

I can't draw. Covers everything really.

So, this isn't the full chapter guys. Sorry, but I was 'volunteered' by my parents – I wager most of you know what this is like - to help out on a house project. On the one hand, yay, I get to destroy shit, but on the other hand, damn there goes 2/3rds of my time. I had hoped to get seven thousand words done a day. I barely managed more than three. And I really didn't want working on this to carry over into next month, thus screwing up my time frame there too. So here we are.

Regardless, thanks go to Justlovereadin' and Hiryo for looking through this for me so quickly. They both spotted a rather large problem that I had missed.

Chapter 32: Warm Farewells and Overlarge Welcomes

Leaving behind Wendy was a wrench for Ranma. Knowing how it might be a year or more before he could see her again was a very different thing from leaving her for a few days here and there. The Water Dragon Martial Arts Slayer (title subject to change) found himself occasionally glancing over his shoulder the first few days out from Magnolia, kind of moping as they moved along at Lisanna and Anna's, (the slowest of the large group) best pace.

Jenny, Erza and Juvia all noticed their boyfriend's preoccupation, while the others didn't. Elfman and Natsu spent most of those first days coming up with exercises and physical-type dares and penalties for one another to make the time pass faster, while the three Strauss sisters spent most of the time talking about various things. Perhaps the most surprising, Gajeel spent his time, while Ranma was moping, writing things down in a notebook. Some pages he discarded into the campfire, others he kept, but no one could figure out what he was writing, despite Natsu's best efforts.

Meanwhile, Erza and Jenny kept on trying to explain that Wendy would be all right and that Seilah and the rest would watch over her. On the other hand Juvia, while doing what she could to jolly Ranma out of his depressed mood, was quite smug about the whole thing. "And you still wish to argue that you are not father material? Juvia is laughing," became her most used phrase over the first few days out from Magnolia.

And every time, Ranma would mock-sowl at her, although he didn't argue the point, which Juvia took as a win. Juvia wasn't looking to become a mother right now thanks to the discussion they all had on that score, but she wanted Ranma to acknowledge that such a thing was in the future, and that when it came, Ranma would be a good father.

On the third day, Ranma's spirits rose. For all that he had enjoyed his time in Magnolia, Ranma loved to travel. *Although*, he thought to himself as he plodded along to at the side of the rest of the group, *this kind of slow travel is a bit of torture*.

"We can't keep on going so sloooowwwlllly," Ranma announced.

Then he hopped over Natsu's head, ruffling his pink hair with a hand, and then dodging the punch that Natsu launched his way. "So close Pinky!"

"Gah, stay still and let me hit you, please, just once!" Natsu nearly whined, although he wasn't charging forward, somehow knowing that was what Ranma wanted.

"Nah, that doesn't sound nearly as much fun." Seeing Natsu wasn't going to take the bait, Ranma turned and quickly knelt, reaching into a small hollow between a stone and a tree, plucking up a flower and tossing it to the nearby Erza. It was a crimson rose, the petals merging almost with Erza's hair.

She caught it and smiled prettily, winding through her hair. "Thank you, Ranma, but if you expect this to butter me up for something, you had best think again."

"Kinky!" Ranma laughed, causing Erza to blush very slightly, before walloping him in the head, managing to do the very thing Natsu had tried earlier.

While Ranma grumbled he rubbed at his head, wondering how the hell Erza's punches hurt so much, Jenny and Juvia both gushed at the rose and how closely its color matched Erza's hair. Nearby, Natsu instantly started to look around for flowers for Anna and Lisa, much to their delight. While he wasn't the quickest when it came to romance, when he saw something he thought romantic, he was quick to copy it, and often, better it too.

Gajeel and Happy both huffed, one in confusion the other annoyance, while Mira looked a little jealous for a second, muttering, "Hmph, I've never gotten flowers except when I'm on modeling gigs or from would-be swains, and that isn't nearly as much fun as your lover just randomly finding and giving you one. Ugh. Where's my spontaneous gift of love, huh?"

"Lexus isn't romantic enough for you? Who'd have guessed," Ranma teased.

Mira blushed rosily, and she glared at him growling out, "How did you... that is... there's nothing between..."

"Wait, there really is something going on there? I was just joking. You did seem to be spending a lot of time together since Tenrou Island." Ranma shook his head in wonder.

"You bastard!" Mira growled.

“Mira-nee, you and Laxus!?” Lisa gasped. “That’s so sweet!”

“And kind of hot too.” Anna mused, smirking slightly at her older sister. “You should totally get him to do some modeling with you. ‘Meet the new Fairy Tail Master, the Bright as Lightning...’” she frowned, shaking her head. “Meh, that’s a work in progress, I guess. Still how could you not tell us about this, Mira-nee?”

While Jenny and Juvia didn’t seem to react at all to this, Erza looked a little poleaxed. “Laxus and Mira? That’s a little strange to contemplate,” she murmured, understating things tremendously. After all, one was, while one of her best friends (and the only such friend who wasn’t also her lover,) Laxus was her former Master. It was very weird to contemplate their getting together.

Gajeel laughed, while Elfman looked stricken. “What can I say, we Dragon Slayers like feisty girls!”

“And you can’t get more fight combative and fiery than an S-class mage,” Mira regained control of herself at that point, smirking. “Isn’t that right, Erza, Jenny?”

“Too right,” Jenny laughed, while Erza simply nodded, still looking a little off-balance thanks to the mental image of Laxus and Mira being together. Sensing this, Jenny decided to change the subject a bit. “But you were saying something Ranma?”

Ranma nodded, going along with the topic change despite being rather pleased with the amount of chaos his joke had created. “Heh, yeah, I was. I wanted to say that we should speed up.”

“None of us have the endurance you have, or even these two,” Juvia objected, gesturing to Natsu and Gajeel. “Juvia is used to running, and even jogging for exercise. But there is a wide difference between that and jogging marathon-style.”

Ranma shrugged. “In that case, we’ll be buying horses sometime in the future so you and Jenny can keep up with us.” Horses tended to like Ranma for some reason, despite him being a Dragon Slayer. Gajeel and Natsu looked at him like someone had who had just signed up for torture, and Ranma wagged one hand rapidly front of his face. “Not for us guys, will be running alongside the horses.”

Natsu whooped at that, looking up at his little friend on his head, while Gajeel grunted in agreement. “I’m not looking forward to it, but it’ll just be another kind of training, right?”

Ranma laughed as he threw an arm around Gajeel, who instantly tried to get away from him. “See, this guy gets it...”

“Everything can be training,” Erza, Jenny and Juvia all intoned before Ranma could get the line off.

He pouted dramatically at them, and Juvia smiled to herself, as the group once more began to get moving, again. She wound her way through the rest of them and took his hand in hers, squeezing. “Juvia see that you’re feeling better? Juvia is happy for you.”

Ranma put an arm around Juvia’s shoulder, but unlike Gajeel, Juvia made no motion to try to get away from him, nuzzling into his side as they continued to walk side by side. “Yeah, you can say that. I still miss Wendy but I told her that it was time for her to start spreading her own wings without me telling her how, and that’s still valid. And, well you and the others are certainly better company than Carla.”

With that he kissed Juvia on the cheek before pushing her in the back lightly. “Ten-minute run, magical or not, it’s your choice.!” Ranma shouted at the top of his lungs. “Let’s get those legs pumping people.”

Anna and Lisanna both protested, but Mira and Erza both agreed instantly. They started to run easily keeping pace with one another, glaring hard enough that the energy seems to go through their eyes as they left the rest of them behind. Before one or the other could throw out a challenge, Ranma caught up easily, a smirk on his lips as he turned, now racing backward. “Last one into camp tonight will have to buy food for everyone in the next town.”

“Oh, heck no!” Anna shouted, and she and Lisanna smacked fists as Lisanna used her magic to transform into a giant, plushy-like bunny, about twelve feet tall. Anna instantly leaped onto her twin’s back, pulling out a small wand and tapping both herself and bunny-Lisanna. “Wand of Weightlessness, activate!” This wand was a staple of the Rune Knights, and did just what it said: it made anything you tapped one you activated the spell weigh about half as much as it would otherwise.

Jenny followed this plan too, changing into one of her many Take Over: Mecha Soul forms. In this case it was a S.E. motorcycle. Within seconds she was racing ahead, forcing Erza to use her own Running Armor. Ever competitive, Erza then started a race that quickly left the non-s-class mages in the dust.

Natsu grinned, pausing in his own run. “Wait, we can use magic too! Happy, let’s do it!”

“Aye, sir!” Happy shouted in reply to Natsu’s question. While Natsu began to blast out flame from his legs, Happy’s wings appeared and soon, they were flying along directly above the road.

He only got so far before he was hit in the face by a glob of dirt that Ranma had scooped up out of the road. “I said run, not fly. Keep your feet on the ground Natsu. You of all people

here don't need more training in growing your magic, what you need is physical style endurance."

Natsu grumbled but remembering his fights against Acnologia and Bluenote before him and could agree. He'd fought very well against Bluenote but in the fight against the black Dragon, his endurance had slowly started to hamper them. His magical reserves were still good to go, but Natsu's body had slowed down dramatically, particularly his reaction speed. *Doesn't mean I won't get you back for the mud to the face though!*

The rest of the day, the group interspersed running with walking. Ranma also pulled Gajeel and Natsu out of the group occasionally to go over martial arts techniques with them. Natsu took this much more seriously than before, and Ranma could see an increase in his combat style and self-control from when they had started during the winter.

He also started to speak to Gajeel about something he had noticed. "Of all of us Dragon Slayers, your element is the only one that is, well, solid in its normal form. Have you ever tried to eat a specific kind of metal, and then use it's specific properties?"

"What do you mean? Iron's iron, man," Gajeel grumbled. Of all of them, he was routinely the slowest, although he had a good sprint, and saved up his endurance to use it all at once in the race before they made camp, getting out of whatever penalty Ranma called out for the day.

"Yeah, sure. But Natsu eats fire, and sometimes he's occasionally eaten fires with special properties."

"Like my Sticky Fire I got from Macao, or the time I ate that lacrima stuff from the Tower of Torture or whatever it was called," Natsu interjected. "Once I ate something, I can use its special properties later. Although..." And here Natsu's normal happy expression shifted to one of concern. "I had bad reactions when I ate the lacrima stuff, knocked me flat on my back for days after once the fight was over. And I remember trying to eat other types of fire occasionally with the same kind of reaction."

"True," Ranma paused in thought at that, before deciding the risk was worth it. "That kind of reaction is something to be aware of. But if Natsu can survive it, I'd wager you could too. Eating other metals or iron that has special properties could be a way to help you build your magical reserves and expand your magical range."

Gajeel frowned thinking. "What properties are you talking about? And I'll warn you now, I am not nearly as willing to try to put my stomach on the line as this idiot."

"Yeah, I'm not going to recommend you eat lacrima like this idiot either. But still, think about it. Covering yourself in copper scales would probably be better against someone who's using poisons or rust-based magic. Maybe eating a magical metal might give your attacks an

added attack bonus.” Again Ranma paused, trying to dredge up a memory of a chemistry class he’d had once in his old life. “Steel would be probably something you could eat with little risk of rejection it’s just iron with added, er... carbon? Coal. But I’d wager it would make your scales more durable for a short amount of time, without creating a larger penalty for using it.”

“Yeah, that could work. I’ve thought a time or two about eating steel before. Not other metals though. I... had a very bad reaction once about a week or so before Metalicana disappeared when I tried to eat some iron ore that, it turned out, had some gold running through it,” Gajeel warned. “That’s why I shouted at Natsu for a bit after that tower foolishness.”

“Maybe at the time your body had a bad reaction, but today, I’d wage it will be less because you’re both older and stronger.” Ranma shrugged. “I realize this is going to be dangerous, and we’ll need to be on the lookout for bad reactions.” He smirked, gesturing over to Jenny. “But remember, we’ve got Jenny and her Stomach Pump.”

Natsu groaned, shaking his head. “Dude why!? I had just started to forget that nightmare!”

Gajeel though, was looking between his fellow Dragon Slayers, a frown on his face, as he slowly nodded. “Alright. I don’t like it. I really don’t like it, but... but if I can eat steel without having a nasty reaction, maybe absorbing the properties of different metals will be worth it.”

“That’s the spirit! And hey, think about it. If you can eat steel, then eventually you might be able to eat magical steel too. I have a bit of the metal from that metal dragon thing we ran into in Edolas, and I’d be interested to see what it could give you. Eventually.” Ranma added since he knew Gajeel was right. There was a large chance all of this could be impossible, but it was too good an idea not to pursue, especially when it came to the metal of the Dorma Anim from Edolas. But Ranma had gathered up quite a few pieces. Some he had sent to Heart Kreuz at Erza’s behest, and the larger chunk had been turned over to King Toma, who sent it on to Seven. But that still left Ranma with a nearly intact fang in his Requip space.

“Beyond that, I’ve noticed that using your iron-scaled defense seems to take it out of you. Maybe calling on it and keeping it in place for a while could help?”

“Yeah, I need to work on my endurance too, so that at least I can follow up on now,” the other man acknowledged, frowning thoughtfully. “As for the rest, again I’ll think about it.”

Ranma nodded firmly, and the party continued.

As they went, the group debated on how they would travel once they got to the border with Seven. The Dragon Slayers tried to fight it, but both Jenny and Juvia were adamant that taking a train just made good sense. Both girls knew they were travelling by foot now to let Lisa and Anna spend as much time as they could with Natsu, and Erza to do the same with Ranma.

Although thankfully for Gajeel, neither group had been overly affectionate with one another in front of him.

But the only one among them who could travel as fast as a train over long periods of time was Ranma, and it made no sense for them to spend more time in Seven or Iceberg than they had to. Eventually, the Dragon Slayers reluctantly agreed with that point. Although they didn't show it, both of the younger Dragon Slayers had been bitten by the wanderlust bug and were eager to see the continent and whatever they would find there.

After more than a week of travel, the party found themselves stopping in at a town where Mira and Elfman would go their separate ways. It was decided they would all spend one more night together, then Mira and Elfman would leave in the morning, heading towards the border with Bosco. From there they would take a ship straight across the Straits to Minstrel.

Ranma frowned thoughtfully as he looked at Mira, thinking about her powers as he suddenly realized what she was after. "You wouldn't be looking for any survivors of a certain war we heard about, would you?"

"I cannot tell a lie," Mira proclaimed piously, then grinned, full of teeth as she moved to follow Erza toward the bar for their food. "I'm looking to munch down on some demon souls, yeah."

"For my part, I am interested in running into new monster more than demons. I understand Desierto has a lot of those even a man such as I have never heard of. But regardless, we'll be saying our farewells here," Elfman said as his sister left. "A man has to do what a man has to do and this man must travel a different path than all of you."

"Gehhiih!" Yet you're still traveling with your big sister, how much of a man does that make you?" Gajeel taunted. "Does she hold your hand at night until you fall asleep? Or can't you look after yourself without your sister along to do the cooking and everything else?"

"People living in glass houses should not throw stones," Ranma muttered of the last one. The night before Gajeel had, despite his best efforts, been the last into camp, and they had forced him to cook dinner all on his own. This had been a mistake, costing them much of the morning due to several of them having stomach issues.

Now everyone there nodded, shaking their heads in unison, bar Elfman, who, despite that episode still fresh in everyone's mind, could not stop himself from rising to the taunt. He reared up from his chair growling out "My sister is as much a man as any but I do not need her protection! Would you like an example!?"

Gajeel snorted at him, getting up from his own table and grinning evilly, while Natsu threw up his arms, flames erupting from them. "Hell yes! This is the way to say farewell in Fairy

Tail!” With that, he launched himself over the table towards Elfman, smashing into him and taking to the ground.

Coming back from the bar with her food, Erza and Mira scowled at this and were about to set the trays down and interrupt things, but Ranma waved them off, gesturing to another nearby table. It being a workday, the bar was nearly empty, and what other people were within seemed to be betting on, which of the two mages would win rather than taking umbrage at the fight itself. “Let them have this. Natsu’s right in a way, you Fairy Tail Mages don’t tend to do well with emotions, preferring your fists.”

Erza gave him a narrow-eyed stare of incredulity at that, and Ranma had the grace to look sheepish even as he retorted, “Hey, I learned, and I’m perfectly happy with you know positive emotions, even the mushy ones these days.” With that he made a kissy face towards her, which caused Erza to blush for a second, before her stare came back in force.

“You know what, Ranma’s right.” Mira set the food down, then smirked at Erza as she summoned her Satan Soul powers. “And since that is the case...” Erza had barely a second to notice the change in Mira’s tone before she was coldcocked, the blow slamming into her face and hurling her ass over kettle into a nearby wall. A soul extinction flashed towards Ranma, who blocked it with crossed arms but was still sent skidding backward. “Let’s see who’s the baddest then! Right now, here and now!”

The energy of the soul extinction flaring out, Ranma charged forward, a wild grin on his face. “Well, it’ll show us a good baseline before the training journey really begins, anyway.” *That and throwing down with Mira and Erza is always fun.*

Not having jumped forward to join the brawling Elfman and Natsu just yet, Gajeel shook his head, pulling out a guitar. “Ah me, all this talk about leaving and such, it puts me in the mood to sing instead of fight. Shoooba...”

“Oh hell no, your singing sounds like someone gargling with iron files,” Ranma grumbled, dodging under a swing from Erza’s sword before grabbing up a nearby chair hurling it at the man.

It smashed into his head, sending Gajeel off the table he had perched on to the floor, his guitar flying into a corner. He was soon up though, picking bits of chair out of his hair. Then he charged forward, roaring out, “Shooby da boo! You people wouldn’t know good music if it bit you on the ass!”

Seeing the fight getting out of hand the onlookers decided to vacate the premises. The innkeeper also rushed towards them, only to be knocked out a second later, as Elfman roared and tossed Natsu off him. Natsu’s back slammed into the older man, sending him sprawling to the floor, unconscious.

The remaining four women did not join in, sitting calmly nearby and watching the events. Jenny just leaned back in the booth she and Juvia had commandeered, taking a sip from a wine glass, the bottle of it open on the table set beside two plates of pasta, which she and Juvia were eating slowly. Of them all, only Juvia and Jenny were wine drinkers for preference, and they had gotten their own booth. Anna and Lisanna sat nearby at their own tables, although the two of them were not silent, cheering on their man lustily. "Go get 'em Natsu! Hit Elf-nii into next week!"

"Come on Happy, go for the eyes!" Lisanna caroled, watching Happy dive-bombing the group, slapping a fish he'd pulled from somewhere into every face he could reach.

"You know, most the time I am ecstatic to be involved with Ranma. He's almost everything I've ever looked for in a man. And then you see something like this, where Ranma's more than willing to fight at the drop of a hat, letting out his full combat junkie status. Then you can only sigh and wonder why a tornado of chaos and destruction was somehow mislabeled as a man," Jenny muttered.

Juvia nodded, and the two of them continued to eat, enjoying the floor show to go with their meal.

But then, Gajeel was smashed into their table thanks to a flying punch from Erza, who quickly turned her attention onto Mira.

Dodging the older Strauss sibling's attack, Erza got behind her, then locked in a hold around Mira's waist before suplexing her into the floor. Both women were then smashed in their sides by Natsu, who had just tried to attack Ranma. The aqua-sexual had dodged upwards kicking out hard, catching Natsu in the side of the head, hurtling him into Elfman, both of them crashing into the two ladies. Ranma then proceeded to pummel them laughing all the while as they all tried to defend themselves from his aerial assault but mixed up as they were they mostly got in each other's way.

At the same time, Gajeel's smashing through Jenny and Juvia's table had tossed the two plates of pasta into the air and through the universal laws of comedic timing, a plate splatted down on top of Jenny's head before she could dodge.

Juvia had managed to change into water in time to avoid a similar fate, and now stood up still in her water form, gulping as she stared at Jenny, while some of the sauce from began to drip down her face. "Gajeel, Juvia believes you should start running now."

"Huh, why?" Gajeel looked up from the rubble of the table and looked at Jenny's face for a brief second before scrambling away, fear visible on his face where a moment ago he had just been angry. Hell had no fury like a woman scorned, and even Gajeel knew that you didn't mess with a woman's hair. Especially someone like Jenny, who, while proud of her S-class mage status, was extremely vain about her hair.

“All right Assholes!” Jenny shrieked, throwing up her head, and glaring all around her, trembling in fury. “You want to fight, let’s fight! Take Over: Mechanical Soul: Massager!”

That was one that even Ranma hadn’t heard of before and he watched from the middle of the melee as Jenny changed. Armor began to form all around her, very tight armor in fact. Indeed, it was almost something like a bikini, the bottoms of it more like what Ranma wore, rather than Jenny.

If that had been all, the changes which Jenny went through it would have been fine, just another combat Take Over. But it wasn’t. Instead, these changes were accompanied by Jenny’s arms transforming into seven tentacles, each of them ending in a large pad. These began to vibrate as Jenny screamed, “Mess with my hair will you! Take this! Assault Massage Barrage!”

The tentacles reached for them all, and Ranma quickly retreated. “No thank you!”

While the boys all tried to scramble out of the way, Erza and Mira however fought back. They did so very well, since, besides the fear factor the Massager Soul didn’t add much to Jenny’s normal combat ability, although oddly, the tentacle arms seemed able to withstand a lot of punishment, blocking swords and spells with equal ease, while also seeming to drain the tension from any muscle they touched.

What could not withstand such pummeling was the inn itself, which eventually began to collapse after one too many people-shaped-holes were smashed through it. A group of local Rune Knights were called at that point, but Ranma ordered them away, and the fight slowly ground to a halt after the building attempted to collapse on top of them.

The losers of the battle were definitely Mira, Elfman and Gajeel. Mira had found herself at the bottom of the final pile up, and was now looking extremely sore, and one of her legs was having trouble moving properly at the knee. Elfman had simply been pummeled.

But both the Strauss siblings were much less emotionally scarred than Gajeel. As the one who had created the Pasta Incident, he had been Jenny’s primary target, and had paid for it. He was now shivering, shaking his head, and refused to have his back towards Jenny, staring at her in a kind of sick horror.

“What did you do to Gajeel?” Ranma asked as he finished pulling his tent down, looking at the woman quizzically. They’d been forced to camp outside of the town last night, since they destroyed the only inn within the town that wasn’t already booked when they arrived.

Jenny shrugged, smirking slightly and wiggling her fingers, causing Gajeel to yelp in fear, and quickly put Natsu between the two of them. Natsu would have only made fun of the guy for that, but something about the way that Jenny was grinning at the two of them made him uncomfortable too. “Ehh, don’t worry about it, he’ll be right as rain soon.”

Shaking his head at that, Ranma looked over at Mira and Elfman. "Well, I suppose this is where we part ways."

The two Strauss siblings looked up nodding their heads, and Anna moved forward to hug them, smiling wanly at the two of them. "We'll send you messages once we find a place stay for a few days down there, and we shouldn't be away as long as this lot," Lisanna said, thrusting a thumb towards Erza and the others. "Don't worry about us, sis."

"It's fine Mira-nee. We'll see you when you get back," Anna said, hugging her tightly.

"Just make sure to watch out for one another, please?" Lisanna hugged her next, and Mira kissed their cheeks, before Elfman lifted them both up into a bear hug, causing the twins to laugh and tug at his ears affectionately.

Setting his siblings down, Elfman turned to Natsu, staring into the Fire Dragon Slayer's eyes for a moment before holding out his fist. Natsu looked at it, then with a smirk thumped it with his own.

Some kind of understanding came between the two men then. It was as if, finally, Elfman was saying that he trusted Natsu to look after his sisters, and wouldn't be bothering him about their relationship any longer, which he had done a few times before this.

Or at least, that's what Ranma thought. Despite his own latent machismo, Ranma didn't actually speak 'guy' all that well, having only a few real male friends in this world, let alone his last.

While the two men were having their moment, Mira turned to say farewell to the others, nodding at Ranma, then looking challengingly at Jenny and Erza. "You better believe I'm going to be stronger when I get back. Don't sit on your laurels, or else I'll be the Queen of the Fairies soon, not you."

Erza rolled her eyes. "Indeed. IN that case, I will hand over all of the responsibilities that come with being the strongest woman in the Guild cheerfully. Do you want that as well?"

"Not a bit of it," Mira laughed, turning aside. The two Strauss siblings made their last farewells, and then left the group to head to the train station, with Lisa and Anna shouting out farewells.

The group heading further north to the border with Seven continued on their way. Still on foot, the trip took four days. There, they found a large city built on the border with Seven, fed by commerce going both ways. It was built on a small river, and home to a large train station, trains going every which way.

Jenny and Juvia were extremely grateful for that, and shouted out, "Yes!" Juvia went on, "Juvia's feet are not used to all of this walking. She would very much prefer to take a train from now on."

Despite having agreed to it before, all of the Dragon Slayers shook their heads at that. "No chance!" Natsu growled, electing himself spokesperson. "I am so not going to go on one of those death traps if I have any choice!"

"You've got that Dragon Weed stuff," Jenny answered, shrugging her shoulders.

"And," Juvia added, "taking a train is simply faster. As we said before, the only one here who can travel faster than a train is Ranma. Juvia certainly could not, unless we simply took to the waterways, which would in turn take us well out of our way. Unless you want to take a lot more time to get to anywhere interesting, trains are a must. Besides which, you all agreed to this anyway."

There was still some grumbling from all three of the Dragon Slayers, with Ranma even attempting to turn into his female form and use the powerful technique, the Female Pout. But against other women, this failed, as Ranma should have known it would. Even Juvia, who was the weakest of them to feminine persuasion, refused to give up.

"Face facts guys. The train will save us weeks, especially when we get into Iceberg and Stella. Those nations are pretty bad countries, right?"

Ranma frowned, muttering, "How dare you use logic against me," giving her pout extra power.

Seeing this wasn't working still, Ranma sighed heating up some water, and pouring it over her head. Wringing out his hair, Ranma nodded. "Iceberg's escarpment kind of shatters along the edges of Stella and Seven, creating lots of valleys and a lot of farmland. If we want to hit that village I'd heard about with the sacred fire, we will be heading from the more urban areas and deep into the rural countryside of Stella, which is pretty bad going, lots of hills and mountains. Not nearly as bad as Joya, but still rough country."

With a final sigh, Ranma shook his head. "Let's go get you ladies some horses. Buying them here is a better idea than Seven or Iceberg, and we can find better magical saddles here."

"Traitor," Natsu muttered, while Gajeel sighed in resignation.

"Realist," Ranma disagreed, shaking his head. "Besides, just because we're taking the train doesn't mean we'll have to be on it all day. We can all leap off of the train and run alongside for a bit."

Both of the other dragons looked at Ranma, shaking their heads. "You might be able to, not us," Gajeel answered bluntly.

Ranma shrugged, acknowledging that point but not seeing any reason to continue this argument. *It's times like this that I miss Wendy for more than just her companionship*, he thought to himself with a chuckle, before looking around at the others. "Gajeel, Natsu, you two can do whatever you want. We'll spend the night here," he said, gesturing up to the sky, which was blushing with the coming of eventide, and then back to Erza. "Especially considering that this is where Anna Lisanna and Erza are turning back."

The ladies nodded, all of them somewhat subdued. Ranma looked over the other two, but Juvia shook her head firmly, and after a second's hesitation, Jenny joined her. "Juvia thinks that you and Erza should spend the night together on your own. Juvia and Jenny will have you all to themselves soon enough."

Ranma looked over at Erza smiling brightly as he bowed holding out his hand towards her. "In that case, my lady, might I have the honor of your company tonight?"

"You may, good sir," Erza answered with a smile, putting her hand on his. But before he could lift her hand up to his lips, Erza pulled his hand up to her own lips.

Ranma blushed at that, then laughed at how it had been turned on him, before asking, "What do you think we should do?"

"I believe that we should split up our duties for this date. If you would perhaps make some food for the two of us, I'm not in the mood for a restaurant style date, and find a place to have it, I will find us a hotel room. I believe that will allow our companions to use our tent."

"We'll find a room for ourselves too," Anna and Lisanna said as one, then laughed at the moment of twin speak. Natsu blushed at the implications, despite what they had done before leaving Magnolia, sleeping together with his girlfriends was still something he wasn't used to even thinking about, let alone doing.

"But we'll find a different hotel than you Gajeel. We're um, kind of sorry that this whole trip has made you the odd man out."

Gajeel shrugged. "Meh, I don't really care about that. I try not to even think what you lucky assholes are getting up to and most of the time you're all pretty good about keeping the kisses and hugs to yourselves. For now though..." He looked over at Natsu. "So, you want to find a place to throw down for a bit?"

"Heck yes!" Natsu shouted, grabbing Gajeel's arm. "Let's go!"

Lisa giggled. "Why do you think that Natsu was so eager to fight? More than normal, I mean."

"No idea. Maybe Natsu just wanted to prove that he's a big bad Dragon Slayer, instead of a henpecked boyfriend before tonight? But it doesn't matter what he feels like, we both know what he is. Right~" Anna giggled, causing Lisanna to laugh in turn as they walked off arm in arm.

"So," Jenny said looking over at Juvia as the two of them walked around, "What do you think we should do?"

"Let's find some food and maybe go see a play." There wasn't a theater so much as a small area where local players get together and put on small shows, but Jenny had been here before and had enjoyed it. Juvia nodded thoughtfully at that, although Juvia was still looking back longingly at Erza and Ranma as the two of them also split off.

That night, Ranma and Erza met up at the tallest building in the city. This was an observatory built around a massive telescope. In fact, the various lenses composed the largest creation of glass that Ranma had seen in this world.

Ranma always had a fondness for tall buildings and views like this, and Erza enjoyed stargazing as well. On those nights when she was on the move away from towns or other build up areas, anyway. Then she could see the stars, the tiny pinpricks of white light fascinating her with the myriad shapes they could occasionally be seen to have formed into.

Here that was surprisingly easy, despite been the center of the city, none of the reflected light from the rest of the city were able to impact the view from up here. There was some kind of lacrima-created circle around the building, keeping those glares away. They were subtle, but Ranma had seen them on the way in.

"Are we actually allowed to be up here?" Erza asked, looking around the top of the roof, then down at the picnic blanket that Ranma had pulled out of his Requip Space along with the food. There were even a few small pillows, although Erza recognized those as coming from Ranma's tent.

In answer to Erza's question, Ranma simply shrugged his shoulders. "They run tourist groups up here during the day, we're out of sight, and none of the mages or scientists should notice us up here."

"So not quite legal, but it's more because most don't even think getting up here is possible and being up here despite that would get us in trouble," Erza translated, chuckling slightly. "Why does this not surprise me?"

Ranma shrugged once more as he started to lay out their food, which, despite it having taken them five minutes to get up here unseen, was still warm thanks to Ranma's use of Requip Magic instead of ki space. "Because I think restrictions like that are stupid. I'm not up here to hurt anyone, I'm not up here to do anything but enjoy the view and your company."

"Hmm... well this is an amazing view," Erza answered, setting aside her concerns about the legalities of this. The fact that Ranma had set this up for the two of them was more important to her right now. *And Ranma is right, we're not up here to hurt anything*, she thought, somewhat weakly, her normal rule-abiding personality at war with her inner romantic.

"Did, um, did you find a hotel for us?" Ranma asked, flushing a little. For some reason the planning that act showed made him a little embarrassed. It just seemed a bit different than going back to their own tents or apartment, he had no idea why.

Erza on the other hand nodded firmly. To her, it was simply a logical progression. Besides, the place she found had some interesting choices. "I did. And what did you decide to cook for us?"

"In my world, it was called General's Tso's chicken. I also have some fried rice with my own recipe," Ranma answered. "Simple fare, but we've had big, formal dinners before, and besides, I've discovered that company is the best spice."

Erza smiled prettily at that, leaning over to give a short kiss, before sitting down next to him on one of the small cushions. The two of them spent the rest of the evening talking, staring up at the stars, their arms around one another's waists as they leaned back against the side of the telescope, with Ranma taking a few moments to feed Erza and vice versa.

The crimson-haired woman spoke more often of her responsibilities to the Guild, why she was so big on maintaining order and following the rules, how the big sister mentality that she'd had with the other slaves had evolved into trying to be the big sister for the entire Guild. "Despite the fact that a lot of the Guild members at the time I joined were older than me. I knew even then that I was stronger than most."

In return, Ranma opened up more about his past life, speaking about some of the other people in it that he hadn't already rather than his rivals or the specific fights he had been in. and not the girls who had been after his hand, or bound to him by his father's words. He'd spoken about them a lot before. Now instead he talked more, about his few real allies. Kasumi and Dr. Tofu figured prominently, as did Cologne. "Although I still couldn't tell you if she actually liked me, or was helping me for her own amusement."

"But there was no child you practiced on for Wendy? I know you made up those rules of Big Brothering, and they worked very well. It's just surprising to me how you were willing and, moreover, able to take on the responsibility of looking after Wendy when she was so young when you two met."

Ranma shrugged. "Nope, no other kids. The closest would've been Miss Hinako, and she really wasn't a kid. She was an adult stuck in a kid's body."

"What?"

That led into an entirely different discussion. Erza became rather amused and horrified at the idea of someone being able to use magic to suck the magic away from other people in order to retain their real age. "Was that some kind of disease?"

"No, actually it was a cure for a disease. She was diagnosed with some rarer heart disease when she was young. But she would've died at a very young age if not for Happy."

"Your perverted Grand Master?" Erza drawled, rubbing her head against his for a moment.

Ranma returned the gesture. "I never acknowledged him as my master. Although that didn't stop me from learning from him."

"I'm not certain I want to know what you learned from him." Erza gave Ranma a mock-disapproving look.

"Oh, it's been helpful a time or two," Ranma snickered. Lifting his arm from around her waist, Ranma's hand flickered. A second later, Erza suddenly felt that she wasn't wearing as much up top as she should have been.

Pulling away from Ranma to stare at him in shock, Erza saw that his other hand now held her bra, which he had somehow removed from under her clothing. Ranma smirked back at her cheekily, waggling his eyebrows. "See what I mean?"

Erza laughed, shaking her head, then she leaned forward, kissing him.

The kiss and Ranma's little joke signaled a segue in their discussion. Gone was talk about the past. Now they started to talk about the future, what Erza was going to do while Ranma was gone, what training she wanted to do, and more importantly, what armor she wanted to add into her repertoires, interspersing this conversation with kisses.

"I think I'm going to work almost exclusively with Belserion. That blade will give me an offensive punch that I can use against Acnologia. But I still will need armor, something that can do a lot of different jobs. I think before this I relied too much on being able to tailor my armors to different fights. Against someone like Acnologia, it's necessary to have something as more of a jack of all trades," Erza said, pulling back and humming thoughtfully as she spoke. "Something that gives me both the most defensive properties I can get while not restricting my movement. And one which can also fly as well is a necessity. But finding one armor that can do that is going to be hard, to say the least."

“Or work on your Requip speed more. You’re already very good at that, you don’t even need all the sparkly light show glowing bits to summon up your weapons most the time, but you could get better at full armor changes,” Ranma suggested, breathing in deeply, his chest heaving.

“True. It’s a thought. Beyond that...” Erza began, only to be interrupted by a kiss.

As always with Erza and Ranma, these interruptions soon turned primal. At first, Erza took the initiative, pushing Ranma back against the side of the giant telescope. In turn Ranma pulled Erza’s arms from around him, then twisted around. Still kissing her, Ranma pushed Erza’s hands up above her head. There he started to slowly grind his hips against hers, causing a thumping sound to echo from the telescope as their tongues dueled in Ranma’s mouth, Erza having taken control of the kiss, while Ranma was busy moving the two of them around.

Unfortunately, while Ranma had told the truth that most of the workers here were off for the night, that didn’t mean the observatory was entirely empty. After only a few moments of making out, the two of them were interrupted by a voice from below shouting out “What the hell is going on up there, what’s moving the telescope?”

“More importantly, what’s causing that thumping noise?” another voice opined, sounding more querulous than angry.

Pulling back from Erza, Ranma leaned over the side of the observatory’s top, staring down past its curvature to the two people who had just come outside. One of them was dressed in a white lab coat, the other in a sky-blue robe with white stars on it. Both of them were looking up at the top of the observatory, scowling.

Pulling back, Ranma turned to look at Erza, but she had already started to clean up their impromptu picnic, smiling at him sheepishly. “I take it is time we left?”

“Time we left,” Ranma agreed with a nod, pointing over her shoulder to the back of the observatory. “That way, I think.”

The two of them left as the magic user was about to use a spell to launch himself up into the air, and the last thing Ranma saw before hiding among the town’s rooftops was the man shouting something down at his fellow, gesticulating angrily at the side of the telescope.

“We, er, didn’t dent it, did we?” Erza mumbled, chagrin filling her and the feeling of having broken the law making her feel extremely guilty.

Ranma shook his head firmly. “No, but I think we did move it a bit out of alignment.” Then his lips quirked. “Heh, you could say that the stars moved for us, right?”

With an eyeroll, Erza shook her head, her humor returning to her despite the horrible joke. "Nice try, but I feel poor word choice."

Ranma shrugged. "Meh, it was a stretch." The two of them looked at one another, then Ranma asked sheepishly "Er, so, uh where is this hotel you booked for the night?"

At that reminder, Erza's eyes lit up, and she took Ranma's hand in hers, bounding away over the rooftops.

Soon they were on a street with several hotels on it, and Erza absentmindedly gestured to one, saying that that was the place that Gajeel Juvia and Jenny were staying at. "This is ours," she added, leading the way into another hotel. At the front desk, she gave her name, and said, "I believe we requested a... specific type of suite?"

The man nodded, looking through his book for a moment, then his eyes widened, he gulped in shock, and he looked back up at her. "Er, y, you did, madame, but, um are you certain that is the suite that you requested?"

At that Ranma's eyes narrowed, and he began to get the idea that Erza was being a little adventuresome again. *Well, I suppose I enjoyed it the other night back in Magnolia, so that is okay, I guess.*

Yet even with that heads up, Ranma was still surprised by what their suite consisted of. Because it was a bondage room. There was a rack, some kind of wooden triangle thing, a X-shaped wrack, a wall of toys, and a heart-shaped bed. "This is a bit much, Erza," Ranma muttered.

"Oh, I don't expect us to try everything," Erza said quickly, taking his arm and hers and pulling him lightly into the room. "I just thought that... well, some of these things looked interesting." She paused then, her eyes locked the far wall where all of the toys and tools as it were wooden lined up, frowning a bit at the whip. "Although I think a whip is a bit too far. They are a combat weapon, not a BDSM aid. And... is that a brand?"

Erza shivered, staring at it and the small brazier set to one side, freeing in place for a moment as she remembered how she had lost her eye. Most days she didn't even remember one of her eyes was artificial, but that small brazier looked almost exactly like the one used to heat the poker that had taken her eye. Intellectually Erza knew that it was there for roleplaying purposes, that the brand was probably a magical one, with only a bit of heat to it and nothing more, but even so, the memory was a bit too strong.

"Well, I don't like playing with fire, so that's out." With that Ranma strode forward and picked up the magical brand of some kind. Ranma didn't know how it worked and didn't care to contemplate, instead he tossed it into a corner, followed by the brazier. Which, outside of having rubber coal inside it instead of real, looked all too real. This was followed by a series of

candles, tossing them into the corner after the whip. A mask, I don't see the point of that...either."

He paused then, staring at something that said 'massager' on the side. It looked like a large hilt but ended at dozen tentacles. *Massager my ass, Jenny! UGH. I know you're kinky and love you Jenny, but geez.*

Ranma's attitude towards the toys and his tone tore Erza from her momentary lapse into horrible memory, and she moving after him, hugging him from behind until Ranma turned in her arms, hugging her back. "Sorry about that," she murmured. "I don't normally have flashbacks like that, but the brazier and the brand... that was startling."

"You don't have that to explain to me," Ranma growled angrily. "Just remember that those bastards, and even the tower they tried to build are destroyed now, six hundred phantoms under the ocean. Or whatever it was around there."

She chuckled at that, remembering how Ranma had dealt with the island in question, the giant fanged maw coming out of the ocean and tearing the island down into the depths.

Now with her balance restored, Erza moved away from him to pick up one of the paddles, smacking it against her hand thoughtfully a wicked smile on her face. "This on the other hand, I think we can have some fun with."

Ranma nodded. They'd used something similar before, if somewhat smaller and less, well, intimidating. Erza's paddle that she had used both on Tenrou and in the apartment in Magnolia was pink and white. This one looked matte black and had holes on it which whistled as Erza waved it through the air.

She then picked up a few of the other toys, a sash of silk, and some nipple clamps, then looked over at the triangle thoughtfully. "Perhaps later," she murmured, then looked back at Ranma, frowning a little, her gaze going over to the X-shaped stand. "With what happened with the whip, I don't think I should... that is..."

Waving that off Ranma moved over to the X-shaped thing, then clamped one arm in place thoughtfully. He then flexed, stopping only when the metal began to groan and bend. "Heh, yeah, if we use this kind of thing on me, it'll be mostly imaginative than actually up to keeping me chained down. You realize that right?" There was too much give in the chains even at their tightest and Ranma could easily tear himself out of them.

Erza laughed at that, and then, as Ranma turned away to pull his arm out, whacked Ranma hard on the rear with the paddle.

“Yow!” Ranma yelled, more out of surprise than anything else. As the hit registered though, he became thankful that Erza’s general ability to get through his durability for some reason with her punches hadn’t extended to being able to hurt him with that thing.

“Strip, dog,” Erza ordered happily.

Ranma growled a bit, but obeyed. Tonight was about Erza after all, and they did have to both be naked to do it, and he was happy to see Erza quickly recovering from the earlier moment. Using his Martial Arts Clothing change technique, he was soon naked, while Erza too stripped down to her underwear, a pair of black panties and stockings, causing Little Ranma to stand at attention. The two of them lost themselves in kissing for a time, oddly gentle in comparison to most of their make-out sessions. Then Ranma’s back smacked against the x-shaped thing in the center of the room.

Pulling back, Ranma held up her hands which glowed for a moment, then she was suddenly holding silk scarves, which she had pulled out from her Requip Space. She removing the clamps from the X-shaped wall, gesturing lightly to Ranma with the silk scarves. The hopeful, inquisitive look on Erza’s face convinced Ranma, and he nodded, stepping up into the thing. The two of them kissed and nuzzled and touched anything either of them could reach, which slowed up the proceedings, but soon Ranma’s legs were tied up by the silk scarves, followed by one of his arms.

At that point, Erza pulled away, her panties drenched, her juices running out of them and down the inside of her legs. The tender touches coupled with the fact Ranma was letting her lead, letting her tie him up like this, was pushing her buttons like a jackhammer.

“The safety word,” she whispered as she tied Ranma’s final arm into place with the silk. “is Watermelon.”

Ranma was still laughing at that as Erza leaned into kissing him once more, her hand going down to his shaft...

OOOOOO

With a sigh, Gildarts moved up the pathway leading towards a large mansion well away from the train station he had taken. He really, really didn’t want to do this, but there was no one else who could help Gildarts get the training and experience against Dragon Slayer magic. *Much as I don’t like the asshole, God Serena really does have the chops to back up his ego.*

Reaching the mansion’s front door, Gildarts knocked and waited. A moment later, a man dressed in a butler’s outfit. He seemed to sneer down his nose at Gildarts, an odd feat considering the difference in their height. “The master is not expecting anyone,” the man intoned firmly, “especially not someone... like yourself.” The man now really did sneer, glancing up and down Gildarts’ outfit.

“Really? Because I did send a messenger pigeon ahead, telling him I’d be coming over today. Now, I have had a long trek, and I’m really not in the mood for any of his normal shit. So why don’t you let me in, okay neighbor?” Gildarts intoned, keeping his voice mild.

The man’s eyes narrowed. “I’m afraid that without orders to the contrary, we do not give out handouts, let alone allow common riffraff to meet...”

Before he could finish the sentence, the man was then blown backward. Gildarts had lightly gestured with one finger, summoning up a portion of his Crash Magic. The front door and the walls to either side shattered into tiny cubes, which were then flung on to the man. They weren’t flung too fast, but they still battered the man aside. “Nevermind, I’ll just announce myself.” Gildarts had little to no patience with bootlickers, no matter whose boot they were currently looking.

He moved through the mansion, smiling cheerfully and getting a little more upbeat about this entire thing as he took the trio of scantily clad, extremely pretty girls acting like maids in his view. They weren’t as pretty, as say Mira or Jenny but they were up there anyway. “Don’t mind me ladies, just an old acquaintance stopping by to say hi. You wouldn’t happen to know where GS, er, that is God Serena is, would you?”

It turned out the maids did, and none of them were fans of the unconscious man. Two of them started to kick him while he was down, while the third gave Gildarts direction through the mansion and out to the pool in the back yard. There, several more young ladies were lounging around, peeling grapes or making drinks while in the center of the pool on a float God Serena laid out. He wasn’t wearing his normal attire, instead he wore a baggy pair of swim shorts, sunglasses and a tan.

The moment Gildarts stepped outside, all the women there looked at him, then back to the lounging man who was on a little slowly in the center of the. “Hey GS, I love what you’ve done with the place. But we need to have a serious talk.”

“And I thought my Butler was being quite specific. God Serena is not in the mood to talk to you Gildarts. If this is about some kind of serious issue, as you put it, you can deal with it on your own. Or if you’re too weak, God Serena believes that you can look to one of the other Wizard Saints without involving God Serena.”

“Ah, but none of the other wizard saints are Dragon Slayers, no matter how artificial you are, GS,” Gildarts taunted.

That was one way to get a rise out of God Serena, as well as the use of the word GS, rather than his full name. Mentioning the fact that God Serena got his magic from the number of lacrima crystals embedded into his body.

The two powerful mages had met before and had never gotten along and that dislike for one another had continued with every random interaction. Gildarts believed God Serena was an arrogant prick, whose claim to fame was not natural talent, but something that had been installed in him by other people, which he thought was a piss poor reason for pride. God Serena, in turn, believed that Gildarts was, a large buffoon who tried to take some of the limelight away from where it belonged and who dressed like a hobo. There was a little bit of respect between them but not a lot.

God Serena glared at him. "Hmmpf, I suppose rumors of your strength were exaggerated then Gildarts Clive, as well as your common sense. Only a moron would have had some kind of trouble elsewhere, and then come here and taunt God Serena. If you want to commit suicide, go do it on your own time."

Gildarts smirked wintrily. "Funny thing, because the reason why I'm here, is because I'm sort of dying in installments, with Acnologia being the one to claim the payments."

At that name, both of God Serena's eyes opened and he looked at Gildarts. "You come here to speak about him? God Serena believes that you really are losing your mind, Gildarts. How, or perhaps why, would Acnologia care a whit about such as you?"

"I know you're arrogant God Serena, you don't have to prove you're stupid too." With that, Gildarts removed his cloak, revealing his metal arm and leg, which he proceeded to tap down on the ground, releasing a pulse of Crash Magic which shattered the ground in front of him in a straight towards God Serena. The most powerful Wizard Saint quickly used his own magic to block the incoming attack, swallowing it up with a Sea King Dragon Slayer's attack.

He leaped up off of the float, landing nearby, glaring angrily at Gildarts, before taking in his appearance at last. Slowly, he became more serious. Straightening up from the combat crouched and glaring at Gildarts. "It does look as if you got into a bit of a scrap. But I say again, why would Acnologia go after you?"

"He didn't. The first time, which cost me my arm and leg, we sort of accidentally ran into one another. I took the 100 Year Quest, and Acnologia seemed to take an instant dislike for me being in his territory. But then, Acnologia appeared again,..."

From there, Gildarts explained the fight against Acnologia which had occurred on Tenrou Island. The other man listened intently, his normal attitude set to the side for a moment. "Alright, God Serena understands that Acnologia is no myth. And might even be hunting Dragon Slayers. So, you're here to what, warn God Serena?"

"No. I'm here to say we should start training together. Full on serious-type spars. You, me, and Laxus, the new Guild Master. Two Dragon Slayers and my Crash magic. Between us, one of us should be able to get strong enough to kill that black-hearted fucker."

“And what makes you think God Serena would need your help with that!” God Serena scoffed.

“Heh, well, let’s find out, yeah? After all, Acnologia beat me easy. If you can’t do the same, maybe there’s room for improvement, hmm?” Gildarts taunted.

God Serena rolled his eyes. “Fine, but let’s not fight here. God Serena has no wish for his mansion to be damaged. Oh, and the women too.”

Following the other mage away from the mansion and out into a nearby bit of woodland, Gildarts was pleased with how this meeting had gone. *I’ve got his attention now, I just need to keep it pointed in the right direction and maybe me and Laxus will have found a sparring partner worthy of the name.*

OOOOOOO

The next morning, Ranma woke up before Erza, the redhead sleeping the sleep of the utterly exhausted splayed out next to him on the heart-shaped bed. He looked down at her smiling slightly as he moved a bit of her hair, which was still stiff with the sweat of their exertions last night, staring down at her face. At the face of a girl who he had come to love.

Shifting his gaze from Erza’s face down her body, Ranma winced seeing the welts here and there on her body from last night. Her rear too was still extremely red from where Ranma had paddled it. Indeed, Ranma’s own rear and wrists weren’t sore as well was thanks to his own ki-healing ability. Erza had discovered that she was both into spanking, and being spanked, and Ranma had cheerfully gone along with that one, the sensation... unusual but not unwelcome.

Beyond that, Ranma hadn’t been into a lot of what they’d tried, but that was fair, since Erza also hadn’t been. The nipple clamps were just the start of their false starts, not having done anything to him, and not having been of interest to Erza. There had also been a weird thing designed to bring electricity into it, and after trying it out on their fingers neither lover could understand why the hell it was even there. Candles too. Pouring burnt wax on someone was supposed to hurt but it didn’t do anything to either of them and the feeling of this strange lube the room had was beyond bizarre. Anal beads too, while something Erza recognized, was not something either felt comfortable with.

But oddly, one aspect he had discovered was kind of interesting was having Erza tie him down, so he couldn’t move. It made Ranma felt a little off-balance, which in turn heightened the experience somehow. Ranma wasn’t certain why, but suspected it was because it was a sign of trust.

Ranma had trusted Erza to know what he would and would not like, had trusted her with some measure of power over him. It had left Ranma in a vulnerable position, one he would normally never be caught dead in, but Erza had, while taking advantage of it, hadn’t

pushed beyond what Ranma was comfortable with, showing that his trust had not been misplaced. And then Erza had done the same with him.

Although, I am damn glad Erza knows herself enough to know she wouldn't be comfortable like that. The way she flinched when we saw the brazier was a sign, and she didn't like it when I used the iron manacles on her either. Silk was fine for Erza and me both though so. I think I'm right about why we both liked it. It felt oddly interesting too, instead of making our lovemaking almost a fight, into something more about trust and letting the other person have control.

By the time his gaze had returned to her face, Erza's own eyes were open, staring up at him in turn. Reaching up with one hand she took Ranma's hand in her own, wrapping her fingers around his, smiling up at him blearily. "Well, last night was interesting" she said, mirroring Ranma's own thoughts. "Some of those things I enjoyed. Others not so much," she mock scowled. "Those nipple clamps were utterly useless. And I had such high hopes for them too."

Laughing at that, Ranma looked over at the clock on one wall, then sighed. "Come on, love, it's nearly time to check out, and I have... a... train... to... catch..." he shuddered. "On second thought, let's stay here, I think we could come up with something to do for a few hours surely," Ranma's voice trailed off into a throaty murmur as he moved to hover over her.

Erza smiled languidly, reached up and pulled him down into a toe-curling kiss, causing Ranma to moan into her mouth. But then, she flipped them so that she was on top, before rolling out of bed, standing up on slightly uncertain legs before moving towards the suites shower. Which, she was amused to note, had both a normal area and an area which was set up in such a way as to let someone wash a dog. "Get your lazy carcass up," she called over her shoulder, her words deliberately crude. "If I can move after having your cock stuck in me for most of the night, you can certainly come and wash my hair for me."

Grumbling, Ranma moved after her. "You know, I was already going to offer to help you do your hair but now I'm not certain you deserve it. You could at least sympathize with me about my movement sickness."

"I suppose that was a little callous of me," Erza sighed, shivering in delight as, despite his words, Ranma's fingers began to work their way through her hair, the shower's heated water helping matters immensely. "The aversion you and the other Dragon Slayers have to moving vehicles is just so bizarre. Do you have any idea why that is?"

"No. If I had any idea what was causing it, I might be able to solve it, beyond Dragon Weed, anyway," Ranma answered.

Chuckling at that, Erza gave him another kiss, then pulling Ranma into the water, moving behind him. She then leaned forward, brushing her breasts against his back as her arms went around him. "Now, let's get you clean, Ranma..."

Despite their being very handsy with one another, the time in the shower did not segue into another 'wrestling' session, and soon they were checking out of the hotel, meeting up in the lobby with Natsu, Anna and Lisa. Moving across the street to another hotel, where Ranma had paid for Gajeel to stay, The Iron Dragon Slayer not wanting to be even in the same building as the other Dragon Slayers got laid while he didn't.

Jenny and Juvia, who stayed in the same hotel, were the last to arrive, coming down from their room, with Jenny looking a little bleary-eyed. And Ranma noticed a few men loitering around the foyer looking at the two lovely girls with both awe and regret. "Do I want to know?" Ranma asked, gesturing to Jenny then around at the people looking their way.

"Bah, they're just annoyed that their efforts to chat us up or get us drunk last night didn't work. Because it turns out, that Juvia is a cheat and a liar," Jenny grumbled, poking Juvia in the cheek with an annoyed finger.

The bluenette huffed in indignation, though her gaze was tender as she looked at the blonde next to her, then back to Ranma, smiling brightly as he gave Juvia a slightly possessive hug, glaring down the men looking their way even as she replied to Jenny's words. "Juvia did not cheat. Juvia merely could not inform Jenny of all the facts."

"What do you mean?" Erza asked.

"Last night we started a drinking contest for, shall we say... certain favors." The glance Jenny sent Ranma's way even as Erza pulled her into a sideways hug gave the redhead enough of a clue as to what kind of favors they were talking about, though Ranma didn't seem to spot it. "But while I kept on getting drunker and drunker, this girl didn't look as if she was feeling it and it turns out that she was cheating!"

"I prefer to call it strategizing," Jenny demurred. But when Ranma and Erza looked at her question, she shrugged her shoulders. "Juvia can metabolize liquids fast, or stop them from metabolizing, then pass them through Juvia's body unseen." As they watched, half of her body, the portion away from Ranma's warmth, shifted into water. "Drip, drip into another glass on the floor under the booth went the alcohol."

"So, she wasn't getting drunk because the alcohol wasn't even touching her system! How is that not cheating? Especially with the fact she set up another glass to catch the alcohol after she pretended to drink it!?" Jenny exclaimed.

"Did you say no magic allowed?"

“No, but I thought that was...”

“Then there’s no foul,” Ranma overrode Jenny. “Although I will say that because Juvia didn’t warn you she was doing so, she should forfeit a third of her winnings.”

“I find this fair and just,” Erza agreed with a nod. When asked their opinion, Lisa, Anna and Natsu all agreed, though Natsu added, “But I still don’t know why people like getting drunk so much. Drinking’s okay I guess, some of those fruity cocktail things taste kind of cool, and I like hard cider, tastes of apples. But getting drunk? That I don’t get. No matter how many times Cana’s demonstrated it in front of me, it just doesn’t look like fun.”

The rest of them laughed at that, while Juvia decided, “Most of the things we were betting on weren’t money and certainly couldn’t be exchanged for such. But Juvia agrees with this ruling.”

The group made their way joking and laughing with one another, even Gajeel, to the town’s train station.

Soon, it was time for Erza, Anna and Lisa to leave. While Anna and Lisa were getting teary-eyed and clinging to Natsu, Erza was trying to keep a stiff upper lip. But it was obvious to Ranma that she was still annoyed about how her responsibilities forced her to return to Fairy Tail, particularly when Jenny and Juvia were going with him.

So Ranma did what he thought was the only thing he could do right now. He pulled her into a hug, then leaning in to give her a kiss on the lips, which quickly deepened into the same kind of toe-curling, moan inducing kiss that Erza had used earlier. After a few minutes he pulled back licking at her tongue as it continued to quest after Ranma’s, ignoring the flushed faces of the people on the train and the annoyed face of Gajeel.

The Iron Dragon Slayer and Happy stood to one side, looking away, although the Exceed was snickering behind his paws, shaking his head in amusement at the sight of Lisa and Anna, exchanging kisses with Natsu.

Once they both got their breath back, Ranma said firmly, “We’ll come back, Love. I promise. We’ll even try to keep in touch, though that’s much less certain,” he added with a dry chuckle. “But we will be back, you can take that to the bank.”

“And I will help Seilah and the others watch over Wendy, while also getting stronger myself. Hopefully she hasn’t gotten your trouble attracting,” Jean hissed, “through being near you. But if she has, maybe I’ll get her some armor of her own. We will both be waiting for you to return.”

“Oh, she’ll love that,” Ranma laughed. “Just so long as she can put flowers or ladybugs on it, make it look girly enough anyway. Just don’t let her convince you to, ahem, pad it up top, yeah?”

Erza laughed, and the two of them looked into one another’s eyes for a moment, then shared a last, chaste kiss, before Ranma turning away, and boarded the train. Erza, Lisa and Anna were able to watch through the windows as the group of four found their place in a small cubicle. And even though it was still at the moment, they could see that the three Dragon Slayers were looking a little green as they sat down, which caused Erza to laugh and the twins to murmur distress for their boyfriend.

For his part, Ranma pouted at the redhead, then held up a hand, giving her a thumbs up, while his other hand automatically reached into his Requip space for his Dragon Weed.

She held up a hand to him, and then continued to watch as the train slowly began to pull out of the station. Anna and Lisa moved up to either side of her, with Anna leaning against her, throwing an arm around her shoulders, while Lisa took her hand, squeezing. “They’ll be back.”

“Yes. Ranma promised he would. And,” her eyes suddenly narrowed as she looked down at the twins, “I understand that the two of you had a little bit of a plot to give Natsu some added incentive to return?”

The twins had the grace to look to blush a little, looking away from her, but Anna, the more outgoing of the two even now, nodded. “We did. By the time we get back to Magnolia, we should know if, um... well...”

Erza shook her head, wondering idly if she was struck more by their courage, or their silliness, before shaking her head and gesturing. “Come on, this isn’t the time for maudlin thoughts. We need to get back and get to work with the guild.”

OOOOOO

As the train wound its way along a path leading deeper into Seven, the Dragon Slayers were not happy, to put it mildly. Despite the Dragon Weed calming them down and allowing them to slowly slip into a semi-awake state, being on a moving vehicle was never going to be fun trip for any of them. The fact that they were also going to go through most of Ranma’s stored supply, which he had taken out in total from a Bank of Fiore branch they’d seen in the town where Mira and Elfman had left them, also annoyed Ranma. Getting more anywhere on their trek was going to be very difficult, and as much as he was concentrating on not being sick, Ranma couldn’t think up a plan to get more unless they stumbled on an apothecary, which sold some.

When they arrived in the capital of Seven, where they would have to change trains, Jenny and Juvia helped the Dragon Slayer's up out of their chairs and off the train. Once off the train, the two ladies stepped back as the Dragon Slayers, in a moment of strange choreography, fell to their knees, raised their hands to the heavens, and shouted out "Freedom! Solid ground!" with one voice.

"That was freaky," Jenny admitted, "still, you three got through the first leg like troopers."

"Ugh, don't remind me," Natsu grumbled, stretching, cracking his back explosively.

Gajeel grunted agreement and looked as if he was about to either keel over or kiss the ground in supplication, it was hard to tell which.

Even Ranma agreed with that sentiment. His plan to hop out and run alongside the train hadn't happened. Almost as soon as he had inhaled some of the Dragon Weed, Ranma had started to slip into a semi-meditative state. After that, he just couldn't get enough energy to do it. *Then again, this leg was only ten hours. The next leg is going to be two days.*

Shaking himself out of those thoughts, Ranma turned to the young Dragon Slayers. "Natsu, Gajeel, remember, this is Seven, not Fiore. Most of the mages around here are the research, not combat type. So they probably won't want to fight you Natsu. We also need to buy tents, and some camp supplies."

"Hell yes. I want a tent like yours," Gajeel answered firmly.

"Meh, I don't want something like that, but a new bedroll would be nice. I prefer to sleep under the stars."

"You won't if we get torrential rains or snow," Ranma warned. "And besides, there are tents which can be enchanted to let you see through the tent anyway. I thought about getting one like that when Wendy and I were moving through territory known to have a lot of dangerous animals, but Wendy didn't like it." He shrugged his shoulders as if to say that had been that, and to Ranma it had been. "Beyond that, we might want to buy supplies too. Seven's good for that kind of thing. Although Gajeel, there's is something here for you specifically ..."

Ranma paused, trying to orient himself and failing. "Darn it, last time I was here, I didn't come through the trains." He looked around, then shrugged, and from a standing start leaped up four stories, landing on the rooftop of the train station. Ignoring some shouts of shock and consternation from the crowd moving all around the building, Ranma looked around thoughtfully.

He was joined quickly by Jenny, whose legs were now covered by what looked some kind of mechanical rabbit suit, covering her legs in armor. "What are we looking for?"

“There is a magic guild of metalworkers here. I can’t remember their name, but I know they’re supposed to have their headquarters here in Seventy-Seven.”

“Then let’s ask around like normal people would instead of standing up here like idiots, hmm...” Jenny teased, taking his hand in hers and tugging lightly on it to indicate they should get down from the roof.

Soon, this strategy eventually got them to where he wanted to be, the shopping district. Buying the tents for the two boys was easy. Ranma simply led the group into the tentmakers place, then gestured to one of the older designs on display, mentioning that it was the one that Ranma himself used.

“Do the inside of it have to be so girly?” Natsu grumbled, remembering what he had seen of the interior of Ranma’s tent before. “I mean, I know you had Wendy and Carla with you and turn into a girl yourself half the time, but I don’t, and the only two ladies here will be spending time in your tent, not mine or Gajeel’s.”

“Aye Sir. Although I am fully behind the idea of getting two tents. Gajeel snores like a saw on a log.”

“Oy you flying blue-furred bastard!” Gajeel growled, chasing the Exceed around for a bit, still annoyed that Panther Lily had decided to not come with them. He was still working on adding to his arsenal of magic weapons, and that meant taking real jobs for the guild. He also wanted to work with Carla on a few things, the two of them planning to exchange techniques and training.

Interrupting this, Ranma chuckled shaking his head. “You haven’t actually been in my tent since we left Magnolia. Most of the stuff you call girly was removed, since all of it was Wendy’s.”

Juvia pouted. She had quite liked a few of those soft, ‘girly’ touches.

“That girl has some good design instincts,” Jenny agreed, looking around the thoughtfully. “Should we get another tent do you think? A spare, I mean. I can pay for it.”

“It might be a good idea. And some extra sleeping bags, too. With Requip Space, we don’t need to watch the overall weight of our gear. Beyond that, a backpack for those of you without Requip, medical supplies, water canteens, knives, forks, that kind of thing.”

He looked around, then moved towards what looked like a set of cooking utensils and bowls. “This kind of thing is what I mean.”

The others looked at it and noted that the metals looked to have been worked with crushed lacrima, adding to their durability, as well as the heat that they could take.

“With what we’ve been talking about previously, I think I might want to eat some of those in the future,” Gajeel muttered, shaking his head.

“Good thought, so get your own set. I’ll carry it for you in my Requip space. But for now, that gives me an idea.” Ranma looked over to the nearest worker, and asking him where they bought these utensils. The man gave them directions to an entire street devoted to the Titan’s Arm Guild.

Ranma blinked at that, wondering what the heck was up with the whole Titan thing, which seemed to be an odd affectation of guilds in Seven. *Ego, maybe?*

“Hey Happy look at the fishing poles. And look at all the fancy bait,” Natsu exclaimed moving off quickly.

“Aye sir!”

Before the other boys could break off entirely to look at whatever grabbed their fancy, Ranma dragged the two of them back to the area with the tents, where they started to argue about which tents were better. A silly argument in Ranma’s opinion, since they weren’t being forced to share one tent between them, but he didn’t particularly care. “Just make certain that it is durable, and has enough room for you to sleep in comfortably. And a heat lacrima. Winters are no joke if you don’t prepare for them.”

Leaving the boys to argue about whether a traditional triangle-shaped tent was better than an igloo-shaped one like Ranma’s, Ranma moved deeper into the store, finding a few things for Jenny and Juvia. First was a nightlight that Juvia fell in love with. It looked as if it was a kind of tulip, which slowed slowly shifted colors and opened on command. Whereas Jenny found a sleeping bag lined with fur that she absolutely adored. When he saw her working her fingers through the fur, a faint blush on her features as she bit her bottom lip, Ranma had to get them. It was so automatic that he didn’t even think about it. Anything to put that look on her face whenever they went to bed.

Boots turned into the next difficulty. First, Jenny nearly got a pair with heels on, and had to be talked out of it, while Juvia only wanted on pair for winter, believing that horseback riding-type boots would be the only ones she needed. Ranma’s laugh at that, put a pout on her face that stayed there for some time. Then Natsu refused to get any, saying that he didn’t need them.

That was idiotic to Ranma’s mind, and Ranma decided that at that point, the guys could look after themselves. “You have money to get along with, and I presume you both have funds of your own.”

Gajeel snorted, shaking his head. “I don’t. I haven’t been on any S class jobs for a while. I’ve been training all over the winter, barely get getting enough to pay my rent.”

In sharp contrast to that, Natsu, nodded firmly shocking both other Dragon Slayers. "I've got enough." He then looked superiorly over at Gajeel. "And I suppose I could loan you some, you make it worth my time. I'm thinking a full kowtow and a 'thank you oh great Fire Dragon Natsu' will do."

"Bah, I'm thinking men could go mountain climbing on your ego if you think that will ever happen, Flame-brain," Gajeel growled, and the two Dragon Slayers butted heads.

Ranma however, grabbed them both by the shoulders, his hands emitting water, which quickly encircles their necks. "Boys, if you want to fight, take it outside. As in outside the city limits."

The two Dragon Slayers grumbled a bit but subsided, and Ranma told Natsu that he would pay him back for anything spent on Gajeel. But Ranma couldn't stop himself from asking "How do you have money anyway?" He had been just as surprised by that revelation as Gajeel.

"Hey! Why do you think I wouldn't? I go on a lot of jobs and get a lot of cash you know."

"Yes, but most of that cash goes to paying for the damages you do, Natsu," Happy said happily, coming over from where he had been examining a series of fishing poles. Dodging a swipe from Natsu, he landed on Ranma's shoulder. "But beyond that, we don't spend much money either. We eat a lot at the Guild, we don't get you know anything for the house or anything like that. So we always have a little bit every mission to set aside, despite Natsu being so destructive."

"That would be a lot more impressive if not for the whole paying for damages part," Ranma laughed, his opinion of Natsu once more restored to what it had been previously. "Whatever. Happy, I'm putting you in charge. Make sure they get boots, gloves and raincoats." Although all three Dragon Slayers could ignore cold weather, oddly enough, Natsu and Gajeel both reported they could still get sick if they spent too much time soaked in cold weather. "And don't go wild with fishing rods. One each, please. You guys know what to buy, you buy stuff that isn't necessary, we'll be returning stuff before we get on the train again."

All three Dragon Slayers looked as if they might well hurl at that point and Natsu and Gajeel joined forces to try and convince Ranma that was a bad idea. But Ranma knew the girls had been right, trains were just faster that was it. Although he did compromise and say that they wouldn't take trains once they reached Stella. After all, from there they would be looking for a specific village, in the back of beyond. Trains weren't going to help then.

With the boys looking after themselves for now, and Happy in charge, Ranma took the two girls out to get some clothing. Both of them did have some clothing that was good for hiking or horseback riding, but most of it was for summer and springtime weather. Their winter clothing was mostly more pretty than durable, and Ranma wanted them to have several sets that would last as well as their combat clothing.

However, looking for hiking-type clothing didn't mean that the two girls couldn't have fun.

Ranma honestly should've seen it coming when the two of them began to whisper to one another as they moved down the streets towards the clothing store, but the first indication Ranma had that the two girls were going to have fun with him, came when Jenny came out of the changing room for the first time. She wore a pair of hiking jeans that looked as if they had been painted on her perfect, svelte legs, and a button-down shirt that wouldn't have looked out of place on Bisca given her normal fashion sense. But Bisca wouldn't have very obviously left her bra off, or tucked up the shirt underneath her breasts, leaving her stomach bare.

"Well, what do you think?" she questioned coquettishly.

Then Juvia came out of the next changing room over wearing perhaps the best example of the shorts normally called Daisy Dukes back in his old dimension that Ranma had ever seen. Her legs, slightly thicker in the thigh than Jenny's, with a bit more to the rear, looked insanely hot in them. Whereas her shirt was her normal, semi-winter-ready blouse.

Gulping Ranma tried to force out the words, his tongue tied in his mouth so bad that he could barely make out the words, let alone tear his eyes away from the girls, his erection now somewhat obvious in his pants. "Y, you both look, a, amazing, I just well it doesn't, I mean jeans are okay, bu, but the shorts, not really I mean walk around them for long enough, you'll, er, chaff I think."

A small, but almost dirty smirk on her face, Juvia nodded judiciously. "Juvia supposes you are correct. That wouldn't be very fun."

"That's what underwear is for dear," Jenny giggled. "Put on some boys underwear underneath. Ranma has several dozen such, after all."

The bluenette nodded. "Ranma also has several pairs of shirts that Juvia rather likes. She likes wearing them."

"Why?" Jenny inquired, smirking as if she knew the answer, which she did.

"Because wearing his clothing marks Juvia as his," Juvia answered firmly.

She looked Ranma up and down, then asked if there were any silk shirts like the one Ranma was wearing in the store.

Normally, Ranma wore clothing that could be worn to good effect on his male or female body, but Juvia's body was just different enough from his own to accentuate the silk shirt even further than Ranma's own bust would have in his female body.

Whereas Jenny, preferred her own kind of clothing. She kept the jeans, and got several pairs of hiking pants to go with them, which were more utilitarian, but which still showed off her rear and thighs, which she was quite proud of. She wasn't as ripped as Erza was, but Jenny knew that she at least tied with the redhead when it came to her legs. She also kept the top that she first wore out in the changing room, before modeling a few more for Ranma, with Juvia joining in.

Ranma soon began to both dread and anticipate whenever Jenny came out of the changing room asking him, "What do you think?" the blonde's tone of voice sultry and seductive Jenny used to act like a lodestone for his eyes despite his best efforts to look away.

"Are you trying to kill me?" Ranma growled, twitching his eyes up towards the ceiling, as he quickly counted to ten. "Swear to god I think all the blood rushing to my head is going to make me burst a blood vessel."

"Oh dear, I don't want to kill you, at least, not like that. Although I do agree, something looks as if it's going to burst," Jenny quipped. "Maybe we can do something about that..."

When Jenny stepped back into the changing room, she did not lock it, while, Juvia came out of her own, having changed back into her normal clothing, except for a fur stole, which she was still trying on in front of a mirror. But what she really was doing, was being a lookout. *I think of all of the forfeits I could give back to Jenny, this is one of the better ones. Certainly I don't have her courage when it comes to doing such things in public like this.*

Jenny's voice from inside rang out just as Ranma was thinking about what she might mean by that last line. "Ranma, could you help me undo this?"

That kind of hint got through even Ranma, and Ranma growled like a dragon in heat, as he quickly pulled the door open, closing and locking it behind him. Then he was pinning a grinning Jenny against the far wall, his mouth on hers, lifting her up with one hand as he undid and removed her top with the other in a sign of dexterity that had her blinking in surprise even as she moaned into the kiss.

Thankfully Juvia didn't actually need to ward off anyone, most of the people in the store were girls, and they had been surreptitiously watching the activities of the two girls and Ranma, recognizing Jenny from her work as a model. She had even been asked for her autograph a few times. Now, Juvia had no doubt that the story of what was happening in the changing room was going to get these girls drinks at the local bar for some days to come.

Elsewhere, the two Dragon Slayers had gone through with what Ranma had ordered them to get: two pairs of hiking boots despite Natsu's protests, a pair of gloves for both of them, and Gajeel had indeed found the local metal-working guild. With Natsu and Happy paying for them, he bought several small, bite-size slivers of metal, each of which had different effects, or were just different. Aluminum with some iron mixed in, copper with the same, and a few

varieties of iron or steel that had enchantments embedded into them. If Gajeel could indeed eat different types of metal and gain something from the pain in doing so, these would do for a start.

But despite Ranma and Jenny's excursions, that night the group was once more back at the train station. And as they stood in front of their nemesis, the Dragons Slayers all dealt with it in their own ways.

Gajeel was stoically trying to force himself into it, standing to one side. He was silent for the most part, his hands and jaw moving as he tried to psych himself up. Ranma had simply closed his eyes and had begun to meditate, using a chant he remembered from some science fiction show he once watched back in his original world. "Fear is the mind killer..."

In stark contrast to the others, Natsu was not handling it at all well. "I don't wanna! We don't have to get on that death trap, me and Happy will just fly alongside..."

"Aye Sir! I can barely use my wings for an hour Natsu. We're going to be moving for day and a half," Happy said from where he was standing to one side of his friend, shaking his head at his antics.

"A day and a half of torture!" Natsu shot back.

Happy nodded at that, as if considering his friend's words, then announced, "Suffer."

"Traitor!" Natsu growled.

Sighing, Ranma looked down at Happy, making a chopping gesture with one hand, catching the Exceed's attention. Happy looked up at his buddy, then looked over at Ranma, and nodded. It would at least allow them to get on the train. As Jenny and Juvia began to try and convince Natsu to get on the train under his own power, Ranma moved up behind him.

Once in position Ranma chopped at the back of his neck with almost his full force. Such was Natsu's durability, that was necessary. Regardless, it worked and Natsu dropped like a stone, only for Ranma to catch him, tossing him over a shoulder. "Come on, let's get this over with."

This time, the carriage that they had paid for was a little more luxurious, something like the rooms they had gotten on the train they had taken straight into Seven before they had fought Brain and his followers and allies.

Ranma quickly moved around the area, setting up small braziers, each of them with some of the Dragon Weed on them. He then lit one of them and gestured for Gajeel to lay down on the nearest booth. "Do you think that's strong enough?"

As he lay down, Gajeel sniffed the air, nodding slightly. "It should be but I won't be able to tell for a bit."

"Here," Ranma held out a tiny bag of his precious Dragon Weed. "Use it sparingly. We're down to the last few pouches of the stuff I bought the last time I went through Desierto."

Ranma lit up another one, then sat across from where Jenny and Juvia had sat down. On the other side of the train, Happy and Natsu had been set up on one of the pull-down bunks.

Before Ranma could sit down, Juvia quickly stood up, moving to sit next to Ranma. He looked at her quizzically his face going green as the train started to move, before quickly turning away and lighting up a third brazier, setting it down in front of him on the floor.

When that was done, he felt Juvia reaching across his shoulders gently tugging him to the side. "Lay your head down here Ranma," Juvia smiled gently. "Erza says that this often works for both you and Natsu occasionally, although Juvia will not be offering her sacred lap pillow to anyone but Juvia's lovers."

"Yeah, though I'm not certain if it's the lying down on my lap thing that works, or the fact that she normally does what I just did to Natsu, Ranma murmured, before nuzzling into Juvia's soft, pliable thighs.

Watching Juvia flush and bite at her lip, Jenny smirked, then went back to her conversation with Juvia, about whether or not she'd found any mechanical souls that allowed her to manipulate water beyond the obvious, such as S.E. powered boats. All the while they talked, Juvia wound her fingers through Ranma's hair, and soon the Martial Dragon Slaying Artist (again, name subject to change) was asleep.

Yet when he woke up the next morning, Ranma joined the other Dragon Slayers in feeling as if they were slowly being tortured, despite the Dragon Weed. Even with the braziers going, the constant jostling and slow turning this train did as it sped from Seven into Iceberg and then onto Stella quickly got to all three. And none of them could simply try to sleep or meditate through it this time.

Thus every four hours, Ranma would get up and jump out one of the windows to run alongside the train. Natsu and Happy did the same, using their combined abilities to fly along beside the train as long as Happy's Aero lasted. Jenny joined in, changing into her S.E. motorcycle form, racing along beside Ranma with Juvia occasionally riding her, adding to the magical expenditure and helping her reserves to grow.

Alas, Gajeel was reduced to being a weight for Ranma's half the time. Only occasionally, as the train slowed to a near crawl to get through treacherous terrain, was Gajeel able to keep up on his own if barely. And as a Dragon Slayer, even being carried by someone else was, strangely, enough to get him to be a bit sick.

That was strange to Ranma. He'd never had that big a problem with moving animals. The weird animals in Edolas, Carla, even Wendy occasionally had carried him, and vice-versa. He supposed that was because unlike the others, Ranma had his ki offsetting a lot of the more detrimental changes the Dragon Slayer magic made in it's user's body.

Yet the time spent outside, combined with the Dragon Weed, worked. The Dragon Slayers only threw up a few times, although one of those times was Gajeel throwing up on Ranma. Luckily they had been passing by a lake, and So Ranma was able to get clean quickly. His attempts to drown Gajeel at the time was mostly done in fun. Mostly.

But eventually, they were out of Seven, into Iceberg and then Stella, arriving at one of its major cities, Moridia. As the train slowed, the Dragon slayers instantly took advantage. They burst out of the train, literally crawling over one another in the doorway in their haste to escape.

Happy watched this with a laugh, while Jenny sighed, looking at one another. "Well, we did our best."

The group stayed in Moridia for a day of rest. At the same time, Ranma worked exclusively with Juvia. The Water Magic user hadn't been able to exercise as much as the others had been able to on the trip and had been feeling somewhat left out. This feeling did not last as Ranma made certain to make love to both Juvia and Jenny that night, leaving all three a sweaty, semi-exhausted mess before he fell asleep.

With the girls on their horses for the first time since they bought them, the group left Moridia with the dawn, moving back north a little bit towards Iceberg, but making their way mostly towards the west of the country. As they went Ranma talked to the locals, whenever they met one, asking about the village with the sacred fire. He didn't get much at first, but he was undaunted. Ranma knew he'd heard the rumor once, it was only hunting it down now that would take some time.

Beyond that, Ranma worked with the others to create a daily schedule. Every morning, Ranma worked with Natsu and Gajeel on various katas, then strength exercises, using trees they had knocked down the night before to use around the campsite. Then the group would run for a few hours before Gajeel and Natsu began to flag, whereupon they would walk until lunch.

When they stopped for lunch, Ranma and the girls sparred or otherwise trained together, trying not to flirt in front of the other two men. Although both girls, as the days wound on, found riding had not been the soft option they had hoped. Jenny took to using her S.E. motorcycle form during the afternoons and evenings, letting the horses run beside them, which opened the way for Natsu and Happy to use their flight technique, while Ranma carried Juvia, teaching her the Boosted Step technique over time, as Gajeel rode on Jenny.

The first time this occurred, Ranma stared at the two of them, his eyes narrowed but he didn't say anything. After all, Jenny was in her motorcycle mode, and a motorcycle was meant to be ridden. That didn't mean that he liked seeing another guy doing that riding, though. Thankfully, Gajeel seemed to sense his ire, and the Iron Dragon Slayer kept his hands on the handlebars for the few minutes he could stay upright before his motion sickness caught up to him.

And if Gajeel found a boa constrictor in his sleeping bag that night after coming back from the makeshift latrine they had dug away from camp? Who knew how it got there? Nor was it Ranma's fault that Jenny requested Gajeel be knocked out prior to being put onto her seat. The smile Ranma wore as he did the deed though, might have been a bit much.

At night, Ranma devoted his time to Gajeel as the others made up the camp. Despite his concerns about their field craft, Natsu and Juvia knew their way around a camp, and Jenny was more than willing to put her hands to whatever work they wanted her to do. She seemed to be enjoying the trip so far, which Ranma was very thankful for.

Regardless, Ranma figured that meditation would help Gajeel's gain access to the properties of the different metals that he ate. This began to pay off after about a week of travel. Gajeel began to exhibit some of the color of the cheap steel file that he was eating as practice on his nails and claws. Which was, unfortunately, was followed by two days of utter exhaustion and sickness which forced the group to stop there for a night.

For Jenny, Ranma full on sparred every night, pushing her hard. He did the same with Juvia and the others occasionally, but with her, Ranma wanted Juvia to work on her various spells, incorporating some of his own into her style.

Eventually, Ranma's questioning of the locals began to get some more details. "I've heard 'bout somethin' like that," one man would say, with another chiming in, his arm raised and pointing. "It's supposed to be over yonder. 'Never been there myself."

Like in most countries, people in Stella tended not to move around much. This was especially true in this area, where farming was hard, the mines were small, and the area was what could be termed as hardscrabble and hilly, with numerous small dales. The villages here were small and, to Ranma's mind, ridiculously insular. The mages all got weird looks as they travelled, but Ranma's money – they had to buy food and fodder occasionally – and his upfront nature helped them get by.

That, and they weren't looking to stay around, Ranma knew. Strangers passing through was one thing. Strangers wishing to put down roots was another.

Then another man Ranma questioned a few days later, told them a bit more. "I've heard of that sacred fire thing. I think it's at a place called Sun Village. Yeah, it's in that direction."

"I've heard tell of it," another man answered Ranma's question the next day frowning a little. "Strange though, I don't think I've ever met anyone from there."

That was a little weird, but Ranma figured if Sun Village was as insular as the rest of these isolated hamlets, then the people might not travel much, regardless of the sacred fire thing.

Eventually, they found a small dale, where the locals said that Sun Village was the next one to the northeast. The farmer Ranma was talking to said something strange. "And if you're going there, I'll warn you strangers not to judge books by their covers."

Ranma blinked at that, then looked around at his companions all of whom were equally confused bar Jenny, who was rubbing at her rump having been riding her horse since that morning and not paying any attention. But she had exhausted herself the night before against Ranma, and had been paying for it all day.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Ranma questioned.

"Just what I said stranger. You'll see what I mean when you get there."

Shrugging his shoulders, Ranma nodded thanks then he and the others moved off, it being only a few hours past midday. Later when evening began, they had traveled up a hill and then back down into another dale where all three of the Dragon Slayers paused, sniffing the air.

"Something smells familiar here," Natsu muttered. "Or... not familiar, but... but similar to a familiar smell. Weird."

Gajeel shrugged. "Something smells here., Can't say it smells weird to me. Like, like a brushfire almost, distant but really powerful."

"I can't say more than you Gajeel, although I am getting a direction," Ranma murmured, pointing off to their left. Soon as they moved in that direction, they found the remains of a road, long disused it was still of considerable size, several times as wide as the tiny trail they had been following before leaving the last village.

"Weird that something like this is here," Ranma murmured. "Roads like this are a decent expense, so why have something so wide all the way out here, if Sun Village is as insular as we think?"

None of the others had any answer to that, but then Natsu sniffed the air, and turned to one side. "Is that a wolf or a dog I'm smelling?"

Gajeel turned in that direction a second later as the wind shifted, as did Ranma, and both of them looked confused as well. "Doesn't smell as wild as a wolf would, maybe a dog."

"It would have to be pretty big," Gajeel said with a frown.

"I'll find out!" Natsu shouted, as he raced out into the woods in the direction of the sentence. "Happy you stay here."

"Aye sir. Why would I want anything to do with a dumb mutt anyway," Happy answered, shaking his head. While Exceed were not entirely catlike, they certainly shared some of a normal cat's uneasiness when it came to strange dogs.

Watching him go, Ranma sighed, looked at the others, then gestured. "Well, we've got nothing better to do for now, let's..."

He was interrupted by the sound of furious, yet oddly cheerful, barking. Seconds later, He and the others watched as Natsu crashed through several trees backward, hurtling towards them.

He was wrestling with some kind of animal, a giant bear sized dog, which was barking and yapping at him, as they wrestled around. It looked like a giant golden retriever almost, with a bit of mutt mixed into its heritage. Natsu whooped and hollered at the animal, having the time of his life, while behind them, moving through the area of forest they had destroyed in their tussle, came a young girl.

She was maybe a year or two older than Wendy, with a bit of curve to her hips and chest, with long red hair like Erza's, had a few scars showing on her face and arms. She wore what looked like a smock, but Jenny noticed that it was well-cared for as the girl came closer, her eyes wide as she stared from Natsu to the others. "It almost looks like someone made that out of really good cotton too, not certain why you would do so, though. And her hair's decently cared for."

Getting over her shock at seeing strangers, the girl smiled at them, then whistled sharply.

The dog stopped wrestling with Natsu and hopped off of him. As Natsu scrambled to his feet with a grin, the happy dog gave him a last lick which caused Happy to shiver in disgust from where he was now sitting on Gajeel's head. Then the dog bounded back over to the girl. She patted it on his nose and was nearly knocked flat by the dog exuberance.

"Hello strangers. You're all tiny, like me. Which is nice. But what are you doing here?" the girl said, staring at Happy with the intensity of someone trying hard not to glomp the cute animal.

"We're here to visit the Sun Village little miss," Juvia answered said with a smile, while Ranma bowed floridly next to her, which caused the girl to giggle. "Juvia is Juvia. This is Ranma,

that is Jenny, Gajeel and you've already met Natsu. The blue furred cat that is currently running away from Natsu is named Happy."

The girls' eyes hadn't strayed from Happy since he had talked, and now as he tried to move pass by her to get away with Natsu, who was trying to give him a slobber-hug, her hair shot out, grabbing at the little creature with a fist made of hair before pulling him back towards her, whereupon she began to nuzzle into the cats' head. "He's so cute and tiny! Are there really places outside of the village where the like of this talking tiny cat are normal?"

"Not really," Ranma replied. "Happy's from a long way away. As for the rest of us, were rather normal-sized for the rest of Ishgar. But that was an interesting trick you did with your hair, dear."

"Ishgar, what's that? I know this is the nation of Stella, but that's all I know about anything beyond the village. I've always been interested in meeting other small people, but none ever come to Sun Village, and I'm too young to be allowed to leave on my own. For now, anyway."

"Does that mean you can take us to Sun Village? We would like to see it for ourselves," Jenny told her politely.

The girl nodded, and her hair once more shifted, becoming a series of hands, which she used to pull herself up onto the dogs back. She hugged the large beast around the neck, then ruffled his ears, and whispered something to it. The dog barked in reply before turning around, heading back the way they had come. "Come on then, I'll take you home. In return, you all can tell me stories about the outside world. The world beyond Stella."

"What's your name? Juvia asked as he went.

The girl smiled. "Flare, my name is Flare of the Sun Village, the village of Giants!"

End Chapter

So like I said, this isn't the full chapter. I had hoped to get them into the mountains between Pergrande and the Blasted lands. Still, this way, I can play around with the giants more, show a bit of the Dragon Slayer's training, and even a bit more in Pergrande with the characters I've already established there.