

Howdy all. Here is the next chapter of *Making Waves*, which returned this month to the monthly patron poll after a long hiatus due to *Justlovereadin'* being on a tour at sea with the Navy. He is back, and I ask you all to join me in thanking him for his service. It won the poll by a thin margin thanks to the idea of carrying over half the votes from the last vote it appeared in, something I came up with to keep rotating my stories and updating all of them in a semi-timely manner.

This has been edited by *Hiryō* and the man once known as *justlovereadin'* now known as *Christian Windsor*.

### Chapter 34: Journey Through the Weird

As they left the gravity controlling mushroom trees, a phrase even Ranma couldn't think about without shaking his head in some amazement, Ranma took stock of his companions and was somewhat surprised. Natsu still seemed a little overwrought, as did Gajeel, despite the soup he had fed them. While Jenny didn't seem to have any stomach issues, she seemed to be rethinking the life choices which had brought her here, looking up into the sky with a faint frown on her face. Juvia's face wore its normal upbeat if otherwise impassive expression, but Ranma had noticed as they were walking that every dozen steps or so she would transform into her water body. And as for Happy, well, he was lazing out on Natsu's head, looking more like a cat than Carla ever had, while she was travelling with Ranma. *A cat, specifically, that is dreaming of a bowl of cream and has found a nice sunbeam to laze out in. Lucky bastard not needing to do his own walking.*

Beyond that, judging from the muttering he was hearing from the two guys, who were much more vocal than the girls at the best of times, Gajeel still seemed annoyed at how poorly he had fared in the battle, if it could really be called that. *After all, how could we fight an entire forest, and why would we? It isn't like the mushrooms were attacking us, it was just their nature that was fucking with us.*

Similarly, Natsu was very obviously quite annoyed that they had not destroyed the entire mushroom gravity defying forest, instead fleeing the area. Now he turned to Ranma and complained once more. "I mean, isn't that what we're here for, to try large scale attacks in areas where we don't care about the surroundings?"

Yeah, sure, but how does gravity magic affect regular magic?" Ranma quipped. "Specifically, how would so many small areas of different gravities effect large scale magical attacks?"

That brought a frown to Natsu's face as he remembered his fight with that Blue Jam guy. *Wait, was that his name? Meh, whatever, I bet I could kick his ass now, whatever his name was.* "You're saying our large-scale attacks might've been broken up or redirected?"

“Or any multitude of things. I know my attacks sometimes missed in there, both my ki attacks, which let me tell ya I was kind of startled by and my magical ones. Remember also those trees weren’t actually sentient, we were just passing through the territory of their magic effects,” Ranma shrugged. “What would be the point? We might be here to try out our large-scale attacks, but I’d rather we use them on monsters or just random flat bits of territory where the only thing to die will be grass rather than random mushroom tree forest places... Especially when the rest of our party is within the same area. Remember, friendly fire is not friendly at all, Natsu.”

“Says you,” Natsu grinned. “Any fire is friendly to me. Or at least edible. Tasty is up in the air.”

There was a chorus of groans at that, but then Jenny spoke up, pulling her gaze from the sky to look over at Ranma earnestly. “Personally I think, a better idea than just going around randomly making war on the landscape would be for us to find a place where we can set up a camp. A safe area, or at least one that is easily defensible. Then we can range out from there, go exploring... or destroying,” she quipped, winking at the free Dragon Slayers, all of whom smirked or grinned at her. The fact that both of those expressions showed quite a bit of tooth was not lost on anyone there.

Ranma nodded. “That’s not a bad idea, which means you and Happy should take to the sky again. See what’s out there.”

“Should we fly in any specific direction?”

Ranma shook his head. “We’re here to explore, not to get somewhere specific. Just move in a circle all around us, keep us within sight,” he added, pulling out his spyglass looking all around them for a moment seeing nothing before shrugging and tossing it to Gajeel when he indicated he wanted to use it. “We’ll keep heading out in this direction. Unless one comes back and tells us we’re heading towards a specific kind of danger.”

“So we can go around it, or so you and these two can go challenge it, natural phenomenon or not,” Jenny snorted. “With you combat junkies it’s hard to tell what you’ll do sometimes.”

Ranma smirked at that but didn’t bother replying.

Chuckling a bit at her own wit, Jenny spread her arms aside, shouting out, “Take Over: Mecha Soul: Power Glider!”

There was the habitual flash of Take Over magic, and when it dissipated, Jenny’s body had once more changed entirely. Her legs were fused into one, small fins coming out of their sides, the bottom of her feet having transformed into some kind of small thrusters. Her arms were turned into large almost papier-mâché like wings, flaring back and towards her feet. Her

body had shifted to resemble the main fuselage, or main body of a plane, although Ranma felt that the breasts sticking out from the bottom of what would be the belly of the glider probably took away from its aerodynamic qualities.

There was a thrumming series of thumps from Jenny's feet, and a second later, Jenny boosted off the ground, zooming high into the sky. Soon she was out of sight above them, her shout of, "Here I go, into the **really** wild blue yonder!" echoing behind her.

"Hmm, Juvia thinks that Jenny is truly worried about being here in the Blasted Lands but is trying to use false bravado to cover for it," Juvia whispered into Ranma's ear.

Nodding Ranma turned, placing an arm around Juvia's stomach, and leaning in to whisper into the bluenette's ear in turn, ignoring the shiver his breath caused. "I can see that too. Funny thing is, false bravado can often become real courage if it's kept up enough. And we really do need her and Happy up there telling us what's out there. Just because we're here to challenge ourselves is no reason to be stupid about it."

"Which is a vote in favor of finding a central campsite to work our way out from," Juvia agreed, pouting as Ranma turned away to look at the others.

"Off you go little buddy!" Natsu said looking at Happy. "Ya can't let Jenny have all the fun."

"Fun, you say, Natsu," Happy snickered, his normally hidden snarkiness readily apparent in his voice. "I think you and I need to sit down and look up the definition of fun sometime. I don't think that word means what you're using it for."

With that, the blue-furred Exceed called upon his Aero magic, and leapt into the air, flying upwards after a series of wing beats. Apparently he had the same idea as Jenny, getting altitude and moving around and down in a spiral from there.

Watching this, Ranma studiously ignored the pouting, needy look on Juvia's face, instead humming thoughtfully as he stared up at Happy as he ascended. "You know, using Happy as a scout is actually pretty smart. And gives me an idea of the direction we should take his training."

"I know, right?! Ninjas are so awesome! But I don't think either of us have the right mentality to go full nin-nin. We've tried a few times and it never works," Natsu finished morosely.

"Let me guess, you shout your name before you attack right?" Gajeel snorted.

Natsu looked at his fellow dragon Slayer like he was an idiot. "Yeah, obviously! I mean, what's the point of sneaking up on someone if they don't know who's about to coldcock them?"

"Juvia agrees with Happy's earlier comment: perhaps you need to open a dictionary and look up the real meaning of some of the terms you use occasionally, Natsu." With a sigh Juvia set aside her desire to have some affection time with Ranma, instead cocking her head and looking at her lover thoughtfully. "What were you actually thinking about, my love?"

Ranma shrugged. "Happy's small size and his ability to fly, which is actually a good deal better than Carla's, shockingly, is his best asset. He hasn't shown any ability to use Ki Claws yet, so we need to think up something else. Either hit-and-run strikes, in which we would emphasize Happy's ability to dodge, enhance his reaction time and straight-ahead speed. We've already begun that. Or maybe adding silent flight and teach him some kind of chameleon or camouflage. That way he can be an unseen scout, specialize in stealth espionage and..." Ranma smirked mischievously, "assassination."

It took a moment for that last bit to register, and then Natsu pulled himself from a daydream about him and Happy acting like ninjas. "Hey! Assassination isn't cool! Killing at all isn't cool."

"Don't worry, I'm not going to try to train him to kill him, just attack and disappear without being noticed, if we can manage it." Ranma shook his head. In his mind, killing was still something best to be avoided if you could, but he had learned in this world that killing was also not something to be shirked if it could not be avoided. That, and there were just a heap ton of scum out there who needed killing.

"Come on group, let's get going. Natsu, you and I will switch off every few minutes sending up flares," Ranma ordered. "Gajeel, you're on point, Natsu left, Juvia right, keep an eye out for anything moving. Around here, any kind of animal ya see might be a monster capable of giving us trouble. And if you see any orcs, give an extra large shout."

**OOOOOO**

Happy soared up into the sky, only beating his wings, occasionally, doing pretty much what Jenny was: having gotten a lot of height by now, using the various hot air currents he could find to stay in the air, to conserve energy. This was a lot more difficult here in the magically saturated territory.

Most magic, regardless of type created a tiny bit of heat in some fashion that Happy didn't understand. He'd heard Laki and astonishingly, Gajeel, Freed and Evergreen talking about it at one point, the physics of magic or something like 'underlying properties of magical theory.' Whatever it was, Happy hadn't bothered listening. It didn't have anything to do with fish, and most of the words they'd used went right over his head.

But, flying, Happy understood, and the use of thermals. He knew that most of the time, thermal waves air slowly began to dissipate over time as they moved away from whatever was creating the hot air rising up from the ground. Here that wasn't the case.

Since entering the Blasted Lands, Happy had already seen the thermal currents end very abruptly, have strange pockets where they were interrupted for a few moments or at times doubled back on themselves. All of which were things that no natural air current should do without some pre-existing weather force to push against it. But here, there was no such thing. Indeed, there was no sign of any of those changes until you hit them.

In other words, they were just weird, much like the rest of the continent past the mountains of Pergrande, and it freaked Happy out something fierce. *Ugh, whose idea was it to come here again? Oh right, Ranma's. I knew he was just as silly as Natsu. But noooo, I have to be out here as spotter, ugh.*

Happy stared all around them, very, very conscious of the fact that he was small, all alone out here, and just the right size for a snack to some creatures. This was why Ranma very rarely ventured away from Natsu whenever they were out in the wild. Unlike his pink-haired friend Happy had quite a well-defined set of survival instincts thank you very much.

Which was why he noticed the area of black and white before he actually entered it.

Pausing in midair, Happy grimaced a bit as he had to fight the air currents, fighting his previous momentum, diving down into a cloud for a second. A cloud which was almost solid to the touch, allowing him to stick his head out and stare ahead and down to the ground.

From one side of the horizon to the other, the world has suddenly gone black and white, utterly monochrome in a way that caused Happy to stare. Unlike cats, Exceed could see in color and suddenly having that taken away from him was very off-putting.

He looked down at himself, breathing a sigh of relief at seeing his blue fur, the ground and finally the area all around him. Determining that the monochrome color was still a bit too far away to bother him, Happy started to move sideways from his previous circle around where the others were just out of sight on the horizon, little dots on the ground.

Keeping that direction in mind, Happy had moved in the direction of the monochrome area, being very careful to stay well away from it, especially when he began to notice that there were several dozen creatures fighting it out within the area. He stared at them for several minutes, watching magic flash out from one side of the conflict to the other, wondering what kind of creatures they were, or perhaps what beast it had been before the runaway magic of this area had mutated it.

It almost looked like a Civil War to his eyes, since the creatures looked very much alive. Several large monsters with two massive treelike legs, holding up nearly cylindrical bodies,

turtle shells and forearms battled it out with what looked to be smaller versions of themselves. Although for some reason, the colors of different. The larger creatures were almost entirely white in the monochrome area, while the smaller creatures were a kind of darkish grey color. *And where are their heads? I don't see anything that could be a head on any of them.*

And they were using magic, which blasted out from crystals seemingly randomly placed around her bodies. From this distance, Happy couldn't see what type of magic, although a portion of it did seem to be able to blind their opponents for short periods of time judging by how the smaller creatures occasionally twitched away from the larger ones, bringing one of their hands up to what had to be their eyes, although even when he used his spyglass, Happy still couldn't see anything to indicate a face there.

From this distance, he couldn't make out much detail beyond that, and really didn't want to. With a shake of his head, Happy turned back in the direction of his companions, eeping in dismay when he didn't see them. But then a blast of fire erupted into the air, and Happy sighed in relief. 'Woo, leave it to Natsu to remember to send up flares.'

Moving in that direction quickly, he saw the tiny figures growing rapidly just as a waterspout from Ranma or Juvia blasted up into the air. A moment later, he paused after a as he saw what looked like a giant bird crossed with a lizard or maybe a mechanical device of some kind diving down on them. "Nope. Best to let the group on the ground handle that kind of thing before I return. No chance I'm going to mess with anything that can eat me without even bothering to open its mouth."

**OOOOOOO**

Ranma knew that using flares like this was a calculated risk, but had felt it was necessary, just in case either of the flyers lost sight of the people on the ground as the group continued travelling forward. Naturally this also attracted the attention of other creatures in the area.

Some of whom were small, and easily scared off. Some were just small, but not so quick to run off when they caught sight of the mages. One time, a squirrel-like creature that looked crossed with a bunny chittered at them angrily. It was about the size of a fox and looked like a hippy painter had gone crazy on it at some point in the past.

Natsu made to barbecue it, but before his fire could do more than appear around his arms Juvia doused him with water, grabbed Natsu by the lapels of his shirt and dragged the Dragon Slayer in close, growling into his face. "Juvia knows that you weren't about to just randomly fricassee that tiny adorable looking creature, were you? When it has made no move to attack us?"

Natsu hastily shook his head, and with a smile Juvia released him. "Good. Natsu is showing remarkable progress in learning common sense... and survival instincts, even if Erza is

not around to smack them into your head.” With that Juvia went back to staring at the little creature cooing at how cute it was.

“A cross between a rabbit and a squirrel but colored like a peacock,” Ranma muttered, cocking his head to one side. “But... if I look closely at those cheeks of the critter, those look like poison sacks.”

Everyone else stared at him for a second then Gajeel smacked his fist into his other palm. “Oh yeah, some animals do that right? Use bright colors to ward off predators. The whole, Yeah, I might be tasty, but you’re going to die from eating me’ thing. I honestly didn’t think that was real when Levi showed me some pictures.”

“Exactly, Iron Boy. I’d probably be fine, I’m about as immune to poison as you can get thanks to certain adventures from my past life. But you guys?” He shrugged, then made a downward motion with his thumb, causing the others to snort.

The next creature that appeared after Ranma had sent up a waterspout was not nearly as innocent-looking. Indeed, it didn’t actually look all that much like a natural monster at all. It was a giant bird to be sure, and its wings were entirely birdlike. Its body however looked crisscrossed with metal bands and what looked like some kind of metal plates, and its talons looked like the same kind of grasping claws Ranma could remember from gatcha games in an arcade, complete with the ability to grow and reach down to them.

The bird attacked directly above, squawking as its limbs shot down towards them, grasping. Each of the claws seemed to have smaller barbs covering the interior of the claws and the talon fit to tear into shred anything they caught.

That didn’t look pleasant, certainly, but even Gajeel, who was easily the slowest in terms of movement speed of all of them was more than fast enough to dodge. The Iron Dragon Slayer did so to a minimal amount before grabbing the claws as it passed him by, holding the beast his “Gihihhi,” accompanying the move.

The others shot their magic towards the creature, shouts of “Water Dragon’s Rising Fang,” swiftly followed by, “Water Slicer” and “Fire Dragon’s Blazing Wing!”

The water strikes arrived first, but seemed to be absorbed into a lacrima crystal embedded into the creature’s chest, but when the fire attack struck. “GRSAAAAAH!” the bird screeched in agony as its head was engulfed by the fire, trying to pull up and away from them.

But Gajeel grunted, and with a thought sent some of his Iron Dragon Slayer magic out from his feet into the ground. Spikes appeared from his feet, punching down into the ground before expanding as he snarled out. “I don’t think so, Birdy! Iron Dragon’s Immovable Claw!”

“Juvia thinks you Dragon Slayers all should stop giving every magical thing you do a specific name,” Juvia muttered.

“Water Dragon’s Boosted Step!” Ranma said, just a bit louder than necessary as he used to flash upward, a punch crashing into the side of the bird still burning head, sending it flopping down towards the others.

Deliberately miming keeping her mouth shut with one hand, Juvia lashed out with her own attack, cutting the creature’s wings off. At which point Gajeel leapt forward, grabbing its neck from behind and wrenching backwards snapping it.

Afterward, all of them stood around the creature, looking at the bird in some confusion. “I thought it was just my eyes playing tricks on me, but it really does look almost like it was merged with something mechanical,” Gajeel muttered, staring at the bird. “Like a Take Over Mecha Soul gone wrong?”

“Or two things merged,” Natsu said, then with a snort elbowed Gajeel. “You’re drooling, dude.”

“Shut up,” Gajeel grunted back hastily wiping at his mouth, finding some drool there, as Natsu had said. Then again, this bird did look really tasty. Still, reality inserted itself into his head for a moment. “Yeah, I mean, it looks tasty, but who knows where it’s been, or what it’s been eating?”

Natsu shut up at that, blinking. “Oh yeah... I remember once Happy caught a pigeon when we were in one of the larger cities in Fiore. He was sick for days.”

“Juvia agrees. And it that could be even worse here. Who knows what bird like this could eat. Indeed, Juvia thinks we all need to be very careful about what we eat here,” Juvia warned. “Outside of your elements anyway. You Dragons Slayers are lucky in that your elements cannot be poisoned against you.”

“That’s a good point, love. I’ll test out any kind of animal we hunt or whatever from now on. Beyond anything else, the background magic here could have some nasty effects to stomachs who aren’t used to eating meats filled with the stuff. But back to the bird, Gajeel might have a point about the whole two things merged thing.” When everyone looked at Ranma, he shrugged. “Remember, we’re not just dealing with the aftereffects of all of the massive magical attacks that occurred centuries ago, we’re also dealing with the evolution it caused.”

Juvia frowned as did Natsu, while Gajeel cocked his head, thinking before nodding slowly as if he understood what Ranma was saying. “What’s left will have been the survivors of the monsters who had high levels of magical resistance back then, or creatures who evolved in highly magical areas... and not all of the weird magic we will see here will be from attacks.



Some of it might be from, well, transportation systems, or construction stuff. I'd wager that monster's ancestors evolved in some factory somewhere that used a shit ton of magic, which they absorbed."

"Huh, come to think of it, I could definitely see that little burrowing pig thing we saw a few hours ago as coming from some kind of agricultural farm. The same goes with the bunny squirrel thing, I'd wager that guy's ancestors were pets who got loose," Gajeel added, before frowning. "Although I don't know if that means they're more likely to be poisonous, or less likely."

"Heh, although I doubt the pig things have survived because they are tougher than anything else," Natsu snickered. Although aggressive, the pig thing had been easily dealt with, punted over the horizon by Natsu when it charged at them.

"Just being tough isn't the only way to survive, Natsu. Being very quick to run away can also help you survive in a lot of situations," Juvia argued, before they all paused in their trek as Happy arrived.

The Exceed landed on Natsu's head, standing there like a little soldier as he saluted the others. "Aye sir! We chose the right way to go after getting out of the mushroom forest. Unless all of you think you want to play around being white for a bit?"

The others all blinked at him and Happy went on to explain what he had seen, shaking his head as he finished. "And I really don't know why the creatures were fighting. I mean, it really looked like two adults were fighting a bunch of kids, but they were really serious about it, I saw what I think was blood at a time or two flying from some of the hits. It was **reaalllly** hard to tell without color."

Ranma snorted at that, then shrugged, firing up another waterspout. "Well, let's see what Jenny found behind door number two. For now, let's butcher this birdie, and I'll test the er... meaty bits for any issues."

Moments later, the other flyer among them came down from on high, shouting down, "Catch me!" just as she canceled her Take Over magic.

Ranma almost automatically boosted himself up into the air, catching her, cancelling Jenny's momentum with ease before landing with the blonde in his arms in the princess carry, cocking his head as he looked down at her. "Was that just an excuse to get some cuddle time or did you really need help landing?"

"I really did want some help, I haven't been able to figure out a good way of landing without needing to run a bit to bleed off my momentum, unlike you, I can't make momentum and gravity my toys," she teased, before smiling brightly, pressing her chest up into his and purring into his ear. "But if you're offering..."

Ranma smirked and allowed his arms to tighten around her slightly, one hand the others couldn't see from where they stood moving from her hip to under Jenny's rear for a second. He squeezed and leaned in so his breathing whispered across Jenny's lips. "Hmm, and what should I do now with you, hmmm?"

Natsu scowled, looking away, but Gajeel wasn't about to let this go on. "Hey! None of that, we're right freaking here, you horndogs!"

With a sigh Jenny reluctantly slipped out from Ranma's arms, reporting that she had seen an even larger area of mushroom forest to their immediate south and forward. "You'd be able to see it if you travel in that direction for a few moments and it spreads all over that area. I think it was once connected to the portion of the mushroom forest we ran into, but something happened to almost cut that segment away. If you keep going straight, you'll see remnants of the bits that were connecting them soon enough."

"We've been seeing signs of blasted territory like someone used fire magic or plasma magic on a large scale," Ranma mused, while Natsu thrust up a hand in the background, whooping about how his magic was the most destructive. They were, after all, standing in the middle of a large crater, one of a multitude they had been traveling through.

"Juvia thinks that truly isn't something to be proud of. And you were doing so well in the commonsense area for just a moment there, Natsu," Juvia lamented.

But Jenny shook her head, interrupting the two. "I mean this was a little more recently than that. I found a whole swath of destroyed mushroom parts just beyond the next few hills, get to the top of this hill and you'll start to see it. All of that area's been smashed to pieces from above as if by something with rather overly large fists, maybe the size of one of Acnologia's paws, attacked the whole area from above."

All of the Dragon Slayer's perked up at that, and Jenny rolled her eyes. "Don't get excited. I didn't see any sign of what caused those impacts. Besides, you never know, it might've been an herbivore or something, which ate most of the mushrooms after smashing them. You wouldn't want to fight a plant eater, would you?"

Natsu and Gajeel both shook their heads, looking somewhat downcast, but Ranma laughed. "Are you serious? Ooh, right you're a city girl, Jenny, heck the lot of you are."

"HEY!" Natsu growled, with Happy nodding in agreement. "You take that back!"

"Ahuh, and how often have you guys spent anytime longer than say a month or more? How much do you actually know about animals?" At that, both of them backed down, and Ranma went on, "Herbivores can be dangerous too, sometimes way more dangerous than predators. I remember one time we found this group of creatures, Me and Wendy. They were normal, plant-eating animals, almost like large goats, down in... Joya, I think it was?"

Ranma paused for a second, frowning in momentary confusion before shrugging. "Anyway, even as we were observing the herd, several of them had tried to sneak up on us from behind, tried to ram us. To most people they would've actually been a danger. And back in my original world there was this creature called a hippo which was mostly a plant eater too and was big fat and silly looking. But it killed more people every year than alligators or lions."

For some reason, lions and alligators were creatures in Ishgar, whereas hippos weren't. Ranma had no idea why, but he'd never seen one in his travels, or even heard of them. So it was a minor mystery.

"Well, I didn't see any threats or really unusual geographic things outside of the mushroom forest. The smashed segment was pretty thoroughly demolished, almost as if it was made by a whole herd of banks rather than one creature, which gives some weight to Ranma's point. But the ground on either side of that strip of forest is pretty threat free," Jenny reported.

"Regardless, let's move in that direction. Then, when we get away from the mushroom forest entirely, we can start training our large-scale magical attacks," Ranma ordered.

"Sounds good, although I will warn you, the ground out there is very hard and very rocky. There're lots of little rocky hills here and there. As if some things had been shot up out of the ground, maybe?"

"So long as it wasn't living things, the magic **should** have dissipated," Ranma answered frowning. "Unless you saw anything active?"

Jenny shook her head, but Juvia spoke up then "My love brings up an interesting point."

She gestured down to herself, and everyone noticed that Juvia had once more transformed into her water-form for a moment. She stood perfectly still, not even breathing for a second, but everyone could still see ripples going through her. "The magic here is monstrously dense, as we were warned of. I believe we all need to be on the lookout to make certain that the background magic doesn't bother or start to impact our bodies. You three Dragon Slayer's might be all right, but Happy in particular could be susceptible, as could Juvia and Jenny."

Ranma grimaced at that but nodded as Jenny hastily transformed into her SE motorcycle Take Over form. "If any of us see signs of magic around here starting to affect us, change our attitudes, mutate our bodies in anyway, we'll call it quits and head back home. Magical assaults, weird geography and magically mutated monsters we can fight. Active body mutations thanks to too much background magic, we can't."

"Did you see anything that we could use as a base of operations?" Gajeel asked Jenny. "You mentioned that being a good idea earlier."

She and Happy both shook their heads, although no one had expected anything from Happy given the whole monochrome territory he had seen covering the world from one side to another. With that, Ranma indicated they should get a move on.

Having already transformed into her SE motorcycle form, Jenny ordered Juvia and Gajeel to hop aboard, while Natsu and Ranma used their Turbo or Boosted Step techniques to keep up, pushing forward quickly. They covered several dozen miles, pushing into and through the destroyed areas of mushroom forest that Jenny had spotted then out into the territory beyond with only the occasional attack from strange creatures.

They did have to deal with several instances of strange magical effects, though. Their senses went dead at one point, each of them going blind for several seconds.

Still more of the lands actually seemed to be a strange illusion, where they stepped into large holes in the ground as they moved forward. Other segments of the ground rose into the air, seemingly at random, just affected by the background magic of the Blasted Lands. Weird sounds abounded, coming to them on the wind, ranging from age-old battles, to the sounds of a forest when there were no trees at all within sight.

However, the next real threat to them form of a group of monsters rather than the background magic of this territory.

The monster was some kind of ambush predator, which hid so well that Ranma, even with his enhanced senses and knowledge of terrain barely spotted them. One moment they were traversing alone across the dusty, cratered ground and the next, small segments of the blasted, cratered ground rippled. Featherlike bits of cloth flickered, separating and flattening across the monster's backs before they charged forward, roaring.

These were eight-limbed creatures, with four legs, and four arms reaching forward towards the attackers, with hunched backs with scales that seemed to excrete the strange cloth that had previously been covering their forms. Two of their forearms were liberally covered with lacrima crystals, from which beams of green shot out before them as they charged. Their fangs were a little larger than their mouths should indicate, and they were all almost as tan as the land around them, further letting them blend in even with their camo tents pulled back.

One of the magical bolts struck Gajeel and Jenny, who in motorcycle form couldn't dodge an attack from her side fast enough. Several of them also went through Juvia, causing ripples in her water form.

"OW the fuck!?" Jenny barked out in pain as the motorcycle was sent onto its side as Ranma and Natsu spread out to either side, dodging the continued magical fire coming their way.

Juvia stayed in her water form, letting the falling motorcycle pass through her, while Gajeel rolled with it, viciously chortling. "Gihihi, the magic is like magic bullets, they don't hurt much!"

"Guow! Speak for yourself Iron Boy," Jenny muttered, canceling her Take Over magic before rolling along on her side for a second, dodging still more attacks, shifting into her Bubblegum form mid-roll.

Leaping to her feet, Jenny was now covered by blue marked by strips of dark pink, its joints somewhat overdone, looking almost like those you could find on a doll, her head covered by a helmet whose spherical shape was marred by indented visor and a jutting dark grey jaw and two 'ears' that sloped backward and up from the sides of her helmet. While her mechanical gauntlets were fully articulated, a nozzle stuck out from one palm denoting a gun, while the wrist of the other gauntlet was heavily built up, with small lines denoting that it could perhaps move back and forth.

The feet of the robot ended in hover skates, adding immensely to Jenny's mobility. This, coupled with its mix of long-range and close-in attacks explained why this Mech Soul was quickly becoming one of Jenny's go-to forms. Now she zoomed to the side of the attacking monsters, her machine gun firing, splattering one of the creatures into pieces. "They don't have much armor, no need for..."

She was interrupted by Natsu's bellow of, "Fire Dragon's Destructive Flame!" and watched with dead eyes behind her helmet as the large fireball flew out from the Fire Dragon Slayer. Fire blasted out from his mouth into the charging monsters, washing over the majority of the creatures. The lacrima on their arms flared but cracked almost instantly and most of the monsters were incinerated all on the spot.

However, a few of them appeared to have been mutated even further from whatever creature they had once been than the others, and instead of having arms covered with lacrima-like protrusions, the same sort Happy had seen on the monsters battling it out in the monochrome territory, they had their whole upper bodies covered with them. These crystals absorbed the magically infused fire attack from Natsu and they were still standing as the attack began to dissipate.

However, a series of Water Slicers from Juvia and a single Water Dragon's Roar from Ranma wiped out the remaining attackers.

"Well, that was annoying," Ranma muttered, shaking his head. "Not really a threat to any of us, but still..."

"Yeah, that was a warning to keep our eyes peeled. If those bastards had attacked from an ambush, they could have done some damage," Gajeel said, shaking his head. "We need to always be on our toes out here."

“Aye sir,” Happy said, staring up at the clouds above them. “And on that note, I think we’re going to get some rain soon.”

Ranma looked up along with the others, and groaned, “Yeah, that looks like a major storm moving in. And how much do any of you want to bet that it will be a regular thunder lightning ringing kind of storm around here?”

“Not even Natsu’s stupid enough to take that bet,” Gajeel snarked

Natsu nodded a few times, before it dawned on him what Gajeel had actually said. “Hey! I’m way smarter than you are, Iron Head!”

Gajeel just snorted, and Juvia shook her head, looking over the group. “Do you think we should keep going, try to get out of this area to seek shelter? Or should we put up our tents here?”

To Ranma that was a no-brainer, and he urged the group forward quickly, with Jenny and Happy once more taking to the air to scout forward of the rest of the group. Ranma picked up Gajeel, Natsu and Juvia as they raced on as quickly as they could move. This was no time to do any more training, as Ranma usually made Gajeel do to keep up with the others. Even Ranma didn’t want to deal with the weirdness of a rainstorm in this place.

But they didn’t find any kind of shelter, and in their haste continued to run into other bits of geography-based magical issues. None of these stopped them for long, but slowed them down, as it was very hard for Jenny to make ground in the air when the wind suddenly stopped moving, or when an invisible wall appeared in front of the group which they couldn’t break through and had to go around.

And so, they were still very much out into the open when the storm clouds started to descend. To the astonishment of the people below, the storms began to break apart. Not dissipate no, the clouds hit a certain point in the air, and then seemed to shift into cubes of various sizes. Cubes that continued to descend, spread around, and finally become the source of the rain they had all feared would come.

“Wow, it’s like Gildarts was around here so long as he somehow left his enchantments behind!” Natsu enthused, a wide grin on his face as he used a fire attack on one of the clouds above them. This turned much of the rain coming from that cloud to steam but didn’t stop any of the other cubes from dumping their contents onto the ground.

Worse, those contents were not just rain, but weather of all sorts. This was rapidly proven when Natsu howled in sudden pain from a tiny pellet of hail that caught him in the eye. “GYOW! Damn it, they can shoot whatever bit of weather they have in them sideways too?!”

“It seems to be a bit random, which side of the cube the weather comes out. I just saw one release a bit of water directly up only for it to just fall back into the cube. Talk about pathetic, right? Gihihi,” Gajeel’s voice ended in a laugh as several bits of hail struck his arm and head, while nearby, Jenny was nearly knocked off her feet by a wave of torrential rain from another cube. “Watch your step, Blondie.”

“Oh shut up, you rusted pile of scrap!” Jenny grumbled, yelping and rolling as still more hail hammered down like slow-moving shrapnel all around her from several different cube-clouds. In her normal body, Jenny only had a normal mage’s level of durability.

In contrast, Juvia was able to ignore most of the weather, having rapidly turned into her water form, as was Ranma, given his normal durability. Gajeel also was pretty much immune to the weather. At least at first, as for the first few moments, despite the whole cube thing, the weather coming at them was the usual sort: rain, snow, sleet, hail. Not very normal to see them all at once, but no real threat, even to Jenny thanks to her transforming into her Bubblegum form.

But that was only the start. Several minutes after the storm began, it became far more dangerous.

The first warning they had of this was when several droplets hit Ranma’s arms. Ranma hadn’t bothered to use his Water Dragon Slayer powers to keep the rain away from him. It was a hard and not at all fun mental exercise and Ranma would normally see as just good training. But they didn’t know how long this storm would last and he didn’t want to tire himself out. Further, she couldn’t do anything about the snow or hail. Something about the change from liquid to solid negated her control, despite the fact the nature of water didn’t change much. That was something both Ranma and Juvia were determined to try and correct in the future.

So, Ranma had allowed the curse to occur, and at first, she didn’t realize there was anything different about the rain coming towards her from above and to the side, right up until the first drops hit her arm. “WhAOOOWW what the heck!?” she hissed in anger and pain as raindrops began to eat into her skin.

Hastily turning, she raced over to another area, rushing into and through some of the torrential rain there washing away the acid, looking up at where the attack had come from. Luckily, the cube that the acid had come from was markedly greener in the overcast light than the others around it. “Watch out for those green cubes! They’ve got acid in them!”

“Something about the way you said that makes me want to make a joke, but I can’t think why right now,” Gajeel grunted, as one of the green clouds came towards him. He almost missed a lightning bolt cutting down from the side, but Juvia got between him and it quickly, taking the bolt on her chest. Since she had change into her pure water form, the lightning did nothing to Juvia, and Gajeel was able to get away from the acid from the green cloud quickly.

"I take it back! This is like Gildarts left behind a part of his enchantments, and every cube has gone crazy!" Natsu shouted, sending out another series of flame attacks up in every direction trying to destroy the clouds. This, needless to say, was a futile endeavor. He destroyed dozens of them, but there were far too many other cubes around and after a time as the steam rose, it formed into still more cubes under whatever weird weather condition were occurring here.

"This is getting kind of desperate. Time to take some extreme measures. Take Over: Mecha Soul: Powered Fan!" Jenny glowed for a brief moment and then transformed.

When her transformation ended, Jenny stood slightly taller than any of them in an entirely new Take Over form. This form though... well, to call it unfit for hand-to-hand combat was underselling it. First, she was about as wide as she was tall, most of that width concentrated on her stomach region, which had shifted form into a large, circular fan, complete with a series of propellers already slowly whirling up to speed.

On top of this, Jenny's breasts lay, looking almost normal in comparison, although heavily pressed up and out by this form and covered with pink colored rubber. That pink colored rubber continued upward, covering Jenny's head with a hood of thick rubber, and her arms with pink rubber body armor. And unlike her hang glider form, in this one Jenny had legs, sort of. They were really not fully articulated, but her grey metal legs could move at least.

Juvia, Natsu and Gajeel stared at Jenny, confused the Iron Dragon Slayer began to laugh before rolling away hastily his laughter cutting off as another bout of acid struck the area where he had previously been. "Okay, I've seen you take on some hilarious forms, before, but what the hell is the story behind that thing?"

Ranma just looked once, smacked her forehead, and then let loose a bolt of water magic into another acid cloud. Even so, the redhead couldn't stop herself from twitting her blonde lover. "Er Jenny, far be it from me to question your sense of aesthetics, but I gotta say that thing is ugly. And pink. Horribly pink. And I got no idea where you're going with that body."

"Oh shut up! I come from an island where the summers are so hot it's hard to move and my air conditioning failed a lot. Sue me." Jenny grumbled. "And this form can be really useful too! Watch!"

When the lightning bolts from above hit her, Jenny's new form absorbed them, the rubber covering her form absorbing it easily. When the torrential rain battered at her, it simply sloughed off her new form. The wind did nothing to her, and when her internal engine had built up enough speed, Jenny showed why she had chosen this form. "Tornado Blast!"

From the fan that made up the bulk of this Take Over form a wide-angled blast of wind poured, so powerful it knocked Natsu and Ranma almost off their feet. This was just the



backblast however, as the wind flashed up into the storm shattering several dozen storm-cubes and continuing on to make a dent in the clouds above them.

“Okay, I take it back. That forms useful. Still ugly though,” Ranma quipped.

“I bought it when I was a kid darn it,” Jenny muttered. “Don’t judge mini-me. And um, I might need someone to help me move.”

With Jenny’s new form protecting them, the group began to make headway moving forward. Although like with the others, the acid cubes were still dangerous to Jenny, forcing Ranma and Juvia to target them specifically, while Jenny took over destroying the majority every few minutes.

But that was a bit of a problem: the range of this storm. From one horizon to the other behind them the sky was entirely blotted out by the main storm cloud high above, and the cubes were nearly as wide spread. With the sun so blocked, and so much rain coming down from nearly every angle, actually seeing where they were going was quite hard.

“We need to do more to break up the clouds!” Ranma shouted, looking over at Juvia. The transformation-type water mage looked back at Ranma, and nodded, charging towards her.

Placing her hands to either side of her mouth, Ranma called upon the absorbing side of his Water Dragon Slayer powers, trying to ignore the slight whimper that reached his ears as she drank down Juvia’s water form and a lot of the rain all around her. Blue magical energy formed around her hands and mouth before Ranma roared. “Water Dragon’s Tandem Deluge!”

With that, Ranma turned his head upward and shot Juvia’s water form out into the air above the party. Juvia’s face appeared within the torrent of water, her expression grim as she pushed her hands out in either direction, pushing her water magic to move faster than she normally would as she did. With the added impetus, the water blasting out from Juvia in every direction caused a veritable midair explosion of water among the clouds around Juvia, dissipating several thousand cubes.

Below her, the rest of the party used mid-range, wide angle attacks, a chorus of shouts echoing through the air up toward Juvia.

“Vibrating Big Death!”

“Metal Dragon’s Roar!”

“Fire Dragon’s Enveloping Wings!”

All these attacks combined to destroy the last few scattered cloud cubes, and Juvia fell back through the ongoing rain, reforming her water body before landing with a splash on the

muddy ground below. Once more, Juvia reformed her human-like body, smiling as she found Jenny and Ranma waiting for her.

“Let’s get going guys and girls,” Ranma shouted, her voice cutting through the ongoing sound of the rain coming down. “We need to get a move on, unless you all want to play in the water all day?”

“MM.... I’d bet Juvia likes the idea of Ranma playing with her all day~,” Jenny teased, her tone coquettish, causing Juvia to giggle but nod in agreement. The two girls’ jokes didn’t travel far enough for even Ranma to hear though, let alone the others and they all pushed on quickly, while the girls continued their badinage.

Even with the strange cubelike structures in the air dissipated, the rain continued down. And it continued for hours. Soon, everyone but Ranma and Juvia were utterly miserable. Worse yet was the fact that visibility was poor even for Ranma. Within an hour they had walked into two ambushes from the weird dupli-arms, who appeared very much gluttons for punishment, four long ditches Ranma and Natsu fell into and a lot of rocks which routinely tripped Jenny and Gajeel.

More than two hours later, Gajeel took the lead, while Ranma felt to the back of the group. From there, she occasionally sucked in the water as it came down from on high to give them brief moments of relief. But even though she could then dispel the water in a Water Dragon’s Roar, Ranma wasn’t able to do much to make travelling through this rain any easier.

It was the Metal Dragon Slayer who spotted something in the distance to one side of the route, while Juvia and Ranma used their Unison Raid again to try and give them some relief. In that brief surcease, Gajeel noticed a large something in the distance, a mound of some kind. “I see a cliff face or something out there.”

“Lead us to it then! We need to get you three out of the rain at least,” Ranma ordered, the redhead now carrying Jenny on her back. She had been using her Take Over form for hours, and the larger-scale wind attack had taken more energy than she had anticipated. That, and Jenny just wanted to cuddle on this particularly dreary day.

Soon enough the group was in sight of the cliff face that Gajeel had noticed, and at the bottom of the cliff was something that had all of them smiling in delight: a cave.

As they came closer, however, it became apparent that it was not a natural cave. Rather, it looked like a creature had dug out the ground at the base of the cliff. A mound of dirt that looked about as high as Ranma’s waist on her current body was built up at the bottom of the cave entrance and the stone above it was marked with long claw marks.

Everyone looked at one another, and Jenny shook her head. “No, that isn’t suspicious at all,” she drawled.

“We need to get out of the rain at least!” Natsu shouted, not for the fun of it, but to be heard over the sound of rain. Natsu knew the rain was actually a pretty good training tool for him, forcing him to always keep his Flame Aura around to keep from getting drenched. But it was getting tiring quickly now after the continued punishment of at least five hours in the rain.

“Natsu and Gajeel you two go first. Jenny, Happy follow-up. Juvia and I will try to scout around a bit, see if we can find a better place just in case,” Ranma ordered. While a part of Ranma was reluctant to send the others into possible danger like that, a larger part of Ranma knew he had to trust his companions to defend themselves without him. After all, he had sent Jenny and Happy out on their own earlier. And while this was more dangerous as it was clear there was an animal or monster here, He knew the three combatants at least could handle themselves.

With Gajeel and Natsu in the lead, Jenny and Happy followed after them. The cave was actually a small tunnel leading deeper into the earth, something that made them all even more nervous. But it was more than large enough for all of them to fit inside comfortably.

Despite their trepidation, the group pushed further.

The creature they eventually found had its back towards them at first, its large claws, mole claws, but which were at the end of double-jointed, thin, insectile arms, digging into the wall of dirt ahead of it. When it turned towards them, the large furry butt was replaced by an equally furry snout, although its legs and arms looked like that from a giant praying mantis. The creature stared back at them with small beady eyes, but made no move to attack, just snuffling at the air softly, as if confused by their scents, before slowly trundling towards them.

Natsu prepared to attack, but Jenny smacked him upside the head before his fire magic could do more than sparkle around his fingers. “Stop that! It’s not attacking us, it doesn’t even look like it wants to defend itself. Leave it alone, and maybe it will leave us alone. Just once in this wacky place I’d like to meet something that doesn’t automatically attack us.”

“The ground? It hasn’t attacked us yet, after all” Gajeel asked starkly. While much of the magic of this territory had centered itself in the ground beneath them, few attacks had so far come from the ground beneath their feet.

Jenny’s arm glowed, and she was soon pressing the tip of her Bubblegum Suit’s machine gun to Gajeel’s head, glaring down at him like an angry goddess. “Dead man says what?”

“I said nothing!” Gajeel answered instantly, knowing where that line could take them all too easily.

Natsu smiled, moving forward and holding his hand out to the strange mole mantis creature, which began to snuffle at it. “I think I know a name for the species! Let’s call them Moltis!”

“Mole and praying mantis together. That makes a lot of sense actually,” Gajeel said, scowling even as he complemented his fellow Dragon Slayer, placing the pinket between him and the crazy blonde.

The mole mantis creature sniffled at Natsu’s hand, then pushed its snout underneath, sniffing at his pocket. “He must be smelling some of my supplies.”

“You keep supplies in your pocket?”

“No, but that’s where I store my treats. Or any fruit I find around the place,” so saying Natsu reached into the pocket and grinning pulled out a large, chunk of sugar cane, while Happy looked on, his face showing some confusion and some jealousy.

“Why wouldn’t you keep fish in there, Natsu? They’re a much better snack than sugar cane.”

“Maybe for you, little guy, but they’re also really smelly,” Natsu rejoined, while the Moltis instantly began to nibble at the sugarcane, making happy nom nom noises that reminded Gajeel strongly of Wendy for some reason.

“Aww, it looks kind of cute like that,” Jenny said, moving forward to pat the mole mantis creature on its back.

However, as the others watched, the mole’s eyes started to change from black and blissful-looking to red and angry. Steam erupted from its mouth for a second, followed by a red tint spreading through its fur.

“Oh that can’t be good,” Jenny muttered, pulling back quickly.

An instant later, the now-red-furred Moltis bull rushed Natsu, smashing into Natsu and hurling him to one side to crash into the side of the tunnel. The strike nor the follow-on strike to the side of his head hadn’t bothered Natsu all that much, despite knocking the Fire Dragon Slayer off his feet. The Moltis was not a very strong creature, despite whatever magic was on its molelike claws to let it burrow through the ground so easily, and Natsu stared at the creature as it continued its attack, trying to bite Happy, while its mantis arms lashed out in either direction, mole claws trying to slice into Jenny or Gajeel.

Growling, Natsu shot forward, a fiery fist crashing into the side of the Moltis and incinerating half of its body with a single strike. Another blast of magic from his hand immolated the rest, turning it into ash. “What the heck was that about?”

“I don’t think your sugar treat agreed with it,” Happy said shaking his head. You should have tried a good wholesome fish, like I said.”

“Come on. Let’s make sure that was the only one of those critters in here, and don’t let the next one eat sugar no matter how much it snuffles at you,” Jenny growled, shaking her head slightly, a sad scowl on her face. *Not that I wouldn’t have tried to feed it some of my chocolate treats*, she admitted internally, even as she barged past Natsu and led the way deeper into the cave.

OOOOOOO

Elsewhere, Ranma and Juvia were having a bit of a treat themselves. They had scouted around the rocky outcroppings as they said they would. However they did so quickly, and... well... Juvia was right there in front of Ranma, looking all sexy and wet, her clothing sticking to her body like a second skin. Was it any wonder that the shorter redhead had pinned Juvia to the ground to instigate a major make-out session?

Uncaring of the rain still coming down on both of them, or the mud of the ground rapidly soaking into her clothing, Juvia responded just as eagerly, putting her watery arms around Ranma and sucking Ranma’s tongue for several moments, before Ranma began to dominate the kiss. One hand roved up from the taller girl’s waist under her blouse, while Ranma’s other tiny hand captured one of Juvia’s.

Juvia whimpered and began to hump her core up against Ranma’s waist, causing the redhead to press down into her, a whimper of “Juvia...” Causing Juvia to shiver in delight at the need she heard there. Her free hand wound around the redhead, bringing her into a hug so tight, their breasts pressed flat against one another.

“GRRRR!” a sound roused them from one side, and Ranma snarled, twisting off of Juvia his hand coming up to grab a large paw that came towards her. She gripped it hard, staring past it at the creature that had interrupted their romantic time.

It was huge, a massive cat of some kind built along the lines of a panther, but many times larger, with what looked like crystals buried into its side at several intervals. Its tail, which was a large, lizard like appendage, ended in several sharp spikes.

This came at Ranma, but Juvia, just as incensed as Ranma about this interruption, lashed out with a “Water Slicer!”

From her outstretched hands a Water Slicer flashed. It was small, more so than all the other attacks they had used today, but the water attack flashed forward so fast there was a booming noise as it broke the sound barrier. Before the panther lizard thing even knew what had happened, her attack cut off its tail, along with one of its paws.

Even so the creature lunged forward, unwilling to admit defeat despite those tremendous wounds. But a punch from Ranma shattered its skull and sent it soaring to land

somewhere else out of sight through the rain. "Fuck you!" she snarled. Then she sighed, looking at Juvia apologetically. "Rain check?"

Juvia blinked, staring at Ranma's bedraggled but still somewhat sexy form, then began to giggle at Ranma's word choice, pulling her into a hug. But the moment had most decidedly passed, and arm in arm the two of them moved back towards the cave.

As they entered, they found a decidedly glum group waiting near the entrance to the tunnel. Jenny noticed how happy Juvia was as soon as they entered and scowled a little at both of them. *Why do I think they were getting the good kind of dirty out there? Damn it. I want some horse-time too*, she thought, using the term she and the other girls had come up with to describe their romantic (or at least lustful) moments with Ranma.

Ranma looked over at Gajeel sardonically asking, "So I take it this didn't work out without a measure of violence as we thought?"

Gajeel grunted, shaking his head. "Mole mantis creature. Went crazy and attacked us after it ate some of Natsu's sugar. Have we mentioned before that this place is weird?"

"Yeah, it's almost like someone used thousands of monstrously powerful magical spells all on top of one another so much so that it deformed the very area around us," Ranma quipped.

"No one likes a smartass Ranma," Jenny grumbled, punching him hard in the shoulder.

Looking at Jenny's somewhat distraught and annoyed face, as well as the glare that was currently aimed towards Ranma, realized she'd somehow goofed and apologized, moving forward to hug her. "Er, sorry. Um, maybe I should have been in here with you?"

"We had more than enough firepower to handle things. I'm just a little annoyed that the Moltis went crazy as it did. And instead of helping us, or scouting out still further away, you decided to make some fun time with Juvia. And you didn't even invite me," Jenny whispered into Ranma's ear, before allowing Ranma to place her arm around Jenny's waist, pulling her in close.

The shorter redhead's breasts pressed into the bottom of Jenny's larger ones, and Ranma apologized again, before leaning upward and whispering into Jenny's ear. "I'll make it up to you later, when we have some more time."

That sounded promising to Jenny, and she perked up quite quickly, before helping Ranma and the others to set up their tents. They did so near the central point of the tunnel, well away from the entrance and yet not at the far back, just in case. The cave was cold and muddy, but dry, and right now that was all they needed. "Come on guys," Ranma ordered,

gesturing into the tents. "Out of the wet clothing, and then me and Juvia will cook us all up some food."

The fact that would be another type of apology to Jenny didn't need to be said. Regardless, the meal Ranma cooked for them all, a hearty noodle soup with a side of sausages, went down like a treat. Despite that, everyone was far too tired after the day's hard travel to do more than eat and talk quietly about what else they might run into before retiring.

As they prepared for bed, Ranma, in his male form now, gestured for Jenny to sit in front of him. "I promised you a bit of pampering, I think. Come on over here and let me comb your hair."

Jenny blinked at that, but agreed, although she had hoped for something a bit more carnal in nature. *Still, our tent doesn't keep in all the noise, so that makes sense, I guess.* Her thoughts soon flew away however as Ranma's fingers worked through her hair, massaging her scalp as he began to brush his other hand through her hair slowly, working out several small knots that Jenny didn't even realize she'd had.

Soon the former model felt all the day's tension draining away from her. Then Ranma warmed up his hand with ki, and the pleasant feeling rose to be pleasurable, causing Jenny to bite back a whimper. "AaHhn~~, damn that feels good, Ranma," she murmured, letting out a breathy little moan as she pushed her head back up into Ranma's hands.

Chuckling Ranma continued, first cleaning, then massaging and finally combing her hair up into a series of long braids, each braid marked with a different colored string. Ranma had kept them around from when Wendy had been going through different hair styles, and it worked out quite well now.

By the time Ranma was done, Jenny, and the watching Juvia, were both quite worked up, if for different reasons. Jenny was a whimpering, whining mess under Ranma's ministrations, which Juvia had begun to touch herself slowly, watching Jenny's face, her obvious arousal and Ranma's caring, concentrating face as he put all his attention to what he was doing to Jenny.

Not that Ranma was any better. Jenny's rump had shifted back enough so she was sitting in his lap instead of in front of her, and her shifting, writhing and vocalization caused the natural reaction to his mage's staff. Now, as he finished, he removed his hands from Jenny's hair, causing her to whimper as he whispered, "I'm done."

Within seconds, Juvia had crossed the intervening distance. Gently pushing Jenny to one side, she plopped herself down in Ranma's lap, silently asking with doe-like eyes that he do the same to her. Chuckling Ranma agreed, although Jenny had begun to pout, turning into and pressing her body against Ranma's side. Her hand slipped between the bluenette and Ranma,

reaching down to his lap. "Now, I wonder what you have here," she murmured, as she proceeded to give Ranma a very enthusiastic handjob.

Despite the need to keep their noise to a minimum, needless to say, all three lovers went to sleep quite happy that night.

That happiness did not last much past the morning, as the rain had continued on through the night, and now mud had begun to slough into the tunnel. Working together, Ranma and Gajeel put up a small berm made out of metal to stop any further mudflow towards their camp, yet even when they finished it and Natsu up some torches throughout the cave rather than using a single fire as a light source, the rain continued to come down in buckets.

Occasionally literally. Buckets full of water could be seen here and there through the rain as they crashed to the ground outside the tents. Along with sheets of snow, which quickly melted under the rain, enough ice to cover the ground, and more. "So... I think we're stuck here for a while guys. Unless any of you think we could maybe push our way out and through it?"

The chorus of, "Hell no!" he got from all quarters was his only response and Ranma nodded wryly. "Right, so instead let's do some exercises and meditation. Beyond that, I know I've got some cards somewhere."

The bizarre weather went on for days, forcing the majority of the party to remain inside the cave and mostly in their tents, which was a lot warmer and far more comfortable than the tunnel. Only Juvia and Ranma could go outside with any kind of ease, and occasionally they did go out just to get away from the others for a time despite what it naturally did to their clothing. All three boys were not the type to enjoy being stuck inside for any length of time and not a day would go by without some flare up between them. Jenny and Juvia got along far better, but even there, Jenny's temper occasionally got the better of her.

Luckily, having two tents, one for the trio of lovers, and one for the three boys, kept the friction to as low a level as possible. And the various dead monsters Juvia and Ranma occasionally brought back, added steak, bacon and other meat-type goodness to their supplies. Fruit and veggies would, it seemed, be at a premium.

The moment the cloud cubes began to break up, Jenny and Happy took to the air once more, pushing out further all around the group than a series of markers Ranma and Juvia had left as they scouted around. The two flyers had to deal with a few scattered moments of odd magical shit: blank spaces in midair, lightning blasts that seemed frozen in midair, whirls of air, floating rocks and shrubbery, but they dealt with it all easily and between them determined a route that would take them away from the most obvious wild magic zones.

It honestly wouldn't have mattered to any of the group if they hadn't been able to find any such thing. After being stuck inside the tunnel for so long, none of them, not even the two girls, had any desire to remain there a moment longer. They pushed on as quickly as they could,



with Ranma and Natsu switching off carrying the other two as they used their powers to blast along the ground or simply run so fast a horse would have wept in envy as they put more ground between them and the tunnel.

Twice more as the group traveled, they were attacked by the monsters Natsu called Four-by-Fours, and many times they had to deal with odd landscapes and magic.

At one point this took the form of a huge field of plasma, still ratcheting upward into the sky. Watching this from a safe distance reminded Ranma of geysers he had read about back in his old world, the kind which released steam that blasted out of holes at calculated moments.

“And you’re sure trying to go around is worse?” Ranma asked, looking over at Jenny.

“We’re certain,” she and Happy said as one, with Jenny going on. “In the direction I tried to go, I found a series of huge canyons, all of them different colors, with strange pink magic flashing through the area like water. And the feel of wild magic is insane there, nearly enough to make me pass out.”

“I didn’t find anything like that, just another storm front moving in,” Happy opined. “I don’t think any of us want to deal with that kind of thing again, right?”

All three boys groaned, knowing that if they had to spend any more time in an enclosed space together, they probably wouldn’t be able to stop themselves from destroying the place. “Fuck it. Let’s see if we can figure out the timing then.”

Getting across that zone was difficult, and despite Ranma’s best efforts, Gajeel and Ranma both suffered near misses before they were across.

“I still say we should be using our magic more! Destroying that area with long-range magic might have stopped those stupid plasma blasts,” Natsu argued as they finally made it across and the two flyers left them once more flying out and away from the group.

“Or made whatever is releasing those blasts wake up, or go crazy, or make the blasts become even more spaced out and crazy than they are already,” Ranma quipped, counting points off on his fingers. “We don’t know enough about what was causing that bit of wild magic to understand what attacking the area like that would have done. But you’re right in a way, Natsu.”

Everyone else looked at Ranma incredulously, and he shrugged. “We **are** here to test out more destructive and simply larger scale attacks. So, I say we start breaking them out. Besides, we’ve all been stuck inside for days, bar me and Juvia anyway and we all deserve a chance to let loose.”

Juvia nodded, while Gajeel and Natsu exchanged a very unusual high five, united for once in delight that they would soon be allowed to go wild.

“Juvia suggests that we find a high rise or hill somewhere. That way, we can see more of the surrounding territory, and you all can even launch your attacks in different directions. Then Juvia will officiate as to who has the most destructive attack.”

Ranma’s eyes narrowed at his lover, and she sent him a wink, as Natsu and Gajeel both shouted, “That will be me!”

Ranma rolled his eyes, but decided to go along with the chest thumping contest and pointed at himself. “Please boys, you know it’s not even going to be a contest!”

“Oh yeah! We’ll see about that, girly man!” Natsu growled out.

Ranma blinked, then snorted. “Damn, I haven’t heard that one in a while. You really had to reach for that, didn’t you?”

“Yeah, not my best,” Natsu answered morosely kicking at the ground with one foot. “I was going to go for fish face, or something like Little Stream, but I thought they didn’t really work either.”

“Trying to find a taunting type nickname for Ranma that doesn’t have to do with his curse is kind of hard,” Gajeel added, nodding commiseratingly towards the other Dragon Slayer. “I remember once he got me so angry during a spar, all I could shout was ‘Stupid Pigtail’ over and over.”

“None of you are worthy of becoming an apprentice in the art of Make Them Mad, Make Them Stupid. You have much to learn before you can even take a step towards that hallowed path,” Ranma said, smiling like a Buddha as his fingers shifted into the traditional Buddhist prayer stance. “Only when you can make this enlightened one both laugh and snarl at once will you prove worthy to learn further of the sacred art.”

“Juvia believes that if Ranma’s head got any bigger, it could perhaps be seen from orbit. Certainly his ego is showing, to the point that Happy and Jenny will no longer need flares to know where we are,” Juvia interjected, her eyes twinkling a bit.

Ranma’s stance broke, and he pointed at her with a finger from either hand, shouting out, “See, right there, that is what I’m talking about!”

The quartet continued on their way, trading barbs as they went until they saw a hill in the distance to one side of their route, in the direction Happy had traveled as he made a wide circle around them. They moved in that direction, and without a word, Gajeel and Natsu took

up positions on the hill facing in two different directions. Ranma situated himself between them, with Juvia behind them

She was prepared to simply watch the trio of Dragon slayers at work until Ranma turned his head, staring at her. "What are you doing? You can start using large-scale attacks too, you know. See if you can do that technique we were talking about, draining the water away from a large area all at once."

Juvia sighed, but nodded and faced back the way they came, crouching down onto the ground on her knees so that she could concentrate more on the water within the ground itself through her hands. Luckily it seemed as if the storm had been so widely spread it had hit this area too, and she could sense the moistness within the ground.

"Hey, wait. Without her, we don't have a neutral judge!" Natsu said.

"Judge? We don't need no stinking judge! Whichever of our attacks is most destructive is going to be obvious! Now put up or shut up Flame Brain!" Gajeel snorted. "You won the rock-paper scissors contest, so get on with it!"

"Hearing that insult from someone other than Gray is just weird. But whatever," Natsu muttered most decidedly not missing his dead frie-the icy asshole. If his scowl when he brought up his hands as if containing a ball between them, looked more sad and forced than it should, none of the others commented. Natsu concentrated for a brief moment, and an aura of fire burst out from him, engulfing Natsu from head to toe in flames. He began to concentrate into his hands, the fire around his body pulsing into his hands in a series of flashes. "Dragon's Secret Art: Hidden Armageddon Mode: Crimson Lotus: Avenging Crescendo Flaming Wave!"

With the last word, Natsu sucked in the fire all around him, and then sent it into the condensed, and now glowing blue-white, fireball within his hands. Then he thrust his hands out, sending that ball of flame away from his body. It instantly began to expand the moment it left his hands and continued to do so as it flashed away from him.

By the time it was a hundred feet away, it was the size of the house. By the time it was two hundred feet away, it had grown to the size of a one of the giants they had met on their journey. And it continued to expand, searing the land underneath and to a wide area around it as the fireball sped away. Then at some predetermined point the fireball exploded, sending fire in every direction including back towards the hill.

Instantly Ranma took several steps forward, raising a wall of water all around them. "Water Dragon's Protective Scales!"

There was a loud hissing as the water turned into steam, and Gajeel and Juvia both grimaced at the heat coming off of the wall of water. Ranma maintained the wall for a few seconds, but eventually the steam faded. Staring out into the distance the band of mages saw a

seared out crater resembling something like the plasma strikes they had been dodging earlier, only on a far, **far** larger scale. And instead of simply leaving seared earth behind it, everywhere that explosion had touched, again going back toward the hill, was ablaze with fire, spreading out quickly.

Natsu's attack had basically destroyed an area of countryside the size of two city blocks. It hadn't spread as far as it had gone, making an almost rectangular area of destruction reaching out from Natsu.

Natsu whooped, thrusting a fist up into the air, before nearly collapsing onto his rear, stumbling for a second to regain his balance. "Hell yes! What you all think of that! That's the way this fire Dragon Slayer plays baby! Just you wait you big, black scaled bastard, I'm going to roast you alive!"

Ranma looked at him and could see the signs of scales appearing here and there on Natsu, a sign of his exertion, or perhaps how much in touch with his draconic seed Natsu had become for the few moments it took him to create that attack. "I'm impressed," he admitted, nodding his head. "And you've given me a target for my own attack."

Natsu pouted, wanting the flames of his attack to stay around for a while, but Gajeel shook his head, smacking him upside the head lightly. "Use your brain, idiot. We don't want fires like that to get out of hand."

Nodding at the Iron Dragon Slayer, Ranma took his own turn. He concentrated for a brief moment, his hands pressed together, as a similar aura to Natsu's appeared all around him but made of water rather than fire. With a gesture, Ranma raised his hands above his head, gesturing the water around him into the air where it began to form a disk, his mouth open and through it sending up still more water. The water continued to cascade up from Ranma's opened mouth up into the attack for some time, spreading out more and more, until both the hill and more than 2 acres in every direction was dyed blue from the light of the sun coming through the water above them.

Closing his eyes, Ranma twisted his hands above his head, spinning them in place to add a rotational aspect to the attack. Finally, when there was a sound like a loud thrumming noise in the air, Ranma roared, "Water Dragon's Spinning Tail Slash!" launching the water from above his head as if he was tossing a particularly large discus.

The water flashed forward, huge droplets splashing out in every direction, not doing as much damage as Natsu's attack did, but encompassing a far wider area. Indeed, it seemed to disappear out to both sides and towards the horizon, dousing every bit of flame his attack had left. But the original attack, although shrunk, kept its thin, flat shape but as it sped away from Ranma. It also retained the rotation when it hit a distant mountain.

And when it did, the discus of water struck at near-supersonic speeds, slicing into the stone from one end of the mountain to the other, only beginning to dissipate as it did. A moment later there was a distant booming noise as the mountain settled, an avalanche no doubt even now rumbling down its flanks.

Natsu gaped, and Ranma smirked, crossing his arms and looking at Natsu challengingly. "Just because I don't make a habit of destroying as much stuff as you do, doesn't mean you're better at it than me, grasshopper."

Snarling, Natsu shook his head and was about to demand a second try, when Gajeel spoke up. "Damn, you two are hard acts to follow." The punk-looking Dragon Slayer grinned then. "But what kind of musician would I be, if I couldn't create an encore. Gihih!"

Juvia had left her position where she had been trying to meditate on the water of the ground underneath them, and now leaned onto Ranma's shoulder, staring out at the devastation the water and fire Dragon Slayers had wrought, shaking her head. "Juvia fully believes that such attacks are indeed quite crazy and is pleased we are out here where no one can complain about the destruction. Juvia also has to worry that doing so will have attracted attention of any monsters or beasts capable of similar destruction."

"I thought about that, but then I decided that any such monster would prove a worthy challenge for us." Ranma shrugged, then asked solicitously, "Are you doing okay?"

Ranma had taken to asking that question several times a day ever since they had been stuck inside the cave. His concern had nothing to do with the weather but everything to do with the background magic of the Blasted Lands. All of them could feel it in the air here, oppressive, making their movements a little slower, a little harder. It was like moving through a barely discernible increase in gravity, or a particularly thick kind of fog maybe? Only instead of interfering with your ability to see or hear what was going on around you, it pressed in on your mind.

The Dragon Slayers barely noticed, their brand of magic defending them from the wild magic. But the remaining trio had no such defense.

"Juvia is fine Ranma. So long as Juvia spends a lot of time in her water form, the ambient magic will not bother Juvia's mind overmuch. Moreover, being inside your tent at night seems to provide us with some protection given the defenses built-in to the canvas," Juvia answered, smiling at Ranma's concern for her, giving him a brief kiss on the cheek.

Ranma turned slightly catching her lips with his own as Gajeel very pointedly turned away and shouted to Natsu about how "It's my turn to show my stuff!"

To do so, he turned away from the field of destruction that Natsu had created and Ranma had calmed down, turning more towards the north rather than the east.

In contrast to the others, Gajeel's attack was fully a breath-based assault. He gathered his magical energies for a time, just as long as Natsu had, and then roared up into the sky at an angle over the territory he was targeting. All the magic he had gathered burst out from his mouth in a roar somewhat like the ubiquitous Dragon Slayer's Roar that all of them could use, only far larger.

And as Gajeel roared, Natsu saw hundreds of thousands of tiny projectiles coming out of his mouth as well. They had been created by the limited conjuration skill Gajeel had thanks to his Dragon Slayer status, growing as they came out, merging together. "Iron Dragon Slayer's Death Rain!"

From out of the sky in a wide angle, wider in point of fact than the damage Natsu had done. Hundreds of thousands of hand-sized metal spikes flashed down into the ground with such tremendous force that even the hill began to quiver and shake from the repeated blasts into the ground. Each of which created craters as the bolts dug into the ground.

"... Okay, I'll admit, that was impressive," Natsu remarked, shaking his head.

Ranma and Juvia hadn't even bothered to watch as Juvia was getting into the kiss quite a bit. Over the past few days with them stuck in the cave, Juvia had almost gotten used to Ranma being his female form when they went outside. At night, Juvia had switched off with Jenny, who had gotten the most time with Ranma at that point an unspoken agreement between the two girls. Now though, getting back into the habit of kissing Ranma as a guy was delightful, as Ranma was always quite a bit more aggressive when in his male body, more hands on he was, the more demanding in his kiss.

They only broke up, when Gajeel sent a spike of metal towards their heads, as he growled out, "God damnit, to have to watch that shit! You're making me fucking jealous, to say nothing about how much your situational awareness goes down."

Ranma scowled a bit, twirling the spike of metal he'd caught out of the air, pointing it at the other man. "You want to revise that statement?" Deep inside though he knew Gajeel was right. They told the others that Ranma's relationship with Jenny and Juvia wouldn't be getting in the way of their exploration and training, and here he was, letting that very thing happen. Even as Gajeel and Natsu both bristled, he sighed, dropping the spike to the ground. "You're right. We'll try to keep moments like that to a minimum."

"Juvia is also sorry. Making out in the rain lost its appeal after the first day, and one of the few things Ranma's tent cannot do anything about is noise," Juvia apologized.

"Just so long as you don't wave it in front of our faces, guys," Natsu said shaking his head before brightening. "And whenever you do, you have to agree to fight us Ranma!"

“Sparring is going to be a major part of our training here for sure,” Ranma agreed with a grin. “Frankly, one of the goals all three of us share, is that I want all of us to be able to use Dragon Force by the time we return.”

Ranma knew he was close to that point already and just needed another push or two to reach it. But neither Gajeel nor Natsu had shown any sign of it yet.

Still the two other Dragon Slayers grinned at that, nodding their heads firmly. They’d just seen Wendy with her Dragon Force activated, and had come away extremely impressed. And if the youngest and least combative Dragon Slayer could use such a technique to such a degree, both were eagerly hopeful whole for what they could do in turn.

At about that point, Jenny arrived, landing nearby, shaking her head as she stared out over the destruction. “I was flying above that area, you bastard!” she grumbled, smacking Gajeel upside the head. “When we stop for the evening, I’m going to kick your ass!”

“Gihihi, bring it on Blondie!” Gajeel snorted back.

Jenny glared at him some more before looking over at Ranma. “I think it’s about lunch time, don’t you?”

Ranma laughed at that but shrugged, pulled out some of the breakfast he’d made earlier for them all, bacon and pancakes. Cold pancakes were never a thing Ranma had ever gotten into, a but everyone else seemed to enjoy them, leaving him with more of the bagels, while he and Natsu shot up flares for Happy.

They waited there for the Exceed to return, although they did not have to wait long. Jenny broke off explaining what she had seen of the territory she’d been flying over before Gajeel’s attack had nearly knocked her out of the sky and demolished most of that territory as Happy landed once more on Natsu’s head, using it like a landing pad. He saluted as he looked around at the others. “Aye sir! Scout Happy reporting. I have spotted orcs out there, but not like the orcs that we’ve seen before.”

“A new type of orc, or a Shambler?” Ranma asked, handing the small feline a plate of food, ignoring Natsu’s growl of ‘don’t eat up there dammit!’ as he did.

“I don’t know. They might have been orcs, but they were solidified in place, almost like they were frozen by an ice magic attack, or maybe something like Evergreen’s scary stare?” Happy said with a shrug. “It happened recently whatever it is.”

Ranma hummed thoughtfully, then gestured in the direction Happy had come, which was much further south than the trails of destruction the three Dragon slayers had recently created. “It’s down that way, right?”

“Aye sir!” Happy said through a mouth full of bacon. While he would’ve preferred a good fish, bacon was good too.

“Do you think you could lead us to it?”

Everyone else stared at Ranma, and he shrugged. “Remember what we’re here for guys. We’re here to train, but I also wanted to see if we could figure out where the orcs were coming from and destroy whatever it was. Even if the orcs are coming from multiple places, destroying one of the places that are somehow creating them is a great idea.”

“I get you,” Gajeel grunted, thinking deeply as he looked behind them, then down and the direction Happy had mentioned. “And actually, I think that will take us back a little ways towards Ishgar, which makes sense when you think about it.”

Everyone else agreed, and soon they were all moving once more, with Jenny carrying Juvia and Gajeel once more. Ranma bounded through the air, a laugh trailing behind him as he followed in Happy’s wake, his feet blasting off each time he set down with Water Dragon Slayer magic as he used his Boosted Step attack to travel.

Natsu tried to follow, but soon fell behind Ranma, and waited for the others to catch up, a curious look on his face, as he looked at Juvia and the SE motorcycle form of Jenny. “He was shouting about something called the Hulk having nothing on him. Does that mean anything to either of you two?”

The two girls shook their heads in unison, and the group continued on following after Ranma and Happy.

Soon after that, they found a corpse of something **huge**. It was massive, easily the largest land-based creature any of them had ever seen, perhaps even the size of the black dragon. Around it was hundreds, perhaps a little under a thousand frozen orcs and Shamblers all of them either crushed or frozen in place by the same basilisk-like magic that Happy had reported.

The thing looked as if it had a massive jaw, easily a fourth of its total length. That mouth had large, herbivore-like teeth rather than predatory ones, something that surprised everyone bar Ranma, who reminded them of his story about the dangerous herd creatures who had tried to attack him and Wendy once. “That’s precisely what we’re dealing with here. Look around you. This whole place looks torn up and blasted, but there are definitely footprints for at least a dozen more creatures of this type around here.”

After looking over the corpse for a time and noting the multiple human-sized lacrima that were still connected to the corpse, the group moved on.



As they traveled, however, the group was once more subjected to strange weather patterns. In this case, it came in the form of a windstorm that seemed to come out from nowhere, ripping and tearing up the ground as it came towards them over a flat, level stone plane.

“Shit!” Gajeel grunted, his skin flashing into iron scales as Natsu grimaced, Happy crashing into his shoulder with a wail of fright.

“Natsu, catch!” Ranma shouted, tossing something to Natsu, then moving to Gajeel, tying a rope around him, one of several he had bought for this trip. “You’re our anchor Gajeel, keep moving, but keep your eyes open as much as possible for any kind of place we can take cover, or danger.”

Gajeel’s answer was cut off as the wind picked up to the point it blew Happy off of Natsu’s back, a yowl of pain coming from the Fire Dragon Slayer as he tried to put on the pair of goggles Ranma had tossed him and grab at Happy at the same time. Like the rope, they had been one of the purchases that Ranma had made, two for each of them just in case. “Happy!”

Juvia, who had already turned into her water form, lashed out with an arm, grabbing at Happy and pulling him to safety. She hid behind Natsu for a moment, silently helping to tie the little fellow under Natsu’s shirt via his dragon-scale scarf.

Meanwhile, Jenny had chosen to take on her most defensive form, a bulky robot with large shields on its arms and back. It wasn’t a form she enjoyed taking, because, although somewhat mid-range in terms of magical cost, the form was the next best thing to immobile, and had barely any offensive weapons. “Unfortunately, this form is kind of hard to move in, so you’re going to have to carry me...”

“Heh, cool, I get some weight training in at the same time,” Ranma snickered, kneeling down in front of her, his own goggles in place around his head. “And this is probably the only time I can get away with calling a girl heavy and not get smacked.”

Jenny shook her head, lightly smacking him on the back of the head as she climbed into his arms. Juvia, still in her water form, moved along the water, and then up Ranma’s back, sliding between his shirt and Jenny’s armored form. “Juvia is ready as well.”

This was stated not a second too soon as the wind, which had been picking up every second their preparations took, had reached tornado level by this point. This turned the sand and stone all around them into weapons, and Ranma grimaced as the sand started to wear at his skin. The sand also obscured their vision something fierce. “Fuck. Gajeel! Remember what I said! Be on the lookout for anything dangerous!”

Gajeel barely felt the sand or even the larger stones smacking into his body despite the wind driving them with enough force to shatter wood or dent regular steel. On the other hand,

while the goggles let him see, they didn't let him see very far, a fact he shared with Ranma in no uncertain terms. "How exactly am I supposed to do that in this kind of weather you ass!"

"Send out Iron spikes every few minutes in a fan around us!" Ranma answered, lobbing his on ki attack forward. "Natsu, what about your fire magic?"

"No way!" Natsu shouted. Of the three, he was having the worst time of it. Jenny's weight helped keep Ranma grounded, but Happy's didn't do the same, and he had to crouch well down, and only moved at all because he was in direct line behind Gajeel. "If I throw a fireball anywhere in this, there's no telling where this wind will take it, no matter how much air my fire attack will use up. Hell, this is stronger than any wind attacks I've ever seen!"

Grimacing, Ranma could only tell them both to do their best. Caught in the open with no place to shelter, that was about all they could do. "Gajeel, you think you have enough juice to make some kind of shelter?"

"Are you crazy!?" Gajeel shot back. "I could maybe make two medium sized metal walls, but that's not enough to protect us from this wind! It and the same would eat through the metal in a few hours. The same thing would have happened with that damn acid." Gajeel couldn't make his metal extrusions to be as tough as his metal scales unless he was still in some way connected to them, and that drained magic.

At that, the group fell silent, pushing on, hoping to get through the windstorm. It was grim going for a while, but as they went, one of Ranma's passengers decided that she should do what she could to lighten the mood of at least her two lovers.

About thirty minutes after the wind had picked up to the point it was so bad it would flense a normal man's skin off, Ranma heard Jenny gasp, arching a bit on his back. Blinking inside his goggles, Ranma turned, wondering idly when Juvia's water form would soak his skin enough to trigger the change. *Or will it at all, just soaking the back of my body instead of all of it?* When he looked at Jenny, Ranma could barely see her face underneath her visor, but Ranma could tell she was blushing, and looked at her question. "What's wrong?"

"Nnn~, nothingGG!" Jenny whimpered, her voice more high-pitched mutual. "Something R~oadDD up where it shouldn'tTT!"

Ranma stared at her for a second then shrugged and turned to continue forward with Gajeel alongside him. Slowly, the wind became cold, so cold that even Ranma felt it, something he would've thought impossible before this. He had walked with silk shirt and pants through Iceberg, the coldest nation of Ishgar. He had faced winter numerous times, and people with ice or freezing powers and the depths of the ocean, rarely feeling it. But here he most certainly was.

He wasn't the only one, as Natsu was also shivering by this point despite being even more immune to cold than Ranma most of the time. And Gajeel's movements were even slower than they should be due to the wind. If Ranma strained, he could hear a grinding metal-on-metal sort of noise coming from Gajeel, his steel-like skin freezing to the point his joints were slowly being frozen in place.

Soon, it was so cold that Gajeel was having trouble moving at all, but he kept moving, as did Ranma beside him. "I can't feel my face!" Natsu wailed.

"You're lucky, I still can!" Gajeel growled out. "And it ain't pleasant!"

"Huh, now I am so not going to complain," Ranma grumbled, just loud enough for Jenny and Juvia to hear over the wind. "Still can't feel my hands though. Makes me very glad you're the one holding onto me rather than me holding onto you, Jenny."

At that, a portion of Juvia's water form pulled out from under Jenny's armor, shifting up to Ranma neckline and then into his shirt, spreading out underneath the ki-reinforced silk. This should have triggered Ranma's change, but instead of being cool, Juvia's form was somewhat lukewarm, a fact Ranma reveled in as a pair of lips formed out of the water by his collarbone. "Juvia will keep you warm, my love. Drip, Drip."

Ranma was about to thank her, but found himself shivering for a very different reason as Juvia began to caress his chest with her water form, some of her form now working its way down his body. "OkayYYY, Juvia, be, behave! I'll drag all three of us down if you make me stumble."

Juvia giggled at that, but refrain from playing further with him bar a caress across his abs or pecs occasionally. The little gasps and whimpers from Jenny showed that she wasn't done playing with the blonde, however.

This provided a mild sense of torture to Ranma as he kept on going, hearing but not able to take part or even watch as one of his lovers pleased the other, albeit in a very unusual manner, even for their polycule.

Luckily, neither Natsu nor Gajeel were in any presence of mind to notice what was going on to their left. Soon the chill of the wind went away, perhaps created by some errant wild magic, and Gajeel once more pushed forward at a better pace, his Iron Dragon Slayer's weight and durability a true godsend.

When the winds finally let up several hours later, by mutual agreement everyone decided to take a break among a series of jagged rocks they saw in the distance. Once they reached them, not even Natsu, the most energetic of them all, wanted to do anything. He simply slumped down to his side, hugging Happy to him as if the Exceed was a small teddy bear, which the cat-person returned wholeheartedly.

Nearby Ranma and Gajeel sat down as well, staring at one another in exhaustion. Even Ranma's endurance had been tested by this experience. Indeed, all three of the Dragon Slayers were battered. The wind had picked up all the bits of sand and rocks around them, pummeling their fronts in particular as well as sides and occasionally the back of Natsu and Gajeel, although Ranma's had been protected by Jenny's bulk.

With that and needing to keep moving through the tornado or whatever it was, had in Ranma's weary words, "Done a tremendous job of acting almost like toughness training. Kind of more humane than the whole smash a giant bolder into yourself method, now that I think about it."

Gajeel grunted, shaking his head. "Your whole everything is training is going to become a drag at some point. You realize that, right?"

Ranma shrugged, and all three men just sat or lay there for a moment, while Jenny, who had left the group almost indecently fast a moment before, came back with Juvia in tow, the Water Mage now in her normal body, a tiny, extremely mischievous smile on her face. An expression which remained in place as the two girls went about setting up camp in the area between two large rock formations.

Or at least they looked like rock formations at first. One certainly was stone, but the other turned out to be concrete, worn away by time and weather. But that rock formation, more a wall really, did lend some safety from that angle.

The group took shelter there until next day, recovering from the exertion of dealing with the storm. Jenny and Juvia took first watch, while the three Dragon Slayer's and Happy got some rest. Happy might have been shielded from the worst of it by being cocooned in Igneel's scales, but even so, his body just wasn't very durable at all.

Worse, the magical saturation was already beginning to get to him. Jenny was looking a little tired, but not tremendously so despite the need to sustain her Take Over form for more than half the day without break on top of her use prior to that point. Juvia also was somewhat tired, but had spent as much time as possible in her water form, which saved her from the pressure of the background magic in the area.

In contrast, Happy very clearly feeling it and as soon as the tents were set up, he crawled into one, knowing the tent's various spells somehow worked as a buffer. Both Gajeel and Ranma followed, heading into their respective tents, having no interest in food at present, only sleep.

Perhaps Natsu should have joined Happy and Gajeel, but after about an hour's worth of rest the Fire Dragon Slayer was on his feet once more. Stretching in place for a moment, Natsu decided he didn't feel energetic enough yet to try and exercise. *I could be up for a light spar,*

*but the only two awake are Jenny and Juvia, and fighting them isn't nearly as fun as fighting Ranma or Iron Brain.*

He then grinned, staring around him at the strange rock formations they had camped out in. *On the other hand, exploring sounds like fun!*

With that, Natsu moved off, muttering under his breath, "Explore, adventure, explore!"

The area the group found themselves resting in almost looked like a series of different types of rock had been fused together at some point, creating weird shapes here and there within the boundaries. In this area, large circular pits of stone had been dug into the ground descending downward, the far end of them still stone rather than dirt. Some of these had water in them, but Natsu wasn't going to try any until it had the water mages' seal of approval. Here and there, spikes were rising from the ground up to four stories tall in places, with what looks like bird nests on several of them. There were no birds around, possibly because they had been scared off by the group.

Moving through the area, kind of in awe at how cool it all looked, only to stop staring at what looked like a circular hole carved out of a rock. Behind it, he could see several more, descending down into a slide-like formation. "Now that looks like fun!"

Grinning, Natsu stepped forward, and was about to jump through the hole onto the slide just when he saw the area within the ring of stone glimmer. "OH SHIT!" The Fire Dragon Slayer couldn't stop his forward momentum entirely, but a last-second grab at the edge of the rock above him stopped the majority of his body from entering.

Only his legs passed through, which was a very good thing. Because whatever bit of wild magic had been captured in the ring, transformed his legs to that of a bunny rabbit, the change stopping just below his boy bits. Or at least what Natsu thought of as a bunny rabbit as he stared down at himself, one long, powerfully built leg thumping the ground in shock as he took in the reddish fur, that covered his completely changed lower body. "W, what the hell?!" he shrieked at the top of his lungs.

That shrieked brought Jenny and Juvia running, with Ranma and Gajeel following up, much more slowly.

Unfortunately for Natsu, Ranma and Gajeel were no help whatsoever. One look at him, and Gajeel collapsed to the ground, howling in laughter. "Fuzzy-wuzzy!" Gajeel spluttered out, with Ranma following up. "Was a Natsu!"

"You bastards, I'm going to..." Natsu shouted, hopping to his feet and towards them, his hands outstretched. But he overbalanced, not used to his new lower body, his long, thick tail tangling around his legs just as he pushed off, causing Natsu to fall flat on his face.

“HAHAHAHHAH!!!” his fellow Dragon Slayers laughed.

Juvia helped him up, as Jenny snickered, shaking her head, pulling out a magical device from a pocket trailing it on his legs as Ranma got over his reaction to Natsu’s partial transformation. “It’s kind of weird, honestly. I’ve never seen a kangaroo in my travels through Ishgar, but you’re lower body sure looks like one.”

“What’s a kangaroo? Some kind of bunny rabbit?” Natsu grumbled.

“Nope. Think of it as a human sized animal, with really powerful legs, a powerful tail, like you’ve got, and really short upper arms. It was a pretty aggressive animal in the right conditions, but also pretty docile at others. Had this nifty little pouch at the front to keep their kids in, always thought they looked fun,” Ranma answered, pulling up information from a time he’d been forced to read a book about animals at the boy’s school he’d gone to when he met Ryoga. *Huh, that could honestly have been interesting, if Pig-boy had fallen into a drowned spring of Kangaroo.*

“Well, good news. That transformation isn’t a permanent one, it hasn’t latched onto your magical frame. Think of it like being splashed by a magical potion, or an enemy attack. It will fade in time.”

“Huh, you mean like Gildarts cubing me?”

“Cubing you... oh yeah, just like that, actually,” Jenny answered, remembering the time Gildarts had fought Natsu during the mock S-class exams on Tenrou Island. She hadn’t actually seen it, but Ranma and the others monitoring the fights in the caves had told her about it. She shook her head, sticking the mago-meter back into her pocket. The device was one used by doctors to determine the nature and longevity of magical curses and diseases, and had been one of her purchases back in Pergrande before they reached the Trident Pass.

“Tell us what happened,” Jenny ordered looking between Natsu and the ring in the stone.

When Natsu explained, Jenny picked up a pebble, throwing it through the ring. From the other side of the ring a tiny kangaroo the same size as the stone landed, looking around in confusion before hopping away rapidly. “That was both cute and disturbing,” Juvia deadpanned, shaking her head.

Ranma moved forward to examine the circle, while Gajeel kept well, back, scowling. “Another pocket of wild magic?”

“Yep. Natsu, did you see anything they could’ve warn you?”

“If I had, don’t you think I wouldn’t have leapt forward like that!?” Natsu shouted back, only to find everyone else there giving him very deadpan stares and after a moment of self-reflection, Natsu bowed his head with a sigh. “Yeah, okay, maybe I would have. And I guess I did see something right before I hit the stone circle, a kind of shimmer in the air of the circle.”

“That will do as a warning I suppose,” Gajeel grunted, then he blanched. “Damn! It’s a good we ran into these things here. If we’d run into them just randomly out in the Blasted Land with the wind in our faces like earlier today or the rain before that, we would never have seen them.”

Everyone else there blanched as well, but after a second, Juvia’s expression turned thoughtful. She turned into her water form, before sticking her arm through the hole. Her arm transformed into kangaroo about the same size of her forearm, which instantly began to hop away.

“Juvia!?” Ranma shouted, while Jenny pulled her away.

But Juvia simply left chopped off her arm right above where the transformation began, and then shifted the rest of her body around a bit before reforming her arm from the water of the rest of her body. A second later, she transformed back at our human body, once more whole, although looking a little tired. Perhaps due to the wind earlier, there was no water in the atmosphere that she could absorb, and pulling water from the earth was a brand-new thing for her. “Juvia is pleased. This means so long as her head is not caught in a similar situation, Juvia will be able to get out of it.”

“Hmm... maybe me too, if I’m in one of my Take Over Mecha Soul forms,” Jenny mused.

“I’d wager my curse would be unaffected too,” Ranma agreed. “Hmm... the same might go for you Gajeel, given you can transform your body to a certain degree.”

“Hah! Maybe in a few years, and with a ready source of iron to reforge the lost mass,” Gajeel grunted. “I certainly don’t want to try that kind of thing unless I have to.”

“Well, regardless, the transformation will fade away in a few hours. Until then, we’re stuck here, but considering that we were already planning to stay here the rest of the day that isn’t exactly a hardship,” Jenny said, looking over at Natsu.

“Hmm, I think if we do stay here, we need to find any more of these wild magic pockets that are around here,” Ranma decided, glancing down at the bottom of the ring of stone for a second. There at the base where the ring merged into the rest of the stone was what looked like a kind of metal smear, and Ranma wondered what had once been here before the magical wars which had so shattered the continent.

At that point, Happy of all people had a suggestion, having rushed out of the tent at his best friends shrieked at his current best speed, which wasn't much. He was now curled up in Natsu's lap, taking luxury and advantage of the fact was, how soft and furry. "You need to find some way to mark the places where the wild magic is."

Humming thoughtfully, Ranma pulled out a paintbrush from his Requip space, and began to paint dozens of small little stones with it. "If any of us find more of these places, we can set these markers on the ground. Be on the lookout for anything unusual, especially any kind of mirage or something. And I think we explore in teams of two, just in case."

That made sense to all of them, and while a now very clumsy Natsu carried Happy back to the tents, Juvia, Gajeel, Jenny and Ranma split up, with the former model pairing with Ranma.

Moments later, as they moved deeper into what looked like the center of the strange rock formation, Jenny was looking around her in some confusion. "I'm not a naturalist, but isn't it unusual to have so many different types of stone being melted into one another?"

"It's definitely not normal," Ranma answered quietly, shaking his head, a feeling of sadness coming over him as he began to understand what this place had once been. "Nor is the fact that some of these stones aren't stone at all."

Jenny looked over him confusion before pausing, picking out a green painted stone and hurtling it towards a small declivity in the rocks to one side. The stone entered the declivity as one stone, but bounced back out having hit the far side and coming straight back out as eight, having been multiplied several times over. "Huh, we might want to pass some our supplies through that, see if the magic there is more permanent than the one Natsu ran into. Sorry, you were saying?"

"Good eye. And I was saying that some of this stuff is building material," Ranma answered, gesturing to some of the stones around. "Concrete, granite, sheet marble, steel, that's the band of grey there. That wall over there is made of petrified wood. This place..."

"It was a town at some point," Jenny supplied, staring around her, horror on her face. "One hit by one of the large-scale magical attacks used in the ancient wars."

"Yeah. Something from on high, something that melted and made the magic within the city starts to run wild as the enchanted items were destroyed. I've no idea what that spell could have been, or why this town was targeted, and I'm not going to speculate on that or anything else about this place."

"No, thank you. The images of my mind right now don't need that help, Jenny, gulped, looking a little green as she looked around. All thoughts about maybe using this alone time more constructively were gone now as her traitorous brain wondered what had happened to



the people living in this town when it was attacked. Now that she knew what to look like she could see signs of previous buildings, but precious few signs of previous habitation.

After a time, the two of them returned to the makeshift camp, finding that Juvia and Gajeel had returned before them. Having finished putting up walls around their camp, the Iron Dragon Slayer had gone back to teasing Natsu about his "Fuzzy bod."

But Natsu had been practicing while they were all gone, and hopped to his feet quickly. Using his tail as a springboard, he kicked out with both feet into Gajeel's stomach, causing Gajeel to grunt in pain as the Iron Dragon Slayer stumbled back several steps, grabbing at his chest. "Fear the power of the kangaroo!" the Fire Dragon Slayer shouted, doing a one-two combo with his legs while leaning back on his tail still. Go-ahead and make fun of me again, I dare you!"

Rolling her eyes at their antics, Jenny moved to the area between the two tents. "Well, I'm hungry, what about all of you?"

Luckily, as Jenny had predicted, the transformation to his lower body didn't last for very long, he was back to normal. Still, the group decided to stay where they were that night. The dangers in this area were already somewhat known to them, and none of them were willing to travel by night, even if staying out here in the semi-open meant one of them had to be on watch at all times.

Jenny, Juvia and Natsu split the watches between them. The two girls were the least tired from the day's exertions, and Natsu had recovered the fastest of the others, even Ranma, something that honestly didn't surprise the Water Dragon Slayer. Natsu was always incredibly quick to bounce back from any kind of beating he took, so why should this be any different?

The next day, Ranma asked the two flyers to go out as a pair to find the trail of the frozen orcs, which they did with alacrity, Happy alighting on one and waiting for the group to catch up, while Jenny returned to the group, reporting that had found several hundred more frozen orcs. "They're kind of scattered, strangely. Honestly, it almost looks as if the giant monster found a trail of orcs, maybe their equivalent of a convoy or something, and is simply following them back to whatever is creating orcs in the first place."

"Gihihhi," Gajeel snorted. "Makes me wonder if we really need to bother with destroying whatever is producing the orcs ourselves."

"If something in the Blasted Lands could deal with the orcs before this, they would've never become such a threat to Pergrande," Ranma snorted. "We have to assume that means these monsters are not a real danger to them. Remember, they were able to kill that one monster whose corpse we saw before."

The group continued on. This time the flyers took turns flying directly above the group, taking turns to act almost like a lookout in a Crow's Nest would for a ship, rather than scouting around. Both flyers had reported more wild magic zones in the area and had seen other flying animals as well and so had no desire to scout out away from the group on the ground.

Happy was once more the man in the air, using his spyglass to look around them, while below the group dealt with a small band of Four-by-Fours. While certainly not apex predators, the ambush predators definitely seemed to have a lot of aggression, and Ranma and the others were debating on whether or not they would be the equivalent of wolves in the Blasted Lands, a predator that could live anywhere regardless of environment.

"Yeah, maybe crazy, rabid wolves," Natsu grumbled. "I mean, killing them isn't fun anymore, now that we know what to look out for." By 'we,' Natsu meant he and the other Dragon Slayers had figured out how the Four-by-Fours smelled and were now able to pick out that scent quickly.

"Yeah, I feel kind of sad right now, I mean we spotted that group and were already launching our attacks before they tried to come out of their hiding places," Jenny murmured. "They should have run away, but instead they still tried to attack."

"I rather doubt anything around here is used to seeing human-shaped creatures that aren't orcs," Ranma answered with a shrug. "And we don't know if these creatures would attack them too. We can only deal with things as they come at us guys. Don't think our presence is going to change how anything around here acts."

Above them, Happy had turned his attention away from the events on the ground, as soon as it was clear the Four-by-Fours weren't a threat, staring over the horizon at something just at the edge of his vision. Happy waited as the group continued on its way until he could make out more detail, then slowly shook his head from side to side, before flying down towards the others. When he was once more standing on Natsu's head, Happy saluted the group, using the spyglass for a moment. "Aye sir, we found them!"

"The source of the orcs. Or at least one source of orcs?" Ranma asked. "Or are you talking about more of those giant monsters?"

"There's a giant forest out there. Er... I mean a giant forest made of giant trees," Happy explained, waving his hands above his head trying to indicate how huge the trees were. "It's being attacked by a group of ten or so of those huge monsters we found earlier, it's really cool looking, like watching a group of whales fight a few octopuses, while some piranha help."

"Um... okay. That does sound strange at least. All right, lets break off to the left for a bit and then double back in. We don't want to butt in until we know the lay of the land," Ranma instructed.

The others all nodded, but Happy shrugged. "Why bother? I don't think either side of that fight is going to notice us."

When Happy didn't elaborate, Ranma scowled, but decided to at least see if he was right, since they could always just retreat if they needed to.

Less than an hour later, the group stood on a small ridge that went around to either side of them, disappearing out of sight. From the nosebleed section the group stared at what had to be the strangest-looking battle any of them had ever seen. Indeed, the battle was so bizarre that the fact neither side was human barely added to the oddity.

Orcs and Shamblers covered the ground of the battlefield, far more orcs and Shamblers than Ranma had ever seen. Far more than even the invasion of Pergrande, that he and Laxus had helped halt for a time before Gildarts arrived to save the day, wiping out whole armies of the creatures. Certainly, more than the time they had passed the mountains to get to the Blasted Land several days ago. They tried to crawl over one another, hacking and slashing at their enemies trying to use the Shamblers anti-magic field against them but they were not alone. For the source of the orcs could fight as well.

As Happy had warned them, the trees of this particular forest were massive built on a scale much like the tree on Tenrou Island, each of them around the size of a city block, or a quarter mile across. But these trees were not the same at all beyond that. The Tenrou Tree was much like an oak tree crossed perhaps with a palm tree. These trees were built along the lines of weeping willows with a dash of pine tree in the form of hundreds of smaller, whippier branches lined with what looked like pine needles. Nor were the majority of its normal branches, normally sized in comparison to the rest of the tree, in the weeping position due to their natural inclination. Rather, they were pulled down to the ground by sheer weight of produce they bore.

Each of those branches were lined with row after row of fruits, looking almost like giant pears, but stuck together so much, they looked like single pips on a blackberry. And from out of these pears, orcs began to tear their way free as the waving branches touched the ground.

Ranma watched via the group's spyglass as one such orc pulled its way out of a fruit, it stood there, almost like a robot waiting for orders, before shuddering once. A sword like protrusion burst out from one hand, the weapon Ranma had seen orcs use previously. Weapon in hand, it trotted towards the battle occurring at the edge of the edge of the forest, an edge which stretched well beyond Ranma's line of sight into the distance.

The monsters trying to nom on the forest was not having much luck, despite being built to the same size to fight the giant trees. Much like the corpse they had found earlier, these creatures were of a monstrous size. Perhaps his discussion a few days back about hippos was still affecting Ranma's interpretation of what he was seeing, but the monsters trying to eat their

way through the forest looked very much like a hippo of mountainous size coupled with an armadillo.

Fat and thick-bodied the 'hippodillos' stood on four equally thick, short, stubby legs that were barely a story tall each, despite the rest of the monster being several stories tall. Whereas the hippo would only have its thick hide and even thicker layers of fat as a defense, these hippos had the same ubiquitous lacrima that many of the creatures here in the blasted lands seemed to have evolved to, along with what looked like scale armor covering their stomachs and legs up to where they joined the body. On their back, they had hardened shells made of larger scales. And as they all watched, one of the monsters opened his maw so wide it looked like it could swallow a galleon whole, as it chomped down on a portion of the tree trying to lash at the hippodillo with its branches.

"Jeez, what the heck are we watching here?" Natsu muttered, cocking his head to one side. Despite his calm tone, though, Ranma could see his eyes gleaming with interest as he watched the fight, little blooms of fire appearing around his hands.

"Those trees don't look like they're fighting smart or anything, I mean, they're just attacking like a plant would, striking at whatever they can hit, trying to bind the monsters..."

"Hippodillo," Ranma interrupted Gajeel. "I just thought of it."

"Look, the hippodillos do use some kind of freezing magic from their lacrima," Juvia announced, pointing at one hippodillo. As they watched, the lacrima on its body glowed a kind of sickly yellow before a series of beams burst out from them. Unaimed, several missed, yet a few hits, washing over several orcs, and even a Shambler that was caught out away from its fellow, showing that its anti-magic field wasn't up to stopping the attack. All those plant monsters hit were frozen in place, almost like they had been turned into stone.

Gajeel shook his head, going back to his earlier point. "The orcs aren't fighting all that smart either but at least they seem to realize they need to get up to the unarmored portions of those monsters."

True to Gajeel's words, the orcs weren't doing much harm on the ground, causing few wounds that they could see from here, although given the distance that might not be accurate. But most of them were trying to climb up the hippodillos' legs, wishing to get above the armored area to do more damage. They did so, by crawling over the bodies of their dead fellows but it was working slowly. Watching the fight though, Ranma felt that the whiplike tree branches were doing a bit more damage. Not much, but at least they were causing the creatures to bleed.

Yet the dozen or so hippodillos ignored the wounds they were taking as they tried to nom their way deeper into the forest. But two of their brethren had already been slain, while several thousand orcs had been petrified.

“Judging by the way those things are moving I doubt they even feel any of the damage they’re taking. The hippodillos’ll just keep on munching until they’re dead.

“And the trees are just sent wave after wave of orcs as soon as they gestate,” Gajeel analyzed the fight just like what Ranma was doing. “The orcs don’t work together, except accidentally.”

“Yeah, but eventually there will be enough Shamblers in the combat area to shut down those freezing beams, at which point the orcs will be able to make way more headway climbing the hippodillos. The question is, what should we do?” Jenny asked. “I don’t think we can assume the hippodillos will see us as allies if we pitch in alongside them.”

Ranma shook his head, holding up his hand to signal she should wait, still staring at the battle through his spyglass.

However, Natsu didn’t wait. Instead he charged forward, eager to get stuck in. “Come on Happy, let’s show these monsters that fire is the king when it comes to destroying stuff!”

“I don’t think you should be so happy about that kind of thing!” Juvia shouted, even as Happy hopped onto Natsu’s back, his Aero magic activating.

Watching his fellow Dragon Slayer race off, Ranma very slowly raised a hand and facepalmed so hard for slab rang out all around. “Okay, I’m going to go retrieve our two idiots. Jenny, lead the others around the ridge. We’ll attack the forest from another angle so that we avoid the majority of monsters.”

Using his Boosted Step and inherent speed, Ranma caught up with Happy quickly, although by the time he did, Natsu had already started his attack, the same fire assault he had used a few days ago when they let loose some steam after the days of rain.

This attack had actually succeeded in hurting several of the trees, at least four of the huge things, although only one had been set entirely on fire. The others were scorched and burning, but even as Ranma landed next to the twosome at the outskirts of the forest, Ranma saw some of those trees beginning to splash themselves with their own fruits. The long branches acting almost like whips, just like the thinner ones for a moment as they smacked into one another. The fruit ruptured, sending water cascading over the trees, dousing the flames.

Around Natsu were the scorched figures of several orcs, while below the trees more orcs and a few Shamblers began to appear.

Natsu grinned at Ranma, gasping in air from his momentary exertion. “H, hah! Did you see that! What did I say, fire is the way to go! It’s the gift that keeps on giving to, look, it’s already starting to spread to some of the other trees...” Natsu paused as he turned his gaze back towards the forest, seeing that even the conflagration on the tree at the center of his

attack had begun to die down. His eyes narrowed, and he pointed dramatically at the forest, his tone turning flat and dangerous. "Of course you know, this means war."

"You got lucky Natsu, come on, let's get back to the others. Seeing that," Ranma said, pointing to the oncoming orcs as they raced towards the trio, "has given me an idea."

"See, charging in sometimes is the best plan, just because it lets you make one up later," Natsu answered virtuously when they returned to the others.

When they did, Jenny, Gajeel and even Juvia were quick to upbraid Natsu for his thoughtless action, but Ranma quickly brought their attention back to the battle at hand. "None of that, it's not worth it at the moment. Besides, Natsu's right. Fire is the way to go here. Or rather, it's the way to get those orcs to start chasing us away from their trees. I don't think we want to fight both at once, like the hippodillos are doing."

By this point, another hippodillo had apparently lost feeling in one leg, collapsing down to his stomach. Several thousand orcs were already crawling all over it, being frozen occasionally but reaching softer areas to stab with their swords. Strangely it was still munching along quite happily, proving Ranma's earlier theory that the hippodillos lacked pain receptors on the majority of their body, or perhaps everywhere. Who knew?

"Here's what we're going to do. Jenny, turn into whatever type of Mecha Take Over form you have that can deal fire or plasma damage. You, Natsu and I are going to go in quick, I want to hit and run," he said, smacking one hand against the other as if miming a stone bouncing. "I'll go with you the first time, see if my ki attacks are effective, since I doubt most of my water magic attacks will work all that well, and would sort of negate you and Natsu's attacks if I use it in the same area. If they are, I'll keep going out with you. Gajeel, Juvia, I want the two of you ready to deal out wide-angle attacks."

Ranma looked around, then shrugged. "This place is as good as any. And when I say wide angle attacks, I mean the same scale of attack you, me and Natsu played with the other day."

Gajeel smirked, letting loose his habitual laugh at that. "Gihihi, sounds like fun."

Snorting, Ranma turned to his other girlfriend, wishing idly that Erza had come with them. *And not just because I miss her. Erza's various armors would be fantastic for this kind of thing.* "Juvia, I'd like for you to try to drain the water from the ground around us and that forest."

Julio blinked in surprise. "That is a very new part of Juvia's repertoire. I'm uncertain I could create a dry zone even as wide as the area between us and the forest, let alone into the forest's depths."

“Well, if ya can do it, this fight will be easier than otherwise. I’m kinda worried about how fast those trees can regenerate or grow new trees given how quickly they seem to. If they can keep pulling water from the ground to douse our flames, we might be eventually overwhelmed by sheer time and numbers,” Ranma answered.

Juvia winced. From where they were, the smoke from the fires Natsu had started had already begun to dissipate, a sign the fires beneath had been put out. That defensive ability and the sheer size of the individual trees meant that doing any appreciable damage to the forest would take a long time. While Ranma trusted in his endurance, and maybe Natsu’s, astonishingly, the others would undoubtedly tire out in time if it turned out the trees could both regrow and plant new trees that could grow as quickly as their fruits could. *And out here, anything is freaking possible.*

“Juvia will try her best.” With that, Juvia knelt down on the ground, concentrating on the water within the ground by placing her palms against the earth, working her fingers into the ground as she transformed into her water body.

By this point Jenny had transformed into her Death Scythe Form, indicating with a wave of her scythe to Ranma to indicate she was ready. Ranma looked over at Natsu who smacked his fists together, his Flame Aura appearing all around him beyond his back, where Happy once more clung, waiting to lend his friend wings. “Let’s do this!”

The group charged forward, engaging the orcs who had already come out of their home forest towards the newcomers, blasting through them and into the foliage of the trees through use of several Dragon Slayer type attacks. “Natsu, start us up!”

Just as the first monstrous tree was about to attack with one of its whiplike vines, Natsu let loose with a Fire Dragon Slayer’s Roar straight into the trunk of the huge tree. The trunk, about as wide as the one on Tenrou despite how different they were, caught fire, which spread up and down its length, burning leaves and branches into ash, including one of the main branches, one of the ones that held the orcs. The tree issued a wail, even as it started to slap itself fluids from the fruits bursting and putting out the fires in sections.

“Kijin Raishu Dan!” Ranma attacked another tree with the Vorpall Blade attacks of the Yama-Sen-Ken. To his delight, despite the size of the tree, the vorpall blades cut deeply into the wood. It didn’t knock the tree down entirely, but cut deeply into it, causing the tree to lean over, the remnants no longer up to holding up its weight. The upper segment of the skyscraper-sized tree fell, crashing against two of its fellows, taking one of them out as well, although the third stood tall and began to wrap dozens of its whiplike branches around the downed tree.

What it was doing, Ranma had no time to discover, as the nearest trees continued to attack him and his fellows and orcs rushed out to attack them once more. Moments later though, when he looked back, at the downed tree, his worst fears looked to have been realized.

The downed tree was almost merging into the still standing tree, adding to its size. As he watched, the downed trees' branches began to move once more. *Well, crap.*

At the same time Jenny leaped up into the branches of one of the trees. Not trusting her ability to cut through the trunk after seeing Ranma's attack nearly fail, Jenny used her plasma-scythe on the branches first. This was not easy, as the whiplike branches with the pine needles were so fast she had trouble dodging them. *Holy... those aren't pine needles, they're just metal-looking needles, the fuck!?*

Nonetheless, while her blade wasn't big enough to cut through the main trunk, the smaller whiplike branches were not safe from her. She whirled her scythe around as the small guns built into the Deathscythe Take Over's backpack blasted out, targeting the fruits lining the larger tree limbs.

This Takeover Form merged Jenny into one of her most robotic-seeming forms with an emphasis on close-in combat in the form of a scythe with an energy blade. It was also kind of scary to look at, coming complete with wings that doubled as a kind of cloak folding down over its front, while its upper body was painted matte black with a few gold highlights mainly around its movement thrusters in its large pauldrons. Its head was somewhat like her other robotic Take Over forms, with the inclusion of gleaming green eyes. The guns pointed up over the shoulders, pointed forward.

Landing in the now opened area, Jenny rolled forward, her scythe slicing into the limb below her as she hurtled off it. Midair, Jenny blasted back under it, the cutting edge continuing its work. A moment later as she raced away, dodging still more strikes from the needle-lined branches, the tree limb she had attacked fell, the edges smoking lightly.

Natsu too, was wreaking havoc, launching wide-angled attack after attack all around, cackling. "Burn, plants, burn!!"

Zooming past him, Jenny shivered a bit at the manic, almost devilish look in Natsu's eyes. "I think you are enjoying this a little too much, Natsu!"

The Fire Dragon Salyer didn't answer, instead launching another attack into the same tree Jenny had been attacking. "Fire Dragon's Roar!"

Grimacing, Jenny switched to attacking the orcs working to surround them, her guns firing, as she launched forward, fighting alongside Ranma for a moment as he too had turned his attention to the orcs. Hundreds had fallen, and another tree had a chunk cut out of its main trunk thanks to another attack from his Yama-Sen-Ken skill, but Ranma didn't want to use it again, leery about how close Jenny and Natsu were.



As she cut one orc down, Jenny gasped, suddenly feeling heavier, her Take Over form weighing her body down. Jenny's guns went silent, and the plasma blade of her scythe cut off. "Shamblers!"

Grabbing Jenny, Ranma hefted her into her arms, turning back toward the edge of the forest. "Retreat!"

"What!?" Natsu shouted, more roared really. "We're winning!"

Even as he said that though, his Flame Aura cut off, and his last attack shrank dramatically. Yet Natsu still turned away from Ranma, punching out against an orc and then kicking a second before dodging under a strike from a third, dancing around a fourth. A fifth tried to stab him in the back but Happy leaped into its face, slicing his claws into the orc's eyes.

Growling, Ranma transferred Jenny to his back and then fought his way through the horde of orcs, unable to take to the air because of the whipping vines above them. Reaching Natsu, Ranma grabbed him by the shoulder, and literally hurled him over the heads of the orcs out of the forest into the grassland beyond. "When I say move it, it is not a request!"

Natsu righted himself midair, landing solidly on his feet and glaring at Ranma as he leaped after Natsu, his fangs showing. But then Jenny, out of the Shambler's range, rushed past him along with Ranma, while behind them came orcs, and Shamblers in abundance. He stared between Ranma the oncoming orcs, and then belatedly remembered the plan, as Jenny's shout of, "I'd get out of there if I were you!" reached him.

At that point Natsu looked up, the rest of the plan breaking through his anger. "Oh, right."

Gajeel had already sent the same attack he'd used before up into the air, and as Natsu's anger started to fade, the glint of hundreds of metal spears appeared in the air coming down towards his current position. And admittedly a lot of other positions all around.

"Oh, you asshat!" Natsu raged, before using his Afterburners to streak after the other two.

Out in the open, the orcs had no physical defense against the hail of metal spears that crashed down. Several thousand died along with accompanying Shamblers. If they could really be called alive in the first place. If Ranma, who was now staring at the impact of Gajeel's attack through his spyglass. He didn't really need to get this distance, but he wanted to see details, wanted to equate a survival instinct to being alive, then the orcs were not. Even as he watched, more orcs raced out of the forest into the killing ground, moving around or over their dead fellows, without any care of their losses.

As Natsu joined, Ranma announced the damage they had done, while Jenny tossed Natsu a water bottle. "Three. We set one tree on fire, the fire's already out, but it doesn't seem to be moving any of its limbs any longer, so I will count it as out of the fight. I cut down another, and the third is badly wounded from Jenny and your work on it. Whatever we do, those trees are so huge, they can absorb a shit ton of damage. We'll have to destroy the whole forest or else it might just regrow at some point. And I'm already seeing the downed tree being taken apart and turned into fertilizer."

"That's a definite annoyance," Jenny muttered, shaking her head. "Then again, why should I've ever have expected anything different from a forest in this weird place." She then turned serious, pointing at Natsu. "Also, Natsu, do you think your emotions might be affected by the background magic here? Because you got kinda manic there."

"Huhhhh!?" Natsu growled, almost snarling as a spike of anger went through him. "Are you calling me weak!?"

Ranma look at the flame warrior as well, cocking an eyebrow and when he spoke, his voice was almost soothing. "Natsu, you did just as much damage to that forest as I did, and you think we're going to call you weak?"

That little bit of flattery seemed to work, and Natsu gained control of his emotions, enough to realize that, yes, he had been majorly on edge. "It, it hasn't bothered me before, but maybe it's a little more magically dense under the trees?"

"Do you think you can get control of yourself?" Jenny asked seriously. Before this, the group had thought that none of the Dragon Slayers would be impacted by the magical density within the Blasted lands, given their overall durability and the very nature of their magic. But if areas with even higher magical density could impact their emotions, well, none of the trio could be called calm at the best of times.

Hesitating, Natsu scowled, staring back over at the forest. "I, I can handle it, I think. It only started to affect me, while in the forest and it's fading now.

"Okay, lets experiment a bit," Ranma decided, staring out over the killing zone. "Gajeel, switch out with Natsu, the two of us will head in the next time. Jenny, you stay here."

As Ranma was speaking, another wide-angle attack from the Iron Dragon Slayer had crashed into the area between the ridge and the forest, covering several acres of land in metal spikes.

"Fine," Gajeel grunted, breathing deeply and working at his neck with one hand, the impact of two large scale attacks hitting him for a second, "but how are we going to cover that area without us slowing down enough to let the giant trees send out more orcs and those blasted Shamblers?"

“Oh, you know perfectly well. Welcome aboard Air Ranma,” Ranma announced, moving up next to Gajeel. Before the Iron Dragon Slayer could protest, he was being held under one of Ranma’s arms, and even as he went to punch the other man, Ranma gathered magic into his feet and blasted off with his Boosted Step.

In this manner, the duo crossed the intervening distance without entering the killing ground. Midair right above the forest, Ranma grinned, flipping so he was holding one of Gajeel’s arms. “I’d use your Iron Scales if I were you.”

“Gah, oh don’t you dare you ass!” Gajeel growled even as Ranma began to spin in midair. He did however follow Ranma’s ‘suggestion’ and called upon his Iron Dragon Slayer’s Scales. It was well he had, because the next second Ranma had hurled him like a discus towards the trees below.

“GRaaa! Iron Dragon’s Saw Tooth Scale!” Gajeel roared, thrusting out his arms and legs, which sprouted large, fanglike iron protrusions. This was a mid-grade spell he’d come up with, while creating his Serrated Fang attack, and it served him well now, allowing the spinning Gajeel to not only take the impact of crashing into the top of the trees but also to slice into them like a buzzsaw.

And as he did, Gajeel analyzed what he was feeling. The magic was heavier here, he could feel it, making his magic more effective, easier to call upon for now. Gajeel was certain that would go away once there were enough Shamblers around but he didn’t feel any different mentally.

Putting that aside for now, Gajeel shouted out, “Iron Dragon’s Serrated Fang!”

The attack sliced through one of the large tree limbs giving birth to orcs. Then he was slamming down into another, lashing out in every direction at the whiplike branches, grunting as several got through. While his reflexes were decent, Gajeel’s basic speed couldn’t keep up with the hundreds of needle-covered whips coming at him. But his defense was up to taking their blows, while also beginning to saw through the trunk of the tree, keeping well above the ground, where the orcs and Shamblers were released. “Look, they can’t gestate the orcs onto the tree limbs themselves, damn!”

“It looks like they are kind of limited, yeah,” Ranma said, lashing out with a ki attack in one direction, while releasing a vorpal blade assault in the other. The ki attack didn’t do much, simply blasting a large chunk out of one of the tree limbs nearby, not even punching through it toward the distant tree trunk.

But Gajeel’s observation still made him grin, and Ranma leaped away, dodging deeper and through the tree branches towards the main trunk. A vorpal blade cut through it a moment later, and then Ranma was bouncing away, grabbing onto one of the whip branches and

launching himself out of that tree's canopy of foliage, landing on the head of an orc below before leaping back up towards the tree where Gajeel was fighting.

There, he ducked, lashed out with another ki attack into a tree limb, then began to punch and kick every tree branch that came near him, grimacing as his fists slammed into the branches, the needles covering them causing him some pain, even if they didn't break the skin. "It's like getting hit by the world's smallest wrecking ball covered in metal needles!"

"Hah, what happened to everything is training, huh!?" Gajeel grunted in reply, before Ranma was able to get in close enough to the tree's trunk before launching another vorpal blade assault into it.

Grabbing Gajeel, Ranma hurled him out of the branches as the tree fell, asking as he did, "So, how ya feeling?"

"Other than fucking pissed at you for tossing me around, you asshole, I'm feeling a bit weird," Gajeel admitted, his tone almost mellow as he said it, even as he crashed into another tree limb and instantly came under attack from the new tree's whip-branches. Grunting under the impact, Gajeel once more formed his arms into blades as he moved down the branch, cutting his way through the fruits in his way. "The magical density in this forest is way worse than outside of it. Or maybe that's just some kind of byproduct from the trees?"

"I feel that we're coming up with a lot of questions as we move through the Blasted Lands, questions we can't answer without a lot more knowledge of basic magical theory that the six of us have," Ranma mused, ducking around through a series of whip attacks, noticing that once more, the ground beneath them were building up again, along with Shamblers. "But it ain't impacting your emotions?"

"No, Gajeel answered, grimacing as he was smashed off his feet by a particularly powerful strike. Only a last-minute grab, Gajeel punching his hand into the tree limb, saved him from being knocked free. He also looked down as he did, seeing the fruit from the fallen trees bursting, letting orcs and Shamblers out to join the throng, trying to crawl up their parent trees towards them. "FUCK!"

As Gajeel tried to pull himself up, Ranma hummed in thought, slicing through several whip branches, dancing through still more before taking to the air, dodging still more attacks there, unable for the moment to close with their third target. His mind was on the mental instability the Natsu had displayed instead of the growing threat below.

*Could it be something to do with his element then? That the mental impact hits him more because Fire is, well, fire, emotional, aggressive and all that? That made about as much sense as anything else Ranma could think of.*

Several seconds minutes later, Ranma got close enough to the trunk once more to cut into its trunk with a Yama-Sen-Ken attack. Even as it fell the tree fell though, Ranma noticed the same thing Gajeel had, that the gourds of the downed tree, those that hadn't been smashed, still released their charges to join the horde below.

At that point the first few orcs to climb the trees reached Gajeel, and he ducked under a cut from one right into a whip strike that took him across the face. That blow caused him to cry out in pain as a few of the needles struck his nose and eyes. Despite being enhanced as well as his skin, they were still extremely sensitive, and he stumbled, temporarily blinded. More strikes landed, and he grunted in more pain as the orcs tried to grab at him, tearing him away from the tree.

Before they could succeed, Ranma noticed his companion's plight at last. Seconds later, Ranma landed nearby, lashing out with punches and kicks, clearing the orcs off Gajeel and shattering several of the whip branches, grimacing as one strike got through, striking his collarbone. At the same time, Ranma could feel the anti-magic field reaching up to them.

"Time we left!" Ranma growled, grabbing Gajeel and tossing him over one shoulder.

"You could be a little more gentle," Gajeel grumbled, even as they lifted off into the air and raced away.

Once away from the Shamblers and able to use magic once more, Ranma boosted them both away, laughing a bit at Gajeel's comment. "What's the matter dude, you want me to princess carry you or something? I gotta tell you the same thing I said when I saw Jenny's tentacle monster form. I ain't into that kind of thing!"

This earned Ranma a punch to the back of the head, which he thoroughly deserved. Moments later, he let Gajeel down without having teased him further next to the others on the ridge line. "We're back."

"Um, so, er, how did it go?" Natsu asked, looking really embarrassed from his earlier outburst now.

"The background magic is really dense under those trees," Ranma answered before gesturing for Gajeel to take over, staring out into the killing ground. "Happy, you mind getting high and checking on the hippodillo fight?"

"Aye Sir!" Happy shouted.

By the time he returned with the report that there were now four hippodillos still on their feet, Natsu had dealt with another mass of orcs and Shamblers, which had charged out of the forest into the killing zone Gajeel had created. Listening with one ear to Happy's report, Ranma watched as the smalls spears that Gajeel had launched with his wide-angle assault

melted under the heat of Natsu's flames. "Nice job Natsu, that will make it both easier for them to close and more painful."

"That's nice and all, but am I going to stay out here with Gajeel for now?"

"I don't recommend it. Not only do the fallen trees that aren't on fire still release their, produce I guess you could say, the downed trees are being absorbed into the standing trees."

Ranma shook his head. "That answers that. Fire is most decidedly the best kind of thing to use against plant monsters and we need to spread some more of it though the forest."

At that, Natsu grinned, but Ranma went on quickly, wagging a finger at him. *Damn I'm acting like such an adult now. Ugh.* "But Happy is in charge of when to pull you out. If he notices you getting too manic or aggressive, I want him to pull you out without complaint. Understood?"

Snorting, Natsu spoke up, imitating his little buddy as he answered. "Aye, Sir!" before Happy climbed onto Natsu's back.

Another horde of orcs and Shamblers left the forest, which Gajeel dealt with as Ranma checked in with Juvia. She was sitting there, still concentrating on the water within the ground. Reaching down, he touched the ground lightly, finding the grass there, it was fuchsia here, was dry and crackling to the touch. "Good going love, keep it up!" Smirking he leaned in, bussing her cheek lightly before whispering into Juvia's ear. "And after this is over, if you succeed in pulling the water away from that forest, you'll deserve a treat..."

Juvia's cheeks blushed hotly, but she didn't respond further, simply concentrating all the harder on her part of the battle.

Moments later, Ranma, Natsu and Jenny crashed down into the forest once more. Natsu hit like a meteor, all fire and flame, burning everything that came close to him, showing a fantastic level of control by projecting his flames outward, not letting any of them even touch Happy on his back despite the utter destruction he caused as he crashed into the foliage.

Jenny in contrast stayed above the forest, slicing down in fast attack from directly above the trees, aiming at those trees that had already been damaged by the previous assaults. She didn't go for any kills, so to speak. Instead she sliced branches, blew up tree limbs, and generally forced the trees to send a lot of their whip branches up at her rather than the other two.

For his part, Ranma dropped into the foliage, dancing in midair through dozens of waving whip branches, slamming into the topmost tree's trunk, cutting downward into it with the Yama-Sen-Ken. A largish portion of the trunks came apart in bits, and Ranma smashed them in different direction, tearing through the foliage and heading downward, bouncing in a spiral

around the tree's trunk, making it very difficult for the majority of the tree's branches to hit him.

Just like before with Gajeel, Natsu and Ranma's staying to the foliage out of range of much of orcs, although the trees kept on gestating more, the horde becoming so large, that it pushed out into the killing zone, before there were enough Shamblers to impact the three fighters. At that point, the anti-magic the Shamblers created quickly caused Happy's wings to disappear, and Natsu's fire to go out, along with Jenny's transformation despite her being so high in the air.

"OH shit!" Jenny shrieked, her Transformation form still around her for now but its ability to fly dying out. She still had enough mobility to dodge around some of the strikes coming her way from the various whip branches, but even so, it was like being in a falling metal canister and several strikes hit home. Not enough to get through her Deathscythe Take Over Form but certainly enough to dent her now-metallic skin.

Growling in annoyance, Ranma grabbed up Natsu and Happy, tossing the other Dragon Slayer onto his back before clearing the sky around the falling Jenny with use of his ki attacks, before catching Jenny in his arms in a princess carry. "Don't tell Gajeel I did this for you, he might get jealous," Ranma quipped, as he raced out of the woods dodging through a series of attacks from orcs and trees alike.

Jenny laughed and leaned up giving a kiss on the underside of his jaw, even as she internally shivered. She'd never dealt with anti-magic fields before, and the helplessness she felt back there had not been fun at all. "I, I think I'll need to keep to the outer edge of the forest from now on," Jenny said, her tone serious. "I can't expect you to be able to get to me if I fall out of the sky again but that tactic was working very well until that point."

"Fine by me. Natsu and I can be the ones to lance into this particular boil, you just keep our backs as clear as you can," Ranma answered, a whoop coming from Natsu as the Fire Dragon Slayer felt his magic return. A second later he was off Ranma's back, moving forward with the help of Happy and his Afterburner spell.

Back with the others on the ridge, Ranma looked to Gajeel again, who had launched another wide-angle attack to cover their retreat. "Good job Gajeel, but switch off with me for now. We'll stay up here for a while, let them get at least two thirds of the way across the killing fields before we attack."

That was easier said than done for the orcs and Shamblers of course. By this point, the territory between the ridge where Ranma had sent them and the forest had been turned into a bubbling cauldron of still bubbling bits of iron, a few fires here and there, along with hundreds of dead orcs that had been turned into slow-burning piles of refuse.

Yet once they came, with more behind them and still more visible in the shadows of the trees pushing out to join their fellows.

“Natsu first, then Gajeel,” ordered Ranma, “turn that area into a dead zone... again.”

Both Dragon Slayers snickered at that, although Gajeel was starting to feel the effects of continuously using such massive attacks, while Natsu was sporting a few bruises here and there gained after his magic had been suppressed earlier. Still, Ranma knew they were both good to go and he turned away, leaving them to deal with the huge horde of orcs and Shamblers as he moved over to speak to Juvia again, who had not moved from where she was still crouched on the ground. “Having any luck?” he asked in a low tone.

At this direct question, Juvia scowled in annoyance, but she calmed down and replied as Ranma began to massage her back and shoulders. “Mmmmm, that feels good, darling. As to progress, Juvia is, although slowly. There is an underground river that runs beneath the forest. Juvia is trying to divert it elsewhere before further draining the ground of moisture, but that means Juvia needs to force the river to dig out a new course through the earth. It is slow going.”

Ranma nodded, still rubbing Juvia’s back soothingly, seeing the sweat appearing on her forehead, which was only slowly absorbed back into the rest of her body. “Can you break away from it and take a bit of a break?”

“Juvia will have to, after the river has been diverted,” Juvia admitted. “The distance Juvia is fighting through to use this technique is having a negative effect on how much energy it takes.”

Ranma nodded and turned back to the others, watching the destruction the other two Dragon Slayers were creating, before looked all around. After all, this was the Blasted Lands. Just because they were already dealing with one threat, there was no surety that they would not be attacked by something else.

Eventually, the hordes of orcs and Shamblers trying to come out of the forest towards them started to fade, and Ranma nodded over to Gajeel and Natsu. After that display, both of them looked extremely drained, with Gajeel looking mentally weary and Natsu just looking a little tired but a lot battered. After all, they had just used as much magic as they had in the entire battle against Grimoire Heart... with the follow-on battles being omitted anyway.

But Ranma knew they would recover quickly. That was another aspect of being a Dragon Slayer, although Natsu seemed kind of abnormal in that area. “Jenny, you good to go? Natsu stay and recover a bit.”

The blonde nodded and transformed into her Deathscythe form at once, following Ranma up into the air as he once more used his Boosted Step to cross the killing zone. The two



of them crashed down once more into the forest, where Ranma used his Aerial Style to good effect, staying above the tree line around the highest branches, cutting down with his Yama-Sen-Ken's shearing away branches and tree limbs as he forged deeper into the forest. Jenny remained in the air behind him, doing what she could to watch his back from the edge of the forest, unwilling to enter the foliage once more given how badly the anti-magic field could impact her Take Over forms.

This time, Ranma kept an eye on the Shamblers, as their numbers started to build up, and when he reached two hundred, he turned back, realizing something with a groan of annoyance. "Damn it, this fight might go on for a way longer time than I thought."

Shaking his head at that, Ranma returned to the edge of the forest. "Jenny, pull back to me!"

As she did so, the anti-magic field flowed forward with the shifting tides within the horde of orcs, and Ranma barely reached Jenny before her mechanical soul began to be turned off by the magic belt. This time she was caught far deeper in the anti-magic field, and her entire Mecha Soul faded, dumping her to the ground. Landing, she rolled forward, killing a lot of momentum, only to be forced to dodge strikes from several orcs.

Those orcs came apart with strikes from Ranma and Jenny stumbled into Ranma's arms, Ranma once more leapt high up and away, dodging through the trees and branches coming his way with ease, until he touched down once more, alongside the others. "How you doing, Jenny?"

"When those damn Shamblers take away my magic, it's like I get hit in the gut by a Giant!" Jenny grunted, shaking her head. "I'm going to have to take a break for the next one, I think."

Ranma nodded grimly, then look around at the others even as Natsu lobbed a fireball towards the killing ground. With orcs and Shamblers once more almost filling the killing ground in an almost mindless rush, there was no way for any of them to escape and most were turned to ash instantly. The rest were only slightly less injured, hundreds becoming moving bonfires.

While still more orcs were already moving forward, Ranma called Natsu and Gajeel over to join him, Jenny and Juvia. "I think we all should take breaks in turn. I'll take over for the two of you for now. Jenny, pull out some food and water."

As the others ate, Ranma used his newest water attack, the insanely dangerous slicing water crashing through the next horde of orcs. And then into the forest and out of sight. How much damage that did long term given the whole absorbing their downed fellows' thing the trees did, he didn't know but it hopefully helped a bit.

Ranma's attack somewhat calmed down the killing zone, putting out the fires, and causing the still slowly cooling metal to finish doing so, sending intense blasts of steam into the air. Oddly, Gajeel took that as a cue to rush out into the killing zone, gathering up a lot of the metal that he'd already used, bringing it back to the group as he munched on it casually.

"How can you do that? Eating my own fire doesn't give me anything. Heck if any of my own magic's still in the fire it tastes like shit," Natsu growled, shaking his head at how weird the other Dragon Slayer was being.

Gajeel grunted, answering between bites. "It doesn't bother me much. It doesn't taste of anything, but since your magic and Ranma's imbued the metal, it's still filling and I need the resources."

"That's good thinking, and kinda illustrates my concerns right now." Ranma gestured back over his shoulder to the killing fields, and Natsu grunted again, this time something approaching respect as he saw how wide Ranma's attack had been, doubling the area of his own attack. Unlike the trees, the orcs and Shamblers didn't seem able to deal with his overwhelming water type attacks.

"Jenny, give us a flyover, I want a picture of the size of that forest, an estimate of how many trees are in it. Because from what I've been saying, we cut down something like twelve of those massive trees so far, or at least eight. Here, Ranma sent a nod towards Natsu, whose fire powers had destroyed two trees entirely on his own, and helped to destroy at least six others. "But we haven't seen any lessening of the number of orcs or even Shamblers.

Jenny nodded ruefully. "If anything, I'd say there's more of the damn things every time we try our hit and run attacks. It's kinda not well thought out but it's working. This fights almost like hitting a rubber ball. Strike it, it strikes back."

"Exactly." Ranma nodded his head to his girlfriend, who, after giving him a wink, took to the air with Happy. While they were gone more of the orcs and Shamblers came out of the woods towards them, another horde the same size as the last group, with more visible in the woods beyond.

Gajeel grimaced as he saw them, looking over at Ranma. "Do you think we should maybe attack from different angles, pull the orcs and Shamblers the forest is creating from different directions?"

"If we had more members, and if all of us were mobile without needing help, I'd jump on the idea," Ranma said. "But I just think it's impossible. No offense Gajeel, but you aren't mobile enough for that, and I want Juvia to stay here too. I am kind of afraid that we're in this for the long haul, if you know what I mean."

Gajeel hissed in annoyance, but nodded his head, while Natsu simply scowled, stood forward, and launched another vengeful flame attack into the killing ground.

About twenty minutes later and another attack launched into the killing ground, Happy and Jenny came back, with the little Exceed looking frazzled. "We got attacked by large birds," Jenny reported tersely, shaking her head and looking around at the others. "And as for the size of that forest, it's one of the biggest ones I've ever seen in terms of area. Thankfully I don't think there's that many actual trees, say a little over a few thousand, maybe? It's hard to tell."

Ranma thought about it for a moment then sighed. "We have or change our tactics. He looked over at Natsu. "Once you're rested, you and Happy are going to keep on attacking that forest everywhere you can. Juvia, keep trying to divert whatever water you can in the soil. Gajeel and me will keep up the attack here. Jenny will continue to hit and run from the air too, dragging the orc Shamblers into the open."

He looked at Natsu. "I don't want you to close like before. I want you to attack from the air with as many long-range fire attacks you have. Large or small, spread the pain and the fires. Force the trees to use their gourds to put out more fires. That will cut down on the number of orcs the forest and hurl our way."

Natsu whooped, thrusting ahead there. "You mean fighting like an actual dragon, strafing the ground!? This is going to be awesome!"

"Aye sir!" Happy said, also throwing an arm in the air from where he was perched again on Natsu's head. Ranma wondered idly if Happy liked it up there because of the heat the Fire Dragon Slayer gave off all the time, before shaking his head and concentrating on the here and now. "Keep to the air, don't set down, let them keep on tossing out orcs at us and destroy them in drove. We keep away from the forest, and so long as the orcs come at us from one direction and we can see them coming, they're not really that much of a problem. Not even with the Shamblers so long as we can attack from outside their range."

"Yeah, yeah, it was keeping to the area inside the forest that messed us up," Gajeel murmured around a bite of stew.

"Until we start growing tired," Jenny protested. "Orcs' eyes aren't like ours, and unless those plans go into some kind of torpor or something at night, they can keep creating more orcs and throwing them at us."

Ranma shrugged. "I'm not actually using all that much power except when I hit the killing fields, and even then, not much." In comparison to the others, Ranma's magical reserves were immense and he his ki reserves were even larger. "I can stay up all night. Whether or not you can sleep through the noise of my attacks out into the killing ground is the real question."

“The fact he says that so simply annoys me,” Gajeel grumbled, with Natsu nodding in agreement. Still, they understood that if they took the magic out of the equation, Ranma was well beyond their abilities.

The battle continued from there, with Happy and Natsu performing attack runs from the sky all over the forest, while Ranma and Jenny continued to smash into the side of the forest, from this angle, with Ranma aiming at a specific tree each time, downing it and retreating while Jenny spread her attacks all over. All the while, Juvia worked on her part of the plan, pulling all water from the soil in a direct line between her current position and the forest, whereupon she widened her touch. This was not easy at all, and more than a few times she had to take a break, and she started to take headache medicine, so hard was the mental strain. Yet with the river diverted, it became only a matter of time.

The forest didn’t respond like an intelligent creature to the attacks the trees could ‘sense’ would have: husbanding its strength in a defensive position, prioritizing Shamblers and building them up to the point the anti-magic field could spread out beyond the forest’s environs. Instead, it simply kept on sending out hundreds of Orcs and Shamblers once a certain number was reached, and every time in the same direction towards its tormentors as they retreated. Indeed, it seemed to almost ignore Natsu and Happy, as if the nature of their attack seemed like a natural disaster rather than enemy attack.

This allowed Ranma and Gajeel to destroy the orcs and Shamblers from a distance. The two of them lost track of how many hordes they destroyed before the sun began to set, making Ranma wonder aloud, “Why the hell we haven’t seen hordes like this coming at Pergrande. I mean, even with the number of Shamblers, they wouldn’t be a danger to an S-class mage, but if they could send hordes like this there as often as they send the forces they do...”

“Ishgar would have to set up a few S-class mages on the border at all times. And there aren’t really that many true S-class mages out there,” Gajeel agreed. Before admitting with a growl, “I know I wasn’t really up to that level when I was with Phantom Lord. I was close but not yet there. Hell, Natsu handled me easily enough. But if you ever tell him I said that, I’ll tear out your tongue.”

“Please do not. Juvia will need her lover in full control of his tongue for the reward Juvia has decided she wants after this battle is over,” Juvia mumbled, causing both boys to blush and look away from the water mage, who was taking a break from her labors at the moment.

Labors, Ranma reflected that seemed to be bearing fruit, if the muddy quagmire slowly growing behind the ridge was any indication. After all, all that water had to go somewhere.

“You really must be tired darling,” Jenny murmured, also taking a bit of a break. Indeed, they all were, with Happy and Natsu already napping nearby, but determined to go out a few times during the night. “Usually, you leave those kinds of innuendos to me, save in private.”

Juvia hummed as she leaned against Jenny, nodding her head tiredly. "Juvia does not think that she will be able to work again tonight."

"Then don't. I'll take the water you've gathered and use them in a few attacks if needed, or if not, I'll send it further away with one of My Water Dragon Roar's," Ranma said, shrugging his shoulders. "Rest all you need to continue your part of this battle tomorrow. When you get right down to it, depriving that forest of nutrients is even more important to our winning here than anything else we do."

Juvia smiled and soon fell asleep against Jenny, before Ranma picked her up and carried her into her tent for the night.

But for his part, Ranma did not sleep that night. As Jenny had feared, the orcs kept coming through the night, forcing Ranma to keep slaughtering them at range. Natsu was the only other one who had any energy, and he raced around the forest using his After Burner spell racing along the ground without Happy, launching attacks up into the air to fall into the forest and moving on fast. And even Natsu had to sleep for at least a quarter of the night.

The next day, the battle continued through the rest of the day into the night once more, with Juvia concentrating on her part, which was now very visibly having an impact. By the time the sun began to go down the land within the killing zone was very clearly dryer, spreading out into the forest, despite Ranma's water-based attacks the night before.

Juvia also reported that she had begun to reach into the soil directly underneath the forest. It was **very** tough going, and Juvia needed frequent breaks and medicine for the headache that was slowly growing. Using her power like this at such a far-removed location was intensely difficult.

That second night, Ranma kept up the battle in an entirely different way. Since his use of water attacks on the ground between their camp and the forest just meant more work for Juvia, he charged into the forest. Instead of a hit and run attack, he stayed in the blasted out area of the forest they had been working on up to that point, slaying orcs and Shamblers in close quarter combat, the light of his Neko-Ken claws and the stars above were the only light in the battlefield, bar the occasional distant flash of fire from Natsu.

Without the branch whips of the trees to bother with, Ranma relied purely on his physical skills to deal with the Shamblers and orcs, keeping them in place and out of everyone's hair, while the others rested. Hell, he even enjoyed it. The difficulty of using his other senses just as much as his eyes, his need to not rely solely on ki attacks, was both difficult and fun.

The third morning of the battle was somewhat different. Happy and Natsu returned from their first strafing run with a new and very welcome report. "We've got a new herd of hippodillos out there and it's a bit larger than the last one. They're coming from the same

general direction, and are generally speaking a bit smaller than the first group, but they are just as determined to eat the forest!" Natsu whooped.

"I wonder where they are coming from, and why? Some kind of natural disaster where they normally graze? Overpopulation?" Jenny murmured.

"I don't know, and it doesn't matter. We can use this!" Ranma grinned, viciously. "Let's finish this before the weather turns against us."

"That would be bad, yes," Juvia deadpanned, knowing that in that area, they only had luck on their side. None of them could stop a storm from appearing after all.

Natsu needed no urging to keep his own attacks well away from the hippodillos, concentrating on another side of the forest from the massive animals while Ranma, Jenny and Gajeel, continued their own attacks. Halfway through the day, finally, Ranma started to see a lessening of the orcs coming out after them. They'd downed at least a hundred trees, at that point the forest was noticeably dryer in various segments.

When Natsu came back to rest, Ranma asked him how it was going. "Are you seeing any lessening the number of fruits the trees have to put out fires?"

"Oh hell yeah," Natsu laughed, smashing his fists together, while Happy concentrated more on filling his stomach with fish, a treat on this journey for particular stressful moments. "We're wearing them down for sure."

The battle continued throughout the rest of the day, if, it could honestly be called a battle. The only two who were truly fighting it out were Ranma and Jenny, while Juvia's battle was purely mental, and the other two Dragon Slayer's could practically, as Ranma had said, treat this like it was an endurance exercise. It was an intensely difficult one, and both of them even Natsu now, were feeling it.

The final push on the fourth day against the orc-creating forest turned out to be quite anticlimactic. By the time the sun began to set, it had only a few hundred orcs and less than half a dozen Shamblers it could create to defend itself, despite still having several hundred trees. But one after another, the group attacked the trees, exhausted themselves, but unwilling to leave the mission halfway done. Each tree fell, to them or to the remaining hippodillos from the second herd.

In this manner, a forest larger than Enca died, and with it, Ranma hoped so did the continued Orcish threat to Pergrande.

When the last of the trees fell, the team of adventurers spread out, making certain there wasn't any sign of any of the trees healing, growing or otherwise perpetuating themselves. Ranma broke off, searching alone, while the others paired up, moving towards the

center of the forest. *The others might not have noticed, but there was a small glade here. I thought I... ah.*

Stepping over a bunch of shattered, broken or cut portions of at least two trees, Ranma paused, staring at the grass covered object he had noticed during the battle. This was a rock or mound of some kind that came up to Ranma's waist, and was about three feet across. The shape of the thing, the fact it was just a mound, would have gone unnoticed perhaps if not for the fact it was rising out of a glade in the middle of the orc-creating forest left seemingly deliberately without any other growth within it bar grass. *And even orc creating trees can't do anything about grass. But...*

With a wave of his hand and a blast of water, Ranma started to dig through the earth making up the mound. Even here, the evidence of Juvia's depredations was obvious, and the hardened, caked ground could not stand up to his magic for long.

Soon, the mound was gone, mostly, leaving behind a stone plinth set into the ground. Its sides were lined with what looked like previously living vines disappearing down into the ground all around the central plinth. On the side a few etchings, long since eroded to nothing could be vaguely seen as shadows on the stone.

And as Ranma stepped up to the plinth, on the top, he found similar markings, only more elaborate. These marks though, Ranma could almost recognize. *Those wavy W's look like the sign old maps use for mountains. And this line, it almost looks like the coastline of Ishgar, almost... as if Sin and Enca were squished together against the rest of them. Huh. So this thing, it's the control panel of this forest? And it was... what? Set on skirmish mode? Set on economical mode? Was it even a real weapons system, cause the orcs and Shamblers seem pretty damn weak in comparison to some of the things we've seen. Or was this thing mutated by the background magic of the Blasted Lands?*

Shaking his head, Ranma stepped back raising his foot and smashing the plinth with a single kick. There was a blast of magic that caused him to stumble a bit, and then nothing. "Yeah, the past don't matter. All that does is making certain this thing and the orcs can't threaten Ishgar any longer."

Soon after that discovery, Ranma and the others left the hippodillos to happily nom on the dead plants, grateful beyond words that they hadn't had to deal with any kind of rain or adverse weather condition during the battle. If they had, draining the forest of water and thus resources would've probably been impossible, and as Ranma had thought, it was the lessening of nutrients and resources that allowed them to really overcome the forest as quickly as they had. If not for that, they might well have been here for weeks if not months.

Regardless, it was done now.

The group retreated to a small valley, a few miles away that Happy had seen during one of his and Natsu's strafing runs on the forest. There, under the canopy of regular, if bright orange, trees, the group rested for the rest of the day, then that night, and much of the next morning. At that point, Ranma, and Juvia returned to the forest, making sure that there were no attempts being made to regrow itself. But they needn't have worried. Another group of hippodillos, smaller than the first, but still quite large in terms of total mass, had arrived that morning, and were in the process of helping their fellows cheerfully munching on everything they had left behind.

Returning to the others, Ranma said formally, "And with that, I think we can declare this campaign over ladies and gentlemen! Our first full campaign in the Blasted Lands and our first bigtime training exercise too. And a complete success on both counts."

"You call that training?!" came several shouts and Ranma grinned at this sweet music.

"Now," he went on cheerfully ignoring deadpan glares, scowls and other looks his way, "which direction do we all want to go from here?"

OOOOOOO

Having returned from a mission the day before, S-class mage Erza Scarlet, the last member of Ranma's polycule and the only one who had stayed behind, had decided to take a single day off before taking up with more missions once more. With Gildarts training with God Serena, Mirajane off training elsewhere, and a large majority of the most powerful members of the Guild taking time off from regular missions, difficult missions had piled up quickly, leaving those missions for Erza, Evergreen, Elfman and the others to finish them alone.

Erza in particular was being called on quite frequently, so much so, that the only training she had been doing of late, was to enlarge her magical capacity rather than with any new armors or styles. Still, several weeks after Ranma and the others had left, Erza was quite pleased with her progress. Not only had she begun to train her magical reserves with Master Makarov, but she had worked with several blacksmiths, talking about several new armors built on the ideas of previously destroyed armors, something that would make her even more dangerous.

*I wonder how Ranma and the others are doing? Fairy Tail is just not the same without Natsu and Happy around making trouble, as much as I am loathe to admit it. I also have to say that after getting used to sleeping with Ranma and the girls beside me, going without their presence is... **unpleasant**.*

Shaking her head, Erza banished that thought once more, knowing even as she did, it would come back with friends at night. *But I chose to stay behind, I chose to place my love for*



*my guild and my duty to them over my desire to be with Ranma, my love. I can only wait until they return.*

With that thought, Erza finished her movements, sitting down to a meal in the Fairy Tail Guild. She had been hungry before she got here and was eagerly looking forward to her meal. But when Erza's meal finally arrived, the smell of it, a chicken lasagna dish, had a strange adverse effect. Instead of smelling fantastic it hit her nostrils as if someone had passed gas right into her face.

Gagging, Erza grabbed her mouth, feeling her gorge rising as she hurriedly got to her feet, and raced to the girls' bathroom, whereupon she threw up, barely getting to the first bathroom stall before she did. For several moments, Erza was too busy regurgitating her last few meals to think straight and the only noise in the bathroom was her throwing up.

After the disgusting event ended, Erza stood up, shakily wiping her mouth as she shook her head. "Good grief, something I ate in that town last night must not have agreed with me at all. Ugh... I think I smoothie of some kind will work best at this point. Along with some ginger."

Outside, Evergreen and the visiting Catherine, Cana's Earth Land alter, looked at one another, then as one turns to stare at the door into the lady's room. "...You don't think?"

I don't think they'd be that irresponsible, but perhaps? It could be possible. I know Lisanna and Anna were intending something similar, and they hurried out of here to see the Porlyusica this morning," the brunette who dressed like a southern belle answered.

For several moments the two of them just stared at the closed door to the bathroom, then Evergreen, raised a hand, pressing her glasses up her nose before very firmly saying, "Not it."

The brunette spluttered behind her, before heaving to her feet and moving to the door. I do declare I am not it either. I believe this is a job best left to Makarov, or someone else, someone durable enough to deal with the fallout..."

"Good point," Evergreen agreed, hopping to her own feet and making for the hall's main doors, as in his office, Makarov felt a shiver go down his spine as he suddenly had the desire to run for the islands of Bosco and live the life of a hermit. "We'll just leave this to Master Makarov."

**OOOOOO**

The group traveled through an area of the Blasted Lands that reminded Ranma of a weird contest he had once entered to a plane ticket to China: lots of sand, heat, oh, and lots of quicksand. Way too much quicksand. Gajeel and Natsu became intimately familiar with the

quicksand. "Zero out of ten, would not recommend," Natsu grumbled at one point after Ranma and Juvia had to rescue him once more. "Seriously, the fuck is with all this quicksand shit!?"

"Why the heck didn't you use your after burners and just boost your way out of there?" Ranma asked, somewhat amused. "Heck, it might have melted to glass, which could have been kind of cool."

"WH, u, fre... shut up," Natsu grumbled, having forgotten that power, while flailing around in the quicksand.

The only upside was there was little weather trouble to deal with. However, once more Happy proved to be a bit of a weak link, in that the heat was so oppressive, he was next to useless. Juvia also seemed to succumb to a certain degree.

But whereas Natsu complained about the feel of wet fur and the inane mumbling of his little buddy to no end, Ranma didn't complain at all about that. Juvia had not only more than earned some leeway with her work against the orc gestating forest, but, in his words to Juvia, "Having the sweaty boobs of my girlfriend pressed into my back, while she's wearing a muscle-T ain't exactly a hardship, no matter how you slice it."

After six days of slow, methodical looking for quicksand type travel, they left that area behind, entering a segment of the Blasted Lands that, while no longer resembling a desert, didn't resemble anything else much either. The sky here was dominated by huge chunks of earth torn from the ground. These chunks were moving haphazardly around one another, occasionally bumping into one another, then back down, while crashes of lightning flashed in the air. Occasionally beams of magical power arced through the land, thicker than a human, connecting a piece of floating land with a portion of the ground, pulling it down to slam into it, becoming a small hill or butte in the territory.

And then there was the water. Several streams moved through this area, connecting the ground to the floating bits occasionally as if the water considered it all of a piece and gravity did not come into the equation. It was fantastical, it was insane, and, after the desert, something of a relief.

Here, Ranma instigated a few half days, mixing up training with travel time. Jenny's overall plan was still a good one, but after the desert and the battle against the trees, Ranma thought a few days of therapeutic sparring would do all three Dragon Slayers some good. Going on mini dates with his girlfriends at night also helped their morale just as much. It was astonishing what offering to help her do a full mani-pedi could do for a girl, especially when followed up with a massage and some love making in a tent set well away from that of your fellow travelers.

But given the amount of lightning cascading all over the place, the hundreds of wild magic spots and the overall dangerousness of the area, the group didn't stay there for very

long. They were still looking for a place where they could hold up without needing to worry overmuch about defense, after all.

The landscape slowly shifted from weird floating/crashing islands to a land of rolling grass hills interspersed with what looked like walls, melted or cracked in places, but definitely walls. And the grass was... well...

"...Ranma?" Juvia began, staring down at her feet.

"Yes, love?"

"...Why is the grass trying to eat our feet?"

"Just don't think of it dear. It can't get through even Natsu's skin, so we can ignore it," Ranma answered, resolutely staring ahead of them.

"Hey! What is that supposed to mean, 'even Natsu's skin'? Just because I'm not as tough as you or as thick-skinned as Iron Brain isn't..."

Letting the amusing back and forth between Ranma and Natsu wash over her for a moment, Juvia stared at where the grass, with dozens of super tiny mouths, were trying to eat into her currently water form feet. The sight was extremely disturbing, and after a second, she nodded resolutely, then turned her gaze elsewhere.

In this area, the weather also turned against them once more, with random squalls of rain, acid, snow and hail cropping up at least once a day. The few times they had found a place they could be relatively safe in, Gajeel, Natsu, and Ranma were able to put up a protective lean-to or even a full house-like structure. Alas, sometimes areas that looked safe ended up having bits of wild magic.

Most of these faded after some time, but one of them, a warped silence spell of some kind that made them all speak in hoots and growls, stayed with them for several days, making an already somewhat annoying situation even more so. The only thing that kept the group from being at one another's throats, was the fact that Jenny was actually quite good at soothing tempers, even without a voice, and the fact they still had to tents to their name despite a few nighttime animal assaults.

During this time, Jenny and Happy both began to exhibit headaches and other signs of mana overdose, but frankly, Ranma was surprised that Happy was dealing with it so well, eventually putting it down to the fact that his people might have a higher tolerance for how much background magic they could sustain. Jenny also was doing somewhat well, although the time she spent scouting around the group started to shrink with her tiredness and headaches.

For her part, so long as Juvia spent the majority of her in her water form, outside the tent anyway. And as Ranma had predicted, none of the trio of Dragon Slayer's cared at all for the background magic, beyond Natsu occasionally feeling a spike in his darker emotions in areas with particularly high concentrations of magic.

Although there were a few moments where the wild magic was far more annoying for the trio...

"Watch out guys, there is a bit of that mirage like stuff to our left," Natsu warned, pointing it out and already moving away from it.

Ranma and Gajeel both looked in my direction, then thanked Natsu for spotting it first and also shifted their course to go well around the wild magic. However, as they did, a giant bear like creature with the mouth of a crocodile and a secondary head of a lion on a long sinuous tail appeared from what had looked like a small collapsed portion of wall, which somehow must have hidden a cave. It took one look at them, roared and charged.

All three Dragon Slayers paused, then began to debate who should take care of the beast as it roared towards them, while Juvia rolled her eyes, only for the monster to hit the magic field that Natsu had noticed. Whatever it was, or had once been they didn't know, but as they watched, the creature disappeared. And as it did, there was a ferocious noise, blasting out from the bit of wild magic. "FEWWWWOOOOOOO..."

Juvia blushed faintly, as Gajeel looked at Natsu, and Natsu looked at Ranma. Ranma look back at them both, and as one all three men said, "Is it just me, or did that sound like the largest whoopie cushion in the world?"

At that point, the **smell** hit all three. It smelled like foul feet soaked in lye wrapped around feces and thousands of stink bombs, a smell so foul that it almost defied description.

While this was bad enough to cause Juvia to gag and clamp both hands over her nose, all three Dragon Slayers, had it far worse. With screams of agony, they raced in different directions, slapping their hands over their noses as they shouted to the heavens.

"Oh God, why!?"

"My nose, my nose, Happy, chop it off!"

"By the dread god of all musicians, what have I done to deserve this!?"

Jenny and Happy would return hours later only to find all three Dragon Slayer's still comatose frothing at the mouth at the foul stench that had seemingly followed them wherever they went. Nor was this the only time that the group ran into issues due to the enhanced senses of the trio of Dragon Slayers.

“Hmmm, now that’s a weird one,” Juvia said, cocking her head thoughtfully, staring at what looks like a pink cloud at first.

“What is it, do you think?” Ranma asked even as the group made to give the phenomenon a wide berth.

“Juvia refuses to speculate. Juvia quite likes the color at least.”

The four of them skirted around the patch of pinkness, only for it to prove to have been connected to some kind of ancient security system or something of that nature. Because as they passed nearby, there was a loud twinging noise and a faint line in the ground appeared for a second, just as pink as the floating cloud. The sound was almost like someone had taken a rubber band the size of a building and snapped it. “What the heck?”

“Juvia does not know, but-,” at that point, the pink cloud shifted, and turned into different musical notes growing until they filled the sky above the groups, “Juvia does not think this is a good sign,” the bluenette said, clapping her hands over her ears as the three Dragon Slayer’s looked at one another, palling in dawning horror.

Ranma and Natsu both tried to boost their way away, with only Natsu succeeding in getting enough distance before the assault began. He did so by first recognizing the threat a bit quicker and then kicking off of Ranma’s chest to gain just a bit more space between him, and the magical trap. “OH you little FUCCO----!!!”

“REEWHWAMANMMMAZAAANNGGGGGGGG!!!!” Loud, booming discordant cords crashed out from the remains of the keyboard interrupting Ranma, and he and Gajeel howled in agony, falling to their knees, blood flowing from the ruptured eardrums. Even Ranma’s durability couldn’t really cancel out how susceptible his Dragon Slayer hearing was, and after only a few seconds, both of them were down for the count.

However, despite all of their trials and tribulations pushing through the Nibble Grass territory as they began to call it, some of the fights they had and the sparring they did were proving extremely good training-wise. Ranma became more in touch with his Dragon Slayer powers than ever before, and both Natsu and Gajeel were both becoming stronger, more adaptable.

And as they started to see larger hills in the distance, Jenny landed on the ground in front of the group, instead of in Ranma’s arms, having transformed midair to her Bubblegum form. This was something she had been practicing, and had only begun to get right in the past two days. Now Jenny tapped Gajeel back, saying cheerfully, I think you are up next for breakthroughs, Gajeel.”

The Iron Dragon Slayer looked at her quizzically, and Jenny laughed. “You’ll see.”

Moments later, everyone else could see as well, because in the distance, rising out of several hills was what most of them took to be a single solitary mountain for a while. It wasn't however. It was instead, a giant robot.

"Holy... wow..." Natsu said, staring in awe.

Gajeel smiled happily. "Hell yeah, that right there is a man's romance."

"Awesome!" Ranma whooped. "That is just really cool."

The giant robot was ancient, perhaps as ancient as the wars which had created the Blasted Lands in the first place. It was so old the bottom of it had become covered in dirt and stone to the point where a lot of that was in turn covered by shrubs and grass, even a few trees.

The half of it that was uncovered started around its stomach area, and from then upwards it looked almost like a knight, complete with chest plate, armored arms, and a shield raised above its head to ward off some ancient threat. Its head was a little sunken into its shoulders, but looked like a version of helmet that Ranma had once seen in a picture of jousting while dealing with the Chardins, a Frog-helmet, he thought it was? The upper portion of the golem-knight was pockmarked and blasted, with chunks missing as if it had been in a battle in the distant past.

"Yet even so, it was still in one piece, and given the insane amount of odd weather, weird magic and so forth that the ancient wars had left behind, that was just crazy. "The ancients sure as hell built to last. If the sheer number of weird magical spells still fighting it out with one another around here weren't enough to tell me that, something like that thing surely does."

"Most of that thing is metal!" Gajeel said his own voice an almost fanboy squeal, just as awed as Ranma if for a slightly different reason. "What kind of metal can be out in this kind of super magical environment without rusting from the weather or being changed!?"

Ranma blinked, then looked back at Gajeel, the other Dragon Slayer's shock reminding him of something. Turning back to the giant golem, he mused, "Did we just find our world's equivalent of that fake Dragon thing I fought in Earth Land?"

Everyone there stared at one another, even Jenny, who had heard that story, although she hadn't been part of Fairy Tail at the time. "You realize that if you can somehow add the properties of that metal to your body, Gajeel, you're going to be even more of a juggernaut than you are already?"

Gajeel let loose a laugh, and then shouted out, "Then what are we waiting for, let's get in there already!"

## **End Chapter**

This chapter concentrated more on exploration and the types of issues the group were going to run into in the Blasted Lands. Next chapter will concentrate on the training aspect and a few more serious dangers, interspersed with blurbs showing what all is going on elsewhere, including the Alvarez Empire now that their lord and creator is gone. I decided, BTW, that the last bits in the original summary served better as a kind of mid boss battle to show their growth, and thus the passage of time. Sorry, but getting back into this was so hard, I needed to break my original plans up a bit. Still, I hope you all enjoyed this.