grandfather's standing right here welp, don't talk as if my day's past!" The prime minister of the Empire grumbled, shaking his head. He was the only non-Spriggan present, but the others all deferred to him respectfully as he continued to speak, glaring at Ajeel. Yet he allowed Ajeel to act as if he was chairing this meeting earlier, and now he did not even glance at Invel, who normally would be his partner in keeping the other Spriggan in line.

Hmm... has the old man also finally realized that Zeref is not returning. Wherever he is, he certainly cannot return willingly to the Empire, Irene mused.

"I am very afraid that something might have indeed happened to the Emperor," Yajeel said, his words unintentionally following the same line of thought as Irene's and making Invel's blood pressure go through the roof if how red his face became was any indication. His next words, though, caused Invel to go cold once more. "Something that has, at the very least, kept him from communicating with us. What few of you but Irene-sama may know is that I have always been left with a communication device since I came to serve Zeref. Since sighting Acnologia anywhere near the Empire is one of the reasons why I would be allowed to communicate with him thusly, I did so at the time."

The old, stooped, bald man with the rather sad few long strings of hair on his head looked at Irene, the oldest one there, then around at the rest of the Spriggan until his eyes rested on Invel. "Not only has he made no reply, but there was no signal received on my end. So the device might've been destroyed, or else is being blocked in some fashion."

For a moment, the most powerful mages in the world, Irene knew that the so-called Wizards Saints felt that title belonged to them, but Irene knew where they stood alongside herself, which firmly cut the legs out from under any such argument, looked at one another, wondering what could've happened to their Emperor. Well, most of them. Larcade had gone pale, his earlier moment of energy disappearing. Now he stared down at his clasped hands, mumbling something under his breath while Bloodman seemed stunned to hear the words aloud.

And then there was Invel, who looked as if he was torn between shouting that it was impossible for something to happen to Zeref and once more using his magic to shut Ajeel and his grandfather up. "Thi, this is treason! The two of you, you've hatched this idea between you!" Invel began.

Brandish shook her head and made to speak up, but Yajeel spoke up before she could. "**Invel!**" he roared, showing a surprising amount of strength in his old lungs. "You've seen the

same reports I have. I know it goes beyond the pale, but now, more than ever the Spriggan need to seem to act as one. Someone here needs to lead, as I have said to you before.”

At that, Invel seemed stunned, and Irene had to hold back a sigh. *So, Yajeel felt him out about stepping up to act as heir to the Empire, and he didn't understand what he was asking, as if the very idea just could not fit into his world view. Sad.*

“And I don't want it,” Larcade stated quickly, coming out of his stupor. “Not yet. My... my head's not in the right place, and I've got a lot of bad habits to break before I want to have authority over the whole Empire. But we are getting way ahead of ourselves. Right now, we need to work together, rather than argue about who here has seniority.”

That caused Invel to shake his head wildly and he made to stand up, but Larcade waved him away. “Enough, damn it! I... I'm not a leader. Invel, you're about as personable as a statue, it's why you've never had much of a public following. You're good at what you do, organizing and leading the military. If we need a public face, someone the people can rally around if Acnologia keeps on attacking and we can't stop him, then Ajeel will do.”

He glared hard at Ajeel, who grimaced a bit, unhappy but reading the danger in Larcade's eyes. He could serve as a public face for the Empire's government, but that was all. Larcade could legitimately take over, crown himself Emperor if Zeref did not return, while Ajeel, while a nobleman and former prince of a minor country, did not have the same gravitas. And while Invel looked reluctant to even consider that Zeref would not return, Larcade seemed to be more resigned to it, and had the authority to make Invel fall in line as the 'son' of Zeref.

He's also ridiculously popular with the common folk, something only Ajeel and Brandish can say. Even I'm not as popular, although that's because I never cared to be interviewed or put on display by our public relations department, Irene thought, somewhat amused but pleased by how this meeting had gone.

Yajeel brought them back to the here and now by clapping his hands together lightly. “One of the main reasons why we had been planning an invasion of Ishgar for so long was to gain the Fairy Heart, a weapon against Acnologia. I think the loss of two of our numbers shows that we need some kind of edge. Even if we were all able to attack Acnologia at once, there is no guarantee of victory without the Fairy Heart.”

That caused Invel to nod reluctant agreement, even while Bloodman looked interested. Even Brandish looked intrigued, having her own reasons to want to attack Fairy Tail, if not Ishgar as a whole.

For her part, Irene held back a scoff at that. She knew the Fairy Heart was just a massive source of magical energy, not a weapon, per-se. What Zeref would do with it, how he would turn it against Acnologia, Irene had no clue and neither did any of the others. Frankly, of late, she had wondered about much of what Zeref had told them, both the knowledge he had told

them of his plans and his motivations. Yet she said nothing, seeing no reason to spark a fight here with Larcade, Invel and Bloodman, all of whom were still blindingly loyal to Zeref. *Even if Zeref himself might well be dead somehow. I wonder how that happened.*

“You mean for us to attack Ishgar when we’re already dealing with Acnologia, Yajeel? It is a fool who tries to split his forces in the face of the enemy,” Wall countered, quoting one of the more popular military treatises within the Empire. “With the decimation of our air forces, we would have to rely mostly on oceangoing travel, and...”

Ajeel shook his head quickly. “No. As much as it might pain some of us, I’m afraid we might need to reach out to Ishgar diplomatically.” Again, Invel looked about ready to commit murder, with Bloodman also looking furious, but he went on, not giving out orders, but speaking persuasively. “Look, we know that Fairy Tail fought that monster, and we know that most of them came home after. We also know that they have several Dragon Slayers in their guild. Even if we can’t convince them to hand over Fairy Heart, having those Dragon Slayers ready to fight alongside us would be a good move, right?”

“And we might need it,” Yajeel added. “I received a report not ten minutes ago of sighting Acnologia flying away from another destroyed forest.”

Larcade sighed again, then glanced across the table at Irene, who blinked at his sudden attention. “I think you should be the one to do it, Irene. You’re easily the most diplomatic among us, and I count myself in that.” Glancing around, he saw no objections, even though Larcade knew that removing Irene might well make Ajeel and Invel’s clash inevitable. *Unless I can keep the peace on my own. Damn it. More work.* “As heir to Emperor Zeref, I give you plenipotentiary powers as our ambassador. Make whatever deals you need but get us some help.”

Next to Irene, Brandish blinked, surprised at the sudden turn of the conversation, while Wall and Invel both nodded. After a moment, Ajeel also nodded, while Bloodman said nothing, simply staring at the table in thought. It was evident by the look in their eyes, though, that Larcade would have his work cut out for him keeping Invel and Ajeel from one another’s throats.

For her part, Irene had been well aware of Ajeel’s moves in the background and didn’t care then and didn’t care now. If the eventual leader of the Empire was Larcade or someone else, it didn’t matter to her whatsoever. If the Empire fell into infighting between Ajeel’s faction and Invel’s, it didn’t matter either. Irene would remain and do her duty as long as she felt it necessary to do so in order to defend her followers.

And as for her new duties, all Irene could feel at the moment was anticipation. Thoughts and feelings she’d had about Erza Scarlet came to the fore again, old memories, old sensations, her thoughts about how they had to be related in some fashion, something she had brooded on for several weeks in the quiet confines of her head, driving out any idea of challenging Acnologia. “Very well, when do I leave?”

OOOOOO

Raising a hand in front of her nose, Erza sneezed, shaking her head and delicately, pulling a handkerchief out of her Requip Space for a moment as she wiped down her hand to her son as he fell back into her arms, laughing all the while. "I do apologize, girls, I don't know what brought that about."

"Perhaps someone is talking about you. Heh, maybe even Ranma, hmmm?" Anna teased.

"Hah! Perhaps." Anna could not help but notice the whimsical way Erza replied to that, the longing look in her mind. Any irritation Erza had about Ranma's role in getting her pregnant had faded over the past few months, leaving Erza simply longing for her lover's presence once more.

Much of that fading anger was due to Enma having finally begun to walk on his own and even go to the potty on his own, quite a bit faster than either Litsu or Atsu had (or most babies did, regardless of what Erza thought) Erza could go on missions once more. The need to be doing something almost created a visible aura around Erza, which was kind of hilarious to the Strauss twins.

"Still, he will return in a few months, and then... we will have to see. For now, though, I have to thank you three once again for agreeing to look after Enma for a few days."

"It's no trouble at all," Wendy answered cheerfully. "I love hanging around Enma. He's so cute! And with the café eating up all of Seilah's time, I want to find something I can do around Magnolia."

"And having Enma play with Litsu and Atsu is always fun," Lisanna agreed, smiling widely as she thought of her own daughter and her twin's son. Like Erza, they had chosen to follow the easy naming convention of simply mixing up the first names of the father and mother, and it worked quite well. Litsu was a gorgeous little girl with a full head of pink hair already, while Atsu was a white-haired boy and heterochromatic eyes, one black, the other blue.

The pair of them were currently at the guild, sleeping in Makarov's office, with Makarov checking in on them. They were able to crawl quite nicely, but neither was the energetic monster that Enma was. Nor did they, thankfully, have his urge to explore.

"Regardless, I thank you." With that, Erza opened the door to her room. Unlike the others, she still lived in Fairy Hills, while Wendy lived in the apartment she had lived in with Ranma, with Seilah and Carla still living with her, while the twins lived with their family.

Carla wasn't here currently. While Wendy loved being a big sister and spending time with Enma, for some reason, Enma had a fascination with Carla's tail and hair. Neither was safe with him around, and Carla disliked dealing with him.

As the door opened, all three girls stared, with Anna putting their shock into words. "You, you haven't even put away any of your swords! Erza! You can't... Enma!"

She made to charge forward, but Erza was already in motion, grabbing up her son from where he was about to taste-test the bottom of a sword hanging from one of her walls. "Ugh, I know I left you in your crib! How in the world do you keep on getting out of it so quickly?"

Despite hanging from his mother's hand upside down, Enma gabbled happily at her. "Maamaaa!" Then, spotting Wendy and the others, he cooed. "Blu! Blu!"

Giggling at his nickname for her, Wendy hopped forward while Lisanna paused, shaking her head at how advanced the youngster was. He was at least an inch larger than her own kid or that of her twin, and while they had begun to make noises that sounded like words, forming one wasn't in them just yet. In contrast, Enma could climb like a monkey, crawl at a speed that caused adults to need to hurry to keep up with him and had lots of names and words.

Anna, however, was still in shock. "Erza, seriously, you can't leave your room like this. If you have a kid, you have to put away dangerous stuff. That's a major part of parenting."

"It really is," Lisanna agreed. "Frankly, half the time it feels like that's our main task, just looking after Litsu and Atsu until they develop some kind of self-preservation."

"Considering who their father is, do you honestly think that will ever happen?" Erza taunted before shaking her head. "And just because I am a mother doesn't mean I'm going to change my lifestyle or living quarters. I keep an eye on him whenever he's here with me, never fear."

"That's not the point! You can't always be watching him 100% of the time. What if he gets loose from his crib at night somehow? I've seen your little Enma climbing over everything. That crib's sides are not nearly tall enough to stop him. What if he doesn't wake you up and does something like chewing on a sword blade? If Enma hurts himself, what will you do then?"

Erza thought about it for a moment, then shrugged. "Be sad, get him to Porlyusica and hope that the lesson takes. Swords aren't toys, after all, and I feel as if I am sometimes doing him a disservice by continually aiding him."

"UGH!" Lisanna grabbed her hair, shaking her head wildly at the stubbornness of the older woman. "That is not how you're supposed to think, drat it!" *Whoever thought that you'd need Ranma, of all people, around to maybe provide the commonsense portion of a couple?*

At that point, Wendy decided to shift around the ongoing argument, plucking her little brother out of Erza's grip, righting him and bringing her to Wendy's chest. A moment Wendy was by one of the windows, opening it. "How about you two help Erza change her room around to be more child-friendly, while I take Enma over to his playmates?"

Wendy was the only one there who had actually been in Erza's room since Enma had come around, and she didn't want to admit it, but she hadn't seen any problems with her decorations. Enma was a curious boy, but he hadn't ever hurt himself, so she figured that Erza had just been doing a good job of watching him. She hadn't realized that Erza was just making more work for herself with her stubborn refusal to change her room and life in general to further accommodate her growing boy.

"I am not..." Erza began, only for Anna to override her.

"An excellent idea, Wendy. We might be here for a while, but there's some baby food in the kitchen at the guild regardless. Have fun."

"Okay! I'll see you all later," With that, Wendy hopped out of the door and into the air. "Air Dragon's Wind Walk!" from her feet came a long, sustained flow of air, pushing up off the ground and thrusting Wendy into the air. Still holding the youngest member of their little clan to her chest, a chest that had, to Wendy's joy, begun finally to show some curves over the past few months as she finally started to hit puberty, Wendy took to the air, while Enma howled in delight.

Elsewhere in Magnolia, however, there was no feeling of happiness going on.

"So it's confirmed then?" Makarov asked as he looked across the table at Ultear, who leaned back in her own chair, sipping at the ale in her hand. "Serena's not just missing, Iceberg confirmed he's dead?"

"It took some doing, but they finally got a report from one of their ice-breaker vessels," Ultear answered with a sigh. "It took forever to convince them to act on Gildarts' words and actually get off their asses to look for anyone who might have witnessed God Serena flying by, but they found one eventually. Iceberg's information network has known that Acnologia had a lair out there for quite some time. Considering that was the direction the sailors reported Serena was flying and how long it's been since he went missing, the Council of Kings has concluded that Serena is dead," Ultear said bluntly.

"Sad. Even after Gildarts called me out to his mansion and told me about him missing, I'd hoped he would show up somewhere. Serena was an ass, far too arrogant by half, and yes, this is me saying it. But he was also powerful, and I'm proof that being an asshole doesn't mean you can't exactly work with others. It just makes it harder."

Lexus made this statement drolly, causing his grandfather and his... Butt buddy? Girlfriend? Laugh. Gildarts wasn't there at present. He wasn't someone who liked to stay still for long, and after he and Lexus had spent a few weeks sparring, and drinking God Serena's mansion dry, the older mage had headed out once more. He'd told Lexus about wanting to head into Minstrel or the city-state of Bellum. As for Ultear, she'd taken the excuse of telling Fairy Tail about God Serena's demise as an excuse to come by and have some time with Lexus.

The Fifth Guild Master of Fairy Tail wasn't really certain where he and Ultear stood these days. They'd shacked up several times over the past year and a half, but neither of them had brought up the 'relationship' word. Lexus hadn't exactly been looking for relationships, and he knew Ultear wasn't either. Did that mean they were exclusive? He had no idea. While he'd had several relationships when he was younger, most of them had fizzled out because, and Lexus knew this, he really sucked at figuring out what was physical attraction and what was actual emotional attraction, the kind that, you know, you needed to make a relationship work long term. Both of them seemed happy enough with things as is, though, so Lexus had no desire to explain it.

"You know, if you want to act as if you're so aware of your faults, why don't you do some of your own damn paperwork some of the time?" Makarov grumbled.

"You complain, but what exactly else would you do with your time anyway, old man, drink yourself to death?" his grandson shot back coldly.

"No, I'd play with the kids, you brat!" Makarov growled out, looking a little shifty for a moment even as he finished his ale. He technically wasn't supposed to be drinking so much, but so long as no one told Porlyusica, he wouldn't get in trouble for it.

Rolling her eyes, Ultear stood up. "Well, that was my report. I wouldn't be surprised if the king of Fiore pushed for you to be recognized as a Wizard, Saint Lexus. Although, don't expect it to be ratified by the other kings anytime soon. All of them will drag their feet at that."

"Like I'd want that responsibility on top of being guild master," Lexus snorted. "The only Wizard Saint emblem I want is the one around my Gramp's neck, and I'll take it from him when he's no longer worthy of the title."

"I'm right here, you brat!" Makarov barked back, shaking his head. "Thanks for the heads up, Ultear. Was there anything else the king wanted us to know?"

"Trouble in Pergrande," Ultear said bluntly, coming back to the table with her hands full of mugs of beer, sitting two of them down in front of the two family members. She sat down, taking a long swig from her own before going on. "You know that they routinely deal with orc incursions? Well, for the past year, there haven't been as many orcs, but there have been other things. Large lumbering creatures that defy description. The kings are talking about it, and the king of Pergrande wants to request a few more high-level mages to be posted along the border

there. I figure, considering that you all told me that Ranma and his little group went into the Blasted Lands, you might be interested.”

“It would just be like that idiot to solve one problem only to make a bigger one later,” Laxus chuckled before shaking his head. “But no spotting of actually Acnologia?”

“Not within Ishgar, as far as we know... Maybe after killing God Serena he’ll want to lay low for a little while. And even more hopefully, that ‘little while’ will be in dragon terms rather than human terms.”

A decade or more of peace would suit me just fine,” Makarov agreed while Laxus scoffed. “These past two years been very nice in that regard.”

Nearby, Cana looked up from where she had been about to set out a deck of tarot cards, staring over to where Makarov had been speaking, then very deliberately setting the cards down. Her girlfriend looked at her quizzically. “What’s wrong?”

“Oh, nothing, just a sudden urge to get drunk until I forget that the master just decided to tempt fate,” Cana said, heading towards the bar to do just that.

OOOOOOO

Kurnugi gasped as he lay out on the ground, still in his draconic body but battered beyond belief. Five days, five days of near constant sparring with Ranma, and Ranma could now defeat him within a mere hour of combat. *If I were one to be concerned about the state of my ego, I would be feeling it now.* “I think, I think you are ready. Or as ready as training against me can make you for Acnologia.”

Ranma was on his knees nearby, gasping in the air. He was battered, too, but his bruises were already beginning to heal even as Kurnugi watched. If there was one thing that he truly was annoyed by, the other man could heal from practically everything. It was by far the most broken ability that Kevin had ever seen. And this was a dragon saying it.

“I, I think so too. Fighting you like this can still help me build up endurance, magical and physical, but I think we’re about as ready as we’re going to get for Acnologia. And frankly, I think we’re all ready to see civilization again.” He looked over to Juvia, who smiled back at him. She and Jenny had started to bring that topic up with Ranma a few nights back, and he had proven receptive but only wanted to leave once he could beat Kurnugi decisively. “I’ve recently been getting my ear talked off about that point.”

That night, the two of them asked the others their opinions. To no one’s surprise, Jenny was all for it, but Natsu and Gajeel both agreeing was a bigger surprise. They’d succeeded in getting in touch with their fathers several times over the past few days, and their training there had reached a milestone that had been one of the things that most eluded them up to this

point. Both could now achieve Dragon Force, just as Ranma could, and felt that anything else would take years more to achieve. As such, they, too, were ready to head back and start the search for Acnologia. “In that case, I think we will set out tomorrow. I wonder what all’s been going on in the civilized lands while we’ve been gone?”

End Chapter

Don’t worry folks, I won’t cover the travel time LOL. The story will shift attention to Erza and the rest, along with Irene and... well, the tensions in the Empire. We will see what happens there.

Shout out seriously goes out to *Justlovereadin’*. Honestly a lot of the trouble in this chapter I ran into could have been solved much easier if I had just asked his opinion on the Fairy Tail characters. I kind of found myself in a hole because of who I thought would pair with Dimaria against Acnologia. Hiryo was a big help as always with the caps, the actual attacks, and so forth, but I think the chapter would not have been as true to the characters without *Justlovereadin’*.