

Some of these scenes might be more disjointed than my usual. This was not written in one go, though the last scene was, it was written whenever this particular concept wouldn't stay silent in my head LOL. Still, hope you like it. I might post it over on fanfic in December as part of my present to my fans there, since I think the Vanadis section needs some serious love. It's a great series and I just don't understand why it isn't more popular.

Sword, Bow, and Horse

Chapter 1: A Horse thinks = A Butterfly's Wings

Ranma lay back on the rooftop of the Tendo dojo, scowling as he stared out into the darkening sky, remembering what had occurred yesterday. He was not Happosai, no, he was **furious** at what had occurred and not just because of what Happosai had done to him or that he had come so close to being weakened for the rest of his life thanks to the Weakness Moxibustion Point.

No, what enraged Ranma was something else. *This is the second time I've been caught out by something like this! Pressure points, moxibustion, they're the same thing, and I obviously need to learn some about them. They're a subtle and dangerous Art. Why the hell hasn't my Oyaji thought about adding some of that stuff to our style? I think adding pressure points into our aerial mastery would make taking on multiple enemies easier.*

As if summoned by Ranma's thoughts about him, Genma hopped up onto the roof a scowl on his for-once human face. "Boy! You need to head downstairs and thank your fiancée for the help she gave you this afternoon against the dreaded master. If not for Akane, you'd still be a weak good for nothing!"

"Why should I?" Ranma muttered, looking away in embarrassment, though a part of him wondered where his Oyaji got off, demanding he thank someone else. *As if Oyaji ever thanked anyone for anything.* "Like I asked her to get in the way, besides I'm busy thinking about the Art up here Oyaji, and that's way more important. You taught me that, remember!"

"Oh what an ungrateful **girl** I've raised!" his father shouted, grabbing at Ranma's shoulder and lifting him up off the roof. "Now you get down there, and you thank Akane properly!"

Ranma broke his grip, then blocked a few other blows, looking at his father seriously. "Oyaji, why have you never told me about pressure points and other stuff like that?"

“Bah, they are a distraction from the true Art boy, anyone can poke a finger into someone else after all.” Genma said sententiously.

That line made Ranma pause, staring at his father before shaking his head and not going there very purposefully. “But we just saw how strong they can be. Think about it Oyaji, if you could shut down your opponents by making them weak or paralyze them or unable to feel their arms, that would be huge in a fight, wouldn't it?”

That was why Ranma had memorized the little chart showing the Weakness Moxibustion point even as it was being torn apart in front of him by the wind of the Hiryu Shouten Ha. “And don't you remember what trouble I ran into before with the Old Ghoul and her using that pressure point on me that made me so susceptible to heat I couldn't transform!? There could be others too, right?”

“Bah, there aren't,” Genma said definitively, though he looked a little shifty as he did so. “You've already run into the worst of the lot, and thanks to your fiancé,” he said pushing Ranma towards the edge of the rooftop. ‘You were able to survive it. Now go thank her proper boy!”

“Come on Oyaji, you expect me to take your word for that?” Ranma said, pushing back against his father's grip before breaking it easily. “You didn't even let me know about the moxibustion point before Happi used it on me, and you'd never heard of the Phoenix one or how to counter it either! That means there's more out there to learn.”

“I'm you're martial arts teacher! And I say there isn't,” Genma said, getting into Ranma's face belligerently. “Don't you believe you're your old man!”

“Are you even listening to yourself!?” Ranma said with a laugh. “Believe you? The only way I'd believe anything from you is if it serves that fat stomach of yours!”

Genma growled at that, and threw a punch at Ranma's head. “Respect your elder boy!” But Ranma ducked under the attack, and then the two were off, dancing around the rooftops and exchanging blows and insults in equal measure.

They were interrupted after a few minutes by both people shouting at them from below and a cackle from nearby accompanied by a splash of cold water. The first was ignorable, given it was coming from Akane and Soun, but the second, thanks to the water, wasn't and girl and panda turned to stare at the Grand Master of Anything Goes sitting on the nearby chimney, smirking at them around his pipe.

Worse for Ranma's ego, the diminutive garden gnome looked none the worse for wear after their clash earlier that day. *Damn, I thought my accelerated healing was good, just goes to show I've got more to learn there too.*

“The boy’s right,” Happosai said puffing on his pipe. “There’s a lot more to pressure points than you know Genma. If the boy wants to learn, why stop him? Our school is all about taking from others and working them into a greater whole after all.”

Happosai cackled again, holding up a frilly red bra. “Heck, I’d even be willing to offer you some help, all you have to do is model this for...”

With an incandescent roar of rage, the redhead grabbed her father by the arm and hurled him towards the ancient pervert then, ignoring the shouts from down below from Akane, Ranma bounded off over the rooftops, thinking hard about who she could go to learn more about pressure points and such. This didn't last very long, since it was a very short list, and only one name among it was one that she trusted. After changing back into his male body, Ranma went over to Doctor Tofu's clinic

But when he arrived, he saw the man exiting the building, with a heavy bag over his shoulder. Looking closer, Ranma could see a serious look on his face, and he was somewhat surprised at the speed the older man showed as he ran off. “Hey doc, got a minute?” Ranma asked hopping down to run beside the older man easily. “I was looking to talk to ya about something.”

“Ranma, I can't deal with you right now,” Doctor Tofu said sharply. “There's been a car accident at the edge of Nerima, and I've been called in to help stabilize the wounded.”

Shrugging, Ranma continued on beside him for two more steps then grabbed Tofu by the back of his shirt and hopped up onto one of the nearby rooftops. “Then why are you pussyfooting around like a normal pedestrian, man? Let’s go!”

Doctor Tofu blinked then looked around a little sheepishly. “It's been a while since I've roof-hopped for very long, actually.”

“Then you should get back into the swing of things quick Doc,” Ranma replied with a smirk, pushing him hard in the back. “Now come on which way do we go?”

When they arrived in record time, they found a scene of destruction. Several cars had been crushed by a truck, which had turned badly onto the road they were on, smashing into several other cars, and buildings, its driver three sheets to the wind.

Taking a quick glance around, Doctor Tofu immediately took charge of the scene, impressing Ranma somewhat. He moved those injured that had already escaped the car crash out and away, treating them as best he could. None of the ones who had been able to move on their own were very wounded, save for two men who had been cut rather badly by flying debris. Worse still, were three other people, one woman, and two young children, trapped in the back of a car whose roof had been crushed, trapping them within.

Some of the policemen on the scene explained this to Ranma as Tofu did what he could for the others. ...So we just have to wait until the Jaws of Life to get them out.”

“You're new to the area aren't ya?” Ranma said with a grim smile, moving over to the car quickly, having actually been examining it for weaknesses while the cops were jabbering on. He had to straighten up a single strut first in order to get a clear grip on the rest, but once that was done Ranma pulled and with a shriek of tortured steel, the piece of roof came away. He tossed it to one side, doing the same to the other side, before lifting out the first of the kids, setting her down their feet, then their mother, moving over to Doctor Tofu quickly with her, seeing a nasty bruise covering half her head.

Once there, Ranma waved off the police officers, who were staring at him in shock, evidently not one of them coming from within the Nerima district. Instead, he watched Doctor Tofu go about his business with the wounded. The doctor seemed to have eyes in the back of his head, the ability to concentrate on multiple things at once, turning from one patient to help another when they started to groan or shift and soon he had even the worst injured slowly recovering under his ministrations.

I've never actually sat back and watched Tofu work like this, or any doctor really. Ranma admitted to himself. *I mean I knew he was a decent martial artist and knew about pressure points, but I suppose his doctoring skills are even more impressive.*

Then he frowned, staring at Tofu's hands, which were around the forearm of a young boy, one of the three Ranma had rescued. The boy had been whimpering a second ago, and there had been a noticeable bulge in his forearm, but now not only had he calmed down, but the bulge was gone. *What the heck, that's not just setting the bone, what did he do there?*

Something had just happened, just on the edge of Ranma's senses, not seen but sensed. Ranma was no stranger to using the body's ki to heal, in fact, that was the only way he could use his own ki at this point, but he knew of its existence. He had been healing faster and in many ways better than most people could for years now and also had run into a few other ways it could be used consciously since coming here to Nerima. But the ability to take his own ki and use it to heal someone else? That was not what anything he had ever seen before.

Soon though, Doctor Tofu had all of the patients stabilized enough to be moved to a hospital and those walking wounded had been seen to. AN ambulance had also finally arrived through the snarled up traffic, and Doctor Tofu spent several minutes talking to the EMTs, getting respectful nods in return, before Ranma help lift the worst of the patients into the ambulance.

With his job done, Doctor Tofu exchanged bows with the police and gathered up his remaining equipment, and gestured Ranma to follow him, making his way back down a side street. “Why exactly were you looking for me in the first place, Ranma?” he asked politely.

“Not that I'm ungrateful for the help, but you said you were looking for me when you first showed up.”

Ranma fell into step beside him again, and the two of them walked back into Nerima, soon leaving the majority of the larger streets behind and entering into the almost quixotic and somewhat backward area of Tokyo as Ranma explained his troubles. During this, Tofu looked at him thoughtfully, but remained silent until the younger man had finished speaking. “So you want me to teach you about pressure points.”

Thinking about all he knew about Ranma, Tofu frowned thoughtfully. Ranma had only been in the area for a little over a year now, but he had certainly made an impression on everyone, especially of late given his issues with the ancient Grand Master of Anything Goes. *The battles he seems to attract are getting larger all the time, but he has yet to involve innocent bystanders in any of them.*

And that was just it: for the most part Tofu felt that Ranma acted more like a trouble magnet, attracting those fights, rather than seeking them out. Yes, his general attitude certainly didn't help, but despite being the equivalent of gas on a fire, it also wasn't all that horrible on its own. Yet there was a great difference between believing that the young boy had good character and a decent idea of what honor meant and giving him an entirely new way to hurt his enemies.

“What you want out of life Ranma?” Tofu asked obliquely. “I've always heard about how you're going to be the new master for Anything Goes, and take over the Tendo dojo, but I've never actually heard you say that was what you wanted.”

“To be fair Doc it's not like you and I hang out or anything,” Ranma said with a chuckle before sheepishly pulling at his pigtail. “Still, you got a point I guess. It's just, everyone else is making these choices, but for me, it don't make sense. I'm not even 17 yet, why do I need to think about what I want out of life now?”

“What better time to do it?” Tofu answered promptly. “If you're serious about something, then you need to start early. Don't you know that already, from your martial arts training?”

Ranma slowly nodded, then sighed. “I don't know what I want,” he said honestly. “I mean I like Nerima, I like the idea of having a home I guess, it's the first time that's ever been an idea I could get into, but do I want to be a teacher? I don't know. I know I want to help people, that's part of the code, but how is up in the air. Maybe I could be a policeman or something. There have to be supernatural and superstrong martial artist-type criminals, right?”

“Like your friend Ryoga and his penchant for self-destruction?” Tofu asked with a dry, almost sharp smile. The pig-boy had smashed through his offices at one point in an effort to find Ranma, and Tofu had not taken kindly to it, or the fact that when he attempted to

remonstrate with the younger man, his blows had done absolutely nothing until he, ironically, used the very techniques that had now brought Ranma to him for training.

After a second spent staring at Ranma, Tofu nodded. "Realize, that I am unwilling to teach you, if all you're going to do with my knowledge is turn it around and use it to hurt other people. And I'm not going to teach you just pressure points. If you want to learn them, you're going to have to learn my Art Ranma."

"You mean like that stuff you did with that kid, the one with the black hair and the school uniform?" Tofu looked at him in surprise, and Ranma shrugged. "I saw something there, like you had used your own ki to heal him almost."

"That... was exactly what I did yes," Tofu said with a smile. "I set the bone physically then accelerated the healing to get rid of the bruising up to a point. You were able to see that?"

"More like sensed something was going on rather than seen," Ranma said, scratching at his pigtail again sheepishly. "I know about ki reinforcement, that damn stick of the old ghoul and the gnome's pipe, weapons space, like Mousse uses, and healing of course, I've been healing myself for years. But to consciously control it, to add your own to someone else's? That I can't do."

"Then we have our first objective don't we?" Tofu said with a smile, although inwardly he was very impressed. Yes, he knew that Ranma knew about how to use ki as he explained, but to go beyond that to understand that control was possible, that was even more impressive from someone so young. "We will see if we can use that mind of yours for anything but martial arts, Ranma."

OOOOOOO

A few weeks went by, with everyone noticing that Ranma had adopted a new routine, which had a marked impact on his daily life. Instead of heading home with Akane, he would head to the clinic to work with and learn from Doctor Tofu. This made Genma somewhat pleased, since taking time to teach Ranma meant Tofu couldn't watch him during his job, of advertising for the clinic and cleaning up outside. He still had to deal with kids in some zokeepers coming after him occasionally, but he felt those only came around during slow weeks.

Nabiki was not so pleased. She was no longer making money on the fights that would occur at school. On Doctor Tofu's orders, Ranma would ignore, avoid or end any match with anyone who attempt to fight him without hurting them. He stopped staying after school to

help the various athletics teams (much to their shrieks of dismay) and thus missed getting caught up in some of the shenanigans that the new principal was always tossing about, and didn't even chase after Happosai anymore. Instead, he had gotten together with a group of girls and actually devised a few traps for the old man to keep him away from the girls when they were changing. It cost them a few 'lovelies' but the girls were fine with that. This meant the girls respect for Ranma had gone through the roof, but that a large portion of the money Nabiki had been getting from their madcap chases went out the door.

Worse for her pure entertainment purposes, Ranma had learned to keep his cool, which helped keep things calm at home. This was again down to Dr. Tofu, wanting Ranma to exert control of his mouth and emotions before he learned about pressure points and using ki to heal. It was very necessary, or else he would fall into the trap of using emotion to connect to his ki, which would have long-term consequences.

At first, Akane didn't care. In fact, she actually enjoyed the fact they had time away from one another. Akane hated the fact the parents always pushed them together. And despite the fact that Ranma occasionally needed her help, mostly for schoolwork, but a few times to deal with his various enemies, like Happosai and the weakness point, Ranma was still far too arrogant, and far too irritating, always calling her names. Now, they still fought occasionally, but at least this way Akane didn't feel like she had to watch him all the time so that he wouldn't head over to see the one of the floozies that flocked around him. They didn't get along any better, but their relationship, if it could be called that, didn't get any worse.

For her part, Kasumi was very happy to see the change in Ranma. It meant the young boy was maturing. Indeed, she thought this was the first real step towards growing as a person outside his Art he had taken since arriving in Nerima. As such, she actively encouraged it, even coming around to prepare meals for him and Tofu, though of course this did not have the positive effect she wanted it to have.

Soun was at first not at all happy about the fact Akane and Ranma were no longer around one another after school. He felt, as did Genma, that the more time they spent around one another, the closer the two would get. But with Genma blinded by the fact Ranma was now making his life easier in the short term, Akane and Kasumi convinced Soun to not try to make trouble. Beyond a few wailing sessions about them not liking one another and how the schools would never be joined at dinner a few times of course.

Even though it was cutting into the time he could spend with her after school, Ukyo was pleased for her friend, seeing it as the first step to Ranma becoming a doctor, which, in her mind, would be fantastic. Shampoo was much the same way, since the position of healer was well-respected among her people to. On the few occasions where she came by and saw Ranma learning from Doctor Tofu, she left them alone, not barging in as she normally would with her massive maces leading the way.

“This is too-too nice that you learn from good doctor,” she said, leaning into Ranma's personal space and hanging over his shoulder to look at the book Ranma was studying. Then she frowned, tugging at his pigtail for a moment. “But you need learn in Chinese too Airen!”

“How many times do I have to say it Shampoo! I'm not learning this so that I become better stock for your tribe,” Ranma growled, but made no move to push her off. That was always a problem with Shampoo. *Where the heck do you put your hands on a girl if you're trying to push her away? Especially one who's so curvy and smells nice and...* shaking his head Ranma should that thought off. *None of that! Remember this is the same girl who would've killed you if you were really a girl yourself. Keep that in mind at all times! And the fact that Akane would geld you, Ucchan would cry, and your father would probably try to kill you.*

Cologne was rather ambivalent about it. She was partly displeased because Ranma hadn't come to her, but knew that Ranma didn't really understand how she viewed him: rather than being there to really help her granddaughter win Ranma's hand, she saw more as a toy and a source of amusement than anything else. Besides, she was busy with their restaurant anyway.

Doctor Tofu, the man who had forced Ranma to change in order to learn what he wanted to, was personally astonished. The boy with the odd curse was a sponge for anything when he decided to put his mind to it. After only about a month and a half, he had learned everything Doctor Tofu felt up to teaching him about using pressure points and other esoteric means of healing and had begun to be able to see ki and even manipulate his own to a certain degree. From someone so young that was astonishing, and it made Tofu realized he wasn't really the right one to take Ranma's training to the next level.

Of course, Genma and Soun wouldn't hear about an opportunity to get Ranma and Akane some time away from her rivals. At first Akane didn't want to go, but then Genma had challenged her to prove she could learn martial arts as quick as Ranma, while also taking care of him as a woman. The moment that Akane pride had been brought into question, she forced Ranma and Tofu to bring her along.

Now she sat across from him on the train in a huff, not looking at him, while Ranma morbidly wondered how badly this was going to go. He leaned over to Doctor Tofu and whispered, “So, exactly what is your old master like?” *Please don't let him be like Gramps, please don't let him be like Gramps!*

“No he's not like Happosai,” Doctor Tofu said, wincing a little. “He's not interested in stealing your panties.”

“So what is he interested in,” Ranma said, now turning and crossing his arms, glaring at Tofu.

“Poses,” the bespectacled man said reluctantly. “Once he knows you’re female, he’ll force you to pose in numerous different poses. That and cosplay outfits. He’s mad about them.”

“...How exactly do you know that?” Ranma said after moment’s silent contemplation.

Tofu shuddered, and looked away, and Ranma blanched. “You know what, I take that back, I don’t want to know.”

“Thank you,” Tofu replied feelingly, trying to regain some of his dignity.

After two train changes and a bus ride followed by a 40 minute hike at Akane’s best speed, they were finally at the door of a clinic deep in the woods, part of a small yet very spread out village that looked straight out of the Showa era, complete with lots of rice fields separating the house, except for the telephone lines and the lights scattered here and there.

The building they were led to was one of the larger in the area, but still was separated by its near neighbor by a few hundred feet worth of forest, and was fronted by a large yard and a gate. Sitting out on the balcony of the house, which was much like the Tendo’s, was an old man who was extremely thin, but also quite tall: he looked as tall as Kuno or his father, but looked as if a strong breeze could blow them over. He had a short, trim beard, and absolutely no hair on the top of his head, and deeply wrinkled face.

He looked up from what he was reading when the three newcomers came within sight. His eyes narrowed, then he seemed to smile, as he caught sight of Akane before gesturing them towards him, to which all three martial artists jumped up over the small gate, landing neatly on the other side and moving towards him. This show of physical prowess did not seem to surprise the older man. He simply waited for them calmly, and then when they were within casual conversation range spoke. “Ahh Ono, I haven’t seen or heard from you in years, and now you show up out of the blue like this? What’s the happy occasion? Did you finally work through your issues with that girl you liked?”

“Not just yet, no,” Ranma said with a chuckle, pushing Tofu forward. “We’re still working on that, but actually we’re here for me sensei,” Ranma said, thumping one hand into his other palm, bowing over them. “My name is Ranma Saotome, and I want to learn how to use pressure points and healing other people through ki.”

“Ranma has learned all he can from me Master Oden.” Doctor Tofu said stepping forward and bowing in turn. “But I think you will find him and apt pupil for everything you can teach them.”

“Not like yourself Ono, who decided that you only wanted to learn half of my art,” the older man responded tartly, shaking his head. “You learned pressure points, you learned the first few steps of the offensive style of the Thousand Needle style, and you learned just enough of ki transference to solve simple issues, but not the full amount. Yet you were at it four over

four years, and you say this boy can learn what you couldn't? How long has he been training under you?

"A little under two months," Tofu replied honestly. "But he has already learned all I can teach them. Ranma is an **astonishingly** fast learner, who is heir to a family style that specializes in adaptation and aerial movement."

"Truly?" the older man replied scratching at a scar above one eye, which Ranma had just noticed. It wasn't large, but it was visible, and he wondered why Oden had one if he could use ki healing. But then he shrugged it off as not if his business is Oden hopped to his feet, surprisingly spry for his age and looks.

"Very well, let's see how good he is. If he is good enough, I may deign to teach him, so long as he can match my price," he said, his eyes glancing over to Akane. "And what about this one? Is she along to just pay that price or is she supposed to be here to learn too?"

Akane bristled, and Tofu made calming down gestures to her. "No sensei, Akane-san is Ranma's fiancé, and came with him," he said.

"Almost at knife point," Ranma said, holding up a finger.

"You're just saying that because you think you'll learn faster than I can," Akane growled. "I'll show you!"

"Akane we've been over this," Ranma replied with a sigh. "You don't take the Art nearly seriously enough to make that kind of boast. Would you want me boasting about how I can act or something?"

They'd had that conversation more than once and under Tofu's direction to keep his cool, Ranma had even refrained from insulting her. It hadn't ended very well for him besides that, but she had slowly come to understand that for Ranma, the Arts wasn't just something he did, it was something he was: his entire life was dedicated to the Art. And deep down, she wasn't certain if she could make the same claim or even wanted to. But her pride wouldn't let allow her to admit that aloud especially to Ranma, and she growled. "Just you watch, I'll learn everything he can teach us before you can!"

Rolling his eyes, Ranma turned back to the master, who was looking at them thoughtfully.

He cocked an eyebrow now then moved over into the open area of his front yard, cocking one hand behind his head the other thrust forward, the wrist angled downward in a style that Ranma recognized. "Snake fist style huh," Ranma said, nodding and moving over to stand in front of him, bowing with his hands over his chest again, before straightening up.

Unlike the older man though, Ranma didn't take any kind of stance, just standing there watching Oden, seemingly at ease.

"Something like that yes, though there are those who would say the Thousand Needle style came first," the older man replied dryly, then attacked without any warning, uncaring or unsurprised at Ranma's not taking a stance.

He **was** surprised however by Ranma's speed as he dodging this way and that, not attacking yet, analyzing Oden's style.

"You are fast," the older man said, stepping back, with Ranma doing the same. "Let's see how fast."

With that the man moved forward again, his slight thin frame moving almost as fast as the Amaguriken technique, causing Ranma's eyes to widen slightly. But he kept up with it, his hand flicking this way and that, until he began to feel pinpricks hitting his arms. *Thousand needle huh, kind of a descriptive name there*, he thought, concentrating on the flow of his ki for a moment as he tried to figure out why his arms were going dead and do something about it.

"Do you feel that!" the older man said with a wide proud grin. "Those are attacks of the Thousand Needles! It is the offensive style based upon pressure points, upon hitting specific spots on the body hard enough to do whatever you wish to your enemy!" The man said, getting through Ranma's guard and going for a thrust to his chest, his fingers in a point as they had been throughout the fight.

But Ranma was still game and moved his body just enough to dodge that the attack, his leg sweeping out to force the older man back before Ranma kicked off the ground with his other foot up into the air. The man barely dodged another kick that would've taken his head off, and Ranma was then behind him, body checking into his back and sending the older man sprawling, before turning.

Having rolled away and turned to face Ranma Oden watched in amazement as Ranma's arms glowed slightly at the points where the old master had touched him. Then they were moving again, and Ranma took up the stance facing the older man. "Neat trick."

The older man stood up straight, signaling a pause in the bout once more before he turned to look at Tofu. "He has mastered the defensive style of 'Open Waters Through the Dam'?"

"It seems so, although I've never seen him do it before. Ranma seems to be the type that learns best by doing apparently," Tofu said dryly.

"Well that's good since that's the way I like to teach too." Without elaborating on that, Oden turned to Akane. "And you girl? Step up and let's see what you can do."

Akane groaned, stepping forward. "I don't suppose I can go change first?" She didn't want to flash this possibly dirty old man her panties after all.

"When would an opponent let you go and change before attacking?" Oden said shaking his head. "Just be glad I believe in bowing before a match."

What happened next was predictable in Ranma's opinion. Akane charged forward, Oden ducked and dodged and then was in among her reach, deadening her arms and then his fingers slamming into her chest. At his touch, her entire body froze in place like a statue.

That hadn't been what Ranma had anticipated and he looked at the older man with more respect. "There's a full body paralyzing point?"

"Something of the sort," Oden said with a smirk. "But I'm not going to tell you about it right away boy, that's one of the higher level attacks of my school after all. Now," he went on, turning away from Akane who was trying to move her jaw enough to make noise beyond a low growling sound, "let's talk about payment. I don't need money, I don't want chores done or any of that. I hope Tofu's told you about my particular...requirements."

"He told me that you like forcing girls to do poses and cosplay" Ranma said bluntly, glancing over to Tofu. "Depending on if I have veto power on whether or not it's too sexy or shows too much skin I don't have a problem with.

"That's nice boy, but I'm not into men," the older man said, gesturing over to Akane. "You'll have to get your fiancé to agree to it."

Ranma sighed and pulled out a bottle of cold water that he'd picked up in the town. "No," he said wryly "I won't." With that, Ranma dumped the water over his head, then shook his hair out, staring at Oden and crossing her arms over her chest. "You ever hear of Jusenkyo?"

Oden eyes went wide for a second, and then he started to laugh raucously. "That," he said aloud, "that works boy! I don't suppose then that you will need to do anything to pay for young Ranma's training," he said, tapping a counterpoint on Akane, who fell forward on her face, having been frozen in a kick and unable to recover from suddenly being able to move again. "Although we would have quite a lot of work to do with you to get you up to where you could use my school," he said honestly. "So from you, I'm afraid I would demand more. You're the right age to pull of the schoolgirl look. So tell me, did you bring your school swimsuit, or your exercise togs?"

Akane growled angrily, and suddenly was holding that large hammer of hers. Given the fact it wasn't aimed at him this time Ranma watched closely, trying to figure out how the heck she did that. *It's not like Akane used weapons space or anything, it's almost like the hammer was constructed out of her anger somehow.*

An instant after the hammer appeared Akane swung it at Oden, who even though his eyes widened rolled away, the hammer blow slamming into the ground with enough force to create a crater where he had just been standing. "Never!" She then glared at Ranma as if it was all his fault, then turned away in a huff, the hammer disappearing. "I'm going home! This, this perverted cheating style, there's nothing here for me or any real martial artist!"

Just nodding his head and keeping quiet took all of Ranma Tofu-trained self-control, but she did so and watched her go with something approaching relief, before turning back to Oden, putting her hands behind her head. "So, when do we start?"

"Hold on girl, I suppose I'll call you girl in that form," he Oden said with a chuckle, looking over to Tofu. If I'm going to train Ranma here, I want you to stay too Ono. I'm getting old, and you already said that Ranma is heir to another style, he can't carry on mine. You need to learn the upper level attacks and ki control techniques."

"Master, I can't stay here that long, I have a practice to run!" Tofu protested.

"Call in favors or what have you, I don't care. You're the only one of my students to return and I don't have much time left to me before I'm too damn old to even perform at all."

Sighing Tofu nodded while Ranma frowned at being excluded, but Oden held up his hand. "I will teach you everything about using your ki I can, and all of the defensive and Offensive styles that Tofu did not learn while training under me. I will also teach you the mid-level attacks and many of the esoteric pressure points so you can defend against and use them. But I will not teach you my Secret Arts. Those are to be taught to my successor only. This is not negotiable."

Ranma continued to frown at that, but slowly she nodded. "I can understand that and I agree." Then she grinned over at Tofu. "Besides, having a sparring partner around will make me learn a lot faster anyway."

Tofu gulped at that, backing away little. "Now Ranma, let's not be hasty."

"Look at it this way, you get some exercise one way or another, and maybe this way, we can continue to work on Kasumi addiction. Heh, I can take a picture, blow it up, and use it like a mask when we fight, maybe that'll break yer habit of going crazy."

"That's a disturbing thought," Tofu replied dryly, but then sighed. "But I suppose I am kind of getting desperate to figure out a solution. Still master, surely there's someone else that could take over your school. You know I'm no martial artist, I'm a doctor first and foremost."

"Bah!" Oden said, waving his hand. "It's all about the flashier arts, Karate and simple Judo or anything from China since anything foreign has to be better! Pathetic! I told you, you're

the only one of my students to come back here in 12 years! Now come on, let's you situated inside. We'll have some lunch, and then we'll talk about my training schedule for you both."

The two younger people followed after the older man and as they stepped up to the porch. Ranma leaned over toward Tofu. "How many other students were with you?"

"Seventeen at one point," Tofu replied in a whisper. "The four girls left first of course then the nine who had girlfriends. The rest of us stayed for a while, but all the others have gotten married since, and I doubt they'd be able to talk their wives into posing."

Somehow, Ranma realized once more that he didn't want to know how Tofu and the remainder had paid for the man's exercises. Voyeurism, photography and of course sneaking around unseen were after all already all too known to him. *Well, at least I'll be learning something new!* Ranma reflected, trying to keep positive thoughts in his head.

That became difficult when he learned Oden wanted to him to practice both in his male and female forms, and was going to Ranma's own body to make him learn the pressure points in both forms! Some of these were of course on his chest, and Ranma had a very hard time not smashing Oden into pieces.

In fact, he failed in not attacking only, not breaking Oden in half. Instead, his attack hurled Oden through several walls. But Oden had what Ranma was quickly coming to believe was a normal pervert's indestructability, and bounced back. But he did stop actually forcing Ranma to go through that. Instead, he made Tofu do it. That was only a little better, but at least Ranma had Tofu firmly in the doctor category, he could deal with it a little bit. When it came to his chest and his private parts though Ranma drew the line and Oden forced him to actually read from books. That slowed his training down tremendously, but even so, despite all of the issues...

Training Montage:

"Thrust that chest out more!" Oden bellowed. "You spent the entire day as a boy, now come on, give me some sugar."

Dressed in an almost see-through white leotard, Ranma complied grumbling angrily under her breath

"Now give me some squats!"

////

“You have got to be kidding me...” Ranma mumbled, staring at the nurse’s outfit Oden held up to him. “There’s no way that’ll fit me.”

“That’s the beauty of it Ranma me lad,” Oden cackled.

////

Argh, what the hell Oden, why the hell does my arm itch and yet not work properly!? What did you do!?”

////

“What do you mean you’re going to break a rib in order for me to understand how to heal it!”

“I told you before Ranma, the best way to learn how to heal others is to have to heal yourself first!”

End montage

Ranma learned everything Oden could teach him and it took him two months, not the seven months Oden had predicted. Of course, Ranma had also learned a few things he hadn't wished to. Ranma had up to this point basically treated his female form like a curse, because it was in his opinion. It was simply something he had to deal with, or could use and manipulate at need and would be discarded if he ever got the chance. The female form wasn't something he wanted to be at home with, or truly learn much about besides how to fight in it. This however shifted from how to fight in to learning about its various weaknesses strengths and more importantly why they were the way they were. He learned about the strengths and weaknesses before, but not the why of them, and he learned more about men and women here than he was really comfortable with.

For his part, Oden was astonished. Looking on as Ranma performed a perfect Thousand Needles style attack on a dummy, he shook his head slowly. One of the higher level attacks, this attack was designed to not only paralyze, but also cut off circulation to the lower extremities. “Two months,” he said to Tofu, who sat beside him. “**Two months** and he has learned everything I can and willing to teach him. Where in the hells did Ranma come from!?”

“I think you would have to ask his father about that. But from what I know, his training began when he was four years old, and was based upon a simple thought: Everything can be it training.” Tofu replied dryly. “So I think it is both the fact that he learns quickly and came to both me and then to you at an already abnormally high level.”

“Perhaps it is, but don't let that fool you, the boy's a practical genius with anything involving the body! My God, if we could get him into the Olympics, Japan would never lose a single event again.” Oden said, chuckling at the very idea.

“The allegations of doping would get depressing,” Ranma quipped, smirking back over at the two of them, having come close enough to hear that last line if not the rest. I'm done I think,” he said, gesturing to the dummy, which had been deformed at precisely the right points to denote the pressure points he had to strike at precisely the right strength. As Oden and Tofu watched, it slowly started to fall over.

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“I think we're done Ranma. As I just told Tofu, you have learned everything I am willing to teach you. That last attack, that was to be your graduation essay as it were, and you performed it flawlessly. Indeed, I've seen you practice on your own. You have even modified some of my own style, adding it to your existing style.” He shook his head repeating, “I have nothing more to teach you Ranma Saotome.”

Ranma grinned then bowed, her hands to her chest. “Thank you for all that you have taught me, master. I can't say all of its been pleasant, but most of it been useful.”

He looked up at the sky then over to Tofu. “Do you think we still have time to get to the train?” Tofu had not completed his training, but he had basically informed Oden that he couldn't in one visit. Instead, Oden would move in with him soon, after taking a few months to sell his house and other such things, which Ranma basically hadn't cared enough to notice.

They did, and the two of them went inside, while Oden sat there, staring at the front yard contemplatively. He bid them farewell when they came out, having not noticed how long they had been gone for, or that Ranma wore a smirk on his face just a little wider than his normal arrogant expression, or the fact that Tofu too was smirking a little.

The two of them walked off, and as they passed through the outer gate, Tofu asked quietly, “So, how long do you think it'll take him to realize you erased all of your pictures from his hard drive, and burned all his hard copies?”

“Oh, I think we should be able to get through at least half the town before he realizes it,” Ranma said, walking just a bit faster. “If we hurry that is.” They were almost out of range of the scream when it occurred, and both men looked at one another before laughing and speeding up quickly.

The train deposited them in Nerima up late that evening. The streets were nearly dark, the only light coming from the various lampposts, when the two men exited the train station. “Well Ranma, it's been interesting, but I don't have anything more I can teach you. Unless you really think you're going to be a doctor?”

Ranma frowned pensively. “I don't know doc, give me a few days to think about it. I do enjoy using the Art to help people, it's part of my Code's main tenant, but I also well, really like punching people,” Ranma said, laughing self-consciously at himself. “The idea of becoming a policeman seems a little more realistic to me. But I'll still help you around the office for a few weeks while ya get back up to speed, give me time to think about it you know.”

Tofu nodded, shook the younger man's hand, and parted ways. While Tofu walked home like a normal person, Ranma quickly hopped up onto a roof, and made his way home to the dojo over the rooftop highway. He was nearly there and about to jump over the walls, when he heard a shout of “Airen you back!”

Turning in the direction of the noise Ranma didn't have time to dodge and ate a face full of tire, as Shampoo stopped her bicycle right on top of him, hurling them both down to the ground. Shampoo rode her bike, and her bike road Ranma, so she was able to hop off her bike quickly, going down to her knees next to him, and pulling Ranma into her chest. “Shampoo so sorry!” she said, and if Ranma didn't know her any better, he could almost have thought she was sincere. “Stopping bicycle be too too hard on rooftop.”

“That's oka, okay,” Ranma said, stuttering a little and trying to wiggle his way out without actually touching Shampoo, which again was quite hard. He managed to do so however, and was standing up again in a few minutes, though Shampoo was still clinging to him.

This proved to be a problem when Akane marched out of the house already glowing red with anger, her hammer in hand. “You...” she hissed, “here we all were, wondering how you were doing, and the moment you come back, you have one of your floozies hanging over you! Ranma, you **pervert!**”

Ranma had a choice then, and oddly enough time to consider it for once instead of simply reacting. He could either take the shot, and be sent flying, dodge and let Akane hit Shampoo, or try to stop Akane. The last would make him have to deal with both Akane's renewed anger and the two fathers, who Ranma could see coming out of the house behind her, yelling at him for daring to touching their little girl/his fiancé. Letting the blow hit Shampoo, would cause Shampoo to take the rivalry between the two of them seriously, which would quickly result in Akane either been killed, or simply humiliated on a daily basis, which she would

probably take out on Ranma in the long-run. Dealing with the parents would be an all-night thing, and probably would carry over into the next day. Not at all the kind of restful homecoming Ranma wanted. In the end, Ranma decided that his best option was to do as normal and let Akane hit him rather than someone else.

But that doesn't mean I'm going to not get a few jabs in all my own, he thought. Throwing off Tofu's injunctions about watching his mouth and keeping calm, he grinned at Akane. "Akane, hey! I see you're still suffering from tomboyitis and did your thighs become even thickerRRR!?"

With that, Ranma was punted off into the distance, having pushed Shampoo to the side, his hand pushing just below her breasts to do it. While Shampoo started yelling at Akane behind him Ranma sailed through the night air writing himself and actually crossing his legs under him as he looked around. "Ah the night is so peaceful up here...."

Then he looked where he was going, and blinked. "Is that Ryoga?"

Flipping himself a few times through the air, Ranma deadened most of his forward momentum, then landed lightly on a lamppost, before hopping down next to Ryoga. "Hey Ryoga, haven't seen you in a while. Why're you looking so glum, chum?"

"Oh... Ranma," the other young man said, looking at Ranma through nearly dead eyes. "You're here. Good, I have this new technique. It probably won't work, but I want to try on you anyway. Who knows, I might luck out and finally have my revenge on you."

Ranma frowned looking around. "It's nighttime dude, can we put it off till tomorrow? You can come back to the Tendos for the night, I suppose. Just no sneaking into Akane's room as P-chan dig? Only I've got a lot of new, nasty tricks of my own, and some of them would make you stay in that form until I released you."

"I guess so," Ryoga said disconsolately sighing and looking even more depressed. "Isn't that always the way, nothing goes right for me."

"Ryoga," Ranma said, throwing arm around his frival. "Are you okay? You're a little bit more depressed than normal."

A few weeks went by, with Ranma fighting Ryoga the very next day then remonstrating with the other young man harshly about the technique he'd learned. The technique was based on emotional ki, and in particular depressed the power of depression. Tofu had been very clear on that point: the more you use a ki technique like that, the more that feeling overcame you. And while poking fun at Ryoga was one of Ranma's favorite pastimes, that didn't mean that he wanted the pig-headed martial artist to collapse into a black hole of depression, which was the way he'd been going.

Instead, with Tofu's help, the two of them worked out how to create their own pure ki attacks. Ranma learned his first, something that sent Ryoga back into depression for a time until he was cheered up by Akane of all people. Having learned how to move ki through the body to an amazing degree, using it as an attack only took visualization and practice on pushing it out of the body. But even so, it was a semi-bonding experience between the two martial artists, until Ryoga got himself lost again.

After that, life in Nerima started to wear on Ranma. Besides becoming fed up with his old man and most of the Tendos (even Kasumi occasionally). The fights were now just boring without Ryoga around. Ranma had learned enough of the offensive style of the Thousand Needles to shut everyone down around him with an ease that was simply astonishing. Even Kodachi if she bothered him in his female form (no need to hurt her or even though her besides a jab to the forehead and back) and turning Kuno into a statue soon became his favorite part of going to school. None of them could match his speed, and so none of them could dodge his attacks. Ryoga couldn't either, but he was able to move enough so that even with Amaguriken Ranma couldn't hit his pressure points hard and often enough to take him down quickly.

And Ranma wasn't willing to handicap himself anymore. There was just no way that his local rivals could make the fights more interesting and unless he went out of his way to give himself a major handicap they didn't really have enough to offer in terms of exercise or training. Besides, he was still learning more from Tofu about medicine, and finding that quite interesting, even if it forced him to read a hell of a lot more than he was comfortable with. But that was just it. Ranma felt he was learning and moving on, growing up even!

But the people at the Tendo place, all of them seemed to be stuck in a rut, and he wasn't certain how to deal with it. He started to spend more time with his friend Ukyo as well as Shampoo a few times. Shampoo had backed off after that first night back, and didn't cling to him whenever someone else could be around, which Ranma was very thankful for. *It's a pity, he thought as he walked home one night from Ukyo's, that she comes from such a backward tribe. She's damn sexy, but the moment I act on it boom we're hitched, and I become a second-class citizen. Screw that!*

And then there's Ukyo, he thought, chuckling. He'd spent a lot of time with her since coming home, basically helping her to get her restaurant up and running again after she'd run into a few of her own adventures while he was away. But Ranma still thought of Ukyo as the guy he'd hung out with as a young boy. *And crossed with her continued cross-dressing, well I've got enough problems in that area without adding more, thank you very much.*

On the other hand, being around the two of them, had told Ranma two things, one of which he'd realized earlier that evening. One, he wasn't interested in either of them or the restaurant life and two, Ranma wasn't actually attracted physically to Akane.

Flashback:

Ranma looked up, from wringing out his hair after having sprayed some hot water over his head to see Akane and two of her friends racing inside Ukyo's restaurant. "At least I'm not the only one getting wet today," he quipped, gesturing the three of them over to the grill. "Are you three hungry, or did you just come in here to escape the rain?"

"Both," said Sayuri, wringing her long hair out, and then taking the towel Ranma had offered, patting her chest and back down.

As she did, Ranma couldn't stop himself from looking at the three of them from head to toe. Whatever he normally acted like, Ranma was still a guy, he still had urges. He just had a near inhuman amount of discipline and control.

The three friends were a study in contrasts. Sayuri was an athletic girl, with a modest chest, which Ranma could tell since her school uniform was clinging to her thanks to the rain, and long legs. She was something of a track and soccer star apparently. The sight of her drenched like this caused Ranma to look away hurriedly, his eyes flicking over to Yuka. Yuka too was very girly in shape, the quintessential normal girl, not very athletic, not very fit, but also not very bookish. She had more curves than Sayuri, which she accidentally showed off to Ranma as she turned around, patting down her back in the rear, which was even more soaked than the rest of her, her knee socks soaked from some kind of splash.

Pulling his eyes back from that, Ranma's eyes rested on Akane, and he sighed. Akane had nothing up top, in comparison to the other two and had big, thick hips showing her body's strength and power. Indeed her entire body was nearly squat with muscle, but that really wasn't all that sexy to him. Yes, being strong was great and all, but Akane just didn't have anything else going for her physically.

Sighing, Ranma turned to the grill, muttering under his breath. "No chest, just none and thick hips too, so sad," before realizing he'd spoken aloud. Looking up, Ranma paled a little, as he saw all three girls glaring at him, and the hammer already coming towards him.

End flashback

So if I don't, erm, that is, I don't feel anything towards her y'know, physically, can I still...I...lo...like Akane, in the boy girl way? Even in his mind, he Ranma couldn't quite get that word out and his face went red. Is that even possible?

Over the next few days, Ranma watched Akane occasionally, thinking those thoughts, and wondering if there was anything about Akane that really attracted to him besides her body, which obviously didn't. In the end, he decided that no, there wasn't. Ranma had clung to her

because of Akane's offer of friendship, and she was a nice enough girl when she wasn't angry or trying to be a martial artist, but was also way too prideful and prickly. The last two could be said about Ranma too. And that was the problem, some of their issues were too similar, and when they were together, they grated against one another. They could be decent friends but nothing more

Ranma's musings as he finally came to that conclusion were interrupted by Soun's voice and he looked up from his thoughts to see the two clowns going into one of their normal routines. "Oh happy day! Genma, look, your boy has finally understood that my little girl is a girl!"

"Yes my old friend," Genma said with a smile. "Soon they will be married and the schools will be joined!"

"Is there a reason why you're checking out my little sister Ranma, baby?" Nabiki asked, smirking as he she saw Akane getting angrier. "Finally understanding what this whole fiancée business means maybe?"

Ranma shook his head, and then to the surprise of all simply smirked at them, then began to laugh. That caused even Akane's anger to fizzle for a moment and she stared at Ranma. "Ranma, are you all right?"

"Oh," just remembering something," he said, giving her a thumb's up before smirking over at Nabiki, the same smirk that always made the girls at school blush. Nabiki didn't but she did look worried. "Oh, just remembering that first day I was here. I was told by your old man and I quote: choose one, she'll be your fiancée. But I never **did** get to choose did I? You all chose **for** me. Which means that all this time, it's still been up to me."

Akane suddenly blinked, then looked at him then back to the parents, then to Nabiki who was paling, before she threw back her head laughed. "Holy hell!" she shouted between guffaws. "He's right." Then Akane leaped up, slapping Nabiki on the shoulder. "Tag in," she said then raced up the stairs, laughing still.

The youngest Tendo's reaction completely took the wind out of Soun, whose 'Big Head Terror Attack™' faltered, leaving him look a little out of it, blinking in shock as he stared up towards where Akane had disappeared. Her reaction had caught him by complete surprise, since before this, Akane could be expected to react badly if anyone tried to even bring up her relationship for Ranma, for good or ill. But Akane had never made any bones about hating being forced into their relationship, if it could even be called that, and the fact Ranma had cut it off like this, was a great way forward for her.

Genma too was appalled, and made to speak, but Ranma beat him to it. "Don't bother old man, we both know that was the case. And as much as you two seem to act like they don't matter for this arrangement of yours, there are still two other Tendo daughters."

In response Nabiki paled further so much she resembled a ghost, staring in shock at Ranma. He slowly got to his feet, picking up his plates and Akane's to carry them into the kitchen. "Never mind Nabiki, you're sexy as hell, but you're also the most egotistical and materialistic a girl I've ever met, I doubt it'd work out. Kasumi though," he went on, winking at the older girl, "Now she's a real consideration."

Kasumi giggled, knowing full well that Ranma didn't see her like that so not taking it seriously.

Not only had she made it her own disinterest in him plain, but Ranma knew Tofu's interest in Kasumi, and after all he had done to help Ranma. Going behind his back like that would be just freaking wrong in Ranma's opinion. And would have made the time they had been spending on trying to train him out of going bonkers around Kasumi a waste of time too.

"Oh, I don't know Ranma. While you might be on your way to becoming a doctor, you're not exactly in a stable position just yet. Perhaps in a few years," Kasumi teased. "Still I wouldn't mind a bit more pampering and perhaps a meal or two I don't have to cook. If that's what I can look forward to as your fiancé, then I could put up with your lack of long term prospects."

Staring between them, the three other people at the table could only gape, even Nabiki was thrown off completely by Kasumi's response, though she was also still reddening at the insult Ranma had tossed her way. Not just because they were true, but because Ranma had the simple guts to say it aloud. *Just you wait Saotome, I'll get you back for that!*

How long Ranma would've been able to remain in that house with his new attitude, and even Akane cheerfully going her own way, Ranma would never find out. The very next day as he was coming home from helping out once more at Doctor Tofu's his life changed again. This time he had been trying to help Tofu get over his Kasumidiction, a term Ranma had come up with knowing it sounded damn dirty, and wanting to shove it down Tofu's throat. It hadn't worked, since Ranma just couldn't sound like Kasumi enough to make Tofu react, and the lack of progress on that score was starting to get at Ranma.

Yet as he was roof hopping his way home, Ranma spotted what looked like some kind of blonde girl in a sailor suit and a mask rushing over the rooftops at the far edge of his line of sight. Blinking he frowned "blonde hair sailor suit, what looks like a whip coming from one hand? Either someone has gotten seriously into cosplay, or sailor Venus is real. Meh, stranger things have happened to me I suppose."

Curiosity getting the better of him almost as if he was a furry demon Ranma hopped after the girl. Soon they exited Nerima proper and entered Juuban, the next district over where the tales of Sailor V had originated. Almost immediately after crossing the border between the two districts, Ranma saw her join a battle going on against Youma monsters that looked like a

cross between various beasts and men and women, their furs dark, their eyes red or covered in shadow.

Ranma scowled angrily as he saw the monsters attacking the Sailor Soldiers. "You'd think that lot would've learned not to come near Nerima by this point. The last time they had shown up, one of them had the misfortune of being shaped a woman wearing a red brassiere, and Happi had found her. What resulted was best left to the imagination of particularly dirty people as the ki vampire met the even stronger ki vampire with the underwear fetish, and Ranma still shuddered thinking about it. *Still, at least it looks as if most of these are asexual at best.*

Then Ranma shrugged. "Well, I wanted some excitement, sure as hell ain't gonna look this gift horse in the mouth."

With that, he leaped down, landing lightly on the head of one, then kicking out at two more using the first causing them to turn in his direction before plunging his fingers deep into the shadow creature's head that he'd been using as a stand. That one screamed, causing everyone to stare at them even as the two Ranma already kicked attacked. Ranma grinned, flipped, and pulling the former prop off its feet, tossing it into two others, then ducked under and back through the attacks of the two already trying to hit him. His hands his punches caught them in the chest and Ranma's fist plunged deep into both of them, hurling them backwards with a cry of agony. "Hey girls, is this a private party, or can anyone join in?"

"Be our guest sempai! My name's Sailor Jupiter, and the rest of these girls are the Sailor Scouts, you're welcome to help!" said one of them. She was pretty-looking brunette, who was a little taller than Ranma female body though why she called him sempai Ranma didn't know. She sent him a flirtatious wink behind her mask and a smile to match before turning and firing off a powerful energy attack of some kind. "Jupiter Lightning Splash!"

The fight quickly turned against the Youma at that point and a portal quickly opened up nearby, their generals eager to get them and their stolen life energy back. Ranma grinned, pushing forward harder, ducking and weaving through them all, aiming for the ones closest to the portal, causing the retreat to slowed rather than actually taking any of them out. "Come on, I'll cut them off from the portal! Any enemy we take out now will be one we won't have to fight later!"

"OH, that is so true," said a drawling voice from nearby, one Ranma only barely heard over the sound of the battle. An instant later he reached the edge of the portal, which quickly began to close. Whatever the attackers had gotten from the people Ranma could see scattered around unconscious, the ones controlling the portals had decided now to cut their losses rather than risk the Sailor Scouts and Ranma invading them in turn.

But as Ranma smashed another Youma to shadowy dust, an attack from an unseen Sailor Scout, caught him in the back. "Dead Scream," the same voice from a few seconds earlier

intoned. The attack, a large purple ball of magical force, caught Ranma in the back and propelled Ranma through the rapidly closing portal, which snapped shut an instant after he disappeared into the roiling mass of magical energy. In that millisecond, Ranma disappeared from the Earth.

“What the hell?!” Shouted the same girl who had introduced herself to Ranma as Jupiter before. She turned angrily, sending a lightning blast from one hand at the area where the attack had come from without even thinking about it, causing Sailor Pluto to gasp and duck away desperately. “Pluto! What the hell, why’d you do that to Sempai darn it!

Even as she defended herself from Jupiter and the other Sailor scout’s shouts and angry threats at the sudden dark turn the fight had taken, Pluto had to stop from smiling for joy. *Yes, one more chaotic locus down, and one of the largest ones too. We’re that much closer to Crystal Tokyo and my finally being free of my geas!* Who cared if Ranma’s leaving would cause further problems for Nerima and even Tokyo in the short term. It was the end result that mattered. For that, Pluto would cheerfully slaughter whole countries, let alone one martial artist, no matter how unusual he was.

OOOOOOO

Up was down, black was white, the sensation of touch was gone, his mind was purple, his skin itched and moved oddly, the air smelled of roses and tasted of old socks and then... reality reasserted itself. Ranma found himself not where he had been, but high up in the sky somewhere. Staring around and then down, Ranma could see nothing of civilization anywhere within sight, and he groaned as he plummeted through the air. “What Chaos God did my old man piss off, and how can I get him off my back?!”

But that was the last real thought Ranma could think of to explain how he got where he was, the ‘where he was’ consuming his mind quickly as he fell through the air. The air up here was thin and that told Ranma he was really high up, as if he had to leaped out of a plane without a parachute, and that meant he needed to slow his descent down or else.

He began to use all the tricks he could slow himself down, spreading his arms out, pulling off his shirt and trying to use it as a makeshift parachute. But after a few dozen feet, the shirt was shredded by the wind. He desperately reached into his ki space for another, this time pushing his ki out into it, toughening it up as much as the cloth could take. This slowed his descent, but Ranma could feel his ki leaking out of him, the air pressure threatening to tear the shirt out of his grip or his tendons as he gripped it. *The toughness training had nothing on this!!*

Ranma continued to plummet for a bit but then he spotted something in the distance, some kind of giant flying creature. It looked like a dinosaur almost, but not quite, more something from one of those fantasy novels he'd seen a time or two. Regardless, Ranma laughed in relief and then began to flip himself, discarding his shirt with relief and kicking off it before the ki he'd injected into the shirt could dissipate to move himself towards the creature, waving his hands and trying desperately to get its attention.

The wyvern had been doing its normal routine, floating on the hot air coming up from below from a few vents deep in the mountains looking for food as always. But pickings were slim on the ground. It had just begun to look for a place to land and rest when it spotted something in the distance, some kind of bird plummeting through the air. With a hungry snarl the wyvern broke off of its dissent, flapping its wings for altitude towards the bird. After all, bird on the wing was always better than birds squashed on the ground.

If wyvern's could blink though, this one would have done so when it got close enough to make out further detail and found that the falling thing wasn't a bird, but a two legged beast, one of those which had such an odd fur, and routinely made claws out of wood and other things. But this one didn't have any such claws, and so it was lunch even if it was falling through the air. With no sign of how it had gotten there. Swooping up the wyvern opened its mouth, expecting an easy meal.

This did not happen.

As the creature snapped at him Ranma's arms, moved faster than a striking cobra and his hands clamped onto its jaws. Slamming its jaws shut, Ranma then flipped over it as the beast try to recoil, landing on its back, and grabbing it around its neck right behind the very dangerous head. The back was made of hard scales, all of them sharper than a sword, and Ranma quickly lifted himself off with his knee protecting his man parts even as tiny cuts appeared on his thighs, slicing through his pants and making marks that looked like papercuts despite his toughness training. Of course if anyone but Ryoga had tried this, their thighs would have been sliced to ribbons. With his legs quickly healing, Ranma had to keep himself pushed off of the thing even as he tried to twist this way and that the wyvern twisting its head around in an effort to bite him despite his grip right behind its head.

Wildly the wyvern twisted this way and that, trying to first bring its fangs and then its claws to bear, but Ranma stamped on its back, pushing its wings down, and sending them both freefalling for a few moments before Ranma lifted up, placing his feet back on its back rather than its wings. The thing took that bare instance to twist its entire body flinging Ranma loose, his bare arms sliced quite badly for someone who had gone through the toughness training.

But the thing had done its job in Ranma's opinion: it had slowed his fall, and even as his arms healed once more from the wounds, Ranma grabbed the chance he had now earned. Thumping his hands together, he pushed them down towards the ground, blasting out towards the ground with a blast of ki energy in intervals. It slowed him down, but it expanded his

reserves like water even worse than toughening up his shirt had. But it worked, and he was able to grab at the first branch coming towards him twirling around to further deaden his momentum.

But Ranma had neglected to think about the wyvern who, angry at the fact it's meal had fought back, attacked just as Ranma reached the trees, having been somewhat unnerved by the gold and white beams of power. Ranma barely had an instant to touch the first tree limb, when the wyvern was on him from behind, slamming him down, biting down hard from the side

Any normal person would already have been dead from but the teeth of the wyvern, which barely penetrated Ranma's skin, just enough to cause a lot of pain, but not to kill him. In response Ranma's hands lashed out again grabbing the thing by its neck, and flipping it over his shoulder to crash into the tree that he just landed on. Then it was Ranma's turn to charge, slamming blow after blow into the thing, using his fists and attempting to use his ki sight to find the wyvern's pressure points, but the hardened scales of the wyvern stopped too much of his hitting power to get through. "Hard way it is then!"

A blow took the wyvern in the side of his head, flinging it sideways, but it's wing claws still found Ranma, opening his stomach up in a cut from one side to the other. A kick send the wyvern backwards, blood exploding out of its mouth as the kick ruptured something inside, Ranma having imparted enough force to finally get through the thing's scales, using what little remained of his ki to do it.

But instead of retreating like any sensible the wyvern stumbled back a further step then quickly turned, bringing its tail up and around like the world's largest whip slamming into Ranma and hurling him through the air. His back hit and then shattered a tree in his flight, but he rolled through, riding the hit as best he could, skidding to a halt as the rest of the tree collapsed around him. Grabbing some of the sharp bits of tree he hurled them at the wyvern. One of them slammed into its wing and through it, pinning it against another tree. A second went through its other shoulder, and a third just missed its eye as the beast reared away, squealing in pain.

Wishing to finish this, Ranma charged forward, ignoring his body giving out on him as he closed. The Wyvern too, its eyes maddened and bloodshot, pulled its wing free, tearing a long gash in its wing and charging forward, ignoring its own wounds.

Just as the two were going to slam into one another again, two arrows came out of nowhere, one right after another aimed at the same exact point. The first one impacted its eye, shattering whatever film covered it protectively even as it bounced off. The second entered the weakened eye up to the quivers. At that, the light in its eyes faded instantly and the wyvern fell like a mannequin with its string cut instantly, plowing into the ground.

Yelping Ranma leaped to one side to avoid the falling corpse and turned in the direction of the shot. From out of the surrounding foliage came a woodsman in green cloth

blending in with ease except for the red hair that was almost like Ranma's female form, if a little lighter. In his hand was a large bow, its string tight but no third arrow on it, a quiver over his shoulder, part of a larger backpack. He wore heavy bowman's gloves of leather, brown to his clothing's green. The man's shoulders were almost as broad as Ranma, and he had a friendly, if somewhat wary expression on his thin face.

Ranma nodded wearily. "Well, that was anti-climactic." Then without further word, Ranma collapsed forward his body finally shutting down from ki exhaustion.

OOOOOOO

As the stranger collapsed from his wounds Tigrevurmud or Tigre to his friends, Vorn, Earl of Alsace, was astonished, appalled and impressed in equal measure. He was appalled by the fact that this man had fought a wyvern with no weapon to hand, impressed that he had survived, and had been doing so well before Tigre have been able to line up a shot. As he stood stunned for a moment he watch as the man's pants, a pocket of some kind or other, exploded outwards, some kind of spell or other the man must have been using somehow escaping it's confines now the man had fallen unconscious.

But looking at the blood scattered around, Tigre quickly shook off his momentary astonishment, moving forward to twist the man onto his back, reaching into his bag for his medical supplies.

Even as he did so, some of the wounds began to heal under his yet still astonished eyes and he shook his head. "This warrior is something else, though I have to wonder where he came from, and why he was fighting a wyvern barehanded. And what those beams of golden light were. Tigre had actually been tracking through the woods to find this particular wyvern, when those flashes had attracted his attention.

Tigre sat those mysteries aside for now in order to help the man, binding his wounds as best he could with poultices and cloth before leaning back. He then looked at the man and then the scattered items he had been carrying in his pocket somehow. Many of them were odd, but at least there appeared to be a pair of undamaged pants. "I wonder if that trick with the pocket is something in the pants."

A second later, a disappointed Tigre set the pants down next to the pigtailed warrior to look at the rest of the things in his pocket. There were a few things with images of food on them, but when Tigre opened one, he found what looked like dried wheat or something similar, and so set them aside. There were a few items that were much more interesting, a knife with many different parts which flicked out from a central handle, amazingly well worked. A box of

some kind with an even smaller box within it with strange gears within. Several camping items whose craft was astonishing, the lightness of them putting similar items, like a pot and spoons, to shame. And a sleeping bag the lightness of which he had not seen before.

Frowning, Tigre stripped the pigtailed warrior's pants off, and put on the ones that hadn't been shredded in battle with the wyvern. He then reached into the pocket again, hoping the magic would now activate, but it didn't. With a sigh, Tigre moved around, and making a makeshift bag from the sleeping bag, tied it to his back over his own. Then he created a stretcher to put the man on. The stretcher over his shoulders, he began to move through the woods back to his homeland.

He stopped twice, hearing noises in the distance and hoping that the golden flashes wouldn't lead some other district's hunter to his prize picked before he could come back with a party and the claimant. Putting up a wyvern for food and its scales for profit was too large a job for just him though. Still, there's nothing I can do about that," he murmured as he bent to his work.

As he moved around, he kept on glancing at the younger man, wondering about him. *Where did you come from, how did you survive the blow that smashed you through that tree,* Tigre thought, having seen that one. "And more importantly, why in the world you're not wearing a shirt. I don't need to resuscitate Titta every time she sees you."

OOOOOOO

Ranma woke up to the smell of something good, and he blinked, pushing himself upright only to let out a groan at the pain of his wounds. "Hiss...riiiight, Sailor Scouts are real and one of them doesn't like me. Wonder if my old man made a deal with her family too? Falling through the air cover, weird flying ass-hat of a lizard, fight, archer saving me with a bow and arrow...Bow and flying lizard, big ass mountains and no cities in or anything else in sight... I am so not at home it's not even funny."

He looked around to discover the red-haired man sitting on the other side of a well-made fire. The man smiled at him, and held up a bowl of stew he had just ladled out of the pot Ranma kept in his ki space. He didn't make much use of that space, but kept a few emergency things in there. But since the red-haired woodsman was holding the bowl of stew out to him now, Ranma wasn't about to begrudge him the use of it. *I guess I was so out of it my ki space collapsed. Damn that's not good.*

Ranma took the bowl gratefully, holding it up in like a flute towards the man, then tapped his chest "Ranma." he said. "Sorry, but I don't think that you'll understand me any better than I understand you."

The man nodded agreeably, then shifted speaking several different languages, badly if his stuttering was any judge. One of them sounded something like English, another like Russian, deep and gargling but he shook his head again with each. The man sighed, then tapped his own chest. "Tigre, Tigre Vorn."

"Tigre," Ranma nodded, then gestured over the man's shoulder towards his bow, putting his hands together and bowing thanks, ignoring the twinge of his wounds. The man shrugged that off, then gestured to Ranma wounds, thumped his chest, and then pointing at Ranma. Ranma understood that to mean that this meant his fight with the wyvern had given the man the opening, but he still nodded, and began to dig in hungrily. *Venison stew*, he thought, *been a while since I had this, but it's still tasty.*

Soon Ranma could feel his reserves of energy slowly returning, and closing his eyes, he redirected some of that energy to healing his wounds. The gash across his stomach slowly disappeared and Ranma then redirected his ki to his broken ribs, especially the one he could feel poking into the side of his lung. Must have happened in the wyvern's attack when I hit the woods.

His other minor aches and pains Ranma let go for now. They heal themselves once he had enough reserves. With that, he carefully pulled off the makeshift bandages Tigre must have put on him. He looked up as Tigre gasped, leaning forward only to stop in astonishment at the sight of Ranma's field-tested he nodded. "Yeah, I heal quick," he said, holding up his bowl hopefully toward the pot.

Tigre stared at Ranma, though if that was his first name, last or if he even had two in the first place Tigre couldn't tell and then he shook his head with a smile. "I think this is going to be an interesting tale stranger, once we can communicate anyway."

The other man's droll tone came through clear despite the language barrier and Ranma laughed, nodding his head. He gestured around them, then back to Tigre. "I'd say yeah, I think we both have stories to tell."

For several days the two of them traveled through the woods together, with Tigre offering his cloak to Ranma, but not his spare shirt. Ranma's shoulders were just a bit too wide for a shirt of Tigre's to fit, which was sort of irritating for Ranma, but he put up with the lack of shirt for now, the cloak doing enough to cover him.

Tigre also attempted to teach him the local language, simple things like tree, branch, quiet, and other things of that nature. Words like 'the', alluded them until Tigre began to add them to other words that Ranma had already learned. In turn, Ranma tried to teach Tigre how

to move through the woods even more quietly than he already could, though he didn't have much to teach him there. Ranma reflected that he would have to wait until they could communicate better before repaying Tigre's kindness. Tigre's interest in his ki pocket, once he got it working on the second day, certainly gave Ranma way to pay him back.

Tigre was continually amazed by Ranma's physical abilities, while Ranma showed amazement by turned by how good a Bowman Tigre was. Several times Tigre took a rabbit or squirrel on the shot, without even seeming to pause before spotting it and losing the arrow. Yet to Tigre's surprise, there was none of the disdain or contempt nobles and many commoners felt towards the bow. Instead, Ranma's amazement seemed genuine.

This was because it was. Ranma had never studied the bow, but he knew the basics, Tigre's was mastery of Kyudo, the Japanese-style of bowmanship was incredible. The idea was to make your mind see the target and arrow as one. Ranma had never been able to do that, unable to visualize the event like that in the distance, but he could recognize mastery when he saw it, and even more amazing was how fast Tigre could do it.

But of course, as Ranma knew it would, the curse came out. As they were moving through the trees, the sky above began to darken and Ranma cursed, looking around desperately for shelter, and finding none. Resignedly he held up his hands to Tigre. "You no be surprise," he said using the word for surprise that he had heard, Tigre use the day before, when describing how he had found Ranma. "Bad magic coming." Again, Tigre had used those words to try to describe the golden light Ranma had used, though Ranma had refrained from explaining where he came from until he could learn the language better.

"Bad magic?" Tigre asked, looking up into the sky. "It's just rain, rain," he repeated, using the word again.

Ranma shook his head. "Rain hit me, bad magic."

"Bad magic... curse, some kind of curse?" The man said, frowning and looking up at the sky again. While he was a nobleman and thus was learned enough to not use the word magic to describe anything inexplicable he came across, he knew it existed too. And Ranma certainly didn't seem to be so credulous as peasants were wont to be.

"Will it hurt?" He asked gesturing along his stomach where the wound Ranma had before had been. "Erm, pain," he said smacking a tree nearby, then wringing his hand out in an effort to mime pain

In response, Ranma shook his head. "No, no hurt," he said, using the new word. "Bad. You look away when I say," he said, gesturing away.

Tigre shrugged, and two of them continued on their way, with Ranma still looking around just in case he could get out of this. Alas, he couldn't and the rain began above them.

Turning slightly at Ranma's growl of frustration Tigre looked on in shock as Ranma shrank and two... protuberances... that the male Ranma most decidedly had not had a moment ago suddenly appeared there pushing out his cloak. It was instantaneous, almost, but very odd to watch the male Ranma shifting into a very female form. Ranma's hips widened and curved, his hair grew a little longer and changed color, his face softened, even, to go along with now having breasts. For all Tigre could see (and he didn't want to see anymore) his new friend had just turned into a woman!

His eyes tracked down, then up, then down again, then as he began to blush, he quickly turned away shaking his head. "B, bad magic!" he stammered. "Right! "Cover yourself, please!"

Ranma pulled his cloak around him tighter, trapping one arm under but tying it closed so that her chest didn't wink at Tigre with every step she took.

It was still suggestive, and looking at her, Tigre shook his head. "I have to wonder what Titta will think about this." he muttered to himself, cocking his head as he looked at Ranma thoughtfully. "Are you a guy originally, or girl? Then he frowned, "guy" he said tapping himself, then gesturing to Ranma "girl. Guy first?"

"Guy first" Ranma said with a firm nod. "Girl bad magic."

"I've never heard the like Ranma," Tigre said reluctantly shaking his head. "But then again, I've never seen the golden light you said you created or your healing ability, so I suppose that's fair. How change, how become guy?" he asked, try to use words that he knew Ranma had already learned now given how serious that question was.

Ranma shrugged, gesturing up to the rain that was still falling of course. "That and fire." He didn't know the word for hot yet.

"Heated water?" Tigre shrugged and gestured for the two of them to keep going down the trail. "Well if that form doesn't cause you pain, I suppose we can wait until the rain stops for you to explain that."

But it didn't stop raining, they were able to find a nice little cave to hide out in that night, but it rained continually and Tigre, looking up in the dawn sky, sighed and shook his head. "I have to get back as quickly as I can for many reasons," he said "so I'm going to keep going. If you want to come with me, you're welcome to, but that isn't going to let up."

Ranma barely understood one word in three of that, but he understood enough and could read the weather just as well as Tigre could. With a philosophical shrug, he held out his hands to Tigre for the cloak then stepped out of the cave transforming instantly under the pounding rain quickly. Even so, the sight of Ranma's bare back caused Tigre to blush again

before he pushed it down quickly and moved around him out into the rain while Ranma once more tied the cloak tightly against her body.

Around midday, the two of them broke out of the woods and into several farmed fields, with a few horses and other animals visible here and there. Without the trees blocking his view, Ranma could now see a small town in the distance, with a palisade around it. It looked tiny but also well made, and Ranma followed Tigre toward it without any further ado.

There was no one around in the town when they arrive, the rain having chased everyone inside. Even the guards that should've been on the outer wall of the little town weren't there. Ranma frowned at that, and pointed it out to Tigre. "That bad, need someone there, right?"

Tigre shook his head. "There's no threat, no enemies," he said using a new word right after one he knew Ranma had learned already. "Don't worry. Now come on. Let's get undercover and dry!"

Nodding enthusiastically, Ranma raced alongside Tigre, only to pause and stare as they came to the largest house in the small community. It was separated from the rest by a little garden of some kind, and built up out of a tiny hill, had a large upper balcony and was at least four stories, while the other buildings were a single story tall outside of the church. *Is Tigre some kind of nobleman?*

This idea was shown to be accurate a moment later as the door opened at Tigre's pounding and the maid stood there. *I suppose some things carry over, um, what's it called, function forces form or something? Still, why a French maid outfit?* Ranma sweatdropped, her eyes going large.

The girl was young, younger than either redhead by two years, maybe three if Ranma was any judge, with light brown hair and a kindly face. She smiled happily at Tigre, then in shock and concern as his disheveled appearance registered. Her face closed down when she looked at Ranma, so much so even Ranma could tell something was going on there. Tigre-sama! You're home. We were getting worried, and then this rain came in! I do wish you would bring someone else along with you on your hunting trips."

"No one else can move through the woods as quietly as I can," Tigre said with a shrug. "Besides, it's a Lord's duty to protect his people, I couldn't turn around and put someone else in danger while I was doing that." he then smiled and ruffled her hair. "Sorry I worried you Titta."

"I knew you'd say something like that," Titta muttered, holding the door open to let the two of them enter then glaring almost angrily at Ranma. "And who is this, and why is she wearing your cloak in such a manner!" Titta could of course see that Ranma was shirtless underneath, and was not pleased with the implications of that.

“Um, this is Ranma. She, erm, well...” Tigre trialed off, smiling as an older man came into the foyer. He was carrying a steaming silver teapot and several cups. “Bertrand, you are a lifesaver!”

The man named Bertrand was an older gentleman, but seemed to have a certain respectability to his face and bearing, Ranma thought. He also had a ready smile, which he turned on both of the redheads. “Ohoh, it does not take a genius to know that a retainer should have some warm water on hand for his master on a day like this. Autumn’s bite is on us after all Tigre-sama. Although I did not expect you would find someone like this young lady.”

“Tigre-sama” Titta interjected, staring down at Ranma chest then turning an almost accusing glare on her face then to Tigre’s. “You didn’t answer me, who is this and why is she wearing just your cloak.”

Ranma blinked at the accusatory tone he heard then suddenly understood what was going on here. He waved Tigre to silence, grinning at the younger girl and reaching forward to ruffle her hair before the girl could move. She squeaked a little, and Ranma held a thumb up. “You know worry about me, I guy.” he said, *even as he thought Gah, I sound like Shampoo! Seriously need to learn more about the local language quick.* He said aloud.

Titta blinked at that, then let her eyes drop again to Ranma’s chest before glancing back up at Ranma’s face, her expression rather droll. “Did she hit head perhaps?” she asked, looking over at Tigre.

“Um, no,” Tigre laughed, “but I suppose you wouldn’t believe me until you see it in action.”

Taking Tigre’s laugh as his cue, Ranma moved over to Bertrand and picked up the teapot pouring the steaming water over her head, instantly triggering the change. “Magic.” He said simply grinning at the girl even as he untied Tigre’s cloak and tossed it to hang on a hook set into the wall nearby.

The girl fainted immediately, swooning to one side as Bertrand suddenly went white, grasping at his heart and leaning against the wall as he stared at Ranma in shock. Tigre grabbed at Titta softly laying her down before racing over to the old man while Ranma began to laugh.

OOOOOO

“Did I say you could slow down maggots?!” Ranma shouted as he jogged (walked for him really) next to twenty other men ranging from his own age into their thirties who were trying to run up a hill near Tigre’s town of Alsace.

“No you bastard you didn’t!” shouted one man, followed by another roaring out “We’re only mortal not warriors of mystical proportions you ass!”

“That’s sir bastard to you lot!” Ranma roared back with a laugh, racing forward to pluck the large backpacks off the first two men who reached the summit, adding them to his own pack, balancing them there as if they weighed nothing before racing down to the other. “Now come on, get up there and then you can rest.”

This was actually their last exercise for the day before they could return to their real jobs, and the men were nominally used to it by now. As the spring sun beat down on them, the men continued to curse and grumble at him good-naturedly, but none faltered or really meant the insults they hurled his way, for the most part anyway.

Ranma had made himself something of a home here in Alsace over the autumn and winter. At first viewed with suspicion and some fear thanks to his curse, people had warmed up to him due to his medical skills, strength and willingness to pitch in. The fact he’d carried the wyvern he and Tigre had killed back alone without help through the woods was still talked about in the taproom.

Over those months Ranma had learned the language and, insisting on repaying Tigre and his household by helping around the place specifically training the tiny militia Alsace kept up. These were mostly farmhands and young men from the few stores, including the second and third sons of the blacksmith. Ranma trained them hard, but not as hard as he could of course. Still, he had a purpose: endurance is **EVERYTHING** in battle. When the roads cleared up so too had rumors of war begun to circulate around the area, and Ranma wanted his new friends to at the least be able to run away.

Ranma was actually enjoying himself here in this new world of his, and figured if his friends back home hadn’t figured out a way to bring him back, one didn’t exist, so why sweat the small stuff? After all, if this wasn’t an honorable way out of all his commitments back home without needing to choose or hurt someone personally he didn’t know what could be. *Besides, Ranma thought as he helped the last man up the slope, I’ve always been more of a barbarian than a modern man anyway. This ain’t so different than living on the road in some of the places me and the old man visited, and the people are a hell of a lot nicer, not to mention Tigre, Titta and Bertrand. Oh, I miss manga and TV, but that’s about it.*

“Ranma-sama, everyone!” a female voice shouted, and Ranma turned to see Titta and several other girls from the tiny village coming up their way. He waved back, bounding forward and down the far easier slope of the hill on that side to grab at lunch baskets, piling them high

and racing back up the hill, with a laughing Titta in hot pursuit. "You can't eat all of that Ranma-sama, that's for the poor men you've been torturing!"

"I'm hurt Titta-chan!" Ranma said, turning and still balancing the baskets on his outstretched arms. In his opinion, Titta was a little cutey with her devotion to Tigre. *Poor guy can't seem to figure out she's interested in him though, and she won't let me just outright tell him for some reason. Eesh, is that what the girls thought I was like? I knew at least Shampoo and Kodachi and maybe even Ukyo were really interested in me, but I had reasons for not returning their affections as I did.* Titta surely didn't have any negative sides to her Ranma had discovered and he was rooting for her.

"Where's Tigre?" Ranma asked several minutes later as the others were eating and talking to their girlfriends, sisters or wives. Many of these men were already married for all they were near Ranma's age, but he supposed that went in line with the whole dark ages level of tech here.

"He is out hunting of course as you would know if you had actually listened to Bertrand this morning before you came out here to torture these poor men," Titta said primly, sitting down next to him carefully. The two had become something like friends in the past months, though Titta still had a problem with Ranma's general uncaring attitude for things like titles and such.

"It's called training Titta, not torturing," Ranma said with an eye-roll then his eyes narrowed as he stared into the distance. "Is Tigre or one of the merchants expecting a messenger today?" Out on the road leading into town, the only real road Ranma had seen in Alsace, there was a single rider racing up the road.

Titta too looked, and frowned, getting to her feet. "I suppose I should be there to greet him if he's looking for Tigre-sama."

"No need," Ranma said, pointing in the other direction towards one of the outlying farms close to the village's wall. There a mop of red hair could just be seen coming around the corner of the farmstead. "Still... I think somethings up, we should get back."

Later, Ranma was unsurprised to find that his instincts were correct. Tigre set the message down and looked at Ranma steadily. That was something Ranma really respected about Tigre, he took his duties to his people seriously and never backed down. Even now faced with the prospect of war, he met that duty steadily. "Ranma, I can't ask you to..."

"You don't have to ask, you're my friend. This might not be my war, but if you and your militia are being called up, it becomes my fight." Ranma said simply. "I'll go with you, just don't expect me to bow and scrape to any of the other nobles."

“Hohoho, do you even know how to bow, let alone scrape?” Bertrand asked, shaking his head. “The best idea for you would be to simply stay quiet in the background.”

“What ‘quiet’ mean?” Ranma asked, effecting the same sort of accent he’d had when he arrived with Tigre, causing the others to laugh. But then Tigre began issuing orders to Bertrand and Titta, and the two of them moved off.

The two young men stood there for a moment then Tigre picked the Black Bow off the wall where it hung. That thing always gave Ranma a weird feeling, like being near a dormant volcano or something, something just at the edge of his sixth sense. Weird, but Tigre seemed at home with it. “Any word on what this war is about?”

Tigre winced, not putting the bow down even as he turned to address Ranma. “No, but it looks as if the young prince is being forced to take action. He needs to make a name for himself quickly, to force the greater nobles to respect his position as heir. So we have invaded Zhcted.

Ranma frowned. Ranma knew Brune was a relatively small nation, but one that had natural defenses on most of its side, and apparently one massively powerful noble and another knight who protected it from two of the other, larger nations out there, including one that made use of slaves. He knew this because a few of the merchants had wondered about Ranma possibly being the knight in question, a man named Roland.

The other nation, the one they were apparently attacking had been described to him by Tifa. It was apparently the home of women called Vanadis, who each wielded a different magical weapon. Ranma supposed that they could be fun to fight, but he didn’t like the idea of Brune being the invader. Or war at all really. It seemed to make violence far too serious and just as impersonal.

Tigre seemed to understand much of that and he sighed, setting down the bow now, it having not reacted to him once more. “I’m not looking forward to it either. It won’t be the first time I’ve killed but it is never easy. But I have to ask, what can I and my people expect from you when we go to war?”

“I’ll keep you and as many of them alive as I possibly can, I’ll bleed and fight for them and you. But I’m not a natural killer Tigre. I’ll kill monsters, maddened beasts, but a person? No,” Ranma said with a shake of his head. “Not unless there’s no other way, and with all of my skills there is always another way.” Ranma smirked wintrily. “Now breaking bones, shattering hands, unhorsing people, and of course, deadening their bodies from the neck down, those are my preferred ways of dealing with multiple people at once.”

“Aheheh,” Tigre chuckled weakly, a sweatdrop appearing on his head. “Can you at least promise to only turn those skills on the soldiers on the other side?”

"I make no promises," Ranma said, his smirk now much more impish.

OOOOOOO

Several weeks later, Ranma found himself scowling as he moved through the camp of the Brune army. *I'm not a soldier, but I sure know about fighting and this group is too freaking confident and not unified enough. They're not ready for a real fight.* He smirked. *But it ain't my business. Keeping the Alsace troop alive is the only reason I'm here. And afterward...Ranma sighed. Afterward I'll have paid off my debt to Tigre, so I might move on, if I've brought too much attention to myself.*

Actually, Ranma might have said something, if he hadn't seen the contempt Tigre was looked at by the other nobles. That had tipped most of the nobles here onto the 'possible enemy' camp.

A case in point was the confrontation Ranma came back to with food for Tigre and Bertrand from the commissary. Sighing he reached out to the back of a young man in violet colored armor. Lifting him off his feet and nodding over to Tigre. "Yo Tigre, food's up. And who's the guy with the gay armor?" Ranma normally wasn't one to use such crude jokes, not being a bigot or even really caring at all what others got up to. But he didn't have anything else to work with at the moment except for the guy's face.

"Wh, how dare, let me go!" shouted the young man, as his two friends moved away quickly, hands dropping to their sword blades.

One of them, a boy with a blonde mop for hair shouted, "Let Lord Zion go, don't you know who he is!?"

"Nope, don't care," Ranma said, before lifting the young man up over his head, holding him there despite all his wriggling, his arm showing and indeed feeling no strain from the activity. "And I don't particularly like other people trying to pick fights with my friends so..."

Tigre moved forward from where he had been squaring off against Zion and his two cronies but didn't move to help Ranma or calm him down. Instead, he simply took the food out of Ranma's hand then sat back down at the fire had been sitting at. "I apologize for my bodyguard," he said, winking at Ranma. "He's a foreigner, a former slave who escaped from his masters. I'm afraid he doesn't have much respect for our nobility here in Brune."

"Then you should beat him!" Shouted the man Ranma was still holding up air in the air.

“Now, now,” said a calm older man, laying a hand on Ranma’s shoulder as he spoke. “I’m sure this isn’t that important, and I am equally certain this young man will set you down Lord Zion. After all, you certainly should also be getting back to your friends and fellow high nobles, shouldn’t you?”

Sighing Ranma did so, even setting the man down lightly enough that he didn’t stumble when his feet hit the ground. Ranma thought that was rather nice of him, frankly. I suppose I should let you go yeah. Although he couldn't stop himself from getting in a final dig as he pointed to his own face. “Oh, and um I can make you up a poultice to clear up that acne of yours if ya want.”

The boy in purple armor glared, one hand reaching for his sword. But staring around him, ion thought better of it, and Ranma huffed, turning away. “Tease.”

He sat down across from Tigre, who smiled at him, shaking his head as Zion led his followers off. “Well, I suppose given what I've seen you do that was relatively diplomatic.”

The old man sat next to them, looking at Ranma for a moment before smiling over at Tigre. “Tigre-san, it's been a long while since I visited Alsace. How are you?”

“I am well Lord Roland thank you for the help just now. I'm afraid Ranma doesn't understand how to defuse situations very well.” Tigre replied.

“I understand how, I just don't care to use those skills” Ranma reported.

So I could tell,” The older man replied with a shake his head. “And it is just Mashas, Tigre-san, you know that.”

They fell silent as a stream of conversation from a tent over reached him from two nobles saying how they had mistreated their people but hadn't gotten away with nearly as much as the Dukes. Tigre immediately made to standup, while Ranma's grip on his bowl started to leave indents in the hard clay. “Calm down,” Mashas said to both young men, smiling approvingly at their actions even so. “Pathetic examples of nobility like that are the rule here, their troops make up the majority of this army. You need to be aware of that.”

“But what they said, that strikes directly against the laws of the land!” Tigre protested.

“I know, but you're in no position to enforce those laws, nor, to be fair is the prince at the moment. If the Prince wins his spurs with this campaign, then the position of the royal family will be solidified, and the strength of the powerful nobles checked. Until then, there is scant little two young man even such as you can do.” Mashas replied, still holding both men's upper arms, though he knew having seen it earlier Ranma could break free easily.

Ranma growled something about disagreeing with that, but shook his head to focus on something else. He could indeed fight all the nobles here, indeed, probably a large portion of the army, but not all of it, not without killing most of the soldiers, who were just doing their jobs for the most part, and making a lot of trouble for Tigre and his friends in Alsace in turn. "I think we need to camp with the rest of the men," he said seriously.

"Why?" Tigre asked before Mashas could question it. The rule of thumb was for soldiers in a Brune army camp to be segregated by rank, with nobles like Tigre and their personal servants in one area, as they were now. This of course allowed them access to certain... benefits, neither young man had made use of.

Ranma gestured all around them. "Come on! This isn't really an army, this is just a group of troops brought together. He waved his hands vaguely trying to figure out how to say it while Mashas looked on, knowing what the young man was going to say but wanting to see what he came up with. "It's like, it's like someone has gathered up all these different martial art schools, and expected them to work together under one person."

That was the only way Ranma could describe it. Ranma wasn't used to politics, or the idea of levy factions loyal more to their lords than to the central authority. Nonetheless, his explanation worked, and Tigre looked around. "You think that most of the troops here are more loyal to their own lords than to the Prince?"

"That goes without saying," Mashas said with a nod of approval. "Yet bunking with your troops rather than in the royal quarters? That would be seen as a sign of weakness. It might result in even more confrontations like the one I just defused."

"So we sneak over there after everyone's gone to sleep," Ranma said shrugged. "But I think we need to warn the troops that they should be compared for a fight against their own sides too."

The other two looked at him in surprise even Mashas not seeing where that was leading and he shrugged. "Think about it, we supposedly outnumber the enemy tremendously right? So if we crush them, what's going to happen after? We're going to fight over the spoils of course."

Ranma had quite a bit of experience with that, having dealt with Mousse and Ryoga, joining forces to go after a cure for their cruses several times only to fight about it after they found it or right before. He'd even seen the pervert brigade occasionally break apart like that after he and Akane made it clear to everyone they were no longer a couple the disparate groups attacking one another just as furiously as they were trying to attack Akane.

"That might occur yes," the older man said with a sigh. "I believe that the prince's tactical acumen is decent enough for someone untried, but he does not have the loyalty of the troops yet. He cannot command a halt to such conflict."

Tigre slowly nodded then stood up resolutely. "All right," he said setting his empty bowl to Bertrand. Ranma looked down his own meal and was surprised he'd also finished eating but set it aside looking up at Tigre. "I'm going out to scout around a bit," he said simply. "Ranma, get in touch with Torsam and the others, tell them about our suspicions. We'll go with your plan of staying in the royal court tonight, and moving over there when everyone else is asleep. Mashas, I am sorry to cut this short."

"Its fine," Mashas said with a smile. "The fact that you are taking your duties to your people so seriously as to prepare for the worst-case scenario says much of you Tigre. I will inform my own men of this same point, and will join them tonight as well. I'm an old campaigner, I can get away with carousing with my sergeants, whereas a youngster like you cannot afford to lose face like that." he smirked. "Your abstemious attitude towards wine and the camp women has already been noted I'm afraid."

Both Ranma and Tigre shuddered. "I've learned a lot about medicine and disease of late," Tigre said diplomatically, "I'm afraid that such does not interest me."

Ranma just shook his head for an entirely different reason. As far as he could tell from looking at them and even talking to a few on the march most of the camp women were there by personal choice, but he was still getting used to the fact that at least in Brune there weren't very many jobs women could take without a man's permission. Courtesan and whore were among those, and some women chose to do so, to use their bodies to make money and to make their own way in the world rather than to try to be beholden to a man.

From Tigre, he understood that that wasn't the case in other countries, some were worse such as in the slaving country called Muozinel, or the other major power, Sachstein. But in Zhcted, women had a far greater role in society, their example shining through. It was part of why Ranma thought he might want to go exploring in some point in the future. Or, as he'd heard it put once, 'go on a walk', a very vigorous walk, through both the larger countries.

Instead of giving voice to those thoughts, he said, "Like either of us care what the rest of these fops think."

Mashas laughed, shaking his head as Tigre nodded in agreement.

Ranma was asleep by the time Tigre got back, the two young men sharing a tent in the noble quarter of the camp. Tigre snorted at that, but seeing as there was quite a bit of carousing and merry-making still going on, he decided to follow Ranma's example, although he slept on top of his bedroll, not in it as Ranma did. And his bow and quiver were both set by his side.

This proved to be a very good thing.

Just as the noble quarter of the camp was beginning to simmer down from its drunken revelry, shouts and screams started near the edge of the camp. It took a while for those shouts to really register with most of the inhabitants though. Even the regular troops had been given wine and allowed to carouse, but it started to spread slowly and then shrieks of “attack, it's an attack!” began to move through the camp.

However, the attackers had been quite crafty. They had closed with the camp, taking out the few watchmen around it, without a warning being sounded. With that done, they sent in a small group to attack one portion of the camp, as others on two other points infiltrated. These two teams set fire to everything they could before escaping. And as the camp began to rouse and all of the better, more responsible soldiers raced to respond to that first attack, out of the night came a horde of cavalry, smashing through into the camp from the other side.

Tigre woke up at the first shouts of the first attack hopping up and kicking at Ranma's side, as he grabbed up his bow. “Wake uPPP!” He found himself on his back, and groaned remembering. “Oh yes, his sleep-fu, though what a few is still eludes me.”

Ranma however was awake, the attempt at kicking him in the side and the shout getting through his sleep-addled brain. He hopped up, looked over at Tigre and said we need to get to your folk!

Nodding quickly, the two of them raced out of the tent, and into chaos. Every noble was stumbling around, shouting various contradictory orders, their retainers racing off to their men. But few enough of them had made any attempt to really keep in communication with their troops once they were in the noble quarter, which left the troops outside without orders, and also dealing with the effects of the party they too had thrown.

Shaking his head, Ranma grabbed at Tigre when he what was about to start bellowing his own orders around. “Let's go, we can't do any good here!”

Tigre balked a brief moment, but then nodded, and the two of them raced to the camp, with Ranma almost leaving Tigre behind before grabbing Tigre up onto his back. With Tigre in place, he leaped over several tents before racing on. They found their own troops awake, Spears being handed out by Bertrand, not moving but staying together in a clump. Four of their men had been on guard on Ranma's orders, and then roused the others the instant trouble began. They'd even had time to buckle on their armor, and were a pebble of calm in a sea of chaos.

Some order had just begun to return to the rest of the troops, and men began to march towards the sound of the fight on the side of the camp, when another's shouts and screams were heard. This time it came from the direct opposite side of the camp. “Cavalry! Cavalry!”

Ranma scowled, and Tigre shouted. “Form square! Spears out!”

“What about the others?” shouted one of his men, Duncan, the oldest of the two blacksmith boys.

“If they've got weapons and are willing to follow orders, let them in,” Tigre said and before Ranma could say anything suddenly his bow was in his hand, and an arrow flew past through an open tent to impact the first cavalry trooper charging through the camp towards them. But there were dozens of others, and the men on foot all around them in the camp began to show the fear that any man on foot showed to heavy cavalry.

Then the fires began in several different places in the camp, and Ranma knew that no one was going to be able to rally the troops. Tigre seemed to realize it top, because he put up his bow, and began to shout orders. “Break to the left from here!” he said. “We need to get out of the camp. There is a small ditch, a dry riverbed there we can hide in.”

He ordered ten of the men to take point while the others formed a square now around them. The men in the lead lowered their spears, while the others didn't holding them at port arms, but ready to lower if someone tried to get in their way. Several times horsemen appeared out of the fire and confusion, but the spears the men held were quite a bit longer than cavalry lances and most veered off cursing.

In the next few minutes seventeen more men joined them, with ten of them bringing their own spears. These were slightly older men, who recognized the danger of panic, and had stayed together. One of them wore Mashas' colors, and he whispered breathlessly to Tigre. “My Lord has already led his own troops out of the camp and sent me to try to find you. But there's worse going on here than just the attack. There's rumors that the Prince himself is dead! Killed by an assassin some say, others say that he was cut down by the first attack.”

“It's every man for himself,” Ranma said grimly, having overheard this. He just then jumped up and out, leaping into a group of enemy soldiers.

These were all heavy infantry, wearing plate to go with their blue surcoats. Their large shields and swords made them the worst enemy to face for the spear and scantily armored troops from Alsace.

To Ranma though, they were just so many targets. Swords flashed out, only to be batted aside, and his fingers flashed out aimed at hinge points, deadening arms and legs. Fists and feet lashed out crumpling armor. The first type of attack sent men to their knees in shocked horror. The second sent them flying or to their knees in agony.

When an officer looking fellow (his armor was shinier) attacked him, Ranma grabbed a sword out of one man's hand, flipping it up and over to bring it back down to lay next to the man's neck. Holding it there then shaking his head his finger in the man's face, before ducking under another blow, kicking out backwards, and then flipping himself up and over their heads,

resting lightly on one head, before leaping back over to Tigre in his men, who had made a fair bit of distance since Ranma had disrupted that attack.

The men he had attacked would live, Ranma wasn't a killer. But taking care of the fifteen men Ranma had just done that too would keep the thirty others he hadn't touched from attacking Tigre and his men.

Ranma did that twice more as they pushed through the camp, once against a group of Brune troops who seemed unable to tell friend from foe. They also gathered up a few more men, some of them in the livery of the royal house itself, and all of them armed with swords and armor rather than spears and leather jerkins, which Ranma thought was the booby prize in terms of armor.

These men affirmed the rumors that Sergeant Licht, Mashas' man, had already explained to Tigre and Ranma. The Prince was dead, and all of the nobles were busy retreating, taking their own troops with them fighting anyone that got in their way.

How long the chaotic fiery mess lasted until they reached the end of the camp, Ranma didn't know. But eventually they did, and Tigre pushed through the spear wall, moving to the right and facing back the way they'd come, and around, oddly enough finding no one trying to break out in this direction. "The dry riverbed is that way," he said, pointing over his shoulder. "Move!"

The group quickly reached the dry riverbed, sliding down and spreading out along it. They had been spotted by a few troopers sneaking out into the darkness behind the fires of the camp, but all of them went down from Tigre's arrows. He sent out single shots each finding a horse or visor despite the fact there was little to no light out here.

Ranma waited by the entrance to the stream for Tigre, nodding at him, but making no move to leave until Tigre entered nodding to Bertrand and his other men, barley able to make them out from the starlight above. A quick call for injuries showed nothing serious, and Tigre moved to stand by Ranma after ordering his men to just bed down and keep quiet.

This had been the first of what the locals would probably call a real fight Ranma had been in, and it disturbed him on many levels. Not only was it far more serious, everyone involved was so mad by anger or fear, it was like nothing else he had ever been involved in. Despite that however, what really worried Ranma was something else altogether.

On the one hand, he really hadn't had any inclination or desire to help these soldiers. They were the invaders after all, and whatever else he was, Ranma wasn't a person to go around starting shit like that. He also wasn't a killer, but he had killed us tonight.

Four men, Ranma thought, four men whose lives I snuffed out like... he shook his head, refusing to even attempt to use a euphemism for that. I killed them, I murdered them. There

should have been another way, there was another way, but in the heat of the moment, I didn't think of any.

Three of those deaths were caused when Ranma moved to defend someone else, pulling out of his own fight to do so when he saw one of the Alsace men were in trouble, having tripped or otherwise been caught out. The last had been almost an accident. Ranma had kicked a man, and he had flown through the air, but where Ranma had thought he was aiming for a toppled tent, proved to not have been quite as toppled as he had expected. The man had become impaled on the shattered tent post like it had been a spear.

It had been a grizzly death and Ranma knew he would probably have issues with that later on. But right now all he was feeling was a little numb and grateful that they had gotten all of their own men out. A few had been wounded in the last final moments, fighting against their own people, who were attempting to head someplace else, but they were all still alive, and that was the most important thing.

Dawn broke several hours later on a ruined, blasted camp, and Ranma scowled as he looked around, sticking his head up just enough to take a look around. "Well, this is a good hiding place I suppose but..."

"But we are kind of trapped here," Tigre said with a sigh. There was very little cover between here and the forest at the horizon to the northeast, which was why the camp had been situated where it had been. And if the camp had been guarded as well as it should have, or perhaps even had a palisade thrown up around it, it would've been perfect. As it was, the attacker's organization and strategy had quickly turned the camp into a death trap.

Now the Alsace men and their fellows were faced with having to figure out a way out of here, with foreign troops no doubt somewhere out here, searching for them and other survivors.

"We have a choice," Tigre said softly, turning to look at Ranma and then down into the culvert towards his men. A few of them still retained their spears, but Tigre knew that any organized troop movement would probably bring down a heavy response from the enemy troopers who had won the war the evening before. He voiced that, then added "That's option one. Option two is to try to sneak out in small groups while I cover you all."

"And I cover you," Ranma said firmly.

Tigre saw his men were willing to do whatever he said including the others would join them. Sergeant Licht slapped his chest hard. "Just give the word Sir, all of us are willing to do whatever you say. You got us out of that camp, we figure what you say will be the best way to get us home."

Tigre nodded then tapped his quiver thoughtfully. They'd picked up arrows throughout the night or rather he had, the only one here who practiced archery as his primary weapon. A few of his other men had bows however, even if their quivers were not nearly as full. "All right, here's the plan. We'll split out in groups of four. There are few rocks out there, we can use them for cover for a time, but then, after that it'll be down to individual speed."

"Then I think we're all very damn glad that Ranma made us run so much," said one of the Alsace men dryly.

This caused Ranma to grin briefly. "You won't be able to out run a horse," he warned seriously "but you probably could out endurance one."

Tigre peaked out over the lip of the gorge again, and nodded. "I'll move out to halfway to the horizon, by those four large rocks there." Those rocks had marked a side of the camp the evening before, but there was nothing near them now to indicate that.

"But you'll be out in the open a target for anyone still around," protested Bertrand.

"So what?" Ranma interjected before Tigre could. "If we're targets, they'll come after us, not you and the rest of the men."

Tigre nodded then without further ado hopped up out of the riverbed, his bow in hand. He moved forwards cautiously, staring around him as Ranma quickly joined him. There was a shout from nearby, and a horseman appeared from among the wreckage of the camp, racing towards them.

An instant later the man was flung out of the saddle, an arrow straight through his visor having hit with enough force to hurl him from the saddle like a lance strike. The horse however skidded to the side and whinnied, racing away.

"Drat," Tigre muttered. "I wanted that horse."

Ranma shrugged. "Why? I can carry you faster than any horse can."

Tigre looked at him, then laughed, causing Ranma to laugh too. Still laughing, they signaled the first of their men out of cover, before Tigre shook his head and stared at Ranma as Ranma did the same. "How can we laugh after last night?"

Ranma shrugged. "The mysteries of the human mind, man. I'm more grateful for it than surprised, let me tell ya."

They stood there out in the open, with Tigre shooting down three more men as they came over the horizon, to the west as his men traveled straight east, first trying to sneak low to

the ground to try and remain unseen, then sprinting after they reached where Ranma and Tigre waited.

But there really was no cover from that point on, and it was only a matter of time before the small trickle of men was spotted.

A large group of horsemen soon came into view, not making towards Tigre and Ranma at first, but towards the forest, where their men word got were heading.

As they came into view, Ranma could make out details. It was a group of seven, with two women in the lead. Ranma could tell from the way the knight in green's chest looked that she was a woman, though at this distance that was doubtful. The other didn't leave him in any doubt at all though wearing a quite cute little outfit admittedly, and with long silver hair, and a feminine body. *Is that the Vanadis who was commanding the troops from last night?*

Before Ranma could do anything, Tigre quickly raised his bow, aiming. An instant later his first arrow took out one of the horses, the one under the woman in armor, sending her crashing to the ground and two of the other men behind her crashing into her dead horse in turn. The others all twisted around, and the girl with silver hair suddenly seemed to perk up in the saddle, and raced towards them, her hand grabbing at the sword.

"Concentrate on the others," Ranma said calmly, stepping forward around Tigre and crouching. "I'll deal with her."

Ignoring that, Tigre sent an arrow straight at the woman's chest, a shot that was so true, even if she had attempted to dodge it she still should've been hit unless she dove out of the saddle. Instead, it hit some kind of shield made entirely of wind, shattering.

"Oh great more magic," Ranma muttered, charging forward.

Eleanora Viltaria, Elen to her friends whatever her retainer might say, had been irritated beyond belief for hours now. The battle last night had been sooooo anti-climactic! The invading army had come apart like a rotten fruit at what she thought of as simple nighttime assault tactics. She had routed a force several dozen times her own group size, and not even taken that many casualties doing it.

Although as she rode, she reflected that a lot of those casualties had seemingly been very odd indeed. Groups of soldiers tried to explain how one man had hurt them somehow, smashing through their armor to make their bodies go numb, shattering steel plate with his hands, or simply hurling them around like toys.

Elen had not seen any sign of that the night before herself, being eager to take the prince's head, only to find the prince either dead already, or just gone. She wasn't certain which frankly and suspected a lot of things had been going on last night that had nothing to do

with her own attack. Other than the rumors about that super soldier however, the night had been **utterly** boring.

Then came the arrows, and suddenly Elen's ennui disappeared. *This looks like fun!*

A man with red hair stood there in the open of plain next to a series of rocks and a man with black hair done up in a little pigtail. There was no weapon in his hand, but no fear in his stance either. And not only did the men make the decision to bring her attention down on them rather than others she could see in the distance, but the first shot had crippled the horses behind her, and dumped both Lim and two of her other retainers on their asses!

Grinning, Elen lifted her sword out of its sheath and began to ride towards the two men.

She was surprised when the man with black hair rushed forward, but his speed was such that Elen took it seriously despite that, bringing Arifar up and around from where it had created the windshield to try and cut the man.

Ranma smacked her magical sword aside to one side, wincing as the wind around it cut into his hands and fingers like tiny papercuts, though those wounds healed quickly. Then he was in the air kicking up hard, forcing the woman with silver hair to roll out of the saddle forward over her horse's head. She then brought her sword around under the horse as it continued on its way leaping over her.

If Ranma wasn't a master of aerial style, that blow would've done him in. But as it was, Ranma smacked the sword down, and kicked out again, causing her to dodge backwards and away to one side. Though she did not release her sword as she did and her own leg came around in a kick that Ranma blocked almost casually, whistling a little at the strength of it even so.

Then he began to feel something, something niggling at his senses from the sword. It was almost as if there was a sound in the distance, the sound of laughter. And it was... At the same time, the girl's face twisted into a look of confusion while around them more troops were unhorsed by Tigre. "Is it just may or..."

"Is there any so reason my sword would be laughing at you?" the woman said looking up at him quizzically even as she attacked forcing Ranma to dodge this way and that. Around her a wind picked up, covering her body and speeding her along, allowing her to keep up with Ranma's own speed.

"Wait," Ranma groaned, allowing the blade to pass just barely to one side of him before striking out, his fist nearly catching the girl in the face, though she ducked under at the last instant, gesturing forward and sending a blast of wind his way. "Magic sword. I'd heard about that, but is it sentient? Able to sense magic?"

“Of course!” the woman said with a laugh, as she continued attacking. “I am a Vanadis after all!” The laughter from Arifar was irritating, and kind of ruined the mood of the fight, but didn’t actually take away from his deadliness in any way, so Elen was prepared to deal with her partner’s odd sense of humor.

“I will break you over my freaking knee magic sword!” Ranma growled angrily dodging again and this time getting a hit in, sending the woman skidding back then ducking desperately as Ranma pressed in. “My curse is not a joke!”

“Curse?” Elen asked, stumbling back and then calling on more of Arifar’s magic to speed her movements. *This man’s speed is incredible!*

Ranma growled, and began to move his hands into the Amaguriken speed attack. But the woman matched him, and then a spear was thrusting at Ranma’s back from one of the last remaining cavalymen. Ranma however dodged to one side and grabbed the spear then flung the man out of the saddle and towards the woman with silver hair. She leaped up over him, and landed, launching forward sword tip first.

“I surrender,” Tigre said from nearby, holding his bow out to one side by one of the tips as two of the men raced towards him. “Ranma, I think we need to surrender now.”

Ranma glanced over his shoulder but nearly got cut in two for his trouble. “What! Why!?”

“You can’t fight them all,” Tigre said philosophically even as a sword point began to press into his back and he held up his hands even higher, letting someone else take his bow without protest.

“Says you!” Ranma shouted, dodging another blow and returning one that caught the woman in the side, causing her to grunt in pain. That had been a punch rather than a pressure point attack, simply because facing an opponent like this Ranma had fallen back completely on his old, more familiar style. The two of them exchanged several more blows until one attack got through to score Ranma on his side.

But even as she pulled back, Ranma’s injuries healed, and she paused frowning now. “Are you even human?”

“That’s what my old man told me,” Ranma said with a shrug, “but I wouldn’t take his word if he said the sky was blue, so who knows? Maybe my mother was a demon or something? Would make a lot of sense considering how much karma likes to make me its bitch.”

Elen giggled at that, stepping back and laughing, throwing her head back and giggling merrily.

"A warlord who giggles, that's a new one," Ranma quipped, coming out of his own stance and looking around, finally finding himself, Tigre and the woman surrounded by dozens of her men. *Huh, where'd the hell they come from?* Ranma hadn't noticed the arrival of still more troops during his one on one battle against the woman.

A sword landed on his shoulder, and a voice growled. "That is not the proper attitude for a prisoner!"

"Oh no," Ranma groaned, looking over to Elen having found in her something of a kindred spirit over the course of the short conflict. "So she's the studious officious sort is she?"

"Yep," Elen said still giggling.

Ranma groaned then grabbed the sword point in his hand, holding it still like it had been caught in a vice. "When I release your sword, you're going to take it away from my neck if you want to keep it," he said, almost conversationally.

"Do as he says Lim," Elen laughed, looking between the two young men. "What are your names you two?"

"Ranma," Ranma said simply. "No last name you'd know, I'm thinking of actually giving myself a new one around here."

"Earl Tigrevurmud Vorn, Of Alsace" Tigre said, nodding his head.

"Very well. I am Eleonora Viltaria, and you are both my prisoners."

Ranma crossed his arms, staring almost contemptuously around her soldiers. "And if I refuse? Our fight was just getting good!"

"I know," Elen said with a sigh while her men bristled. "But I am as you put it warlord, and I can't just set my duties slide out here in the field. If you refuse, maybe I'll send some soldiers on horseback after those men. I was ordered to, as my king put it, 'wipe out the fifth of Brune that dare invade our holy territories'."

Ranma glanced at Tigre who nodded. "Why did you think I was surrendering before? You really can't fight them all: they won't come to you alone."

Scowling at that Ranma scuffed his foot in the ground. "Fine be that way." The brief spar with Elen had reminded him of some of his best martial arts matches, completely wiping the stain of last nights' carnage out of his mind. It would come back, perhaps, at night. But for now he'd had quite a bit of fun there.

Eleonora laughed, linking arms with both men and pulling them towards her horse, which had moved over towards her, looking for all the world as if it dealt with this kind of thing every day. "Don't be like that, it's not like being my prisoner will be all that bad or that long. In fact, I have a proposal for both of you."

"Milady you can't be serious!" said the woman, her voice almost tinny from the helmet she was still wearing. "These men are enemies! That one is far too dangerous to live, and the archer killed at least 15 of our horse, and who knows how many men before that."

"That was in war," Tigre said simply. "If I give you my parole I will keep it."

"And what would that be worth? You're just an archer!" said one of the other knights.

The woman in the light green armor nodded her head. "Milady, surely we have better things to do than taking two prisoners. Searching for evidence of what happened to the Brune Prince for one."

Tigre looked over at Ranma and leaned in whispering. "What's her problem?"

"A lot of people take this whole war thing more seriously than you and I do, or rather take it longer, letting resentment and hate still guide them after the fight." Ranma said with a shake of his head before going on far less philosophically. "Besides, it was her horse you killed with your first arrow, you probably should apologize for that one."

"It was war," Tigre said again, before blinking. "And... her?"

"Duh, can't you tell?"

Tigre looked at Elen then to the other one, his eyes going down each of their forms before blushing slightly and looking away muttering, "Well you'd know more about that kind of thing than me."

Ranma growled, his hands flexing a little. "Tigre, don't make me choke you."

Listening to all this Elen laughed, shaking her head. "You two are truly funny!"

Some of the others also began to laugh, although they didn't know why Tigre had said that line of his. The sword still chuckling in Ranma and Elen's mind though was beginning to get to Ranma's nerves and he growled, pointing down at it. "Is there anything you could do about that!?"

"Nope," Elen said with a laugh. Ignoring the looks from her men at that exchange she pulled herself up into the saddle, patting her horse affectionately as she leaned over into its

mane to stare down at Ranma. "Arifar is a rather recalcitrant child at times, especially when it finds something funny."

Then she pushed herself upright, staring down at the young man her face becoming serious. "Will you give me your paroles?"

Ranma scowled, then thumped his chest once with his head. "I, Ranma will give you my word not to try to escape unless you try to torture me or my friend, or otherwise turn out to be a bit of a dick. That's the best you're going to get for me."

Tigre groaned, as many of those men and women around them muttered angrily the woman in green pointing at him and shouting, "you see Milady!"

"Actually I think that was the most logical parole vow I've ever heard." Elen said with another laugh. Then she looked at Tigre, her eyes softening slightly from the hawkish evaluating look she had been giving Ranma despite their merriment. "And you Tigrevurmud Vorn?"

Tigre nodded. "I give you my parole of parole Lady Viltaria."

The woman smiled, banishing her serious air, and gestured to a few of her soldiers. "Excellent, now go find these two some horses, we should be getting back. I don't think we need to continue the pursuit any longer." Then she began to laugh once more as she turned back towards her own territory in Zhcted, the horse under her actually dancing. "This day is looking a lot better now."

The two young men looked at one another, then as one shrugged, and followed after the troop. There were a lot of hot harsher ways of being taken prisoner after all.

End Chapter

Chapter 2: Purchases are not Refundable

Surprising Ranma and Tigre, it didn't take very long at all for the small Zhcted forces to prepare to leave the field. The reason for this was only partly their small size in relation to the large host Brune had fielded: Elen had brought only five thousand men, Brune twenty-five thousand or so. Added to this was the fact that the silver-haired Vanadis had somehow put a horse under each of her troops and even had double teams of horses for her few carts.

“Tigre, I thought you said horses were expensive,” Ranma said, looking around at the army moving out from its small, orderly camp from where he had been put on a horse, much to his protests during his capture. It wasn’t like he needed one, after all.

“They are, for most people. A Vanadis isn’t most people I suppose and Leitmeritz is known for its horses,” Tigre supplied. “Still, putting a horse under every soldier, that’s a bit much, isn’t it?”

“It’s a major speed multiplier, but I bet it’s a massive drain on resources. Horses don’t work just on grass alone, y’know,” Ranma supplied. “They also can be outpaced by infantry, given how you need to rest them and the infantry themselves.” He gave a significant glance towards Tigre, indicating that he thought the militia he’d trained would have been able to do that.

From nearby Elen nodded. “That’s true, and I normally wouldn’t have bothered with the idea of giving horses to my infantry and archers, but I wanted to use the speed modifier. When facing a force as large as yours, I knew I couldn’t afford to be bogged down.” She then pouted, a face every man there thought was far too cute to really be on the face of a warlord. “Not like I needed to worry about that given how sad this war ended up being.”

“Why wouldn’t you give your archers horses?” Tigre asked.

“Not everyone can shoot from the saddle like you can, Tigre,” Ranma said dryly, while Elen looked on in interest. Then she and Ranma twitched as once more the silence of the small group was filled, to their ears at least, by the sound of Arifar laughing.

Finally Ranma could take no more, and he turned and shouted at Elen, which caused her guards to glare and finger their swords. “Damn it! Can’t you do anything about your freaking sword!?”

“Besides being amused you can hear it too, know that I can’t. Look at it from my perspective, why don’t you? It might sound like it’s laughing a few yards away to you; it’s literally guffawing in my ear to me,” Elen replied. She went so far as to lift her sword out of its sheath and shake it, glaring at the blade.

Now that Elen wasn’t trying to use it to kill him, Ranma could look at the blade calmly for the first time, as did Tigre from next to him on another horse. It was a thick-bladed longsword with an odd looking, large, blue gem, about the size of a hand, set directly into the blade. The guard was of a crescent shape, rising up the blade’s length and centered with a

large ruby. Ranma had noticed that ruby glowed whenever Elen called upon its power. The hilt below that was short but perfect for a woman to wield one handed, despite the size and weight of the blade.

After a moment of glaring and shaking Elen sighed and slid Arifar back into his sheath, looking over at Ranma. "So, try to drown it out?"

"Or ya could just let me go. Or even just, y'know, move away from me."

"Nope," Elen said with a laugh. "You're far too interesting to do that. So, tell me about yourself. Do you always fight weaponless?"

Ranma grumbled at that and might have tried to just run away—not to get away from the army and thus break his parole, no; he would have been doing it just to move out of range of the laughing sword. Elen's desire to keep her two prisoners near her was really starting to get to him. Elen, in point of fact, was winning this little match between them: keeping her cool while Ranma was slowly losing his to the laughing Arifar.

Instead of that occurring, however, Tigre spoke up. "I've seen him use a sword, poorly, and a staff very well. He can't shoot very well, however."

"Compared to you that'd be true of everyone. Your mastery of Kyudo is insane. As for swords, meh, when you're as fast as me you really don't need much technique, and weapons as a whole, I don't use 'em often. I find they limit my flexibility in a fight. I'll cheerfully take my enemies' weapons and break them, though!" Ranma ended in a growl, glaring at Arifar.

That he looked like he was staring at Elen's leg on that side of her horse was lost on him. But many of the men around him noticed. They might have done something about that if Lim hadn't returned, and the army gotten moving, the last of the camp having been packed neatly away and even the fire pits filled in. She nodded to Elen and then seemed to glare unseen at Ranma and Tigre.

Elen nodded back, then asked Ranma, "Kyudo? That's a word from your native language, I take it." She laughed then. "You're certainly not Brunish with your hair in that silly pigtail. Although, to be fair, Tigrevurmud's hair color certainly isn't common in Brune either."

"You can call me Tigre; I know my name's far too long," Tigre said.

"Then you can call me Elen!" Elen replied with a wider smile to a chorus of growls.

“Eleonora-sama!” Lim remonstrated with her leader and best friend.

Elen pouted but still looked meaningfully at Ranma and Tigre, indicating she had been serious. Tigre hesitated, blushing and looking away, causing Elen to flush a bit, but Ranma simply nodded. “Elen then. Kyudo is the art of the bow. It is a lot more than simply shooting a bow; it means being able to see and imagine the idea of your arrow hitting your target then simply creating it. There’s a lot of mysticism about it, but Tigre’s Kyudo is about as automatic and amazing as anything I’ve ever seen.”

“We’ll have to test that when we get back to Leitmeritz,” Elen said thoughtfully. “But you don’t use weapons? Doesn’t that hamper your abilities too?”

Ranma blinked at her, then hopped off the horse and, before anyone could stop him, stooped to grab up a discarded piece of ruined armor from the battle the night before. Where it had come from was anyone’s guess, as there didn’t seem to be a body nearby, but Ranma figured that someone had tossed it away to run all the faster. As Elen watched in interest and her troops pulled out their swords, Ranma bent the metal of the plate in half then in fourths then shattered the molded weapon with a single blow.

As Elen joined Arifar in laughing at the looks around them, Ranma finally replied to her question, his tone dust dry. “I think I’m good.”

Having felt those blows herself, Elen hadn’t really meant to imply Ranma couldn’t handle himself and said so. “But it is very odd indeed to find a warrior who fights with his hands...and feet, yes,” she said, waving away Ranma’s attempt to interrupt her. “I’ve traveled a lot of this continent, and I’ve never run into the like.”

“You’ve traveled that much?” Tigre asked in surprise. “I thought, that is...”

“Oh, that was before Arifar and I met,” Elen said, patting the still laughing sword like it was a living thing. “I was the daughter of a mercenary, and he took me around with him. Then I took over the company, what remained of it, afterward.” She looked at Tigre. “Does that surprise you?”

“Yes,” Tigre replied instantly. “But I would say it also speaks well of you, to have come so far and to have made Leitmeritz so strong and peaceful as it is said to be from such a beginning.”

Elen smiled at that, then frowned as Tigre looked away, back the way they had come from and towards the north. “Thinking about a girl,” Elen teased.

“No. Alsace,” Tigre said simply. “I am its Earl. And I have learned since taking part in this campaign that all too few nobles care for their people as they should. I worry for them.”

That caused Elen to smile even wider, though Ranma felt there was something more than simple appreciation of Tigre’s sense of responsibility there. “Mm, I learned to care for my troops from my father, then to care for my land from Sofy and Sasha,” Elen said with a nod. “I had a lot of trouble with little Earls in my territory too thanks to my humble background, but after I sacked a few manors and took away their lands to give to their people, they got the idea that I was serious about upholding my laws about how to treat my peasants.”

“Sofy, Sasha?” Tigre asked.

“Two more Vanadis, and friends of mine, though Sofy’s like... Well she’s just friendly with everyone, even that potato!” Elen ended in a mutter, growling under her breath.

“Not even gonna ask,” Ranma said dryly, smacking Tigre on the knee before he could do that very thing.

At that Elen shook off her odd expression and looked at Ranma again, one eyebrow rising in query. “Well? Come on, if we are going to have to drown out Arifar, you’re going to have to tell me something about yourself.”

“Well first, I’d like to say, could ya keep any more Vanadis away from me? If I have to deal with another weapon laughing like a mad person near me, I’m gonna scream.”

“I wouldn’t worry about it. I’ve never met someone before you who could hear Arifar. None of the others can hear one another’s weapons, though maybe this curse that you mentioned is allowing you to hear them. You see, how a Vanadis works is...”

“My lady!” Lim shouted, causing Elen to close her mouth with a clack. “You must not share such things with prisoners, and **that** is what they are, milady, not friends, no matter how friendly they might be acting currently. Prisoners, I should add, that we haven’t searched or even chained up.”

While Tigre stayed silent, Ranma smirked. “Huh, you want to search me? Yer kinda being forward there.” *Although that does give me an idea, heh.*

“Silence, you!!” Lim blustered from inside her helmet. “Know that the both of you will be searched thoroughly for weapons and locked in at night just to make certain you do nothing that isn’t technically covered by your paroles!”

“Mah, mah,” Elen replied, making a calm down gesture with her hand. “Come on, Ranma, tell me something about yourself.”

Surrounded by Elen’s army and being glared at by the green-armored woman and a lot of her troops with the laughter of Arifar still niggling at his senses (not his ears; the sword wasn’t making a physical sound), Ranma sighed and nodded. “Sure, so long as you tell me a few stories yourself. Then maybe I can get Tigre to talk about the time child-Tigre accidentally both woke up a bear by stepping on it and then saved a few of his citizens from the same bear later that day.”

“Hey, I told you that story in confidence!” Tigre yelled, causing Elen to giggle again.

Ranma’s tales were quite bit more unbelievable to Lim and Elen than vice-versa, but one thing was clear to them both, despite Tigre having heard much of this before. Ranma had run into a lot more weird, bizarre magic than they had ever considered could even exist. Even stripped of all setting and background, something both Elen and Lim had noticed, the stories were just amazing.

Halfway through the day, Elen, Lim, and their troops received a first-hand example of this as it began to first cloud over, then rain. The army, of course, kept going. Even Elen in her loose clothing wasn’t going to have a problem with rain in spring. Ranma, though, had a major problem with it.

Wiping the rain away from her face, Ranma glared up at the sky. “You! I couldn’t go one day with my dignity at least somewhat intact!?! Well, fuck you, God, just fuck you!”

Gaping, Elen wasn’t certain what she wanted to speak about first, so Tigre beat her to it as the rest of the troops close enough to see the change recoiled, pulling their horses away in shock. “And, as I’ve told you before, Ranma, you’re going to have to be more specific given how many gods there are out there. Though, admittedly, I can’t think offhand which one would have cursed you like that.”

Of course, Tigre knew the truth about Ranma’s origins and much about the curse, winter being a great time to exchange tales in Alsace. But, like Ranma, he wasn’t quite prepared to believe that the Vanadis and her army would be willing to believe that right now.

Then Elen broke down and nearly fell off her horse laughing. “Oh my god, haahahahaha! Is, is that the curse you were talking about? EHEHEHE, no wonder, no wonder Arifar was laughing!”

“Bah, you wouldn’t laugh if you turned into a guy, would you?” Ranma asked crossly.

A few of the men around them paled at that, and one of them even shouted, “Never speak such blasphemy again, you bastard!”

Another one pressed his horse forward between Elen’s magnificent white charger and Ranma, shouting, “Lady Eleonora, don’t let him, her, it touch you; it might be contagious!”

“Harsh, but also semi-logical, I suppose? If, that is, I hadn’t touched Elen a few times in terms of punching her during our spar earlier.”

“Spar?” Elen said, then giggled again, just nodding. “Fine, call it what you will.” *Is this what had you lose your mind, Arifar?* She thought, looking at her sword. Thankfully for her and Ranma, seeing his curse in action seemed to have broken Arifar out of his laughter. He was still radiating good cheer, but not laughing fit to make her head hurt.

“W, where did you get such a bizarre curse?” Lim asked, her tone less frosty than before, though she was still wary. Lim had been concerned since the moment it became clear Ranma was hearing Arifar that it meant he was somehow dangerous to the sword. Seeing this curse, though, it became clear in her mind that he could hear Arifar because he was possibly worthy of becoming a Vanadis.

Sighing, Ranma told them all about Jusenkyo and what had occurred there. Given the size changes sometimes involved, the idea of the other curses were even more fantastic than his sex change to Elen, Lim, and the others. Lim and Elen took turns questioning Ranma on the curse, what had caused it, and her body, accepting it far more easily than the rest of Elen’s troops. The regular troops still looked at the redhead askance, calling her a freak in whispers, they might have thought she couldn’t hear, but, after that, Ranma could at least be thankful that the freaking magic sword had stopped laughing.

“It’s like Arifar wanted to see your curse in action, but, once he saw it, he had had his fill,” Eleonora said, not mentioning that she could still feel her sword snickering at the back of her mind. That probably would not be a good thing to say to Ranma at this point. Thanks to some of the questions that the boy-turned-girl-turned-boy (Ranma had changed back the instant the rain let up) had to answer in the last few hours from her troops, his temper had been wearing thin.

In this manner the army’s ride through the countryside continued, nonstop at a nice, leisurely pace well into the evening, when they finally started to see signs of habitation in front

of them as they exited the purposefully uninhabited area between the two countries. Once they were on a road, their pace increased. With that, they were back to Eleonora's castle as the light started to fade.

The first impression Ranma got was of white stone. The castle on top of the hill, visible over the outer wall, was white. The outer walls were white, and the cobbles leading up to the large gates were also white. After that, though, Ranma realized that there had been at least two reasons why, rather than waiting for the army to invade and break them on these large walls, Elen had seen fit to attack on the Dinant Plains.

Work was still being done on the outer wall in places, Ranma could see, from the pieces left here and there along it and the scaffolds left in position. It was a good sized wall, around six stories tall, but he could see numerous holes along its length as they marched closer. And the second thing Ranma noticed was how few guards were on post. He looked at Ellen. "You rolled the dice on an all-or-nothing attack?"

Tigre got it too as he stared up at the walls. "There aren't any more people here, at least not on watch. If we had been able to beat you..."

"I prefer to fight my battles on someone else's soil," Eleonora said with a chuckle. "Besides, as you can see, this place isn't really a good defensive position."

As the door opened to shouts of welcome and cheers for the returning army from the townspeople, Ranma saw what she meant. Inside the outer walls was indeed a good-sized town with wide, cobbled stones and houses of various sizes. There was a small stream winding its way through the town, up to a castle set against the far back of the outer wall, up a hill.

There, after passing through another inner wall, retainers rushed up from nearby barracks to lead away the horses. The barracks were in rows, each of them uniform in size and well-built of wood and stone, each connecting to its own stable. There were numerous training areas scattered here and there, and the large barbican spread out to either side, with the first floor marked by long exterior hallways abutted by columns to the open inner area and further hallways or stairs leading up from the other side.

But most of this work, in particular the outer wall and the numerous barracks, looked new. "I take it you took over from someone else?" Tigre asked, seeing much the same thing but looking at it from more of a monetary perspective than Ranma was. "That outer wall would cost about as much as everything I'm seeing on the interior, possibly more, given I don't know if you have any nearby quarries."

“While, like my predecessor, I prefer to fight my battles on someone else's soil if they give me provocation,” Elen teased gently as she repeated herself, to which Tigre simply shrugged and Ranma didn't reply at all. “I also like to prepare for the worst. It's taken some time to get the walls to where they are today, and, as you can see, work isn't finished yet. Still, it is good to be home.”

She slid off her horse, but, to Ranma's surprise, none of the stable hands moved to help her. Instead she personally ruffled her horse's mane, smiling as it nuzzled into her shoulder, before leading it off. “I'll see you two tomorrow, Ranma, Tigre.”

That, unfortunately, left the two boys in Lim's hands. “Off your horses,” she ordered brusquely, hopping off of her own and handing its reins to a stable hand. She then gestured for two guards to follow her with the prisoners and moved towards the central building. These were more for show than anything else was and Lim knew it.

Inside Ranma saw a few maids looking at them quizzically before bowing towards Lim and moving away. Turning toward the still armored Lim, Ranma asked conversationally, “So, what's next? Gonna clap us in irons, chain us to the wall, or just toss us in the traditional dark jail cell?” *And when the heck are you going to take that helmet off? It can't be comfortable.*

“I honestly doubt they have any kind of basement to this place,” Tigre murmured, looking around thoughtfully. “It just doesn't seem the type, and, given the position against the outer wall, it would be a weakness in the outer defenses.”

“Of course we do not. It is not as if we make a habit of taking prisoners,” Lim said, glaring at the two boys. They needed to know that they were being heavily honored, far too honored in Lim's point of view, even if Ranma's female form had made her somewhat more accepting of him. They had, after all, still been their enemies not even a day ago. “You will be placed in a unused servants' quarters. But you will be locked in at night and watched during the day. My lady might be interested in your skills, but you are still prisoners.”

The two boys were ushered into a small room on the first floor of the castle, which had two small beds spread out, one against each side wall. They were very simple affairs without even blankets to their name, but both Tigre and Ranma were used to roughing it in far worse conditions. In fact, Tigre joked, “This looks lovely. That bed looks incredibly inviting after the last few weeks of marching and needing to sleep with one eye open.”

Ranma shrugged, having the endurance to keep going at the pace they had been, even with the fighting, for days. But he couldn't argue with the idea that a nap sounded like a good idea and said so. Perhaps, though, this flippant attitude might have been a mistake.

"Search them," Lim ordered, leaning against the wall and watching the two young men like a hawk.

"I thought that was a joke," Ranma said, although internally he was smirking. This was going to be fun.

"Even with your oath we need to search for weapons," Lim said, almost apologetically.

Ranma laughed. "Lim, please, I **am** a weapon."

"That is Limalisha to you!" she growled, her hand on her sword again. "And if you are a weapon, then perhaps we should cut off your limbs?"

"You'd be at it quite a while considering none of your weapons could probably break my skin beyond Arifar, and even trying to do so would put you under the asshole category I mentioned when giving my parole," Ranma said simply. "I doubt that pretty armor of yours would be so pretty if I mangled it by pushing you into that wall you're leaning on."

Lim grimaced at that but, despite her anger at his attitude, understood Ranma's point. He had fought Lady Eleonora one on one without a weapon and had seemingly healed within an instant, somehow, after being wounded by her sword. What was worse was that Lim was getting the impression that he had held back.

"We still need to search you," she said with sigh inside her helmet, shaking her head and gesturing two of the guards forward.

Tigre was easy; he simply held his hands above his head and allowed himself to be patted down, his hair searched for a weapon—which, given its unruly nature and length, made sense—and then his pockets opened. At that, though, Tigre suddenly realized what Ranma was smirking about. *Oh, this actually will be amusing. Pity that I haven't gotten to the point where I can create my own ki space yet. Two of us doing the same thing would be even more amusing.*

Over the winter months Ranma had explained about ki to Tigre, and, once winter ended, Tigre had joined in with the many men in the village who were of an age to be formed into a militia. He trained with them not because he wanted to become stronger or be able to use a spear, but in hopes of eventually being able to build up his ki. He had noticed that his

endurance had skyrocketed and his strength, too. Indeed, he had had to upgrade his bow several times after breaking the ones he had been using before. But he hadn't quite gotten to the point where he could manifest his ki just yet.

Once Tigre was done, the two guards turned to Ranma, who smirked at them, then winked at Tigre and said, "Look, nothing up my sleeves. Elsewhere, that might be a different story, though..."

Tigre groaned at the joke, then sat down on the bed and leaned against the wall to watch the fun.

The search of Ranma's body went well at first too, since he really wasn't hiding anything up his sleeves, unlike a certain weapon user from Earth. But then they got to his pockets.

One of them quickly pulled his hand out, rapidly waving it around and staring at Ranma's pants before frowning and pushing his hand back into the pocket, and then pulled out a box of some kind, connected to some kind of wire, which he also pulled out. He then stared from the object in his hand, some kind of headpiece, down to the pocket as the others did the same. There was no way the box should have fit in the pocket, certainly not without creating an obvious bulge. But there hadn't been a bulge before the box was removed, and there wasn't a lack of one now.

"What?" Ranma asked innocently.

"More magic?" Lim asked dryly.

"Kinda sorta," Ranma said with a chuckle.

Scowling and shaking her head, Lim waved the guards to continue.

"One odd box with this headpiece thing attached to it," one of them said, looking at it thoughtfully as the other noted it down on a clipboard.

"It plays horrible music," Tigre said with a shake of his head. "I really wouldn't recommend trying to push those little buttons at the top."

"Buttons, is that what they are?" The man shook his head and set it aside. Right, next."

“How dare you say my music is horrible, Tigre? It’s not my fault Brunish music is too boring and bland!” Ranma protested, amusement glinting in his eyes.

“Not everyone has a full musicians’ quartet in their pocket,” Tigre said with a shrug.

Ranma had attempted to explain electricity, batteries, and similar to Tigre, but it was like explaining the idea of flying through space to someone who had just barely gotten the concept of river travel being faster than land. It just wasn't going to work. Tigre understood many of the words, but he couldn't understand the meaning when put together. And Ranma, for all his knowledge of healing and the human body, hadn't really paid much attention in school on those few occasions he had gone to school before Nerima, and after that he still hadn't cared much, being too busy with rivals, crazy principals, and random people breaking down walls of threatening to drain his ki. He had no idea what actually went into making a battery or how to explain it or electricity to anyone else except maybe through the use of the whole static electricity concept, which hadn't been possible just yet.

Pulling his hand back out of the pocket, the man searching Ranma glared up at him, who whistled innocently as the man said coldly, “Five throwing daggers of some kind.”

At her gesture, one of them was handed over to Lim, who shook her head and snapped it with her hands. “Poor quality throwing daggers,” she said dryly to the man marking it down.

Ranma pouted at that but shrugged. “I tried to help the blacksmith out at one point. Let's just say I don't have an understanding of metallurgy and leave it at that.”

Lim rolled her eyes at that, but she could feel a small smile forming. Ranma reminded her quite a bit of Elen, and Lim could see why the two of them had hit it off so quickly. *And it's true that some people just understand one another better after crossing blades with them. It doesn't mean that they like one another better, of course, else Elen and Lady Ludmila would get along by now after all the times they've fought,* she thought, keeping a chuckle inside at the idea.

Her smile disappeared several minutes later, however, as the man reaching into Ranma's pockets just kept on pulling stuff out. “Some kind of odd food package times six,” the man said with a sigh, setting the packages down on the foot of Tigre's bed. Then, reaching in further, he pulled out a large sweater with a hood.

“Be careful with that; that was a gift from the people of Tigre's land,” Ranma admonished.

The man scowled and tossed it to Tigre who caught it deftly and said, "Thank you; it'll make a good blanket," ignoring Ranma's indignant shout of, 'hey!' with an eye-roll. "Your sleeping bag is in there, Ranma. I saw you push it in there last night, so you can hardly complain."

Several minutes later, the pile next to Ranma was actually taller than he was, and Lim's irritation had given away to morbid fascination. "Exactly how much more stuff do you have in there?"

By now all of the guards were twitching, glaring at Ranma with every new thing that the one who was exploring his pocket pulled out. "A warhammer!" he shouted, pulling the thing out and setting it aside with difficulty, given its weight.

"I thought you said the blacksmith hadn't given you one of those?" Tigre asked suspiciously. "Did you steal it?"

Ranma shrugged. "I was going to return it. I just wanted to see what it was like to fight with it, and then I kind of forgot about it."

"That I fully believe," Tigre said with a dry smile, shaking his head at his friend's antics. "Still, answer the very angry looking woman in armor, would you?"

"I don't know... I'd prefer to see her face before I say anything more to her," Ranma teased.

"Enough," Lim growled. She was tired, hungry, and she did indeed want to get out of this armor, but she wasn't going to do it here. Even taking off her helmet now would give Ranma the impression that he had won a concession from her, and she wasn't going to give him that satisfaction. "Are there any other weapons in there?"

Ranma paused, thinking about it and looking at the pile of junk that now took up his entire bed. "Damn," he muttered. "I forgot how much effort it's going to be to put it all back. No," he went on, turning back to Lim. "No, there aren't any actual weapons in there." He pointed to the throwing stars, the spear, and the pike, as well as the hammer that had just been brought out. "Those were the only actual weapons. I figure I could turn some of the other things into weapons, but not easily."

"Are there any lock picks or anything of that nature?" Lim asked, wishing to get this over with.

“No,” Ranma said a shake of his head. “I suppose I could create one from the point of the spear, but no, I don't think so.”

“You don't think so?” Lim shouted, her voice rising.

“Well, you know how it is when you have an attic,” Ranma said with a shrug. “Stuff just gets put there and piles up, you know?”

Ranma watched in fascination as Lim's fingers twitched as if she wanted to wring his neck but was keeping the idea at bay with brute willpower. “You will not,” she said coldly, “force me to give you an excuse to break your parole.”

That caused Ranma to blink slowly in surprise. “That, that actually hadn't occurred to me. I was just trying to get your goat.”

Then he actually did something that, after the past several hours of interaction with him, Lim would have thought patently impossible given his arrogant attitude. Ranma apologized.

“Sorry, I was just, you know, being an ass. While I didn't like being forced to surrender, I wasn't trying to make you break your part of that bond of honor,” Ranma said, actually bowing his head at that.

At that act and the sincerity in Ranma's voice, Lim found herself flushing slightly under her helmet. “That's fine, then,” she said, waving him away. “But we will be confiscating the weapons in there.”

“You can also take the Walkman, I think,” Ranma said. “Consider it a gift, and if you think you can figure out how it's working, well, maybe you can figure out a lot more about it than what I can tell you.”

As Lim nodded at that, Ranma turned away and was about to help the two guards sort through the piles of stuff to get at the weapons he'd mentioned, when one of them said, “Wait a minute! We forgot to check his hair.”

Ranma was about to wrench away, but the other guard grabbed him by the shoulder and held him still for a brief second as the other one pushed his pigtail up, looking underneath for any small throwing knife. After all, they had just seen and taken out five of the things from his pocket. Then the man quickly pulled the string keeping Ranma's pigtail there to make certain it wasn't a weapon somehow, like a garrote or like something similar.

“Don't!” But Ranma's cry came too late.

The instant his hair came undone, it started to grow explosively. Where Ranma had before had a short ponytail, he suddenly had locks down to his waist, and then they expanded in every direction, pushing the man who had pulled the small thread away from Ranma's hair away from his head and then growing further. Soon it was pushing the other men backwards, and even Tigre, on his bed.

Lim adroitly hopped out of the cell, staring at what was going on and once more feeling some kind of sick fascination. “What the hell is that!?”

“Get me something to cut it with!” Ranma shouted, reaching through the pile to see if he could find the spear tip or the pike head even as his hair buried the other two guards underneath it. “And whoever is holding the whisker, push it out where I can find it!”

“Ranma what is this!?” Tigre's voice was muffled by this point as he was pressed into the corner, barely breathing with all the hair in the room that was pushing everyone down or against the walls.

Sighing, Ranma realized he had to use drastic measures and shouted at Lim. “Get a cup of water or something; this only happens when I'm a guy!”

Nodding, Lim raced away, shutting the door behind her in the hope that that would stop the monstrous growth of hair from chasing her down the hallway. This worked, and she brought back a maid with a bucket of water while carrying one of her own, just in case.

When she reached the door, however, the hair smashed outward like a battering ram. The door smacked into Lim, sending her careening against the far side of the hallway, and she groaned, her bucket splashing on the floor of the hall.

The maid stared for just an instant, then, as Ranma thrust his head out and shouted, “Splash me!” she obeyed automatically, though she had no idea what would happen. Then she just stared, as the black haired man's face became that of a woman with red hair. And, as quickly as that happened, the growth of the hair ceased, the rogue follicles collapsing and going limp.

Tigre and the guard were still buried, but they were now able to fight it, pushing out of the mounds of hair and staring at one another in an odd moment of solidarity. “Did, did that just happen?”

Tigre sighed. "Yes, it did, but I can't tell you what happened," he said, turning a glare on Ranma. "This is one story Ranma hasn't told me about yet."

Ranma stepped forward, hopping to one side as she heard a commotion from the far side of the hallway as more guards raced up, lifting the door off of Lim and setting it to one side. She looked all right, but she wasn't speaking, and her helmet had a dent on it from where it had crashed into the far side of the wall. He looked over at the guards in the cell and gestured. "I'm going to take her helmet off to see if she's hurt. And then we're going to cut my hair, and you," she said, glaring at the one who, thank the gods, was still holding the Dragon's Whisker, "are going to give me the Dragon's Whisker back."

"Dragon's Whisker?" the guard asked. "Um, dragons don't have whiskers."

"Not around here, they don't, I suppose. I haven't seen one yet," Ranma said, removing Lim's dented helmet only to stop and stare for a second.

Lim had blonde hair in bangs which framed her face and which was bunched up now in a tight bun, having been under her helmet since the battle. Her face was slightly thinner than Elen's, but not overmuch, and she had a small, pointed chin under small, pouty lips. All in all, anyone looking at her would have called her a great beauty. Ranma was no exception, though his attention wasn't so much on her face but what framed it.

"Blonde hair," he murmured, actually running her fingers along the hair while looking for any sign of a head wound and shivering slightly at the feel and the way it framed Lim's face. "That's a first."

OOOOOOO

"AHAHAHAHAH!!!!" Elen howled with laughter, nearly falling out of her chair as she pounded the desk in front of her.

To one side, Lim watched this for a brief moment before shouting, "This is no laughing matter! His hair practically assaulted us!"

Ranma said nothing for a moment, still staring at Lim's hair even now before shaking his head and explaining. "It's called the Dragon's Whisker where I come from. It's supposed to

be, well, it's supposed to cure baldness if you boil it in a soup. Let's just say I was starving at one point and ate the soup when I was younger before I could bother listening to the explanation."

That was one example of Ranma's own actions screwing him over as badly as his old man could have. He owned up to it, at least in his own mind, but would never had told anyone back in Nerima anything like that.

Elen laughed again but waved him to silence, holding her chest. "Wait, wait. Let me breathe for a minute." When she regained control of herself, she smirked at him, cocking her head to one side. "So, from that explanation, can we safely state that you are a bit of a thief?" she teased.

"You can safely say that I was young, stupid, and starving!" Ranma said bluntly. "My old man wasn't the best of role models, and he always taught me that in that kind of situation, food was food, and you could deal with the consequences after. If you're asking me if I've ever stolen anything besides food, maybe my opponents dignity a few times; their reputations, certainly; and their weapons too more times than I can count. But nothing else."

And if I have, they were just weapons that my enemies didn't have time to use against me, Ranma thought virtuously. He was thinking about a few magical items he'd stolen from the Neko Hanten along the way, which the guards hadn't found yet. Still, he had no need or reason to use them and in his ki space they would remain.

"Wait..." said one of the guards who had been in the cell with them and had come into Elen's room to help explain what had happened. "You're saying," he went on slowly, "that this Dragon's Whisker that you have as the string holding your pigtail could solve a man's baldness! Do you have any idea how much that would be worth?"

"Wars were fought over it back home, apparently. At least according to the bald guy who was forced to give me the whisker," Ranma said with a shrug. "Unfortunately, the reason behind that is the fact that it takes an entire Dragon's Whisker to make a single serving."

The man looked visibly disappointed at that, and Ranma shrugged again, looking back over at Elen. "That's why I never even told my old man I had it."

"Was he bald, then?" Elen asked with a chuckle.

"Bald, fat, and ugly," Ranma said with a laugh of his own. "He spent so much time in his panda form that eventually no one was able to tell the difference."

“Hmhf,” Lim grunted, deciding to get a dig in on Ranma given the number of times he'd gotten one in on her. “Is that what you have to look forward to when you hit middle-age, then? Other than the baldness, obviously—you were able to solve that problem through sheer luck. But becoming obese?”

“I doubt it,” Ranma said dryly. “My old man didn't discover how to manipulate his ki until he was in his forties. Me, I learned how to barely a few months back.” Ranma's fingers began to glow blue and gold. “With that, I can eat and eat, and I'd never gain anything unless I wanted to.”

Elen just nodded. She had a passing familiarity with the idea of life energy as a Vanadis, having built up her life energy to the point where she could survive the strain of using Arifar. The idea of being able to actually use the energy within her on a conscious level, however, was interesting. *I wonder how long it would take me to learn how to do that*, she thought. “And is that what creates this expanded pocket concept?”

“Pretty much, yes,” Ranma said with a nod, seeing no harm in sharing it considering how much effort it would take to actually figure out how to create the ki pocket.

“And you promise that you're not going to escape?” Elen said again with a chuckle, mock glaring over at her friend. “Most of this is your fault, Lim,” she said sternly, though her lips were twitching as she did so. “If you had taken them at their word...”

“Not everyone is as honorable as you are, although I will admit that both myself and these two were a little too overzealous,” Lim said with a sigh.

“Well, regardless, you all should head to bed, I think. Tomorrow's going to be an interesting day,” Elen said, dismissing them at last.

The guards led Tigre and Ranma out of the room, leaving Elen and Lim alone. “Milady, why do you trust them so much?” Lim asked bluntly.

“They're interesting,” Elen said with a smile. “One of them is both interesting, honorable, and... Well, let us just say there are possibilities with Tigre, I think. The other is funny, honorable if somewhat offbeat, has simply amazing abilities, and is on the level of a Vanadis in strength.”

And he is hiding something, if rather poorly, based on even the slightest look at these items from his expanded pocket. An expanded pocket! Elen thought, almost laughing manically at the very idea.

Elen shook her head, looking at her friend seriously. "Lim, he could have escaped any time he wanted. I'm the only one here who could fight Ranma, whatever his gender. And, if he was just concentrating on running away, he could've done it. Once those men had reached the woods, we would never have been able to find them, so we couldn't have kept on using that as a threat, and he would have been gone."

"I suppose..." Lim said slowly.

"You're just going to have to trust my word for them, I think, for now. I imagine, in time, you'll get to trust their word, if nothing else." Then she smirked. "I can't say that you and Ranma will ever be friends, though. Your attitudes are kind of exactly opposite one another."

Lim scowled, shaking her head and setting her blonde hair to flying for a moment, since she hadn't put it up in her traditional ponytail just yet after having had it under her helmet for so long. "What do you have planned for them tomorrow?"

"I'd like to spar with Ranma, but, before that, I want to see Tigre shoot. That will put to rest some of the rumors that are already going around the army."

Lim scowled, having heard much the same rumors as she moved through the castle. Though, after the event with Ranma and his hair, she felt a new rumor would be more prevalent: that Ranma was a warlock in disguise, able to enchant hair to attack its owner. "That would be a most excellent idea, milady."

Chuckling, Elen stood up, gave her friend a one armed hug, and then bid her to bed before turning away to enter her own room at the back of her office. She picked up Arifar as she went, the automatic movement of a true Vanadis, setting it beside her as she began to change. "So, the curse was funny enough for you to laugh that long, huh, Arifar, but no longer?"

Pulses of amusement came from Arifar, then images of the curse and then a swirl of monstrous colors all mixed together. "So you weren't laughing just at the curse but at something else?"

She got an affirmative feeling, and then their odd communication paused before the image of Ludmila came up followed by Ranma's face and then back to Ludmila's own before both of them disappeared in a variety of colors as well. "True, they wouldn't get along," she replied, now clothed in a short silk camisole, as she got into bed. "But that can't be your only reason. I know she and I don't get along, but I've never heard a hint that the weapons take on that irritation with one another."

Again Ranma appeared, followed by that swirl of monstrous colors, and then by the laughter of the sword in her mind.

“The chaos,” she finally said, understanding. “You were laughing at the chaos he’s certain to cause?”

Now Elen got a larger affirmative feeling from the sword and chuckled as well. “Yes, I think I’m looking forward to the chaos he causes too. So long as it doesn’t drop entirely on my lap, anyway.”

Again, she only got amusement from Arifar and flicked the hilt of it with a finger, pouting as she pulled the covers back and got into bed. “Some help you are.”

OOOOOOO

Back in Alsace, there was a young maid who Tigre and Ranma knew very well, sitting by a window. As Ranma and Tigre were finally allowed to go back to their room (which had been cleared of hair) and told to rest up, Titta, too, was looking out at the nighttime sky, her hands pressed together hard as she bowed her head. “Please let Lord Tigre come home safe.” Then her eyes narrowed. “And if he doesn’t, Ranma, you will answer to me!”

OOOOOOO

“So, how does this whole prisoner thing work once we’ve given our parole?” Ranma asked. “They’re supposed to try and ransom us back, right? Well, I say us, but I figure you’re the only one that would pony up any money for me, so that kind of defeats the purpose.”

“That’s true. I...” Tigre broke off as Ranma shivered suddenly, looking around wildly. “What is it?”

“A woman just swore she'd punish me for something I couldn't control,” Ranma said slowly, shaking off the feeling of a number seven shiver. “Don't worry; it happens all the time. Go on.”

“Tomorrow morning the Vanadis will set our ransom prices. If my people can match the amount, it'll be sent. Once the money arrives, they let us go. Simple. The taking of rich opponents like that is a time-honored way of gaining money,” Tigre replied.

Ranma looked at him thoughtfully. “Yeahhhh, I really, really don't think that is going to happen.”

“Why not?”

“You just said normal and simple in something that has to deal with me, for one thing. For another, I don't think Elen is the sort to care so much about money,” Ranma replied.

“What else could she be after?”

“Never ask that,” Ranma said with a sigh, lying on his bed.

OOOOOOO

“We only have how many troops!?” Zion shouted in dismay, staring at his commander.

“Only two hundred have rallied to the banner so far, commander. But if we wait here at the edge of the Brune side of the Plains in plain sight, we might be able to gather up the rest.”

Zion scowled, thinking hard. The battle had been a debacle from the beginning, not at **all** the way it was supposed to go. *Father said we were just supposed to be there to see if the prince could win and was worth our family's continued allegiance, despite the old king being so frail of late. I know he's been longing to try for the throne, but the Rule of Strength is such that our family won't do so if it weakens our own position and that of Brune as a whole. If the Prince could prove his strength, we would follow him. But not only did that not happen, we lost the war!*

He wondered idly what happened to the Prince, having heard that he had been assassinated by someone before the battle. Zion had placed a few servants loyal to his family near the Royal Pavilion, and they had reported sounds of a scuffle and the sounds of combat coming from the prince's tent before the traitorous foreign bitch had launched her night attack.

Regardless of what happened to the prince, the army had shattered at the sudden assault, each Lord rushing away, every man for himself like Zion had. *I've lost most of the men Father gave me to lead into this battle. I'd bet most of the other nobles are in a similar state or worse.*

No, Zion was not looking forward to facing his father once he got back. *Still, I'm alive. That is by far the most important thing.* He scowled at the man who had spoken, a lowly leader of five but still the most senior man among the hundred Zion had been able to gather already, and then shook his head. "Leave half the men to gather the rest if they can. Tell them to live off the land however they can. We'll take the rest of what little supplies we have with us. We must get back to Nemetacum and report what has happened."

He must know that the Prince has disappeared, slain by an assassin before his first battle. If that is not weakness, I do not know what is! The time to try for the throne is now! Zion thought viciously, eager to see the day when he would be prince, and his father, king.

OOOOOOO

The next day Ranma woke up to some noise near him, drawing his mind out of the land of sleep. Turning onto his side, facing towards Tigre's bed, he saw Lim kneeling over Tigre, and he might have said something about it being a bit too early, or for the two of them to get their own room or at least wait until he left, if not for two things.

One, the woman had Arifar pointed slightly into Tigre's mouth. That would've caused Ranma to attack instantly, though he did know that Tigre was rather hard to wake. But the other thing, which stopped Ranma from attacking, was the fact that, since she was crouching there, facing away from him, Lim's rear was pressed out towards him, and Ranma could see right up her skirt to her pert, panty-clad rear and long, powerful looking thighs. A part of Ranma's mind noticed that her panties had a small bear print on it, of all things. But that did

not in any way take away Ranma's enjoyment of the rest of what he was seeing here. "Damn," he muttered.

He only realized he had spoken aloud when Lim quickly pulled her sword out of the now awake Tigre's mouth and started to twist around, pushing at her skirt down and glaring at him. "Did you see?!" she growled as she stood up, towering over the still prone Ranma.

"What, you assaulting my friend? Yeah, I saw that," Ranma said, hoping to redirect Lim's anger.

"No! Not that!" The sword point came around quickly to point at Ranma. "Did you see?"

He held up his hands but even his ingrained wariness of an angry woman didn't stop him from taking Lim's appearance in. Now that she wasn't wearing the armor, that was one hell of a treat, in Ranma's opinion, right up there with Elen in her Vanadis outfit.

Her skirt was similar to Elen's combat suit from the other day, a short, skintight blue top wrapping around her bust like a second skin, yet leaving her stomach exposed until the skirt portion began, a mix of blue and white. Lim was also very well endowed, if a little less so than Elen, being close to what Ranma knew as his female form's size, a mid-C, though Lim looked like a high C, low D. Elen, Ranma was certain, had mid-size D cups at a minimum. *Damn, both Elen and Lim blow Shampoo out of the water in the looks department.*

"Did you see?" she barked again, waving the sword in his face.

Now getting a little tired of that—after all, Lim should know her sword really wasn't a threat to him—Ranma's hand flashed up, grabbing her by the wrist and pulling her in before twisting until she was flat down on the bed next to him. A second later, the hand holding the sword was smacked into the wall with enough force to deaden her grip and cause her to drop it, and now it was Ranma's turn to be on top of her, pressing her down.

"You need to stop waving that sword in my face!" he said with a mock growl in his voice as he stared down into her own blue eyes, their color a tad lighter than his own. "Seriously, do you think I'm just going to stand still and let you try to hack at me? I've had enough of being people's whipping boy, thanks." *I'll take my lumps if I've earned 'em through my own actions, not because I saw a girl's rear by accident!*

"...Fine," Lim said with a blush on her face as she looked away. "Now get off me. This is harassment, you know."

For a moment Ranma didn't hear her, staring at her blonde hair along with those eyes and feeling her body against his. Then he hopped off her as if Lim's body had just turned scalding hot, flushing and looking away. "Um, sorry," he muttered, reaching down to pull her to her feet.

But Lim smacked his hand away and rolled to the edge of the bed before getting to her feet, grabbing her sword, and trying to muster what remained of her dignity. Ranma, though, was looking at the wall, grumbling irritably to himself. *Okay, so it is the morning, but, come on, brain, control those hormones! This is **so** not the time!*

Grumbling irritably to herself as well, Lim gestured towards the doorway. "Come. My lady wishes to see the both of you outside on the archery range."

"Me too?" Ranma asked, blinking and look pointing at himself. "I don't use bows."

"That's true, but the two of you are a paired set," Lim said coldly. "I'm not about to leave you alone to wander the castle without supervision."

Ranma rolled his eyes at that, but nodded agreeably and went with the woman, though they did eventually split off from Tigre when Lim pointed at him and then to a few soldiers by another doorway. "They will show you to the bow and arrow set that you will be using."

Outside, Ranma found Elen sitting on a lounge-like chair. She waved at him and Lim, then looked behind them for Tigre. "He'll be here in a moment," Lim said. "We had to actually give him a bow, after all. And that boy was horrendously hard to wake up, so I'm afraid we didn't have time to feed and water them before this exhibition."

"I should probably warn you, he could possibly break some of the bows you have here if they're not strong enough and Tigre forgets his strength," Ranma said with a chuckle.

"Truly? How strong is Tigre, then?" Elen asked, interested. He had seemed skilled, but beyond the strength needed for the draw of his bow, she didn't have a very good idea as to his physical abilities. *Although that scruffy red hair of his is kind of cute,* Elen thought with a giggle.

"Strong enough that he had to personally craft his own bow after breaking two others recently," Ranma said, looking down at her as he stopped by her chair. "So, why exactly am I here?"

“Don't worry,” Elen said with a smirk, one hand dropping to where Arifar was by her side, propped up against the chair. “I'll be getting to you soon enough.”

Shrugging his shoulders at that, Ranma crouched down next to her and then looked around and said quizzically, “Do you mind if I do some exercises or something? I'll get bored just watching Tigre.”

Elen laughed at that, waving him off, and he started to do push-ups, but not like push-ups Elen or any of the others had ever seen. Instead of the traditional method, Ranma lay out, then lifted his legs up off the ground, even his toes not touching. Then he pushed off with one hand, to full length, then back down slowly, and begin to count. “One, two, three...”

Elen looked at this, and after seeing the faces on some of her soldiers chuckled. “Did you make the soldiers of Alsace do that kind of thing?”

“No,” Ranma said, “just regular pushups for them. Seventeen...”

“And how many do you do in a set?” Judging her own body and what Ranma was currently doing, Elen estimated that she could probably do something like seven-hundred with each arm unless she really wanted to kill herself.

“Eight-hundred fifty on each arm,” Ranma said with a sigh, scowling now. “Twenty-six. Unless I really want to push myself. Now, don't make lose count. Twenty-seven...”

“That sounds fun,” Elen said with a chuckle making a note to up her training a bit. Then that thought left her mind as Tigre came out of the castle holding one of her army's bows and with his bowman's glove on his hand once more. He nodded to them, then moved over to take his position on the line, the furthest marker the archery range had. “Three shots?” he asked, looking over at Elen.

“Right,” she said with a smile. “Show my troops that I wasn't wrong about your skills.”

Tigre raised an eyebrow at that, then looked between her and the bow and the arrows. With a shake of his head he sighed, but said, “I'll do my best.”

Ranma continued to do push-ups for a time until he heard Lim growl out, “Are you taking this seriously?” to the sound of Tigre's second shot, whereupon he flipped himself upwards to stand once more, cocking his head as he looked to where the arrow had just disappeared out of sight over the castle's wall. It wasn't like Tigre to miss, like, **ever**. He'd seen Tigre take shots with other people's bows before, even after Ranma had begun training him,

and he was in danger of breaking the darn things. He frowned, thinking aloud. "Maybe his bow was damaged somehow?"

Elen looked at him sharply at that, but looked back as Tigre raised his bow and pulled the string back on the arrow. Before he could shoot, however, a glimpse out of the corner of his eye caught Tigre's attention, and he twisted his head to look that way. Then he twisted back to Elen and shouted, "Look out!"

Not even looking in that direction, Elen whispered, "Arifar." As Ranma and Tigre watched, the wings on either side of Arifar's cross guard flashed open, the ruby on it glinting suddenly as a cyclone of air appeared around Elen in a shield. The crossbow bolt that the assassin had just fired at her hit this shield and shattered into dozens of pieces.

Even as it did, Lim was already turning away and shouting at the nearest guards. "Get up there; apprehend him! We must know who hired him!"

They raced off, and Ranma was about to join them but stopped as Tigre said, "I take it you would prefer injured rather than dead, then?"

"Is that something you should say in this situation?" Lim shouted back.

"Fine," Tigre said with a sigh. "I'll shoot to wound then."

Ranma paused and watched with a smirk on his face as, between one second and the next, Tigre lifted, pulled the string back and fired on a high, arcing line. There was a whistling sound as the arrow flew, then it plummeted down until it was out of sight, hidden by the bottom of the wall. An instant later, there was a scream as the arrow struck its mark.

"That worked," Ranma said with a smirk before racing over and leaping up to land on the walkway of the wall, calmly walking towards the would-be assassin as a few other men raced up the nearest stairwell. The man was lying there, cradling his foot, which had been positively spitted by Tigre's arrow.

With a touch to a pressure point in the side of his neck, Ranma knocked the man out before calmly pulling the arrow out and beginning to dress his wound as a few men reached him. They looked at the arrow, then at the foot, then back over the wall towards Tigre, shaking their heads. "That's at least three hundred alsins, and he wasn't even in sight!"

"Maybe next time you idiots should give them a better bow, then. I've known Tigre to hit at four hundred fifty through trees and over hills," Ranma snarked back.

Back on the ground, the others watched as Ranma hopped up off of the wall, landing as easily as he had jumped up, moving towards them with the captured assassin over one shoulder like a sack of wheat. Tigre laughed at the sight, then turned back to Elen and asked, "Well, do I still need to take another shot, or was that what you wanted to see?"

"I wanted to see something precisely like that," Eleonora said with a laugh, nodding her head. "Well done, Tigrevurmud Vorn!"

Ranma then smirked at her, crossing his arms and looking at her eagerly. "So, does that mean it's my turn?"

"Unfortunately not," Elen said, looking at Ranma's prisoner. "I'm afraid I'll be busy questioning this one for a time and following the trail he will give us even if he won't talk. Still, I'll call Lim to bring the two of you to me in my office when this is cleared up. Now, if you could just dump him somewhere..."

OOOOOOO

The repercussions of the Battle of the Dinant Plains, as it was being called, were tremendous for both sides, and the news of it spread like wildfire. Zhcted rejoiced, the king congratulating his Vanadis for her victory even as he, of course, took credit for it as best he might by stating that she had been his choice for the post. The Dinant Plains became Zhcted territory from one end to the other, and plans were made to send in more royal troops to make certain that it stayed that way and take the area for the crown, not Leitmeritz. Elen, of course, couldn't care less about that, but the king wanted to be certain of his prerogatives (read: wanted to protect his share of the spoils).

On the other side of the ledger, the outlook was obviously quite a bit poorer. Several nobles had died, and their lands fell to their neighbors without a fight, the fate of their people dependent on those neighbors' honor, and, in too many cases, that was scant indeed. The loss of the military men was also felt keenly by the survivors, but worse was to come.

Prince Regnas was dead, and his father, bereaved and weak, retreated utterly from public life upon hearing the first hint of the news. And the real powers in Brune, Thenardier and Ganelon, started to move against one another just as quickly, forcing others to kneel or shift allegiances. Rumors of a real civil war abounded, and fear began to grow throughout the

country in the days following the battle, even as messenger birds delivered further news from near and far.

OOOOOOO

“I apologize for yesterday!”

Those were the first words the two boys heard as they were ushered into Elen’s office. Ranma and Tigre exchanged a look, and then Tigre looked back to Elen. She was dressed in a different outfit than what Ranma supposed was her combat uniform. It looked like Lim’s save for a long overcoat that fell to below her skirt and had long sleeve arms while also covering her upper chest so that no cleavage showed, yet also leaving her stomach bare. Her colors were also a much darker blue than Lim’s.

“What exactly are you saying sorry for?” Tigre asked.

“The bow you were given yesterday for your exhibition was of incredibly poor quality and had actually been sabotaged to boot,” Elen said irritably. “I’m sorry; I should’ve recognized it. That I didn’t, has brought shame on me and my army.”

“So that was a poor bow here in Zhcted as well, then,” Tigre said with a nod. “I thought something was unusual. Still, it is a poor craftsman who blames his tools.”

Elen raised herself up at that and smiled at him. “Well, hearing that I feel much better, though I’m still going to punish the three people who did it.”

“Punish how?” Tigre asked.

“Flogging,” Elen said with a shrug. “You’re an honored prisoner, and I wanted to see you shoot from the sidelines this time rather than face-to-face. After all, I only saw your first two shots in that fight the other day.”

“Wait a second, that’s going a bit far, isn’t it?” Tigre said, while Ranma simply cocked his head, looking at Elen thoughtfully and wondering if she was serious or if this was a test of some kind.

“The ones who did it wanted to humiliate and bring dishonor upon you. Shouldn’t they pay for that?” Elen asked.

Tigre marched forward a few steps before bowing, and Ranma had to bite his lips to keep from laughing, as this brought him eye level to Elen’s chest thanks to the small raised floor that half of the room sat on. He turned aside as he heard the sound of gnashing teeth to look at Lim who the source of that sound, before turning back to the other two.

“Would you please forgive them of this for me?” Tigre asked. “There has been no real harm done, and my pride isn’t so fragile as all that.”

Elen laughed, causing her chest to jiggle, and Tigre finally realized where his eyes had been this whole time. “Pass. You pass again, Tigre Vorn.”

Realizing that it had been a test, coupled with the view he’d been inadvertently staring at, Tigre blushed and stepped back while Ranma rolled his eyes.

“Anyway, while teasing Tigre’s always fun, what exactly was the real reason behind yesterday’s exhibition, as you call it? You saw his skill on the battlefield. Why’d you put him on the spot like that again?”

“I wouldn’t really call that being put on the spot,” Tigre said, ruffling his shaggy red hair in a show of embarrassment. “It was relatively easy, after all, once I got used to the bow and how much I had to hold back my strength, anyway.”

“Ah,” Lim said, and then sighed. “That was to quell a certain rumor that has sprung up, a completely unfounded one!” she nearly growled, glaring at both men, “That my lady has fallen in love with one of you at first sight.”

“Mhmm, who knew men could be such romantics, to want to make rumors of a— what was it?—‘love born between two enemies?’ And of course the maids and other servants have run with it ever since,” Elen giggled. “Well, they aren’t too far off the mark on the falling for part, if only for your skills with bow and fist.”

She looked at them closely, a wicked twinkle in her expressive red eyes. “Disappointed?”

Ranma laughed while Tigre just kept blushing.

“So, let me guess. Some of your men were overreacting and threatening to cause trouble, so you wanted to make Tigre’s worth plain for all to see?” Ranma asked.

“Weeeeeelll, it was either that or go with a certain someone’s idea and have you killed, so yes,” Elen replied, looking around the two boys to Lim.

Ranma looked back at her, one eyebrow raised. “Again, that’d put you firmly in the asshole category. This is a nice castle; I’d hate to have ta wreck it, Lim.”

“Heh, so true,” Elen said with a grin. Fighting a Vanadis in an area where said Vanadis wasn’t interested in preserving the architecture would be a very tough proposition. “I’d try to bill you with the damages, though.”

“Then I’m very glad we found another solution,” Tigre said dryly, regaining his equilibrium. “I’m certain Ranma’s food bill will be enough to put him in your debt eventually anyway.”

“Ouch,” Ranma muttered, while Tigre smirked and Elen smiled at the byplay. Only Lim was immune to it, and she scowled.

Elen paced back to her desk and hopped up to perch on it, crossing her legs and putting her hands down on either side of herself, looking at the two young men. “Anyway, I should say right now that the reason I took you both prisoner was not to get a ransom, but because, like I said, I fell for your skills. You two showed me more worth in a few minutes of fighting than the entirety of the Brune army had up to that point.”

“I can’t say I don’t see where you’re coming from,” Ranma replied ruefully.

“Exactly! Twenty-five thousand to five thousand, it should have been a momentous clash, a true test of courage, my army’s mettle and my own as a Vanadis, the first full sized conflict since my reign here in Leitmeritz began!” Elen huffed, crossing her arms and looking away, a scowl on her pretty features. “And then the enemy army just collapses entirely from a simple sneak attack! Even Prince Regnas was killed! Mou, I had so many plans I wanted to use and couldn’t use even a single one!”

As Tigre sweatdropped at the idea of that assault being called simple, Ranma frowned. “Actually, there were rumors of that happening during the first sneak attack, the one with the infiltrators to the opposite side of where you launched your cavalry charge. Did your infiltrators do that?”

Elen blinked. “No, none of them were supposed to go that far in or look for specific targets, just light stuff on fire and cause mayhem.” Then the scowl was back in full force. “That was another thing, too. It was as if my attack had given someone else the excuse to take out the prince! I hate the idea of being used like that, but, once the army shattered like that, I could do nothing but pursue, as was my duty. A fight that should have been one for the history books reduced to a rout and honorless, if necessary, slaughter.

“And then there were you two, shaking the day up and making the battle so much more interesting! I was so happy!” Elen said as she grabbed Tigre’s hands in her own. “The two of you, standing up for your men like that, facing down a dozen heavily armed cavalymen and myself! The way you instantly came up with and executed a plan, stymied our rush to let your men go. That was better than anything else Brune had shown since mustering that army!”

Ranma chuckled at that, while Tigre simply blushed and looked away again. *Uh-oh, Ranma thought. It looks as if Titta has some competition here, or at least Tigre likes the way she looks more than he’s ever reacted to Titta, which I suppose I can’t say I blame him for. Elen’s one hell of a pretty girl, and she’s got an attitude to match.*

“So let me say it outright. Would the two of you serve under me? Tigre, I would treat you as a count, and Ranma, with your skills you would no doubt become a fine knight in due time,” Elen said. “You don’t have to worry about prejudice or anything like that here. Archers are well respected in Leitmeritz. The animosity of some of my men towards you both will disappear in time. I don’t think it’s a bad deal, myself.”

Tigre smiled at the offer but shook his head. “I’m sorry. The offer is generous, much more so than any lord in Brune would offer one such as me, without a single knightly skill to my name. But I cannot accept. My heart and my duty remains in Alsace, the territory my father passed down to me and which my family has held in fief for generations uncounted. I will not abandon it.”

Even though he had rejected her offer, Elen still smiled at Tigre’s response. “Hmm, I should have expected that, I suppose.” She then turned to look at Ranma. “And you? You have no ties but friendship to Alsace, and I know you didn’t feel any loyalty to Brune as a whole.”

Ranma thought about it for a few minutes but then shook his head. “I can’t give you an answer right now. I like ya, Elen, but I don’t know enough about your rule or Zhcted as a whole to say it’s worth my loyalty.” While Lim bristled at Ranma’s tone and phrasing, Elen merely nodded, and Ranma continued. “Besides, despite what you might think, I don’t like

thinking of myself as a soldier, as someone who has to kill. I'm still having problems with what I had to do during the battle, if I'm honest."

"Understandable," Elen replied. After hearing of Ranma coming from another world, Elen had shifted her perspective of a martial artist from a soldier to being a kind of cloistered monk who also studied combat. It made Ranma's unique skills and outlook make much more sense. "Take all the time you need, but be aware you are still my prisoner in the meantime."

Tigre smiled at his friend, hoping that the other youth would actually find a home here in Leitmeritz. To Tigre's mind, Alsace had always seemed a little too small for him. But then he turned his mind to other matters. "As we are indeed your prisoners, can you tell us how much you decided to put up as the ransom demand for us?"

OOOOOOO

What? Tigre-sama was captured!?" Titta nearly shrieked. She then paused, thinking. "But, but he's alive, at least, and he is an Earl, so they will of course keep him for ransom." She looked back up at Lord Mashas, who had brought the news of the disastrous battle and its repercussions to Alsace personally. That this had also allowed him to collect a half-dozen of his own men who had escaped with the men of Alsace was lost on the distraught young maid. "Do we know how much money they will want?"

Mashas winced and told her, and Titta stared at him in shock. "How much?! But, but we can't pay that! If we took the money of everyone in Alsace and multiplied it by four it still wouldn't be enough!"

"That is the point, I'm afraid," said the older noble with a sigh. "The enemy Vanadis wants to keep Tigre and Ranma. Who, I note, by the way, you didn't ask about..." he teased gently.

Titta didn't answer, already turning away and clasping her hands together as she looked outside at the clear blue sky. "Tigre-sama..."

OOOOOOO

"That's too high!" Tigre said bluntly. "Can't you lower it somehow?"

"Is that anyway for a prisoner to speak to his jailer?" Lim asked harshly.

"Mah, mah, that's enough," Elen said with a chuckle. "I told you I was interested in your skill, Tigre. What kind of noble would I be if I let you just buy your way out of my clutches, hmmm?"

As Tigre blushed and scowled at the same time, Ranma asked, "And what about me?"

"You?" Elen became serious, looking at Ranma and shaking her head slowly. "You I wouldn't give away for anything less than the throne of Brune."

Everyone looked at her in shock, and she shrugged, counting off points on her fingers. "You're a male fighter who can at the least match a Vanadis for speed. Your brute strength is a bit more than my own, you possess skills with what you call ki that are frankly astonishing and could be a major force multiplier once taught to other people—the ki pockets and your ability to heal yourself—and you have professed no true loyalty to Brune, making it possible that I win your loyalty and your mind for my army."

Not that Tigre here isn't worth almost as much, in the long run, anyway, given he comes from Alsace, she finished internally, thinking about some long held plans she had in that direction. "So, there you have it," she said with a grin, then looked at Ranma. "Now, are you still feeling up for a spar?"

Ranma smirked back, clenching his fists tightly. "Heck, yes!"

OOOOOO

Ranma blocked a cut from Elen, using the momentum to skid backwards for a moment before flashing out with a high kick that should've taken her in the face. Instead, Elen too used the momentum of his block to twist away to the side, moving just enough to dodge the attack, and come in again, twisting her arm around in such a way that Arifar was aimed once more towards his chest in a thrust.

This time, though, Ranma smacked the sword downwards and leaped into the air, a kick lashing out. It caught Elen, but she rolled with it, quickly calling upon Arifar's power and flying backwards on a diagonal to hover in the air in front of him until Ranma fell back to earth, muttering irritably as he landed on his feet. Elen had quickly learned that Ranma was far and away more dangerous when he was up in the air, but, thanks to her powers of air manipulation, Elen could match him in that area, negating a large portion of his personal style.

"Why don't you use that kind of power to just stick me up there?" he asked as they circled one another.

"I could, but where would the fun in that be? Besides, I don't want to actually hurt you, and using that kind of power on another person is not something to do lightly," Elen said with a shrug, then blinked as Ranma disappeared, even to her senses.

Her combat senses tingling, Elen rolled forward dodging a kick that would've taken her head off, and then Ranma was in her face again, pressing her hard backwards, his speed once more faster and stronger than nearly anyone she had ever seen before. *Darn it! It's like fighting Sasha only without the knives, the taunting, and, of course, without Ludmila getting in my way! Look on the bright side, right, Elen?*

With a thought, Elen activated Arifar's power, once more coating her body in air magic, causing her to move faster and faster in order to keep up. But her simple strength wasn't up to the task, and she grimaced. Her hands rang with every punch that Ranma delivered, and she found herself being pressed backwards and around the training area.

"Did I say something to offend you?" she asked as Arifar attempted to spear Ranma's neck but was smacked to the side, and then it was her turn to dodge a punch to her jaw that whistled by with fell intent.

But she couldn't dodge a light jab to her left side and moved with the blow, only to find that, instead of a punch, it had been a single finger, which tapped at a point on her side. A second later, her left leg went out from under her as she lost all feeling in it from the waist down. Even so, she quickly brought up Arifar to block Ranma's next blow, only to wince as the flat of the blade was smacked backwards into her head, and she was flung violently away.

As she shook her head and held up a hand, indicating Ranma had won that round, she looked down at her leg. "What did you just do!?"

“Pressure point,” Ranma said, moving over and, when she nodded, tapping another point on her side. The feeling to her leg rushed back quickly, and she got to her feet, pouting somewhat, which Ranma thought was just adorable. “That is one of the many styles I've incorporated into my own over the years. Tigre did say I was something of a doctor too, right?”

“So doctors use these points to knock out their patients where you come from, then?” Elen asked sarcastically.

“It depends on the patient, I suppose,” Ranma said.

The two of them had been sparring for nearly the entire morning now, and that win right now was the first one that had ended decisively in the favor of one or the other. The others were always close matches, ending with Elen pressing Arifar's tip into Ranma's side and his foot by her face, or some other variant of the same.

Elen had been having a lot of fun. Oh, she knew her body would be bruised from head to toe afterward, Ranma having quickly learned that he didn't have to pull his blows overmuch. But facing someone equal or just a bit better than her own skill who didn't use magic or another Viralt? That was a treasure, and one she was determined to get the most out of. *He still hasn't used any of his own special techniques, though, darn it. Still, that will come in time, and maybe then we can compare special attacks.*

For his part, Ranma was also greatly enjoying this. True, Elen was using magic to keep up with his speed, but what was wrong with that? Her technique, her skill, and ability with the sword wasn't based solely on the magic of the blade. In fact, she was by far the best swordsman Ranma had ever faced. Comparing her to Kuno, Mousse, or anyone else was like comparing a lapdog to a wolf. She was also stronger, more durable than you would think, looking at her. In fact, Ranma estimated that she was as strong and as durable as he had been before putting himself through the Bakusai Tenketsu training. Elen was also adaptable, instinctual, and experienced far beyond most of the rivals he fought with in the past. Ranma put that down to her life as a mercenary before becoming a Vanadis.

“As to yer last question, ya just basically said you were holding back in our spars. I didn't like that,” he said bluntly.

Elen frowned slightly and then shook her head. “Your healing ability needs to have some upper limit. I didn't want to find out what it was the hard way.”

“Point,” Ranma said ruefully, then smirked, his eyes gleaming. “Still, maybe we should try a full no holds barred spar, hmm?”

“Maybe some other time,” Elen said with a sigh, stretching her arms above her head and cracking her neck and shoulders.

That this made her chest thrust out even further and bounce was something she didn't realize at first. Before she did realize that, Ranma had moved on, grabbing a glass jug of water from nearby and, after swigging down a few mouthfuls, tossing it to her.

She caught it and then grinned at him. “Maybe you shouldn't be tossing around water lest someone else return the favor, hmm?” Arifar seemed to agree with that statement, the ruby flaring brightly as a peal of laughter went through her mind. “Unless you really would like to see what happens if more of my soldiers decide they like you better when you're in your female form?”

Ranma shuddered. Unfortunately for him, a good many of Elen's troops had gotten past their initial reaction to Ranma's freakishness, and even the threat of a beat down and Elen and Lim's injunction wasn't enough to keep several hundred horny soldier boys from figuring out that, ‘Hey, that guy taking a shower over there can be turned into girl with a splash of water!’ That had led to several beatings that morning.

“By the way, where did you punt them to?” Elen asked now as she took a sip from the water jug.

“They didn't have armor, so took it easy on them. I think the first one barely cleared the inner wall. The other two, I'd wager, landed in those trees on that side of the castle. I wasn't trying to actually aim, so I didn't actually take note of how far they went. What, was there some public work you want to smash or something?” Ranma asked teasingly.

Elen laughed at that, slapping him on the shoulder. She truly had been having a fantastic morning. In fact, the past two days had been great fun. Tigre's ability with the bow was phenomenal, and talking to him had been fun yesterday evening. *And if he can really teach my soldiers to shoot even half as well as he can, that will be simply amazing!* This morning, sparring with Ranma had been perhaps the most exercise she'd had in a long while.

“So, why not right now?” Ranma asked as they drank, returning to the previous topic as they cooled down a bit, stretching and moving in place so that they didn't cramp up later. Even Ranma had to: that was how hard Elen had pushed him. Oh, he hadn't used the majority

of his Thousand Needle Style or any of his ki tricks, but Elen had matched him physically better than most people had ever been able to. *She could take Ryoga, for certain, even that Taro guy, and could catch Happy, if not put him down.*

“Well, unlike you, Mr. Freeloader, I have work I need to do,” Elen said with a chuckle. “Paperwork is what an army, let alone a nation, runs on, and don’t let anyone else tell you anything different.”

“Ouch,” Ranma winced, carefully not saying what he was really thinking: *Better you than me.* “So, what do you want me to do for the day?”

“For now, whatever you want, so long as you don't bother my soldiers,” Elen said with a shrug. “I'd like to talk to you more, especially about that music-making box thing. Though I will agree with Tigre, the music it has on it or in it or whatever is horrible.”

Ranma pouted. “It's not my fault you can't understand the words.”

“It's not our fault if the background music is god-awful!” Elen shot back, smacking him on the shoulder.

The two of them had fallen into an easy comradery with one another, kindred spirits in many ways. They both liked to have fun, they both liked to fight, and they both believed in pushing themselves to be the best they could be. They also both believed in not taking anything outside of war all that seriously, taking fun where they could find it and having a certain irreverent attitude towards normal social proprieties.

Ranma grumbled good-naturedly and then asked if he could leave the compound to go outside. Elen sighed faintly and shook her head. “I don't think that's a good idea. Not unless one of my subcommanders can go with you, and I'm afraid they're all busy today.”

“Besides Lim, who are your subcommanders anyway?”

Rurick and stable master Brownstone. Brownstone is busy today, seeing to the horses from the war—campaign, I should say—against Brune.”

She paused, still wondering about that. Who had the means and would gain something from killing the prince in such a manner such that no one was certain who did it? *Darn it, I don't know enough about the internal politics of Brune.* She looked at Ranma speculatively and then shook her head. *He won't know but...* “By the way, do you think Tigre would know anything about the power players in Brune?”

“No,” Ranma said bluntly. “Tigre isn’t a player in that kind of game, and I doubt he's noticed anything. Tigre cares for the people of Alsace and leaves the rest of the country to its own devices.”

He sighed and shook his head. “We were kind of, well, appalled, frankly, by how the other nobles talked about their people and acted while we were encamped with them. There was a lot of, well... Tigre told you that the two of you were rarities among nobles who actually cared for their people. But the Brunish nobles, the most powerful ones, they seem to prey on their people rather than lead them.”

“That tells me a lot but also doesn't help my questioning at all,” Elen said, her brow furrowing. “I know Ganelon and Thenardier, but who else could gain from removing the prince? What kind of trouble is this going to cause on my borders?”

With a final scowl, she shook off her bad mood. “Well, whatever. I need to go get a bath.” She then smirked at him, pulling at her blouse a little. “Do you want to join me, Ranma?”

Ranma shook his head quickly. “No thanks. I don't want to be lynched by the rest of your army or take Arifar in hard-to-reach spots if I have a natural male reaction to that kind of thing.”

Ellen laughed, clapping him on the shoulder again, causing him to laugh as well before walking off, shouting over her shoulder, “I'll see you tomorrow in the morning, same time, for another spar.” *My bruises should be mostly cleared by then, anyway. Ow, except for the one on my shoulder. He hits like a trebuchet!*

“Fine by me!” With that, Ranma watched her go for a moment before shaking his head and moving off. “I wonder what I should do today...”

The idea of asking either Rurick or Brownstone to go with him did not occur to Ranma. Rurick was a bit of an asshole, judging from how he had been the one who had tried to rig Tigre’s bow the other day, though he had sounded truly thankful for being spared the lash that morning at breakfast and quite respectful of Tigre’s skill too. Still, Ranma wasn't going to him for any favors. Brownstone, he didn't know yet and, again, wasn't going to ask him for anything. *There is Lim, but if Ellen is busy with paperwork, she surely will be too. That’s just the kind of personality she has. In fact, I’m kind of surprised that Elen is willing to do any work without Lim there glaring at her to make sure it gets done at all.*

Nearly back to her room to pick up a change of clothes, Elen sneezed, looking around and blinking in confusion before shrugging it off and wondering how she should hide from Lim today and whether she could convince Tigre to help her. *Ranma would help me in a second, but I doubt Lim needs anymore reasons to dislike him at this point. And since I want them both to join my forces, allowing that to add to that would be counterproductive...*

Heading inside himself, Ranma walked past a few soldiers who glared at him out of the corner of their eyes, but Ranma didn't care. Most of the army didn't like the idea of a man being able to match their mistress blow for blow or perhaps just didn't like his attitude. There were also several hundred among the soldiers who remembered how he had dealt with them during the Battle of the Dinant Plains. To them, pressure points were magic and kind of terrifying, along with the way Ranma crumpled armor at the same time.

That was part of why Ranma still hadn't volunteered his services as a doctor yet. Ranma also wasn't certain how he felt about the locals as a whole, and, despite getting to know Elen, a part of Ranma deeply resented the fact that he'd been captured in the first place. That struck his pride something fierce.

Besides, it ain't like any of the troops I dealt with had life-threatening injuries or anything, Ranma thought, ignoring the inner voice that sounded a bit like Tofu who was trying to get his attention. It was telling him that it was a doctor's duty to aid the wounded regardless of his personal feelings towards them, but while Ranma had learned a lot from the good doctor and even more from his master, he hadn't truly taken in Tofu's view of the world and his place in it. Ranma thought of himself still as a martial artist first and a doctor a distant second instead of the other way around.

Anyway, if they have a problem with how I treat their lady, that's their problem, not mine. I like Ellen; she's a fun gal. And there is Lim too, who is just hilarious to tease. A slight flush suffused Ranma's features as he thought about Lim, her blonde hair, and her body too, which, much like Elen's, could stand against the best he'd ever seen back home.

He shook his head quickly, thinking, *Enough of that! Yes, she's drop dead gorgeous, but so is Ellen, and so was Titta in her own way. Why is it that Lim is the one getting to me like this?* The image of Lim's blonde hair done in that ponytail of hers came to mind. Out of the blue, Ranma found himself wondering how it would feel in his fingers, like spun wheat. *Dammit! Freaking hormones. Have I actually found my type or whatever it's called?*

His liking big boobs couldn't even be called that—Ranma had never met a man who didn't like those except for lolicons, and all of them should just die, in his opinion. But the

blonde hair of Lim was different. That as well as the way she reacted to his teasing and her serious, officious nature made Ranma want to tease her further. *Does that mean I'm a, whatchamacallit, sadist?*

Ranma knew he was a masochist to a certain degree. Any martial artist worth his salt had to like pain in some fashion, but teasing someone else like that was new to him. *Or is it?* he thought as he ascended to the castle's second floor. *I did like to tease Akane all the time, but her reactions weren't nearly as much fun as Lim's. Maybe because her reaction was always to pound me like a pancake with a hammer regardless of how I teased her. But, then again, I also taunted all of my opponents during our matches. But that's just martial arts taunting, right? I can, can stop doing that anytime I want, right?*

He nearly bumped into the woman he was thinking about a second later, dodging around her quickly as she huffed irritably at him and moved to another room, carrying a large pile of paper. "What is that?" he asked, opening the door for her and letting her enter.

Lim paused, glaring at him suspiciously before nodding her head in thanks to the gesture and entering. Inside Ranma found another office, smaller than Elen's, with bookshelves on either wall lined with books and ledgers of some kind, along with a table and a large tin of ink with a quill.

I wonder if I could figure out how to develop pens, Ranma mused to himself as he watched Lim put the papers on her desk and then sit down across from him, pulling out the first one.

"Paperwork," she muttered in answer to his question. "An army doesn't run itself, you know, nor does a county, particularly one the size of Leitmeritz. Just the army has created this pile, though. The amount of wages; the amount of food, horses, salary, bits and pieces of lost equipment to be replaced; whether or not those bits and pieces fall under what my lady needs to replace out of her war chest or what the soldier in question is responsible for; list of infractions, all of which result in a loss of pay; the number of arrows and lands heads expended and not found."

"This," she said, gesturing to the pile she had placed down, "is just what the army produced in the very short campaign with your people."

"Not **my** people," Ranma said, looking down at the paperwork. He'd learned how to read the local languages to a small degree, though their number system didn't make much

sense to him yet. Looking around her desk however, he frowned. "You don't have anything to help you calculate?"

"Paper and quill," she answered tartly, pointing at another stack of papers even as she pulled out the first sheet of paper from her work pile.

"No, I mean something to help you with figuring out the numbers," Ranma said. "A soroban or something. Um, a calculation table is what they're called."

"What is a calculation table?" Lim asked, actually looking up at him now, her brow furrowing and her nose twitching in a way Ranma thought rather cute. "Is it some Brune device to help with numbers?"

"No..." Ranma said slowly, thinking back. "Huh, come to think of it, I don't think I've seen them here." He thought about it for a moment and then smiled as he realized he'd just found something to do for the day. "I'll show it to you in a bit; I think I can make one easily enough. Where is your carpentry room or whatever?"

"Carpenter, not carpentry room," Lim said pointedly, then pointed out the door and gave him directions. "Now leave me alone. I need to finish this. The sooner I do, the sooner I can find Lady Elen and make sure she, too, is doing her work."

Ranma smirked at her but didn't try to tease Lim any further, heading out the doorway and following her directions down to a room on the first floor. He found the carpenters' area, much like the blacksmiths', was a separate section of the first floor area nearest the barracks. The room was lined with different tools, and there were several fletchers there and a few carters at work already under the direction of an older man.

Discerning him as the boss, Ranma asked the old man for a few pieces of spare wood, and, after glowering at him for a moment, the man tartly pointed a finger to another room at the far back. Ranma entered and found enough spare wood close enough to the size he wanted along with smaller bits and pieces of wood which he too could turn to a purpose other than using them to light fires.

Taking up a bench, he brought out his pocketknife, an object he knew that Tigre, and probably Elen, would love to see if their people could recreate. The blacksmith back in Alsace hadn't been able to, though and Ranma doubted the one here would have any better luck. With the dagger portion of the pocketknife, he began to carve the smaller bits of wood into small beads before drilling holes in the center of them with the corkscrew head.

At first the head carpenter's eyes hadn't left the odd tool in Ranma's hands, but now as he looked at what Ranma was making, simple curiosity overcame his professional avarice. "Are you trying to make some kind of simple jewelry for someone?"

Ranma laughed. "Nah, though it is for a lady, yer right about that."

From there Ranma went next door and bought several long nails, which he had the blacksmith fuse together and knock off their ends to make them simple poles. With twenty of them, he slid the beads onto each in turn, five to a pole, then created the frame for the soroban, or abacus, from some more pieces of wood. Then, certain it would all fit together properly, he began to put a finish on each piece in turn.

The carpenter had once more followed him and looked at it thoughtfully. "What is that?" Then he shook his head and asked, "And can I buy that amazing multi-tool thing off you?"

"No, ya can't. It's mine. Though maybe eventually I can help yer blacksmith make more, if he's skilled enough. As for what I've made here," Ranma smirked. "It's something to help someone calculate."

The man backed away rapidly as if Ranma had mentioned witchcraft. "Okay, that's enough, thank you. I don't need to know more."

Ranma looked at him quizzically, and a journeyman nearby whispered to him, "The master doesn't like math, like, **at all**. We blame it on his wife, really. There's no doubt in that pairing who really wears the pants in that house. She controls his purse so much he can't even go out drinking."

Shrugging his shoulders at that, Ranma just nodded and left, heading back towards Lim's office.

As he walked outside of the carpenters' area, Ranma realized that it had actually taken him most of the afternoon to build his abacus. That time had been taken mostly by the metalwork, the woodcarving having been simple enough. But getting the blacksmith to agree to let him use his forge for working on nails like that and ruining them obviously for any other job had taken some doing, as had finishing the wood so that there were no splinters.

It actually looked pretty decent, if Ranma said so himself. *Martial arts carpentry really should be considered its own school rather than a subset of martial arts construction, but there you go.* The abacus was a light red oak color, and, while it wasn't fancy, it still looked nice and worked too.

Having thought that Lim would still be at work, Ranma was surprised to find she wasn't in her office. He found a maid, though, who directed Ranma to her room, where apparently Lim had decided to take the evening meal alone.

Outside her door Ranma paused, hearing a voice inside that sounded like Tigre's along with Lim's own, and he frowned before thinking, *Acting out some kind of play?*

OOOOOOO

Earlier that day Tigre had spotted Elen sneaking off from the palace and had followed her. What followed was a fun and somewhat fascinating trip through the town, seeing the sights and just genuinely having fun. Tigre had even won a few prizes for Elen at a small shooting game set up along one street after making a fool of the owner. The target in question, a small doll like an armored knight, had actually been latched to its stand. But Tigre's shot from behind had unhinged it.

The two of them eventually returned to the castle with Elen sporting a new bow in her hair and a teddy bear. The bear she had given up to Lim, seemingly to offset her fury at the idea of Elen running off like that and Tigre's having 'escaped' from the castle.

"Why didn't you escape when you had the chance?" Lim asked, looking at Tigre over the top of the bear. "Are you that much of an idiot or just lazy?"

"Ahh, I prefer to think I would keep to the terms of my parole rather than anything else," Tigre said, a large sweatdrop on his head as he stared at the blonde.

"Hmf," Lim muttered, then, without another word, walked off carrying the teddy bear.

After that Elen had turned to Tigre and said, "Come with me; you're about to see something hilarious."

OOOOOOO

Knocking on the door, Ranma heard the hurried sounds of shuffling, and then the door opened, revealing Lim standing there primly. “Yes?” she asked coldly, glaring at him.

Ranma smirked, unable to stop himself. “Am I interrupting something?”

“Nothing!” the woman barked, taking a step back and looking around quickly, making certain Ranma was alone in the corridor. “You heard nothing!”

Moving around Lim quickly, Ranma entered the room and stared around at all the stuffed bears. “Cute,” he said simply, moving over and ruffling one of them, a small incredibly fluffy blue bear with tiny eyes and a large, red nose. “I never had any of these when I was younger, or any toys, really. My old man didn't believe in 'em, thinking they were a time waster, and with us living on the road it would've been hard to keep 'em in one piece, too. I remember winning a prize at a fair once, but even then the girl, a family friend, wanted a stuffed pig rather than a bear. Go figure.”

Ranma had long since made the decision to never mention his whole fiancée situation here in this new world. It wasn't like any of that mattered, since there was no way back home.

Lim sniffed haughtily. “There's no accounting for taste. Now, what was it you wanted?”

“Oh, right,” Ranma said, looking at his hands and holding out the abacus. “This is what I was talking about earlier. It's called an abacus or a soroban where I'm from. It can help you with your calculations.”

“How?” Lim asked, looking at it blankly. When Ranma explained, Lim's eyes went wide and then wider still at the implications of what he was saying.

“I've never heard of anything like this,” she said, quickly taking the abacus from him and then doing a few rough calculations. What normally would have taken her some time on paper only took her a few moments on the abacus when she figured out how to use it. “This, this could be a major trade item! For a time, anyway. It's too simple to really create a monopoly, but we can gain quite a bit of favor by handing them out to various lords and nobles and maybe one or two missions to different trading towns with more. No,” she said, muttering and walking off, brushing past Ranma. “No, a better idea would be to...”

At that point the door closed behind her, leaving Ranma in Lim's room alone. “Well, hell. I knew she'd like it, but that much? I just hope she remembers to use it for her own work rather than just trying to make money off it.”

Then he looked around, staring at a bear that was on Lim's bed, a nicely sized four-poster about a foot off the ground, and then out the window and down into the faces of Tigre and Elen. "Tigre, what were you doing down there?" he asked slowly.

Tigre sheepishly pulled himself up through the window while Elen's cheeks were flushed with laughter and maybe a bit of drink, waved up at him happily waiting for her turn to head through the thin window. He looked back at Tigre and said, "Let me guess; you guys were out and about someplace when ya shouldn't be?"

"In a word, yes," Elen said with a giggle, leaping upwards, grabbing the windowsill, and sliding inside quickly. "Then I wanted to show Tigre what Lim did with the teddy bears people got her. He was a little too loud, though, and had to improvise."

That makes a lot more sense than her putting off sparring with me for work, Ranma thought ruefully. "And why didn't ya invite me on this little outing?"

Elen laughed, not replying to that beyond clapping Ranma on the shoulder and moving around him to smile at Tigre. "We're going to have to do that again someday, but I need to run down Lim before her greed gets away from her good sense. That abacus thing you were talking about, that'll help both of our paperwork quite a lot. Thank you, Ranma," she said simply and left the room.

That left the two boys, one of whom was still looking rather awkward in the center of the room while the other one was still holding the large stuffed animal that had been on the bed, squeezing it gently. Then Ranma smirked like a shark and moved in for the kill. *Damn, is this what Nabiki felt like back home?* "So the two of you were out together, like a date?" Ranma teased.

"No, not at all! She was just showing me around the town, we tried all of the various food shops and other things, and I even met some of her subjects too. They all really like her," Tigre confided.

"Yeah, my friend, that's a date, at least in her mind," Ranma said with a grin. "If you're not interested in her, though, you might want to tell her that quickly before she gets any ideas."

"...But I'm a hostage," Tigre said lamely, blushing a little at the idea of Elen being interested in him. "I don't have anything to offer her as I am. And we're from two different countries. Heck, we fought one another a bare few days ago! You're just letting those rumors going around the army get to you."

“Nothing to offer except your skill with a bow, your mind, and that heart of yours. As for the idea of the whole different countries and enemies thing, who cares?” Ranma said with a chuckle. “Still, Titta is going to be so disappointed, though.”

“What?” Tigre asked, his blushed disappearing. “Why would Titta be disappointed?”

Ranma stared at him for a moment, and Tigre quickly grew uncomfortable before Ranma just shook his head. “Never mind. I suppose that the one inside the game doesn't always see it for what it is.”

After all, even now I'm not certain which of the girls back home were interested in me for me, or were just there because of the various honor obligations. Looking back on it, Ranma knew, at least, that Akane had not been interested in him any more than she had been forced to be, and whatever interest there had been between them had faded quickly after Ranma started to learn from Tofu. Shampoo and Ukyo, though, those two were still up in the air, and Ranma kind of regretted not ever having figured it out one way or the other.

Still, I'm in a new world without any of those honor obligations or anything else over my head and no perceivable way back. Might as well have fun with it after all, maybe even get a girlfriend of my own. Even as images of Lim's blonde ponytail again came to his mind, Ranma thought, *Now I just need to figure out how.*

OOOOOOO

“Take these with you,” Felix Aaron Thenardier said to his son, Zion. Felix was a giant of a man, standing well over six feet tall, with a large chest and a cold, grim gaze which caused weaker men to quail, though his son only looked respectful rather than truly fearful. “Burn Alsace to the ground if you have to, but conquer it for our family.”

Not questioning why his father wanted that, Zion laughed delightedly as he stared up at the two dragons above them before bowing heavily towards his father. “Your will be done, Father.”

As they watched the contingent of his army that would serve under his son for this campaign—around three thousand men plus the two dragons and a baggage train—march off,

one of Duke Thenardier's advisors, a short, elderly man named Drekvac who was commander of their dragon taming forces, asked, "Why Alsace, might I ask?"

"Alsace? It is indeed pointless: small, with nothing to offer, not people or resources, far too far away from the places of power. And yet Ganelon might try to move there. So taking it before he can move in is all to the good. Or even just denying it to him entirely without actually conquering it. Further, my son must get used to controlling the dragons."

"And if the count is already on the move to Alsace," Drekvac said thoughtfully, "he would not have brought anything that could face dragons."

"Exactly," Thenardier said with a chuckle in his subterranean sized chest. "Exactly. The weak will be cowed, and that viper will know he is nothing to the Rule of Strength."

OOOOOOO

"What!? Why would they be coming here?!" Titta asked, looking at Bertrand in shock and fear. She knew nothing about warfare, but she knew enough to know that Alsace was well out of the way of the major powers in Brune society. There didn't seem to be any point to them coming here except for destruction and rapine.

"I do not know. It could be as simple as, perhaps, Duke Thenardier's son, Zion, holding a grudge against our lord," Bertrand replied with a sigh, remembering that moment. "Both Ranma and Tigre were involved in that, and perhaps tales of Ranma's strength and power have gotten out, and the Baron is wary of another power player in the game. Regardless, they are coming here."

"What should we do?" Titta asked.

"I will go and find Tigre-sama, but I think you need to warn the rest of the village and the county beyond."

"I will get the word out, hai," Titta said, nodding promptly. "How long do you think we have?"

“According to lords Mashas’ man, the enemy army is moving slowly. Why, I don't know, but they are. It won't even reach the edge of Lord Tigre's territory for another week, and then it's another, six days, perhaps, travel on horseback from there to this town, but there are numerous farms and homesteads along the way that they might burn out.”

“I’ll send runners along the road first and then let all of the other peasants know what's going on,” Titta said, grabbing Bertrand's hands and dragging him to where the coats were, nodding hurriedly to the man wearing Lord Mashas’ color. “But you need to go now! Find Lord Tigre; he'll know what to do!”

Yet despite Titta’s belief that they needed Tigre back, there were those who were not willing to wait for him to somehow return from his imprisonment in Leitmeritz. Among these were the two blacksmith sons, Duncan and Claus, who had begun to act as sub-officers to the militia, as well as the rest of that militia. These men had faced war and seen that they might not be able to fight as traditional forces, but they had skills and training, which could make them deadly.

Gathering together that evening, they decided to merge Ranma’s endurance training with Tigre’s training in hunting and using the bow. “We can't face a force like that in the open, but there are a lot of places along the way where the road comes close to the forests, up into the hills, and rocky crevices where we might be able to ambush them or at least get close enough to look at the army. I think we need to do what we can to slow them down, so that at least they're not sending out forces into the forests. We owe it to Lord Tigre to try, anyway,” said Duncan, and the other men nodded grimly.

OOOOOO

The days after their capture had fallen into a kind of routine for Ranma and Tigre. In the morning or evening Ranma and Elen would spar, while every morning Tigre helped with the army's archers without fail, teaching them how to both shoot more accurately and faster. To Ranma’s surprise, Rurick quickly became the second best Bowman in the army, second only to Tigre himself. A few dozen men even began training with Tigre to shoot from the saddle, which Ranma, knowing quite a bit about how the Mongols had created the world's largest empire, thought was a major force multiplier, and he wondered where Tigre had come up with it, since he hadn’t said anything about that idea.

Mind you, the Mongols had those recurved horn bows, which could punch straight through Persian plate. Those were the best weapon for their kind of warfare, he thought as he ducked under a slash from Elen. Today was an evening day, the light of the evening sun glinting off Arifar as he dodged it. Elen had been busy with her horse that morning along with Lim and a few of the townspeople who needed her intervention on matters between them.

He took a knee to the face in the next instant and then ducked wildly to one side as Elen flipped around him and brought Arifar down in a cut that would've ended with the flat of her blade right along his neck. "I don't know what you're thinking about," she caroled, "but concentrate on the here and now or this won't be fun any longer."

"Right!" Ranma said with a chuckle, coming back to the here and now.

Inside, Lim looked outside of her window, shaking her head. The two combat junkies were at it every morning now, and though part of her applauded it, seeing her mistress exhibit the energy and willingness to push herself to new heights, another part of her deplored how their attitudes were magnifying one another. *I truly fear for the time when Elen forgets entirely how she should act in public in her position as Vanadis.*

"And she's sneaking off with this one every night!" she muttered, looking back at Tigre. He was currently helping her with the paperwork, since Tigre had wanted to give Rurick a chance to lead the archery corps, and both of them were using abacuses.

Lim had realized that something about Tigre had changed the past few days while around her. The fear and wariness he'd felt towards her had disappeared. A case in point of that was a second later when he looked up at her thoughtfully. "So you got this from Ranma?"

"Yes. Did he not share the abacus with you?" That name had stuck rather than the one Ranma used for it, sounding at least a little less otherworldly, pun intended.

"I don't think he's ever actually been around either myself or anyone else doing paperwork before. Still, for him to go out of his way to create that for you," he said, looking down at the abacus in question, "that says something of his respect for you, I think."

Lim flushed slightly at that, having seen some of the looks Ranma gave her hair and being rather flattered by them, then shook it off, and went back to work. A few hours later all of the paperwork was done, not just for the army, but also for Leitmeritz as a whole. What should have taken herself and Elen two or more weeks to get through had been finished in four

days. *Yes, Lim reflected, my initial response to it was spot on. This will be an immense boon to our country, perhaps the world, if it spreads far enough.*

Despite coming to some kind of understanding with Ranma and seeing many qualities in Tigre to like, Lim was no closer to understanding why Elen trusted and liked Tigre so quickly. If anything, Tigre had proven that he had nothing going for him beyond the bow, in her mind...

Flashback:

“You want to test me on other weapons? But Ranma and I told you I don’t have any ability with anything but the bow,” Tigre objected.

“Mah, mah, perhaps Ranma just isn’t a very good teacher. Just think of that,” Elen replied, launching a teasing look towards Ranma, who was standing to one side of where she and Tigre were facing one another in the middle of the training ground. Lim was there too, standing on their other side.

“Heh, well this should be fun,” Ranma said from one side of the training area, twirling a staff in his hand, creating a figure eight with it and then twirling it above his head like another person might play with a pen. “I tested him on staff, mace, dagger, spear, sword, hatchet, axe... If I could find it in Alsace, I tried it with Tigre. None of it worked.”

“I would still like to see this for myself, even so. Now, come at me whenever you are ready,” Elen said, a staff in one of her hands as well.

Tigre groaned but obeyed. First he tried a sword, a long sword like that which most soldiers used. He was disarmed and sent to the ground in an instant, only for the combat to stop as they heard a whimper of fright from Ranma.

He had leaped to the side to avoid being spitted by the sword, his staff flashing out to smack it out of the air. “Where the heck were you aiming that disarm, Elen!?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about. Although if I were a petty person, I might mention how you tried to cop a feel on me during yesterday’s spar when you disarmed me,” Elen said with a smirk, a slight blush to her face as she remembered that incident. It had been the first time a man had touched her in such a way, and she wasn’t certain how she felt about it or about Tigre and their deepening friendship.

“I apologized at the time, darn it!” Ranma huffed with a blush on his face, then screamed as Lim’s booted foot caught him right in the fork from behind, his senses having done

nothing to warn him. He curled up around his personal pain, while Tigre winced and looked away. “You, you, gah!”

“That is the least you should expect after attempting to assault a Vanadis,” Lim said with a huff. That, and she wanted some payback for the fact that Ranma had nearly walked in on her bathing the day before. Her chastity had only been protected by Elen’s small pet, the baby dragon, Lunie. And, admittedly, Ranma apologizing and nearly knocking himself out by smashing his head hard enough to imbed his face into the ground.

“Lim, that was utterly uncalled for!” Elen said, though her twitching cheeks told the real story of her amusement. Then, while Ranma was still on the ground, she called Tigre to step forward again with another name.

But Ranma and Tigre’s predictions soon proved all too true. Any attempt by Tigre to even hold another weapon beyond the bow ended in failure.

End flashback

Just then, Lim’s musings was interrupted by Rurick poking his head into the doorway. “Lord Tigre, there's someone at the gate asking for you.”

Later Ranma and Tigre listened in shock as Bertrand told them what was going on in Brune. “Okay, a civil war I can understand, that even makes a kind of sense since Ganelon and Thenardier are the two strongest nobles and even connected to the royal house, right?” Ranma barely waited for the two men of Brune to nod before going on. “But what the hell is the point of Thenardier forces invading Alsace?”

“Two reasons I can think of,” Tigre said, much to Ranma’s surprise. The other young man’s voice was serious as was his face, and Ranma listened intently. “One, it’s more a political posturing move than anything else. There are lands held by several earls and other minor noble lands between Nemetacum and Alsace, which they will have to cross to get there, including Lord Mashas, a well-respected noble with connections in the royal cabinet. He cows my fellow earls and forces them to admit to his strength, which gives him a way to coerce them in the future.”

Tigre then scratched at his hair sheepishly. “And then there’s the fact that Zion might be holding a grudge for how we dealt with him before the battle on the plains. It might be petty, but it could work to give Zion some experience before he and his father take on Ganelon.”

Ranma stared after him, then shook his head, turned to the window, and, without even looking at Rurick, waved him away. "Yeah, well now we have to figure out what we're going to do about it. Later." He hopped out the window and was away an instant later.

But that wasn't really an option for Tigre. Not only could he not get out of the castle as Ranma could so easily, he felt honor-bound to at least leave openly if he was going to break his parole.

At the main gate, however, Tigre found his way blocked by Elen. "And where do you think you're going at this time of night?" she asked mock-innocently, stepping forward with Arifar on her waist.

"Please let me pass," Tigre stated seriously, his hand clenching around his bow. Yet despite that he couldn't help but stare at her, once more clad in her everyday outfit. Since he had seen her in far less than that earlier that day at a small well on the outskirts of the castle, however, the look had a greater impact.

It took Elen's words to bring him back to reality, and he shouted, "I need to return to Alsace at once! Once I have finished I will return, I swear!"

"What will you do when you get there?" Elen asked.

"Defend my fiefdom from Thenardier, of course!" Tigre replied hotly.

"How?" Elen asked, still calmly. "I know of your skill and even your friend's, but together even the two of you would not be able to stop a whole army. So I ask you, what can you do? It's a fool's errand."

"I, I don't know." Tigre faltered, then rallied. "But as long as I am there, I can do something! Think of some way to help my people!"

"What can someone so haphazard and unthinking like yourself possibly do?!" Elen shouted back, grabbing Arifar and pulling him out of his sheath. The magic blade immediately began to warp the air around it so that it nearly seemed to sparkle in the torchlight.

"If you wish to die that badly, you may as well meet your end right here, trying to run away after giving your parole. The outcome would be exactly the same either way!" Elen said, her voice only marginally calmer as her red eyes locked onto Tigre's brown ones.

"Then you won't let me go, no matter what?" Tigre asked softly

“Do you even understand what bugs me the most about this?” Elen asked, a scowl forming on her face. “Why don’t you use your wits? You and Ranma were able to create and act out a plan on the fly that got your people not only out of the initial assault in one piece, but protected them afterward during the rout as I led my troops against you. Why in the world are you now trying to run off without thinking when there’s nothing that you two alone could do?” she went on, putting a very slight emphasis on the word ‘alone.’

That and the direct look in Elen’s face, or perhaps the fact her sword was still pointed directly at him, made Tigre stop and think. *She’s not striking me down. She’s instead just, just asking me these questions, making me think. So then... What can I do not just to get her on my side now but to gain more help for Alsace.*

Truthfully, Elen had hoped to use this crisis in Alsace to get part of what she really wanted from Tigre: his skills as part of her army. If Tigre asked to formally join her army, Elen would be honor-bound to help his people. *Now to see if my or Lim’s idea of his challenging me to an archery contest is the more accurate.*

What Elen got was neither of those things. Instead she stared at Tigre as he bowed deeply and shouted, “Please lend me your troops!”

Elen stared him while the hiding Lim gaped in astonishment, then Elen started laughing, leaning on Arifar as she stuck the sword tip first in the ground, laughing as if she’d just heard the funniest thing in the world. “So audacious and bizarre, that’s actually kind of refreshing. Still, I can loan my troops to you, but it won’t be free.”

Gulping, Tigre asked, “What do you want?”

“All of Alsace,” Elen replied.

“If you will guarantee fair rule and make certain my people are looked after and protected, I will agree to your terms,” Tigre replied formally.

“Then it’s settled,” Elen said, internally doing cartwheels of joy. *Tigre and Alsace both. Hah, that’s like having my cake now and putting a down payment on one for the future at the same time!*

Lifting her sword in the air, she shouted that they were now going to go to war for the aid of Alsace, calling her troops to readiness. “Now, where is Ranma?” Elen asked, lowering Arifar and looking at Tigre. “I thought he would be with you.”

From nearby Rurick coughed delicately. "I'm afraid he's already gone, my lady."

Rolling her eyes at that, she turned towards the nearest stable where her horse was already waiting, prancing there and eager to be off. "I should've expected that, I suppose. I'll go and get him back. Rurick, Tigre, you two find Lim and get the army up and moving."

She ignored the fact that Lim was nearby, having watched this from behind a tree, knowing that her friend would be back inside the castle for the two men to find later. *Neither of us won this wager, I suppose, but my idea was closer, and I'll count it as a win regardless.*

Ranma was a surprisingly long way away from her castle by the time she caught up with him, having even gotten out past the town and the outer wall. Catching up to him would have had a normal horse lathered and near to useless. But the bond between herself and her horse was such that the horse partook of some of Elen's own bond to Arifar, and Elen caught up with Ranma despite his head start. "And where do you think you're going!?"

"To help some friends," Ranma said, slowing to a halt to look back at her as she shouted that.

Elen pulled her horse to a canter, moving around him for a moment. "And it doesn't bother you that you're breaking your oath?"

"I'd be back," Ranma replied with a careless shrug.

"You think you could fight a whole army yourself?"

Ranma froze at that and then sighed. "I suppose I could if I could contrive the right circumstances and there were no friendlies to be caught in the crossfire," he said slowly, thinking of the Amazon technique, but that would only work if the army was all in one place. If it scattered, Ranma would be put in much the same situation he had been in when Elen captured him and Tigre: unable to defend all the people he had to on his own.

"I honestly believe you would have tried," Elen said with a chuckle. "But now you won't have to."

"What?" Laughing openly now, Elen used her horse to herd Ranma back to her castle as she explained what had happened.

When she finished, Ranma stayed silent for a moment but turned his feet back to the white-walled castle and the town around it. "Huh. Okay, not the way I would've done it, but I

suppose it works. Though I suppose that now we have to figure out how to get your army there in time to save the day.”

The army, barely a thousand men, now moved quickly once more, with every man having a horse under them and carrying all of their supplies on two more. Even then, going through the Dinant plains and up into the mountains on the Brunish side of things and getting to Alsace in time should have been impossible.

But once they reached the forests on the Brunish side, once more Tigre’s skills as a huntsmen and Ranma’s own endurance came to the fore. The two of them split off, creating a trail of markers through the forest, while Ranma actually built bridges where needed by knocking down trees and created places where the army could gather at night. The job was still tough, but, thanks to the number of horses under the soldiers and Elen ordering them to eat in the saddle, they covered a large swath of territory far faster than they should have been able to.

On the outskirts of the forest, before it became farmland around the single town in Alsace, the army spent the morning resting, seeing to their equipment, and then they were off again on different horses this time. Having switched off every day, the horses were still fresh.

So when they saw a force of light cavalry racing down the road in the distance towards the town, there was no question: the army sped into a gallop, racing forward to, not intercept the other force, but to pin them into the town and wipe them out.

As Elen and Tigre led the army forward towards the town at a quick gallop, Ranma split off, racing to one side. He hadn't had a horse under him the entire time, but on foot had had a much easier time of it. Elen’s troops had gone on foot for some of the time but hadn’t been able to move fast enough.

“Where are you off to?” Elen shouted.

“I want to see this army for myself,” Ranma said with a shrug. “I also guarantee that at least a few of the people I've trained here in Alsace are out there somewhere trying to make it difficult for them.”

“He's right,” Tigre said with a nod. “Ranma’s been training us all on how to act and move in the woods, not just improve our basic endurance. And I trained many of them in archery and woodcraft too.”

Elen nodded and waved Ranma off. “Good luck.”

Ranma nodded back and then raced forward. No longer constrained by the army's speed or the need to clear the path for them, Ranma moved as fast as a charging horse and was soon out of sight.

"What is with that man and his endurance?" Lim muttered from her place next to Elen.

"I have to wonder if he can turn it to anything else," Elen said thoughtfully before blushing as that thought actually permeated her brain. Lim too blushed, and the two of them pointedly did not look at one another for a moment as their horses carried them on.

For his part Ranma raced through the farmland, eyes glancing this way and that, until he came close to where the woods abutted a farmer's field. He entered it and moved straight southwest, sort of following the dirt road leading into Alsace, but far deeper into the woods than most would be able to see his movement.

This stopped suddenly as he was nearly shot by someone out of the woods nearby. He twisted, caught the arrow in midair, and shouted, "You idiots, it's me!"

Two men came out from the woods around him, having hidden themselves so well that even Ranma hadn't been able to spot them as he was running along. "Ranma? What are you doing here? Does this mean that Lord Tigre is here too!?" the man asked hopefully.

Once more Ranma had to admire the amount of respect and loyalty that the people of Alsace took in their lord as he nodded at them. "We're here, and we brought a lot of help to. But I broke off to see what was going on at the front line."

The men in front of him nodded and led him a ways through the woods to one side, then deeper up into the mountains towards where the forest began to end and be replaced by rocks. There Ranma found a small hollow between a few boulders. There the group of skirmishers met, men coming in one after another after Ranma and his two guides arrived there.

All of the men reported the same thing. The enemies did have skirmishers of their own, but they didn't make good archers and weren't familiar with the terrain. There had been a few short sharp battles ever since the enemy army had crossed Alsace's border two days before, but nothing decisive one way or the other. The Alsace men had lost one man killed, but, by the count of these men, each of them had slain at least six enemies, mostly from ambush and then just running away.

Ranma didn't think that would be proven accurate, but he did believe that the enemy was having a harder time of it in terms of skirmishes. "But you haven't been able to get close enough to their main army?"

"Not yet," said one of them, shaking his head. "But they pulled the skirmishes back the other day, so were hoping to at least get a glimpse of it soon."

"Claus and Gaston are out there now with their troops. They're supposed to be doing the looking. And if their skirmishes been pushed back out again, both of them are good enough to know when to pull their men back."

Ranma nodded and continued to ask questions about how the battles had been going. The enemy army hadn't found any people yet, Titta and the other townsfolk having organized a withdrawal of the countryside into the town and then up into the mountains. Ranma found it kind of ironic that those same mountains were what guarded the majority of the border between Brune and Zhcted, and that, by doing that, they actually moved closer to their new overlord's center of power. *Huh... Might want to think about that further and much more seriously too.*

This meant there hadn't been any actual full clashes, but skirmishing wasn't going to do enough to stop the invading army. The enemy army was still coming on like a hammer, fit to crush Alsace by its simple size and might. If Alsace lost its one town and the farms around it, the people who had escaped into the woods would soon either have to come out into the open or starve.

This was magnified a moment later when Claus, the youngest son of the village blacksmith, skidded into the hollow, eyes wide. "I've pulled my men back," he reported grimly, heaving between breaths and not even acknowledging Ranma's presence for a minute. "We're pulling out further back into the woods. We can't fight this army! We just can't."

"What are you talking about?" Ranma said, reaching over and grabbing the other young man's shoulder, shaking him lightly. "Are we talking numbers, heavy horse, what?"

"Dragons! They have dragons!" the man babbled. "Two of them. One of them is a flying type and the other is a land type. We got close enough to actually look at them. It's why they pulled back the skirmishers; they know we're not going to attack their army with those there," he wailed.

"...Right," Ranma said, letting go of the man. "Dragons, really?"

The man nodded weakly from where he had collapsed to his rear on the floor of the small gorge. "Really."

"They've also sent out a heavy skirmishing party. Three hundred light cavalry broke off as we were watching this morning," Gaston said, making his presence known as his men moved into the suddenly crowded gorge around him. Gaston was a young, spare man who was one of the best huntsmen in Alsace besides Tigre and a fantastic tree climber, often using that and ambushes to wait for prey. He also just liked to scare people, hence his sudden appearance.

As Ranma answered his contribution with a bland, 'we know,' Claus continued his breakdown. "That earth dragon will simply smash through the trees to get at us, and that air dragon can just swoop down on us and breathe fire, and we're all going to die! They have..."

Growling, Ranma reached down and shook the man again, this time even harder. "Yes, dragons, I know. You have a Ranma, a Tigre, and a Vanadis. We can handle this. As for the main army..." Ranma said, moving over to a tree. With a single blow and an accompanying 'crack!' he shattered the tree, causing it to fall, whereupon he grabbed it and laid it to one side, a show of strength that caused every man there to gape at him. "I'll need someone to spot in a direction to toss these, but I think we can really screw up their day."

That gave the men heart, even the near-terrified Claus and his men, and Ranma went on barking orders. "Tigre and our new allies will deal with that separate force. Claus, you take most of these men and head back now. Gaston, choose four of your men to set up a series of ambushes against an enemy racing through the woods." He smirked then, though there was no humor in the sight as he began to smash off limbs from the tree. "I'll provide the reason for them to be so eager to come into our backyard here."

With Gaston further up the mountain, calling directions, Ranma hefted the tree he'd cut down above his head and then heaved it forward, out over the trees. It was a smallish tree in comparison to some of the monsters around here, but it still was as large as a ballista bolt, if nowhere near as streamlined. As it flew, Ranma checked his body and his ki and nodded in satisfaction.

While he would have normally been able to toss the makeshift ballista bolt in a straight line without further strengthening himself, hurling it up and out of sight on a trajectory like this was tougher, and he had to use some of his ki to aid his strength. But not too much, thankfully, now that the enemy was in Gaston's sight.

“You missed to the left!” Gaston shouted, sounding almost giddy. “The army’s stopped, though. If you can...”

Gaston broke off as Ranma ripped a boulder up from nearby. Ranma was able to throw this even more easily, and the giant ball rocketed up and out as Ranma shouted, “Just call me the living trebuchet, you bastards!”

Down with the invading Thenardier army, there was some consternation at first as they stared at the large ballista bolt that had slammed into the ground near to their line of march before flipping a few times. No one had been hit, but the sight of it said that something was out there, but there was no sign of what it could be.

But Zion wasn’t there any longer, having raced ahead with the light cavalry troops. That left one of his professional sub-officers in charge. He quickly ordered what remained of his light cavalry out in that direction as a screen, while pushing his few skirmishers out along the other side out into the woods there, to make certain there wasn’t a second jaw to this trap.

“One ballista, though, won’t be enough to stop us, but it could cause some damage if they get the range,” he was starting to say, when a huge boulder suddenly slammed into the serried ranks of his infantry to that side. The boulder snuffed out over a dozen men’s lives as it first hit and then bounced through the ranks, and men screamed and tried to get out of the way. “Shit! Order the army to spread out!”

“But Lord Zion will...” the other man began.

“He isn’t here!” shouted the sub-officer, quieting the other man as another rock flashed out, followed by another ballista bolt. The rock missed wide, thankfully, smashing into the ground in front of the army and ‘only’ killing two men there before bouncing away without taking any more victims. The ballista, however, smashed into the land dragon’s side, causing it to bellow in fury.

It hadn’t done any damage, not really, anyway, but the hit had been strong enough to have come from another dragon and thus aroused the somewhat tamed beast’s ire. It turned in the direction of the blow and took the next rock right on the head. That time it actually felt it, and it shook its head before roared and stomping towards where the blows had come from. In its primitive brain it had somehow realized that it was being attacked at a distance and meant to do something about it.

“Get the rest of the army out of its way and make certain the air dragon stays under control!” the sub-officer shouted, changing his orders as he watched the land dragon’s handlers being pulled after the beast and then stepped on as it walked on.

“The only one who can make the air dragon do more than walk is Zion-sama, but we can maybe hurry it along.” The second man, an equally middle-aged man, turned his horse away to do just that as more ballista bolts and rocks fell from the sky. As he did, the man muttered, “How the hell did the Alsaceans get two siege weapons up there, then hide them before we got here?!”

That was a good question, and, after the dragon had done its job, maybe they would find the answer, the acting commander mused before pulling his horse towards the opposite side of the road from the attack, shouting orders as he went.

The initial response from the remaining light infantry had run into problems the instant they entered the woods, as anyone should have been able to tell. Horses in a thick forest were a liability most of the time, certainly when in a hurry. To make matters worse, the Alsaceans opened up, aiming from up in the trees or scattered around the woods as they raced forward. They didn’t volley fire or anything. No, this was the same small skirmishing the few scouts the army had brought along had been dealing with since they entered Alsace.

But the light cavalry had not been part of that low-key warfare and now paid for it. More than a dozen men were unhorsed, most of them dead, before the others heard the blaring notes of the return order followed by the low, long bugle from the horns signifying that the dragon had come to the fore. With wide, fearful eyes, the remaining light cavalry split off to either side of the center of their line, leaving their fellows on the ground while creating two thicker squares of cavalry rather than a line. The horses still alive from the riders now dead whickered in fear and bolted away through the woods.

Then the land dragon slammed into the woods like a monstrous battering ram. The trees in its way shattered, and it didn’t even slow, racing on into the trees of the forest with a roar of fury, eager to get to grips with the thing attacking it.

The shrapnel this caused created the first injuries on the Alsace side of the battle. Two of the hunters took wounds to their chests, which knocked them on their asses, but their friends raced forward and grabbed them, pulling them further into the woods and away from the monster.

Gaston stayed in his position to give Ranma the angle the land dragon was attacking from, then clambered down the tree like a monkey, shouting, "It's coming!"

"Right!" Ranma shouted, launching one more rock on a far steeper angle—Ranma wasn't certain of the terminology. Then he was off and away, grabbing Gaston, heaving him onto a shoulder, and racing on through the woods. "We are out of here!"

Behind them the dragon chuffed as the rock smashed it on the snout, causing even more pain but no real damage, and the dragon went completely berserk, its speed picking up as it raged. But that rage had no outlet. Ranma and his fellows were long gone.

Within an hour, Ranma and Gaston had found the other skirmishers. Ranma did what he could to fix up the two injured, going so far as to actually heal them both, sending ki into their bodies to speed up the recovery. Both men exclaimed at that, then thanked Ranma for using his magic on them, but Ranma just waved that off before leading the way back to the town.

Outside the town they found Elen's army forming up to march off, but Elen and Lim were missing, as was Tigre. Entering the town Ranma found all three, along with Bertrand, Rurick, and Titta. The sight of Titta there with her maid outfit torn made Ranma scowl, though he wondered why the hell she was here rather than in the church or out in the woods.

He didn't address that, though, instead getting right to the point. "Hey, all. I've got good news and bad news. The good news is, me and the skirmishers might have bought us all a few hours to plan and prepare. The bad news is...the enemy has dragons. Two of them. One land, one flight type."

That drew some grimaces all around and a gasp of fear from Titta, who clung to Tigre's side. Elen, though, just nodded. "They can be tough, but Arifar and I can handle them." She then grinned, tossing her hair over one shoulder. "Don't worry, Ranma, you can just go on and play with the human soldiers. Leave the real dangers to me."

Ranma's eyes narrowed while Lim groaned and put a hand over her eyes. "Ooh, was that a challenge? I think it was. Oh, it's on now, Elen."

While his wording was a bit odd, Elen got the gist of what Ranma was saying and laughed, nodding her head before becoming serious. "So, how many men are we dealing with?"

Ranma waved at Gaston, who reported to Tigre, uncertain what was going on here or how his lord had gotten a foreign noble like the silver-haired Vanadis to aid them but not

questioning that yet. "Myself and the other skirmishers have been in contact with the enemy army since they crossed into Alsace, milord. Um, I wasn't one of our officers, but I know how many men we're dealing with. They had at least three thousand, maybe as many as four thousand."

Looking over at Elen, Tigre raised an eyebrow, and she nodded before they both went back to listening to Gaston. Those numbers were about what they had expected to face given the speed at which the Thenardier army had been moving.

"Most of them are heavy cavalry and infantry, with a force of light cavalry and only a handful of skirmishers. That last group is down to four or five men at best unless they've added to them from the rest of the army," Gaston went on. "The main force is moving slowly, but the light cavalry force broke off this morning to head to the town, which..." Gaston finished with a smile, "I suppose you already knew about. Although we thought Lord Zion Thenardier himself was with them."

"He was but got away, darn it," Tigre said with a sigh, his arms tightening around Titta.

It was only now that Ranma noticed both that his friend's hand was hurt and that his bow was broken. Gesturing at them, he asked, "What happened?"

"I, Lord Tigre saved me!" Titta said, torn between crying at her recent ordeal and smiling at her lord and not-at-all secret love interest. "Lord Thenardier attacked the mansion and found me within, but I ran outside onto the balcony and, and when he, he tried to... Anyway, Lord Tigre shot him through the hand."

"I was honestly hoping for a head shot, but the balcony's rail was in my way, and I couldn't quite get the angle. So I went for his hand instead," Tigre said with a sigh.

"Then a second later he fires through several dozen yards of wood to take out an enemy archer with the man's own arrow after catching it in midair," Rurick said, clapping Tigre on the shoulder and smiling proudly.

"Huh, so that training I put you through paid off?" Ranma said with a smirk, causing Tigre to groan and Titta to huff.

"Dodge is not training; dodge is very poorly disguised torture," Tigre retorted.

While Elen and the others looked on in amused confusion at that, Ranma turned to Titta. “But why the hell were you still in the mansion? Why weren’t you with the rest of the townsfolk in the church or out hiding in the woods?”

“I couldn’t leave my post! I was left to watch over the home while lord Tigre was away!” Titta said heatedly.

Ranma stared at her, then groaned and put his head in his hands. “You think he wouldn’t have preferred that you were safe rather than the manor!? How do you not know that of Tigre yet!?”

“He’s right, Titta. If it’s a choice between you and anything in the mansion, even the Black Bow, I’d take you being safe any day,” Tigre said with a firm nod. “It was brave but very foolish.”

This caused Titta to look between the two men and begin to cry softly, nodding her head.

Resolutely looking away, Ranma turned to Elen and asked, “So, how are we going to do this?”

OOOOOOO

“What do you mean, they ambushed you!?” Zion shouted, then winced as his hand was seen to by his physician. “Careful, cow, or I’ll have your head!” he barked to the old woman, then turned back to his officers. “How the hell did they do that!”

“As we’ve said all along, Zion-sama, we have had trouble with skirmishers from the woods. Our forces are ill-suited to fight in the forests that make up the majority of this territory,” the older sub-officer said, his tone respectful. “They somehow set up some kind of way to hurl boulders and ballista bolts at range. We lost nearly a hundred men and more horses to that attack, and the land dragon went out of control when it was struck. But it wasn’t injured, just enraged. As far as we can tell, though, we didn’t kill a single one of them, and we have no idea how they did it.”

Before Zion could say anything to that, a cavalryman pushed into the tent, going to one knee in front of Zion. “Milord, we have spotted the enemy banner! The troops facing us come from Zhcted!”

“WHAT?!” Zion shouted, then bashed his free hand down on his camp table, spilling a goblet of very expensive wine onto its side where it dripped like blood to the ground. “That traitor, Vorn, I’ll have his head! Muster the entire army! We march on them at once! And make certain the land dragon is kept to the fore!”

OOOOOOO

After they had put together a plan to take advantage of their greater maneuverability and the continued over-confidence of their enemies, Ranma joined Tigre and Elen at the front of two-thirds of their forces, with Lim leading the others off, led in turn through the woods by the local skirmishers. Two dozen more Alsace men had joined their forces, armed with long spears, leather armor, and bows. They didn’t fit in with the well-accoutered troops of Zhcted, but they were willing, and most of them were decent archers. They moved to join Rurick and his troops around Tigre on foot.

They were joined at the last moment by Bertrand, carrying six full quivers on his horse and his own body. “With this, I doubt even Tigre-sama will run out of arrows! Although you will still need to worry if someone gets close to him.”

“True enough,” Tigre said with a smile, looking over at Elen and Ranma. Ranma just laughed, while Elen promised that no one was going to get close to him.

The battle began a few minutes later as the heavy cavalry of both sides started to move towards one another. But the first casualties were caused by Tigre, who was able to shoot further and faster than anyone else among the few mounted archers was. His arrows penetrated the helmet visors of four men in quick succession, so fast even Ranma had trouble following the arrows, and he blinked, only now realizing that his red-haired friend was using his family’s Black Bow.

For a second Ranma took the time to glare at the thing, which had always given him some weird vibes. But he turned away as the others archers slowed their horses and dropped from the saddles to open fire. None of them could fire in the saddle yet. That training would

take a good long time. At the same time, Tigre's people set out their long spears in front of them, and the heavy cavalry dressed their lines, charging forward in a spread out line and impacting their opposite numbers.

The battle became general for a moment, and Ranma, out in front with Elen, struck out all around, using a staff from the saddle. He didn't kill many of those he struck, but his victims certainly didn't realize that death would have been a softer option than the broken bones, shattered armor, and simple unconsciousness they were plagued with as Ranma's staff flew around him in a wide, almost unseen barrier of ki-infused wood. Elen was doing much the same, Arifar lashing out to either side; her horse attacking, kicking, biting, and head-butting; and showing what Ranma would have called a perfect example of Jinba Ittai, the art of horse and rider as one.

At first Ranma and Elen's assault seemed fit to break the enemy's line. Then the line shifted suddenly to either side, as its members didn't so much move as flee what was coming up behind them.

The land dragon roared as it marched forward, crushing one man underfoot. Its smell having made their horses throw them off, it then killed four more Zhcted troopers with swift bites from its jaw or slashes from its forward-most claws.

Looking at it, Ranma snarled and launched himself forward off the saddle, rolling as he landed, and raced forward, using his staff as a pole vault to fling himself further upward and forward. "I believe this is my dance!"

Elsewhere, Elen was too closely embroiled with her own surroundings to interfere at first, so she fell back, trying to regain some distance in order to read the flow of the battle. When she did, she sent a runner out and back to sneak around into the woods to find Lim and her portion of the army. By the time she turned back to deal with the dragon, not only had Tigre attempted to deal with it in the same way he'd kill a wyvern, but Ranma was far too close for her to use Arifar.

Ranma landed lightly on the dragon's head, his hand flashing out to crash into the thing's snout only to bounce off as if he had hit stone. "Hard!" he grunted, then the land dragon tried to shake him off, failing miserably as Ranma held on with one hand while gathering ki into his other hand. "Fine, let's see if you can take this!"

Changing his target, Ranma's now glowing fist slammed into the dragon's eye, not once, but several dozen times, then a hundred, as his fist flashed into the Amaguriken. A sound like

some kind of gong reverberated after each successive hit, grabbing the attention of the hundreds of soldiers spread out over the battlefield.

The land dragon went berserk under Ranma, bucking and heaving, and, just as Ranma's fist broke whatever thin, clear rock that was guarding its eye, the thing finally broke his grip on its snout, flinging him away. Its eye had burst under Ranma's blows, but he was hurled into the air.

Flipping through the air, Ranma landed among a group of still organized Thenardier soldiers onto the back of one of their horses, landing on its feet first. Balancing there easily, Ranma used a single blow to smash the horse's owner out of his saddle and then smacked his hands down on the saddle. Using that as a pivot, Ranma kicked out rapidly to every side of him, hurling other people out of their saddles.

Unfortunately for Ranma, the land dragon had followed him, and, in doing so, Elen couldn't get a clear shot on it with her weapon's magical attack. The attack wasn't very good at discerning friend from foe, and Elen refused to catch any of her troops in it. Irritably she sounded the horn call to retreat, but by then it was too late, and the land dragon was on Ranma once more.

Crossing the distance far faster than Ranma had anticipated, Ranma barely had a moment for his instincts to scream a warning before he leaped out of the saddle he had momentarily commandeered. Then the land dragon's claws sliced the fleeing horse into pieces before barreling into the other Thenardier men around Ranma.

"Get out of the way, Ranma!" Elen roared, her voice carrying with all the expertise of a warlord on the battlefield.

Ranma grunted but continued to dodge around for a bit until he had led the dragon away from some of the Thenardier and Zhcted troops on the ground, having noticed that more than a few of the ones who had been unhorsed by their suddenly fearful horses were still alive.

Soon enough, though, Ranma was far enough away for Elen, and she launched her attack. With Arifar pointing at the dragon, Elen roared out, "Ley Adimos!" This attack consisted of a large current of dense air which lifted the land dragon off the ground. Once it was in the air, thrashing and fighting wildly to get free of whatever was holding it, the air suddenly started to shear in two directions. The air then split the dragon in half, almost like a wind shear attack of unimaginable power had hit it.

Staring at the remains, Ranma walked through the rest of the current battlefield unmolested, the surrounding Thenardier forces now in full retreat. "Yeah," he said to Elen as she reached him on her horse. "I'd rather you not use that kind of attack on me. Wow."

Elen laughed but soon turned her attention to the rout. For the death of the land dragon hadn't been the only blow the invading forces had sustained. Limalisha had been launching her own attack elsewhere. She had pulled many of the Thenardier reserves out of position with a ruse using horses, then had ambushed them, overrunning them entirely, and was now behind the Thenardier army, threatening their camp.

But for all his faults, Zion did have a kind of courage. And it was this courage that saved his forward most troops for the moment. "VORN!!!" the young man roared, marching forward. "VORN! I challenge you to a joust, Vorn! The winner wins this field without further lives lost! Will you accept, or are you a coward, hiding behind the skirts of the Vanadis you sold your nation to!?"

Ranma and Elen looked at one another and said as one, "Is he mad!? We're winning...oy, don't copy...stop that!"

They were about to laugh, but then from nearby they saw Tigre break out of a clump of soldiers, Alsace and Zhcted alike. Ranma groaned, and Elen shook her head, leaning down to Ranma. "Is this some man thing?"

Nodding gravely, Ranma watched as Tigre handed off most of his quivers to Bertrand. "Yeah, kind of. I think it was the hiding behind the skirts line. I know that would've worked on me too damn easily."

"Ohoh, even though you could wear a skirt half the time?" Elen teased.

"Meh, my old man pounded into my head this whole women are weak thing, though I don't believe it any longer. Is he going to just use a bow?" Ranma muttered, cocking his head and watching. "Huh, well if anyone can use a bow and arrow in a joust, it's Tigre."

"It's good you no longer believe that rot. I'd have to really use Ley Adimos on you like you requested a week back," Elen huffed, then she smiled as she watched Tigre shoot four shots. The first three all hit the same point on Zion's shield, despite Zion being the one to use his shield to block them. "How exactly did he figure out how Zion would move his shield like that?"

“Tigre and bows are a mystery to me. He’s just that good. And one more...” The two watched, and, as Ranma had said, Tigre fired one more time before the charging Zion reached him. That arrow pierced Zion’s shield at the weakened point, punching straight through his forearm underneath it. “YES! Couldn’t happen to a nicer cockroach!”

Elen laughed, then stopped as, when Tigre turned to either take Zion hostage or finish him off (which Elen knew was unlikely, given Tigre’s personality), the rest of the Thenardier remaining cavalry charged forward followed by their infantry.

She raced forward too, shouting over her shoulder, “Talk later; let’s finish this now!”

Ranma nodded and raced forward on his own two feet after her. He took a moment to nod at Tigre and shout, “I bet that felt good!”

“I don’t like hurting people most of the time, but that was quite satisfying, yes,” Tigre replied, shooting so fast he emptied another quiver in less than a second. Ranma then was too busy with the fight to talk further.

But this turned out to be mostly the last gasp of a beaten force. Zion used the cover of his army to retreat to his camp, which was still secure thanks to the presence of the sky dragon. Uncaring about the fate of his army, Zion immediately climbed into the saddle of the sky dragon and ordered its tethers cut. Under his command, the dragon leaped into the sky and was soon gaining altitude as he shouted down, “As if I’ll let a bow-using, jumped up peasant like you kill me! You just wait, Vorn! You and your new masters will all be crushed by my father along with your precious Alsace!”

Craning his neck, Ranma watched this with a scowl. Then he grabbed a spear from nearby, heaving it into the air. It came close enough for Zion to pull the dragon to one side, but that was all.

“Damn it!” Elen muttered. “After all this, he’s going to get away!”

“He’s going to get away? Is there anything I can do?” Tigre muttered, staring above them. Then he seemed to blink and stared down at the Black Bow.

As Tigre did, Ranma’s eyes narrowed as if he was sensing something just at the edge of his hearing, inaudible but there.

Elen reacted an instant later as Arifar began to glow at her waist. “Ho? You want to help him, I take it? You little two-timer,” she said affectionately, stroking Arifar’s hilt.

With permission from his master so given, Arifar glowed, and a fast wind began to emanate from the weapon, moving toward and then coalescing around Tigre's bow, sliding along the length of the string to the arrow. There the wind began to become more and more visible as the Black Bow glowed with some kind of inner light.

Pulling the string back, Tigre aimed upwards, deducing where the flying dragon would be before firing. The arrow was like a bolt of dark blue and white lightning, composed of the magic of the bow and of Arifar's wind, rocketing into the sky. It was moving so fast that it was doubtful, even had Zion seen it coming, that he could have dodged it. Instead the arrow struck with all the power of a tornado condensed into an area only a few yards across, shredding a wing, the side of the dragon, and Zion himself. The remains slowly started to fall backwards toward the ground, the dragon already dead, unable to even scream a last cry.

Below, the men among the Thenardier army who were able to see this act did just that for the dragon, letting loose a loud wail as Tigre collapsed back, nearly falling out of the saddle. Then, as Ranma reached up to catch the other man, Elen roared, "Tigrevurmud Vorn has shot down Zion Thenardier!"

As that magically augmented shout carried over the fields of Molsheim, men all over the battlefield threw their weapons down and raised their hands in token of surrender. The battle for Alsace was over.

End Chapter

Chapter 3: Acquiring New Titles

As Tigre saw to his people and the majority of the prisoners, Elen and Lim reconstituted their forces and set up a permanent camp several miles away from where what was already being called the battle of the Molsheim Plains, towards Alsace. At the same time, Ranma took to helping to transport the wounded, his gentleness while doing so astonished men who had seen him shatter or just tear apart plate mail with his punches. He was feeling extremely guilty about his part in this battle, still very unused to killing, and he wanted to mitigate his guilt by using his medical skills to save who he could.

Most of the army had witnessed his blinding the dragon and were still a little in awe that he had succeeded in hurting it, so none of them gave him any trouble regardless of which side they had fought on. When it began to spread that Ranma had done that to a dragon, a species which was supposed to be utterly immune to every weapon that was not a Viralt, Ranma would have a new nickname: the 'Dragon Warrior.' This would not be the first nickname he would earn in the following weeks or even that night.

After helping the wounded on their side of the field, Ranma helped the wounded among the prisoners, transporting them back to the medical tents as well. Since those who had surrendered included the minimal baggage train that Thenardier had brought, this made some sense to those witnessing it: the support personnel had included the four doctors Zion had brought along.

Well, at first Ranma used the term 'doctor' when he thought of them. After seeing them in action, along with the two medical men Elen had brought, Ranma had to take that term back. *Fuck, they don't deserve that title at all! Only two of the six seem to have any clue as to what they're doing in terms of surgery!* Worse to Ranma's perspective, those two came from different camps, and were not helping one another at all, nor was the entire operation organized.

Sighing, Ranma rolled up his sleeves and turned to a few of the nearby soldiers. They had been helping their wounded fellows as much as possible, but now that they had been relieved of their burdens, they were just standing around looking exhausted. Pointing at each, one after another, Ranma began to bark orders. "You, rush back to Alsace and requisition as many needles and as much thread as you can. You, find the biggest bucket, or maybe even a tub, and fill it with hot water. You, find the camp and town blacksmiths and then, after you get them back here, help them gather up as much metal rubbish from the battlefield as you can. Small stuff, nothing large."

As the three troopers bounced to obey Ranma, one of the two men from Leitmeritz looked up from where he had been working on sewing a nasty gash on one of Elen's troopers closed. He was an older man of Bertrand's age with no hair to speak of save a long drooping mustache and a lot of hair coming out of his ears. "You have healing skills, youngster?"

"Yep. Now, where're the most wounded? Talk me through your system here, old man," Ranma replied, moving towards him around the soldiers. "And please tell me you know about disease, sterilization, and the use of alcohol to clean wounds!"

For the rest of the day and the entirety of the night, Ranma helped the healers, putting his medical knowledge from Dr. Tofu to good use on a wide scale for the very first time. At first, most of the help he was giving was organizational, having come from a time far more advanced

than the one in this world. Then he used pressure points to deaden limbs or take away the pain from practically every man there, saving both time and supplies. Several arguments began with the other doctors about not amputating mangled limbs, but when Ranma threatened to toss them back to Alsace -which was several miles away - those arguments ended abruptly.

By that point the blacksmiths had arrived, and Ranma walked them through what he wanted. "They're called butterfly clamps where I come from. They're about so big," Ranma explained, holding his fingers out. "I need them to look a bit like a butterfly, almost, but with little hooks on the underside."

Once everything was organized in the medical area as best he could make it, Ranma started in on truly healing the wounded. Doing so, Ranma continued to use more modern knowledge and pressure points than ki healing, since he didn't want to be known as a miracle worker. That would be nasty in the long term, after all, and Ranma had no desire for people to try and tie him down because of his healing skills. However, he did use ki healing with some of the worst injured among the Leitmeritz wounded on top of using his ki to scan the wounded to see what was wrong with them in the first place.

This cut down dramatically on the numbers of wounded who would otherwise have died from their wounds. Even his sewing was better than most of the healers, forcing Ranma to order another runner back to Alsace for every housewife that could be convinced to help. "But only those with a cast iron stomach, mind!"

He even helped the wounded among the Thenardier forces, though there he tried desperately to use only the more normal methods of healing. They had been the attackers here and had, in fact, attacked their own countrymen. He'd help them, but not to the extent of his own side.

Using his ki to figure out the various wounds from the inside, Ranma set bones, enhanced the healing speed of the worst wounded patients, and even healed lungs or perforated stomachs, intestines, and numerous other types of injuries as subtly as he could. With his help more than four-hundred men who would otherwise have died were saved, including four from Alsace and ninety former Thenardier men.

Lim found him still there the next day, Ranma not having slept as he worked. After having talked to a few of the doctors, she watched as Ranma worked on one of the men who had been wounded severely early on in the main battle but not found until later that night, his body buried under the corpse of his horse. As she watched, Ranma set his shattered legs one bit after another, the man showing only slight signs of discomfort during an operation which should have had him screaming.

Then the man's most debilitating wound was laid bare, a deep, bleeding gash on the side. Only the padding under his armor acting like a sop had stopped him from bleeding out. Ranma cleaned it with a burst of alcohol, which caused the man to hiss, and Ranma grinned at him, settling a hand right above the wound. "Oh, come on big man that was the easy part. You're a soldier, ain't ya?"

"Ugh, I'm a soldier, aye, but where in that description did that say I had to be fine with some ass in a pigtail splashing good wine on an open wound, aye?" the man replied, grunting again as Ranma started to sew the wound closed.

Lim blinked, leaning almost into Ranma's back as she saw the wound closing. *I've seen wounds sewn shut before, but do wounds close that quickly normally? Or did Ranma do something there? And what was that glow on his hand? It was gone so quick. I'm not even certain I saw it, but I could have sworn Ranma's hand glowed blue.* Setting that mystery aside, Lim stood back and coughed delicately as Ranma finished with the man in front of him and stretched in place. "Ranma, Lady Eleonora wants you for a meeting in Tigre's mansion."

"Mansion, kind of too big a name for his place, ain't it?" Ranma asked sardonically, sitting up and moving to join her as Lim turned to walk away. "Still, we're done with the worst wounded here."

"I notice you were able to take away that man's pain," Lim said, searching for information about Ranma's odd abilities. "So is that more pressure points?"

"Yep. Can do that, can completely deaden limbs, can do a lot of things."

"And enhance the speed with which other people heal to the extent that you can heal yourself?" Lim probed deeper, hoping to find out if the glowing hand she'd seen had been a trick of the light or not. "You seem to have the magic touch, then."

"Not quite to that extent, no," Ranma replied with a smirk. "As for me having a magic touch, I don't know about that either. Would you like to try it?"

The two of them looked at one another as that question left Ranma's mouth, then they both blushed and looked away as they both understood at the same time how that could have been taken. The rest of the walk to Alsace and the mansion was finished in silence, both awkward and rather rife with something else, some potential neither could name. It was odd, yet both were somehow fine with it at the same time.

They arrived at the small sitting room on the second floor of Tigre's manor, walking up the steps as Titta was shouting at Elen, "Even to wake Tigre-sama up, that is going far too far!!"

“Ma, mah, I just wanted to try it, is all. Lim said it was the only way to make him wake up quickly,” Elen replied.

“Do not throw me under the dragon like that, Elen-sama,” Lim cut in, shaking her head at her best friend and lady. “Say, rather, it is Tigre’s fault for being utterly incapable of being woken up in the mornings.”

“Hmm, that is true,” Elen replied, turning to Tigre with a teasing expression on her face as she leaned in, putting an arm across his shoulders and squeezing once. “Do you always have trouble sleeping or something, Tigre?”

“Not really, I just always want more sleep. Ever since I was a child,” Tigre confessed.

Joining the other two at the table, Ranma watched as Tigre sized Elen up, smirking inwardly. *Huh, this could be good.*

Sure enough, Titta filled two more cups with tea before hesitantly asking, “Um, excuse me, but ano, wh, what is your relationship with Tigre-sama?”

Seeing the look on Titta’s face an imp of mischief woke up in Elen. “Hehehe, Tigre, you see, he belongs to me~~.”

“Ehh!!” Titta squealed.

Tigre smiled somewhat self-consciously. “Ah, well, sort of, both myself and Alsace. I had to hand over control of Alsace to Elen in order to save it. And that has added to my debt rather than removed it.”

“No, no. Say it plain. You belong to me,” Elen said, hugging Tigre’s arm to her in a way that made Tigre blush.

“I, I won’t lose!” Titta shouted, bringing all attention back to her. Looking at Tigre’s confused expression and Elen’s now even more amused one, she then looked to the blank Lim and the smirking Ranma before squeaking and covering her face with the tray, backing away hurriedly and heading down the stairs.

Once the humor of the moment died down, however, the meeting got down to business. “So, what happens now?” Tigre asked.

“Now? Now we leave the forces already here to help prepare Alsace for future trouble, and I have to return to Zhcted to face the music. Invading Brune was specifically against my orders, the battle in the Dinant Plains was something of an aggressive defense, but the king is of no desire to extend our nation’s borders past the natural defense of the mountains.” Elen

gestured to the east of the house to emphasize her point. "I had no orders to cross the border and no real reason, as far as the court is concerned, to get involved here."

"Are you going to get in trouble for it?"

"Not much. I might be shouted at, might lose a few of my interior provinces, but there's scant little they can do to me now that the battle's been fought already. We'll see," Elen replied to Tigre's question. Her look then turned sly as she looked at Ranma. "If it comes down to it, I could bring Ranma with me. Another woman who could hear Arifar would be big news."

"I'm still getting over the fact it's only women who can be bonded to those 'Viralt' of yours," Ranma said with a scowl at being addressed as a woman, while beside him Lim idly noted that the pigtailed man's accent seemed to come and go. "But why would meeting someone who is able to hear Arifar, and only when's laughing at me, at that, be all that important?"

"There's never been a case of one Vanadis hearing the weapons of another. And there's never been someone able to hear a Viralt that is currently bonded to a Vanadis. To say nothing of your combat abilities. News of those two points might offset any anger directed my way from the king," Elen replied.

"What about us here in Alsace?" Tigre asked in concern, waving that concern off. "You and your troops might have intervened on my behalf, but Alsace was the original target, which means we might still be targeted once more after you leave."

"We go on the attack," Ranma said with a firm nod, causing the others to blink at him, and he shrugged. "That guy in the pink armor and the face that looks like a battlefield for the forces of acne and ego, what was his name again?"

"Zion Thenardier," Tigre supplied, amused at Ranma's words, while Elen laughed, and even Lim smiled. "The only son of Duke Thenardier."

"Right, that guy. If his old man's as strong as it's said he is, he'll not even know what's happened yet, since it's only been a few days. I say we take advantage of it, keep the pressure on."

"Ranma, I don't think you understand the real balance of power between a mere Earl and a Duke, especially Duke Thenardier." Tigre shook his head. "Alsace is but a small holding, while Nemetacum is huge, a territory built around some of Brune's oldest mines, with several hundred leagues worth of farmland and its own city. Even with Elen-sama's troops we'd be outnumbered fifty to one."

“And you can’t seriously think that after turning his men aside, and, you know, personally killing **his son**, that he won’t come for you again!” Ranma retorted.

“That’s true, but Tigre’s right. Besides, I won’t be able to station my troops here for long. Alsace just doesn’t have the fodder for our horses and the rest of my troops,” Elen cautioned.

“Maybe, but I’m not talking about taking on his troops in a straight fight. I’m talking about small scale stuff: ambushes, burning bridges, commando style warfare... Right, you lot don’t know that term,” Ranma hissed, thinking for a moment as the three others at the table looked at him quizzically. “Um, small scale attacks meant to attack his logistics, unusual ways of fighting rather than straight up combat.”

Elen hummed, thinking as she tried to produce the word Ranma had used. “Huh, commandos? Interesting concept, and it might work. But I don’t know enough about the lay of the land in Brune to be able to say yes or no.”

“In that case, why don’t we down two birds with one stone,” Ranma said. “My writing ability might be kind of bad...”

“That’s an understatement,” Tigre drawled, earning him a smack to the shoulder.

Despite that interruption Ranma continued, ignoring Elen’s giggles. “But I can make maps pretty damn well, and I’ve got a fantastic memory for terrain. So why don’t I head out and see what kind of mischief I can do to hold up any forces moving towards Alsace while making us some maps?”

“That’s not a bad idea. There are several dozen earldoms, baronies, and other, larger fiefdoms all around Alsace. We don’t know anything about them, but many might have been forced to look the other way when Zion marched through. We could learn who our friends are or even...even start gathering allies for when we have to move against Duke Thenardier,” Tigre said, somewhat sadly. “I have no wish to make war, but, Duke Thenardier, he decided to make war upon my people, and I cannot step back from that.”

“You could offer to join with Duke Ganelon, then,” Lim replied neutrally. “Between you and Lady Eleonora, you have a lot to offer, and, between you, I would wager you could force Thenardier to the negotiating table if not beat him in open combat.”

“HELL no!” Ranma shouted, while Tigre shook his head emphatically.

Despite his response being louder, though, it was the Brune nobleman who went on. “There have long been unsavory rumors about Duke Ganelon, but of late those rumors, coupled

with those about his military strength, are all anyone can hear. Ranma and I overheard many nobles applauding how Ganelon and Thenardier basically abused their people. I will never ally with such a man or any who would act in the same manner to their people. To do so would be the same as betraying my people to his care. Thenardier might rule with the fist of a tyrant, but Ganelon abuses his people as if they are worse than slaves.”

“Good answer,” Lim said with a faint smile as Elen nodded.

The Vanadis thought for a moment, then nodded. “Fine. That kind of survey and spy work actually sounds like a decent idea. And we need to be aware of any moves against us from any noble allied to Thenardier or, yes, Ganelon. Lim, assign Ranma here...fifteen men, I think, mixed cavalry and infantry.”

“No cavalry,” Ranma cautioned. “I doubt we’ll be fighting from the saddle since I plan to travel via the forests as much as possible. Plus, a man on foot or even a group of them doesn’t attract nearly as much attention as people on horseback. We want to sneak, not attack.”

“Actually, I think we should just add fifteen of your men to fifteen of ours here in Alsace. Ranma’s trained them to move on foot very quickly, and almost all of them can shoot and move silently through the woods,” Tigre interjected.

“Thanks to you,” Ranma said with a nod. For all his ability to teach martial arts, Ranma sucked at teaching how to move through the forest, and he knew it.

“In that case, choose five of our archers and five of our infantry, train them for a few days to a week, and then, yes, Ranma, I think that sounds like a good idea. Should I make it an order?” Elen asked impishly, smirking at Ranma’s scowl. Ranma had, Elen knew, never quite gotten over the fact that he had been taken prisoner. And while Tigre had gotten out of his parole with her, in a way, becoming her vassal in truth, Ranma hadn’t, since everything he had done here in Alsace was because of his friendship with Tigre. She knew he saw her and Lim as friends too but wasn’t above teasing him, especially since she hoped it would eventually force him to share more of his skills and past with her.

When Ranma refused to rise to the bait further than a scowl, Elen went on. “Lim, I want you to stay here too. Help Tigre organize a permanent camp for our troops on the other side of the battlefield somewhere, I think, and then with the diplomatic talks with the other local lords. Now, let’s see what route you and this troop should take.”

Later, as they walked to the horses together, Lim sighed and looked at her best friend. "I do not like this at all. I know full well of Ranma's skills and abilities, but to put our men under his command? Nor can I understand your thinking about letting Tigre be in overall command."

"Heheh, you still doubt them even now? True, I wouldn't trust Ranma to lead a large troop, but I think that he has a very interesting skill set which lends itself to small unit tactics. As for Tigre...you saw that shot, didn't you, the one that took out that vyfal (flying dragon)? Couple that with the trust his people show in him and how willingly they, peasants all, fight for him. Together, that shows he is a man I can trust to do what is best. And I also want to see if his planning our march to Alsace and the initial attack was more than just a flash in the pan."

Patting her horse, Elen turned to pull Lim into a hug. "I'll see you soon in Leitmeritz in six weeks. Whatever Ranma thinks, we can't expect any truly aggressive moves in our direction because of how any move against us will take Thenardier or Ganelon out of position, so what we'll really be dealing with in the meantime is gaining allies. I expect that will be lengthy but easy enough. Stay safe, okay?"

Lim nodded, hugging her friend back before stepping away, letting Elen turn and pull herself up into the saddle. She still looked worried but said nothing as she watched her friend ride off at the head of a troop of five, heading northwest towards the road.

OOOOOOO

Ranma smiled as he marched into the manor, smirking as his group of soldiers fell out from their daily run. "Good job, you lot. I didn't even have to carry any of you back this time."

Against Ranma's wishes, Lim and Tigre had agreed that his troops, his new ones, anyway, needed more training in how to move as he wanted them to. He agreed with the training, but not in moving through the woods or even living off the land as they would have to. Instead he had them run and perform various exercises from dawn to dusk followed by several hours of what Ranma called 'dodge.' His men called it a very odd form of torture.

The reason for this was simple: endurance. Endurance was far, **far** more important than most people in this day and age thought, particularly on the march or in a battle. He wanted to push these men so that even if they were pursued they could leave their pursuers in the dust. He wanted them able to fight, march, and march some more so they could pick their battles and fade away as best as possible. Ranma wanted them all to come back, regardless of anything else.

Practically every man behind Ranma was on their knees, groaning and gasping. The few who weren't, Alsace men who'd had longer to get used to Ranma's insanity, still groaned or gave him the finger. He laughed at that, taking it as a good sign, since, when they had started, none of them would have even had enough energy to do that. Then he became serious, squatting down in front of them with a grim look on his face. "You're ready, I think. Take the rest of the evening off, and tomorrow we're going to leave after breakfast."

The men looked at him seriously and then nodded, one after another. "As you will, Captain," said one of the men from Leitmeritz. All of them knew they needed to get on the road. If there really was an enemy unit moving towards Alsace or the Dinant Plains, the sooner they were moving, the better.

When did I become captain then? Well whatever, can't deny I'm in charge anyway. Nodding at them all, Ranma stood back up and turned away, heading inside.

There he found that Tigre and Titta had returned from their survey of Alsace's outlying farmsteads and estates and Mashas had arrived at the mansion from his own lands. Bertrand led Tigre up to where Mashas and Lim, after a bit of a stare-down were sitting now with Tigre. They were discussing what had happened, the outcome, and what they would do now. He sat down just as Tigre said that he would fight Thenardier. "For my land and my people, I can do no less."

"Well said," Mashas replied with a smile, nodding at Ranma as the pigtailed youth set down next to his friend. "Now, tell me more about your plans going forward."

That took some time, but Mashas listened intently and asked Bertrand at one point to go out to his horse and bring his saddlebags back, whereupon he handed over a not very detailed map of Brune as well as a few hundred Brune coins of various denominations. "I'll also send a letter of marque with you, Ranma, so you can requisition what you need from several of the other nobles. I've made a lot of friends over the years, and many of them will help you with food, if nothing else. As for targets, there are a few dikes, a few bridges and other things that could slow down any army moving towards the northwestern territories. If you honestly think that you can travel that distance so freely and quickly?"

Ranma smirked, the same lopsided smirk that had always sent his old rivals into frothing rage and the girls to blushing. Here it didn't seem to have any appreciable impact. "Try me."

"Ranma has said often enough over the past few days that a man on foot can out-march a horse. Now he'll have a chance to prove it, though I maintain that riding a horse is still better, since it forces the horse to do most of the work." Lim said.

“What, you think **your** weight’d matter at all to me? Or do ya just like the idea of breaking me to the saddle?” Ranma asked with a laugh. “You could try to ride me, Lim, but I guarantee you’d be the one dropping from exhaustion first, even if I, as you put it, was the one doing all the work.”

Lim blushed at that and growled irritably, looking away as her thoughts went to very odd places when he said that. “Gah, that, no!”

Hearing her response, Ranma thought about what he’d just said and then blushed hotly. “Ah, no, I didn’t mean... That is... Uggh...” To the great amusement of the other two men there he looked away too, and the two of them stared at opposite walls.

In particular, Tigre was smiling, amused at his friend’s and Lim’s reactions. *I wonder if that is because they like one another, although, if that is the case, why does she pick on him so much? Girls. They can be so strange sometimes. Thank goodness I don’t have any problems in that area.*

To one side Titta sneezed as did several other people scattered throughout Zhcted and Brune. “Huh, a cold?”

OOOOOOO

Days later, Elen arrived at Silesia for her meeting with King Victor. The ruler of Zhcted and direct descendant of the dark mage who had created the seven Viralt, Victor was an elderly man around seventy years of age who had never truly trusted Vanadis of any stripe and looked down on Eleonora from his throne angrily as he called her onto the carpet. Around her in the vast throne room were several hundred courtiers, most of whom were unimportant save for the fact that they could get the king to listen to them, but others powers in the country on their own.

In a loud tone designed to overawe, Victor demanded her explanation for her departure to Brune without his consent. Elen replied that she was hired by Tigre and claimed that his archery skill could be a helpful asset to the kingdom, though became frustrated as the king was displeased at the news and deemed her a "disgrace" for involving Zhcted with Brune's civil affairs for such a specious reason as admiring a single person’s skill with a bow.

Luckily, Elen was saved by her fellow Vanadis, Sofya Obertas. Sofy defended her and explained the details on her behalf. When the king asked Elen the real reason for her alliance

with Tigre, she answered that all Tigre ever wanted was Alsace's peace, but she also continued that, when Tigre gained more land with his victories, these conquered lands would be in the name of King of Zhcted. At that appeal to his greed, King Victor grudgingly approved her alliance with Tigre and her takeover of Alsace.

Elen was about to breathe a sigh of relief at Sofy's aid when an old man moved from where he had been standing in the king's shadow, a gentle cough gaining the attention of everyone there. "Ahem. Yet, even so, there are still questions that must be asked about this intervention that you led. Specifically, how it actually succeeded. Rumors have reached our ears of miraculous happenings, beyond even the power of a single Vanadis."

As Sofy frowned in surprise, a few others in the audience whispered among themselves, and Elen blinked as she spotted two other Vanadis there. One she had almost expected to see, but the other, her presence was both a good sign and an odd one, considering how far away her lands were.

But Elen had only a brief moment to wonder about that, as her attention shifted back up at King Victor's spymaster as he finished. "We would like to know about these odd rumors of someone able to fight you hand to hand and then to charge a dragon unaided. Is this another case of Brune finding a fighter on the level of Roland?"

"I... It could well have been, yes. I had not wanted to say so in this setting, Lord Miron, but yes. I met a woman who could hear Arifar to a certain degree and could indeed fight me near to a standstill when I was not using Arifar's special attacks," Elen said, then deciding to take a plunge and put her annexation of Alsace in an even better light. *I hope Ranma forgives me for this. It's a few steps further than what we talked about before I left, but it might get us more help against Thenardier, so maybe he won't take it too badly?* She looked directly at King Victor and said simply, "It turns out that Ranko is the illegitimate half-sister of Earl Vorn. She is a truly deadly warrior of a like I've never met before. It is true she attacked the suro (land dragon) that Zion Thenardier brought to the battlefield..."

She paused as the court broke out in shocked gasps and mutters at that. The reality of the Thenardier family somehow controlling dragons enough to point them at their enemies was something none of them had ever wished to hear. But the king made no acknowledgment of that, nor did Sofy, the other two Vanadis, Elen, or the spymaster. After all, the Viralt had been created to kill dragons. There was a reason why none of the beasts resided in Zhcted any longer.

"Enough!" Victor bellowed, glaring around the room and hushing his courtiers like so many sheep in the presence of a lion. An old lion, it had to be said, but one that could still kill any of them. "Continue, Vanadis Viltaria."

“As I was saying, Ranko found herself near the front of the battle when the suro was released to attack our troops. She immediately engaged it and proceeded to avoid its attacks with an ease even I would have had trouble matching. She then shattered the protective layer over one of its eyes, pulping the eye underneath. I fully believe if the fight had continued, Ranko would have blinded the beast and then found some way to kill it.”

Again mutters abounded.

Dragons in this world were the penultimate predator and nearly immune to human weapons. A sword would shatter, a hammer would crack, a spear break on their hides, claws, even eyes or wings. Even dragons’ eyes were protected by a thin veneer that acted like the strongest armor, as Ranma had discovered. Against a dragon, only the Viralt, magically created weapons filled with the powers of various elements, could work through their Draconic arts, or Veda.

Eventually the mutters were ended as Miron stepped back slightly, his own eyes rather wide. To one side, where she had removed herself after her earlier intervention, Sofy watched the man, wondering how much of that had been conjecture and what had been facts he simply wanted substantiated. After all, the very idea that a man could defeat a dragon alone was impossible to believe.

Victor, however stared down at Elen for a time and then nodded. “For now we will acknowledge this Tigre as one of your generals and Alsace as a part of Leitmeritz. Any further land you add in this conflict between yourself and Duke Thenardier will need to be addressed in turn, but the suggestion of Vanadis Obertas has some merit. For now this interview is over. Majordomo, what is next on the docket?”

Moments later Elen leaned against a pillar in an open-air hallway to one side of the court, where business was still going on. *Well, that kind of went better than I expected?* she thought, scratching at her chin thoughtfully, staring out into the castle’s gardens. The king’s attempts at land grabs were easy to anticipate, but the fact that the spymaster was already aware of Ranma—or, rather, Ranko—was something she had not anticipated.

Her musings were interrupted by a voice to one side of her. “My my, of all the people I could run into. Imagine, starting a war without the permission of our king. You are still lacking the proper awareness of your duties as a war maiden, I see, Eleonora Viltaria.”

Lips curling into a sneer, Elen turned to address the speaker directly. She was another young woman, looking a little younger than Elen, perhaps. Certainly she was shorter, which Elen was always amused by, just like she was amused by the other girl’s lack of a chest. She had light blue hair cut short to her ears, marked by two ruby hairpieces and a large white bow at the

back. She was currently wearing an outfit that tried to put her nonexistent chest on display, unlike Elen's own modest court gown, although she moved through the hall like one born to such luxury.

Snorting, Elen twitched lightly in place, sending her large chest to bouncing as she made a point of looking down at the other girl. "Hmfm, and I see you haven't grown in any way since I saw you last, Ludmila Lourie. Is that why you're bothering me now, to learn how to grow past that prepubescent body of yours? If you ask nicely, I might tell you the secret of my own beautiful curves."

"Hmfm, you wish," Ludmila scoffed. "Just imagine, you, the human avatar of boorishness and inelegance, offering to teach someone else anything!"

"Oh, what was that? Huh, you little potato!?" Elen growled, leaning in as the other girl did the same, glaring right back at her from inches away.

Their stare down ended when they were both rapped lightly on the head by a jingling golden staff head and a voice admonishing, "Geez, this won't do, you two. It's like Sasha and I have always told you, please don't fight. It's beneath you as Vanadis."

The speaker was another Vanadis both young ladies knew very well: the current Vanadis mediator, Sofya Obertas. Turning to her, both younger women pouted as they stared at Sofy's chest for a moment before looking up at her face. Sofy was a beautiful young woman with light green eyes and long, curly hair the color of spun gold.

She was also taller than either of them, with thin-seeming shoulders, narrow hips, and long, slender legs. She also, to the two younger girls' chagrin, had an extremely voluptuous figure with enormous breasts. They were even larger than Elen's by a wide margin.

Thankfully for both younger Vanadis' egos, Sofy didn't dress to show her curves off overmuch. Her clothing normally consisted of a long pale green and white dress which, while tight up the front, was only open from just above her breasts and shoulders. She also had a flower hair clip and hair band made out of pearl in her hair, a heart-shaped pearl necklace, and a bracelet on her left wrist. In her right hand Sofy held her Viralt, which Ranma would have likened to a wandering monk's prayer staff, but made of metal with a large, gold colored metal circle on the staff with six rings wound around it and a central spear-like segment with a jewel set on the top of it.

And when Sofy struck you with her staff it hurt like blazes, something both Elen and Ludmila could attest to at the moment. Rubbing her head, Elen backed away from Ludmila,

growling irritably at the younger girl. "Sofy's right. This isn't the place to fight, so why don't you just get out of here, huh?"

"Hmmm, as expected of an uncouth barbarian who was lucky enough to be selected to rise to a station she could never have otherwise reached," Ludmila growled back.

"Ara, but perhaps true decorum knows when not to open one's mouth at all, lest they give offense?" a new voice asked.

All three Vanadis turned in some surprise to see the fourth of their little club that Elen had noticed before, and both Elen and Ludmila had to gulp at the sight. Sofy was known as a great beauty and made both of them feel a little inadequate in the chest area. And Valentina Glinka Estes was, rather irritatingly to both younger Vanadis, on that same level of beauty.

Valentina had long, dark navy blue hair and deep purple eyes, and stood equally as tall as Sofy with nearly as voluptuous a figure, an enormous bust and curvy waistline and slim form that was a little thinner than Sofy's in the waist. Her body was shown off to far greater impact than Sofy's by Valentina's choice of clothing, which consisted of a white dress that exposed acres of cleavage.

Her dress also had three different colored roses. A white one was in her hair, a purple rose hung on her waist, and red roses appeared on her white scarf and shoes

Most important to the two younger Vanadis of course, was her chest! *Gah!!! Milk cows, the both of them!* was Ludmila's thought, while Elen's thoughts were a little less angry but just as jealous.

Sofy smiled politely at the other Vanadis. "Ara, you're up and about, Valentina?"

Pouting, Valentina looked away, clutching her Viralt to her. This was a long-handled scythe with a single overlarge blade that curved in each direction, the back part being only marginally smaller than the primary, split in two, almost, with a jagged hole in the middle. A large flower of some kind was set where the blade met the handle. Coupled with the dark purple and crimson coloring of the blade, this gave Valentina's Viralt, Ezendeis, a rather more feminine appearance than such a weapon should really have had.

"Mou, just because my teleporting power takes it out of me even more than yours doesn't mean you have to be so mean, Sofya," Valentina replied.

Sofya giggled, waving that away as if implying she hadn't meant anything even as she looked at the other tall girl closely. She was always wary around Valentina. Of all the Vanadis, Valentina was the most mysterious to her, even in Sofy's current position as mediator among

them. She didn't dislike the other woman, but neither had she ever had much to do with her. Still, Valentina had made her territory, Osterode, far richer than it had been before her assumption of the position as its ruler, and she had crushed a resurgent horse lord assault and a massive outbreak of bandits, which Sofy knew had really been funded mercenary groups sent into Zhcted from Mouzinel.

Smiling, Valentina turned to look at Elen. "I too had heard about you meeting someone on the Dinant Plains that was able to fight you one on one. But it's a funny thing, all the rumors I've heard made that individual out to be a man. Indeed, there was even a name given to him, that of the Living Trebuchet."

"Perhaps that was wishful thinking on the part of the rumormongers?" Elen asked lightly, which caused even Ludmila to laugh. "As to Ranko and the reality there, I've said all I want to say on that. You seriously would need to see 'her' in action to believe it," she went on, saying nothing but the truth, yet also being misleading. *And I won't be telling you about Arifar's reaction to him either. That is going to be too darn fun.*

Humming thoughtfully, Valentina stared at Elen for a few seconds before smiling and turning a far more searching gaze at Ludmila, whose back straightened under that look. Like Elen, Ludmila didn't know the other Vanadis all that well, but there was also the fact that Valentina was of equal social status to her, the daughter of a nobleman before her Viralt had accepted her.

And her look was rather less kind than Sofy's as she looked at Ludmila. "Really, Lady Lourie. If you go looking for a fight, then doesn't the fault lie in you just as much as the individual who throws the first metaphorical punch?"

Ludmila stiffened but slowly nodded as Valentina looked at her. "Very, very well. I will withdraw, for now." She glared at Elen coolly, Laviac clenched in one hand. "But do not think this is over just yet, Eleonora."

The three other Vanadis watched her go for a time, then Sofy said softly, "Elen, you should know that you've set Ludmila against you, at least, by taking this stance against Duke Thenardier."

"What?!" Elen gasped, for the moment ignoring Valentina's presence to address this mystery. "But, but why? I mean, I don't like the girl, but I know her well enough to know she would have no truck with someone like Thenardier."

"It's not a personal connection but a familial one. Her family and his have been allies for generations," Sofy replied with Valentina nodding beside her.

Elen grimaced bitterly. "Of course. That's what happens when your Viralt has been passed down so many generations of the same family. What about you, Valentina?" she asked, making no move to address the other Vanadis as Lady anything, disdaining such fripperies and honestly wondering what brought the other Vanadis here. As far as Elen could remember they had only talked three times before this at best.

"Hmm... Well, I have no ties to Thenardier, but Osterode does have some fiscal ties to Ganelon, although it must be said that I dislike him as an individual possibly as much as Ludmila no doubt dislikes Thenardier," Valentina said, looking at Elen thoughtfully, her head cocked to one side as she shifted her Viralt so that the shaft of the scythe was between her breasts, hugging it almost like it was a person. "However, unlike Ludmila, who only sought you out for a confrontation, I want to know the truth. If not about your motivations, then at least about the rumors the spymaster questioned you on."

Before Elen could reply, Sofy turned away, gesturing for the other two to follow her out into the garden. This allowed Elen gather her thoughts, and she wondered if Valentina worked for the king as a spy, and, if so, if she should tell the truth. *Would I be believed, even so? There have been men who can fight Vanadis one on one, but they are incredibly rare. And the curse is such that no one would believe anything else I tell them about Ranma.*

Sofy led them to a small bench where they all sat down, with Elen in the middle and the other two looking towards her. Once sitting down and seeing Elen still hesitating in replying, Valentina spoke up again. "Unlike Lord Miron, I would be willing to pay rather than merely demand. Perhaps even send troops, if need be, to help you. I have several companies of my men here in the capital, having been called up with them to aid in the campaign against Brune if the Dinant Plains went against you, Elen."

She smiled much more naturally now than she had earlier, bouncing in place and bowing her head towards Elen, causing her breasts to sway around her Viralt in a way that sent a nearby servant stumbling away with his face entirely red and which caused Elen's eyebrow to twitch. "That was rather well done, that campaign. A defensive campaign fought entirely on the move on the other side's soil. Very well done Elen!"

That caused Elen to smile, but her thoughts were still serious despite Valentina's attempt to butter her up lightly. "What kind of troops would we be talking about here? Would they willingly obey my orders and those of my officers? How long would it take them to arrive in Alsace?"

That these troops would be spies to check up on her and her actions was so obvious she didn't need to comment on it. Nor did the question, 'And who else will hear what I tell you?' actually spring from her lips, though it hovered in the air.

“Hmm... Well, I would think if I strip half the carts from the other companies, a single company of pikemen could make the trip within, say, a month from here to Leitmeritz? From there you would have to take over their transportation. I am afraid a single company is all I could spare without the king or others noticing. Officially, at any rate. And if it bothers you, yes, Lord Miron has heard about some very odd things; the king has not. He is a man who does not believe in anything unless it can be proven.”

Given the distance involved, that was actually pretty fast for a troop of heavy infantry, especially pikemen, and Elen slowly nodded. Her troops lacked pikes, mainly being light infantry, horse, and heavy horse with a large number of archers thrown in. *And if I have to fight Ludmila like Sofy hinted earlier, having my own heavy infantry to put up against hers, and especially her cavalry, would be a good idea.*

“All right, I’ll agree to that. But don’t blame me if you don’t believe anything I tell you. A lot of it is so fantastical even I wouldn’t believe it if I hadn’t actually seen it.” From there, Elen went on to describe her meeting with Tigre and Ranma and Ranma’s curse as well as what she had seen of his skills.

Both older Vanadis blinked and tried to interrupt when she explained the curse, but Elen shook her head and shouted, “Yes, I know it sounds impossible, but it happened right in front of me! It is just damned weird. Don’t ask me how it works, it makes my head hurt thinking about it!”

And I’m not even telling you about what I think of his origins. That was one secret Elen was going to keep as long as possible. The implications of it was far too big to let anyone else know about.

Staring at Elen as she wound down, Valentina once more cocked her head thoughtfully to one side and then shifted her gaze over Elen to Sofy. “Do you believe her? I confess, it all sounds too fantastical to me. And yes, I know all too well the amount of sophistry there is in a Vanadis saying something like that.”

“I’ve never known Elen to lie, and certainly not about something like this,” Sofy replied before giggling. “If only because she has always seemed to concentrate her imagination on army maneuvers and romantic gossip.”

Elen blushed at that, flailing her hands in the air, causing both older Vanadis to laugh even as they moved out of arm range. “Mou, come on! It’s all true, I tell you!”

Still giggling, Valentina shook her head and stood up, the motion again causing her breasts to wobble in a way that grabbed Elen’s attention and no small amount of ire. “Well, in

any event, I think even the story itself is enough to pay me for the loan of my troops. So long as you agree to the standard contract, Eleonora?”

That simply meant that Elen would pay the company of pikemen for their upkeep, transport, and, if need be, take care of any funeral rites once they reached her lands. Since that was a very good deal, Elen quickly nodded. “Of course.”

“Good. But please, don’t let anything happen to them? Osterode is not so strong that we can fritter away even a single company of our pikemen.” Valentina moved off, saying over her shoulder, “I will have them on the road in two days’ time. Until next time, Eleonora, Sofya.”

As she walked off, Valentina kept an almost whimsical smile on her face, but her thoughts were still on what she had learned. *So it was really a man, or man that can turn into a woman, if Eleonora was telling the truth. And I think that bit about this Ranma fellow being related to Earl Vorn is so much whitewash, even if Eleonora didn’t take it back. I will need to send some of my own agents to Alsace to figure out the truth of this. But someone who could fight against a Viralt wielder bare handed, that is a power I may wish to harness to my own ambitions. And if he really is involved in this Brune civil war...*

At that thought Valentina sighed internally. *My plan to reach out to Ganelon further, to create a fallback point for him if need be, is premature at this point. Money is important, and his contacts both in Brune and elsewhere could be a major benefit, true, but I don’t know enough about him, something which has always bothered me. And now there is this unknown and how he might be impacting things. No. It is best to learn, watch, and discover rather than reach out to more allies just yet. I still have a few years left before I will have to move to achieve my dream.*

OOOOOOO

As Elen was readying to leave Silesia, Ranma and his troops were preparing for their last two spoiler missions before turning towards home. They had been moving through northeastern Brune for several weeks now. They kept to the forests whenever possible, hunting for their food as they went and never staying in one place for long as they searched for targets and gathered information.

Most of that information was in the way of the very detailed maps Ranma was making as they went. Occasionally Ranma would send one or two of his troops to talk to farmers or to

walk into town to listen to rumors. But for the most part, the lay of the land was perhaps the most important thing they discovered.

Since this trip had begun, Ranma had learned that Brune was a land with a wide variety of environments. The east was utterly dominated by the Voyes Mountain Range that separated Brune from Zhcted, the depth, height, and impassibility of which reminded Ranma of the Karakoram mountains he had seen once with his father. Alsace resided in a valley somewhat deep in those mountains.

The mountains gave way in the north to farmland around a small village named Aude, where the land of Mashas, Earl of Aude, abutted the Dinant Plains, which was even richer farmland. In a half circle around Alsace were several other equally small fiefdoms producing wood or food and scant else. This area leading into the Voyes was dotted by numerous small rivers, most of them easily fordable.

Beyond that area, to the south and west, what could be called Brune proper began. Since entering that area, Ranma had found a few larger rivers, though few and far between, and lots of farmland. The fiefdoms, too, were larger, barons and landed knights giving way to Earls, Counts and Knightly Orders. The Knightly Orders were officially neutral, unwilling to fight for either side in the civil war, but their military might was such that no one was willing to try to force them to join a side.

Astonishing Ranma, his men had heard that morning that Thenardier had fully backed their neutrality, agreeing to not engage their troops so long as they did their duty to the whole of Brune to defend it from invaders. That had made him wonder about what really made the other man tick. *So, is he a power mad asshole, a patriot, or both? If so, which is the stronger motivation?*

To the south was a large town called Territoire, ruled by a Lord Augre. He was Tigre's current diplomatic target, since it was well known that he was deeply unhappy with the ongoing civil war. Ranma hadn't entered his lands beyond talking to a few outlying farms, though Augre's westernmost neighbor hadn't been so lucky. Having heard from others that this man believed he could get away with raping and abusing his people, Ranma and his men had ambushed the man when he rode off to 'inspect' some of the farms. Neither the man nor his guards had survived that meeting.

That had happened a few days ago, and since then Ranma had discovered that the civil war had gone cold thanks to news of Zion's defeat having begun to spread. With Thenardier's attempt to utterly terrorize with the speed and ferocity of his forces having failed, both Ganelon and Thenardier were busy gathering allies and mustering forces now for a more

serious clash. Thenardier was literally forcing his neighbors to choose between joining up with him or being wiped out.

Not that Ganelon's any better, Ranma thought to himself as he marked down a few more details on his current map, which was about the lands of Brune just southwest of Mashas's territory. Here the land of Counts really began, with each Count owning several large plantations and a single village or the equivalent. These lands produced most of the cotton, silk, and other such materials for Brune, and the lords here were far richer than those to the east, though not quite as much as the lords further west or southwest, which, Ranma had been told, was where the mines that produced metal, stone, and gems were located.

There were also a few larger rivers here, ones that needed bridges to cross. And Ganelon's influence could be seen here all too easily. The burned out hamlets, the tales of men press-ganged into work forces and their women taken, abused, and sold into slavery abounded. It was a rich land, but right now all too much of it looked like something out of the Warring States period to Ranma: a war zone, in other words.

Well, we're going to be doing something about that right now, Ranma thought grimly, putting his notes away and looking up at the top of a tree which stuck out of the large series of granite boulders which marked their current position. "Where away?"

The man up in the treetops, a native of Zhcted named Duncan, grinned and shouted down, "North-northeast and just shy of a league, coming towards us along the road."

Nodding, Ranma moved over to a boulder as large as he was and grabbed it in both arms, heaving it out of the ground. He held it above his head a moment in one arm, sighted along a angle another man was pointing along using a compass in his other hands. Then, when the man up top shouted, "Now!" Ranma let fly.

The large boulder flew through the air with a light whistle, and Ranma leaped up to join Duncan top of the tree, nodding to him. They watched as the shot arced through the air towards the company of horsemen moving down the road from a burned out hamlet beyond. They saw the boulder coming and scattered, and the boulder slammed into the ground, doing no real damage. Yet a second later Ranma nodded grimly as all around the road from the tall fields of wheat sprouted another crop. This crop came in the form of men with bows, and, as one, they loosed before ducking down and racing off.

Above them the sky, which had been darkening all day, began to open up at last, but even the feel of his curse activating didn't stop Ranma from shouting, "Up and at 'em, boys!" Below, five men on horseback rode forward, straight down the road in a wedge, getting up to

charging speed before crashing into their opposite numbers. At the same time Ranma raced forward to join her other infantry, leaving Duncan and his aide behind her.

The company of cavalry, heavy cavalry, had been scattered now and lost nearly half their number. Thanks to the twin shocks and the pinpricks of the archers, they weren't able to reform before Ranma led the rest of her men, wielding short swords and coming up out of the wheat around them. A blow caught a horse in the side of the head, knocking the beast out and dumping its rider. Another blow from the redhead dispatched that rider, followed by a leaping kick that sent another man flying, his faceplate crumpled along with the head beneath. Ranma used the impact of that to change direction so that she slammed into another man, taking him off his horse to the ground.

Elsewhere short swords stabbed, gutting horses and dumping their riders, where they were set upon instantly. Others tried to turn and flee, but the archers took them out, two archers to each man trying to run. A few minutes later it was all over.

Staring around and down at the dead bodies scattered everywhere, Ranma sighed, looking down at her fists, which had been stained crimson by the blood of her victims. *Fuck, when did I get used to killing like this?*

Spotting the column of smoke from the hamlet to the west she sighed and nodded slightly. *Oh yeah. Seeing what these bastards are doing to their own people makes it a lot easier. You don't try to capture or imprison a rabid animal; you put it down.*

But now that the battle was over, Ranma grabbed at the bridle of one of her men, jerking her head towards the hamlet. "Gather up Sven and Togrün. Let's go see if there are any survivors or any of these bastards leading off some of them for slaves."

"Right." The man nodded and turned away, shouting for the men Ranma had mentioned. They did indeed find survivors and four men leading off an even dozen women in chains. Freeing them took no time at all, but Ranma was still within the burned out hamlet, taking care of the wounded as night fell.

Though she didn't know it at the time, this act added to Ranma's mystique from earlier battles. The peasants gave her another title because of that to add to the few she'd already earned, such as Lim's 'Magic Hands': the Maiden of Mercy.

Early the next day her troops, which had not lost a single man to enemy action since this mission had begun, were ready to move on. As they did, Duncan spoke up. "Ranma, we should be heading back to Alsace now."

“Right. Though we’re so far north, we might be closer to Aude and the Dinant Plains than Alsace.” Ranma hummed thoughtfully, smiling as she handed over a small carved figure to a tiny child who had hidden with his even younger sibling in the hamlet’s well.

The children rushed off to join the others, including a young looking girl Titta’s age with a very decent body and a near broken expression on her face. Ranma didn’t know exactly what she had gone through to get a look like that, but she thought she could guess far too easily. “Let’s make straight west from here, same orders for the march as normal. Let’s start for home.”

“Horses to carry the armor, every man to carry his own equipment otherwise,” Duncan recited, then smirked, jerking a thumb up at the rain still coming down. “The men won’t like marching in this, especially at the pace you set. Still, at least with this weather you’ll be giving us something nice to look at while we move along.”

“Don’t make me thwack you upside the head, Duncan. I might forget my strength one of these days, then where’d ya be, huh?” Ranma growled, but there was no heat in it. She’d gotten to know these men, and, other than a few bad apples she had been forced to deal with along the way, they were good men. Ranma didn’t mind giving them something to look at so long as they didn’t try to touch. “Let’s get moving.”

With that, Ranma led her men off at a trot leaving behind a thankful if somewhat bewildered group of peasants. Since the rain was now really coming down, soaking their clothing and almost pasting her clothing to her body, this did indeed become something of a treat for the eyes.

Ranma could feel their eyes on her and even heard a few brave whistles, to which she rolled her eyes. “If any of you fall down from staring at my ass, realize I’m gonna have to laugh at you and then stomp you into the ground. And I might just aim where I stomp, get me?”

With the carrot dangling in front of them and the stick now firmly in their minds, the troop of forty men raced on. Their horses easily kept up with them, being led by one of the walking wounded on horseback. They left the road soon after, marching through the wheat fields and the mud, making good time as they headed back to the lands of their allies and home beyond.

The rain didn’t let up for several days. Indeed, there was no sign of it stopping anytime soon when they halted for a full break: a half day spent taking care of equipment and recuperating from a forced march.

By this point being in his female form didn't bother Ranma overmuch, but she was getting a little irritated at the ongoing looks from her men and the comments had begun to get a little too ribald. So instead of camping out with them, Ranma bunked up in a boulder and napped while the others worked. Since she didn't have much in the way of equipment, she could get away with that.

She rested for several hours before she was roused by a shout. "Ranma, Sven's coming back in!"

Sven was one of the Alsace natives who had worked with the ambush teams under Gaston. He was a baby-faced youth Ranma's own age who was soft and gentle spoken. He was also able to blend into any village with the ease of a fish to water.

He raced through the small copse of rocks and scrub the troop was camping in. He gasped in a few breaths, then shouted aloud, "Lord Ranma, there's an army between us and the river back to Aude!"

"How large an army are we talking about? Horse, cavalry, what? And whose banner are they flying?" Ranma asked, leaping down to land right in front of Sven, sending him stepping backwards quickly.

"I don't know the heraldry for the main banner, but they are also flying Ganelon's colors in two places, milord. I estimate their numbers at near to three thousand or so. Mostly light cavalry, infantry, and about fifty heavy cavalry," Sven reported. The son of a shopkeeper, he had learned how to count and estimate at a young age.

"Damn, that's the biggest formation we've seen since the battle against Pimple-face," Ranma mused, causing snorts of laughter at her description of Zion once again. She pulled out her map of the area from her ki space, moving over to stick it under a thin rocky overhang to protect it from the rain. "That's the river Resia, isn't it?"

One of Mashas's men moved over. Of all of them, the three men Mashas had added to Ranma's force had suffered the most at the bruising pace he had set, but they had brought along their horses and had pulled their weight in battle at least. "Aye, it is. The river was named for some late queen or other, and it marks the borders of Count Lupin and Count Tourmaline's lands. There's only one bridge across it for hundreds of leagues in either direction, since, for most of its length, it's in a deep gully."

Not knowing either of those names, Ranma looked around at the other men who had stepped up to become his sergeants on this little jaunt, though such a rank didn't seem to exist in Brune. "Anyone know anything important about those two counts?" Though they had

passed through portions of this land before, they had been careful to pass mostly unnoticed save by anyone flying Ganelon or Thenardier colors, who weren't going to tell anyone anything after Ranma and his men finished with them.

After a chorus of headshakes, Ranma scowled, examining the map. *There isn't anything important from what we've seen on the other side of the river but Aude. This must be another enforced recruitment mission or an attempt to start moving against Tigre and his allies.* "Well then, I think we need to get there before them. Pack everything up. We're moving on."

Over the next day and a half Ranma pushed her troops hard, despite the muck and mire of the continuous rain making the going harder with every passing hour. They pushed on through the night, with Ranma carrying literally every piece of kit in her ki space, which somewhat appalled the men when she started to cram their gear away. This sense of horror came from two different sources.

One of them, a small mousy man from Leitmeritz, asked plaintively, "Ranma, why the hell've you been making us carry all our gear if you can just carry it in that key space thingie!?"

"Because it would be tough to get it back out at any kind of speed, and because this way carrying your gear helped you lot toughen up," Ranma replied blithely, smirking around at them all. There were more than a few groans and curses, and she smiled. "Ah, sweet music to my ears."

"...Ranma, why did you just stuff all our tents and sleeping gear in there as well?" Duncan asked, his voice full of trepidation.

"Because we're not stopping tonight. We're going to push on and get to that river before the army reaches that bridge, get across, and get in position opposite them on the other side." Ranma stood up then, cracking her neck and gesturing them onward. "Now move! Pretend you're racing to defend your homes, because some of you are already, and the rest of you might be in the days to come if we don't get there in time!"

That might not have been the best pep talk, but it motivated his men nonetheless. They reached the river early on the third day of their trip to the Resia, upriver of where the army was making for the bridge over it. Here the river was several hundred feet below them at the bottom of the gully, barely visible in the dark and rain. The gully on the other hand was wide, almost beyond bow range.

"Well, we're here. Now what?" Duncan grouched, sitting on his rear and rubbing at his eyes, which were pounding after running all day and night without any let up. He was so drenched, in fact, that even sitting in the mud didn't make him any more uncomfortable.

“Now you lot stay here, and I’ll make us a rope bridge,” Ranma ordered, pulling all of their gear out as well as lots of other things from her ki space, making one of the Zhcted troopers groan.

The others looked at him, and that worthy shook his head. “Having flashbacks,” he muttered, making Ranma realize that he must have been one of the troops who had helped Lim search him that time in Elen’s castle. The man then openly ogled Ranma from head to toe with a grin on his face. “Although the view is way better this time around.”

“Boys, don’t make me neuter you.” Ranma quipped, a tone of real warning in her voice, and the man quickly apologized, with the other men from Leitmeritz laughing at him while the Brune men simply shook their heads silently.

They watched as Ranma tied thick ropes to a nearby tree. Then even these men, used to Ranma’s truly superhuman abilities, gaped as she, without even a running start, leaped over the gully to the other side, trailing the ropes behind her. Moments later there was a crude rope bridge there, and the men, groaning, got to their feet and started across. After that, Ranma took the bridge down and the journey continued.

Several days later Ranma stood in a light rain with her men and several hundred archers and infantrymen from Count Tourmaline’s lands along with a few dozen men from Aude on one side of the bridge over the river Resia. Coming towards them on the other side of the bridge was the force Sven had spotted a week back. They had covered more than twice the distance in much less time, but the army’s progress hadn’t stopped. And there were a lot more men over there now than the three thousand or so Sven had seen. Ranma estimated they had added another four thousand men. Most looked no better than bandits or peasants conscripted into service, but wherever they came from, there were a lot more of them than the few hundred with Ranma.

Regardless, the sight of so many conscripts solidified Ranma’s desire to not try to use her most powerful techniques here. Most of the soldiers over there hadn’t had time to do anything wrong, or so she hoped. *Regardless, I’m not going to let ‘em cross the bridge.*

That bridge was a magnificent construct, three hundred feet wide, made of stone with steel reinforcements. The river, having been fed by nearly a week of solid rain, rushed by far below, separating most of Ganelon’s territory from the northwest of the country. Everyone Ranma had talked to said it was one of the major public works in Brune. *Pity.*

Ranma stood in the center of that expanse with several knights and lords around her. It hadn’t stopped raining even once since that ambush a week ago. “I can’t convince you lot to back off and let me handle this?”

“No you can’t, milady,” one of them, a man younger than Mashas but with a body built along the same lines, replied. “This is our land, and we can’t let you speak for us, no matter your warning us that this army was approaching.”

Ignoring the ‘milady’ bit since she hadn’t been able to shift back to her male form for more than a week, Ranma nodded. “Fine, but remember what I said: when it comes time, you lot back off. We can’t beat that army in a stand up fight, which leaves me to do my thing.” Ranma gestured past them to the dozens of prepared ballista bolts, boulders, and even a few large clay urns. “Those and another little surprise of mine will hopefully be enough to make them back off.”

“And, if they do that, they’ll have to go deep into southern Brune to get around the gully.” Saying that, another man nodded sharply. He was a fat, extremely overweight man, but he was the local Count, and for all his fatness he seemed smart enough to know that he didn’t know enough to really take part in planning this fight. “That will take them deep into areas controlled by Thenardier’s allies.”

They all fell silent as the enemy host stopped just out of bow range, which actually wasn’t out of Ranma’s range with the ballista bolts and everything else. *Huh, so either they don’t know anything about me yet thanks to this body of mine, or...or they just don’t care about their soldiers enough to choose their safety over the advantage of getting them that little bit closer to the bridge.*

As Ranma and the locals watched, a white flag appeared amongst the enemy banners, and a small party of horsemen rode forward. Under that flag of truce they stopped at the far end of the bridge and shouted, “My Lord Greast, general of Lord Ganelon, wishes to parlay with the Lord Tourmaline and his allies, including the Lady Ranko Vorn.”

Duncan, the only man among Ranma’s standing with the other officers on the bridge, barked a laugh. “Ranma, you’re Tigre’s sister? I never knew!”

“Neither did I,” Ranma replied dryly. “Must be a rumor from somewhere.” She looked around at the others who all nodded. Cupping her hands, the redhead then bellowed out, “Come ahead then! We acknowledge the parlay.”

Instead of coming ahead, though, the men on horseback turned aside. They were quickly replaced by another group who lugged up a pavilion which they set up alongside the bridge on the other side of the gully. Then, as Ranma watched, another man moved forward. To either side of him rode a knight on a horse, carrying a sheet over the man’s head.

Staring, Ranma shook her wet hair out of her head. "Is this guy for real?" Seeing the confused looks she shook her head. "Erm, I meant, is this the way that guy would normally act or is it a show he's putting on to try to get us to underestimate him or something? Never mind, I was just asking myself that question." *Huh, still running into words I don't know the local equivalent of.*

Soon the pavilion was set up, and Ranma and the others were invited forward. Warily, they did so, but Ranma was tense as a bowstring as she led the way. *If this is some kind of trap, they won't live long enough to regret it!*

The man who had been escorted under an awning to the pavilion was a tall man, standing a few inches taller than even the local knight, who was in turn taller than Ranma's male form. He was somewhat handsome, Ranma supposed, sort of making Ranma think of a Mikado Sanzenin with blond hair and aged into his thirties, but with the same fit, thin body. He wore florid clothing without even a breastplate to hint at being a soldier, and his hands were well-manicured and cared for, one hand clasped around a wine goblet as a bottle of wine sat on the table in the center of the pavilion.

Yet, for all of that, there was something almost dead about the man's eyes. And when his lips formed a smile, it was like someone else had grafted the smile onto his face rather than anything natural. And when Ranma moved under the pavilion, the man's look at her caused Ranma's fists to clench.

"Ah, you must be the Lady Ranko. We have heard of Urs Vorn's illegitimate child and her skills, but few of those tales give justice to your splendor. The Living Trebuchet is so droll a nickname for such a flower of feminine beauty," the man said, standing up and bowing his head to her very slightly.

Narrowing her eyes, Ranma raised a fist. "Enough of that talk and that look in your eyes, blondie, unless you want to go flying? Who are you, and what do you want here?"

Seemingly not taken aback by Ranma's tone and glare, the man sighed theatrically. "I see the rumors about your uncouth attitude, at least, were accurate. Still, those of standing must make allowances for those born into the dirt. I am Count Greast, Duke Ganelon's right hand man. As for why I am here, I am here to bring northeastern Brune under Ganelon's banner. By force or by agreement, it matters not which."

Ranma growled, but one of the locals spoke up quickly. "Well then, what terms are you offering?"

“Simple terms. You and your allies have already begun to gather troops, and with them and your alliance with Zhcted you would bring more troops to the army than any other unit under Lord Ganelon’s command. Therefore my lord will be generous. You and your men will get first rights.”

“First rights?” Ranma asked.

Greast smiled at her, and, again, there was something incredibly slimy in the look he bestowed on her. “Ah, I suppose for a woman that wouldn’t have much interest, would it? First right means your troops and you will have first pick of the women and of the other property when we storm any town or city.”

The local knight slammed a fist down on the table and stood up, roaring, “Are you insane!? How dare you offer something like that!? Those are fellow citizens of Brune you war upon!”

Through her shock and fury, Ranma idly noticed that it wasn’t so much the act itself that the man was objecting to, but rather the act of doing it to their fellow citizens. *Fucking medieval world values!*

“Truly? I thought it was quite generous. I’ll admit it assumes we would be victorious in the first place, but surely that is not such a tremendous issue?” Greast asked, waving the man’s anger away. “Well, that was only one thing, I suppose. I have two other offers. One, if Lady Ranko here can guarantee she can keep the arrangement with the lovely Vanadis from Zhcted going, we will provide means with which Tigrevurmud Vorn can be removed without leaving any evidence of your involvement in the deed.”

“Right, that’s about enough!” Ranma growled, standing up from the table, laying one hand on the edge and slowly gouging out the wood with her fingers to work through some of her anger. “Tigre is my friend. Mentioning future atrocities, I can stand for, but not outright offering to murder my friend for me! If that’s all you’ve got to say, then we’re done here!”

“Friend, not brother? I see,” Greast said, nodding his head sagely before smiling, looking straight at Ranma’s breasts for a moment where they pushed out the shirt she was wearing, which was still stuck to her like a second skin. “Well, I have another offer. I will turn around my army entirely and will further not move on from this spot for three months if you agree to spend a few nights with me. That is perhaps the best offer you could ever get.”

Gritting her teeth, Ranma growled out. “It is only that white flag above us that is keeping you alive right now. Get out of here, and let’s see if your army can cash the checks

your mouth is writing!" She paused, then growled. "I mean has the goods to back up what you're trying to sell. Freaking idioms."

"Oh, we will. One way or another, Ranko, I will have you in my tent again tonight. I would have preferred you to give me your body. The look in your eyes would have been delicious," Greast said calmly, his mouth twitching and his eyes still with that same dead, slimy look he'd had since the discussion began. "But I suppose breaking you physically before doing so mentally will be just as fun."

Ranma laughed loud and long at that, marching out into the rain. As soon as the others followed her, she growled out, "Right, ready your troops, but the moment they start to storm forward onto the bridge, back off! Plan B just become Plan A in a big way."

"Why does that simple statement fill me with nameless dread?" mused Lord Tourmaline, looking at Ranma warily.

"Just don't ask, milord," Duncan said, having moved well away from Ranma. "I've learned not to question milady when she's in a mood."

"You show much wisdom for one so young," muttered the knight, sweating slightly at the aura of fury Ranma was giving off.

As soon as the pavilion was taken down, the Ganelon army rushed forward en-masse, roaring out a shout that was half war cry and half bestial roar. Staring at them from the center of the bridge with several other heavily armored infantry around her, Ranma saw this, saw their faces, and, just for a moment, wondered if she really was right in that the conscripts in that army hadn't done anything to warrant their deaths. They looked just as blood maddened as the regular armymen.

Still, there was no point in second guessing her decision at this point, and Ranma roared out, "NOW!"

At that cry the troops who had seemed to have been holding the center of the bridge fell back, first moving slowly, then almost breaking as the enemy army came on. Ranma alone stood her ground and waited. She waited until the first hundred men were onto the bridge, most of whom wore the brown and dark purple livery of the men who had set up the pavilion. Then, with a wink in their direction, she knelt down, pressing her finger to the stone of the bridge. "Bakusai Tenketsu!" she howled, pulsing her ki into the bridge and using the ancient Amazon technique of boulder clearing to an entirely different purpose.

The blast shattered the expanse of the bridge for a yard in every direction, sending up stone shrapnel that gutted the first dozen men racing toward her and their horses and dumped

the majority of the stone into the river. The rest of the racing cavalry had a brief moment to gape at this sudden turn around before the rest of the bridge began to collapse.

Ranma turned and leaped clear, landing beside her allies, then watched as the enemy army recoiled. "Archers to the fore!"

With the enemy army bunched up around the bridge, they were now within bow range, and the archers on both sides started to fire. But the Ganelon troopers were in disarray, their organization shot to hell and back. The troopers on Ranma's side of the river were surprised but recovered quickly, and sheets of arrows were in the air moments after her destruction of the bridge.

However, what really broke Greast's army was the same thing that stopped them crossing the bridge: Ranma. She marched over to the ballista bolts and launched them into the sky to crash down among the army, one after another. Hundreds died in the next few moments, and the entire army started to recoil, then break, and finally flee. Whether or not they would reform later was no concern of Ranma's.

Instead she hefted a slightly smaller than normal ballista bolt over her shoulder and watched as the army came apart, searching for Greast. She spotted him at the far back, whipping his horse into a lather in order to try and get out of range, having apparently commanded from the rear the entire battle.

With a grunt of effort Ranma hurled the ballista bolt forward trying to aim at that one man. But Ranma wasn't Tigre, and her aim wasn't quite up to this. The ballista bolt slammed into the ground well beyond the stampeding horse, and Greast was out of sight before Ranma could grab another. She still threw several boulders blindly but somehow knew that the bastard had gotten away.

"W, what have you done?" Tourmaline stuttered, gaping at the ruined bridge. "That, do you have any idea how long or how much money it will cost to rebuild that bridge!?"

"Make whoever becomes king or whatever once this civil war is over pay for it," Ranma replied dryly. "I was kind of busy with, you know, saving your lands and your people."

"Yes, I, I suppose that is true," Tourmaline muttered.

He continued to stare at the redhead as, above them, the clouds finally broke, and she turned her head upward, shouting out, "Oh, now the weather changes!? Fuck you, God! I say again, fuck you! If that bastard develops an obsession with me I will hunt you down, and we will have **words!**"

“Erm, milady, which god exactly has earned your ire?” Duncan asked before Ranma slapped him upside the head and marched off, still grumbling. “Was it something I said?”

OOOOOOO

Elsewhere Greast gasped, his eyes wide as he leaned against a tree, his finery now rumpled and torn from his escape. “That, that was, what was that!? Destroying a bridge with a single finger!? Even a Vanadis could not do that!” Then he held his chest with one hand, a wide, licentious smile coming to his face. “But she looked so magnificent, so powerful! I simply must own her! Whatever it takes.”

Several weeks later Greast returned to Lutetia and explained what had happened to his forces. His lord took it stoically, staring down at a rich inlaid table with a map of Brune marked out into it with precious gems and gold. Ganelon was a short, almost unassuming man, but with the eyes of a snake or some other venomous creature, and he was just as cold.

He showed this now by waving Greast’s words off. “I had already heard of the debacle. It was but a single roll of the dice towards what is, at best, a tertiary goal right now. The loss matters less than the fact this Vorn has this Ranko, the rumors of a male warrior of equal strength, and his alliance with the Vanadis of Arifar. While Thenardier might create the forces to stand up to them eventually on his own, we cannot face them openly. No. To fight such monsters in human form, we must supply a knight with the strength of a monster as well...”

OOOOOOO

About four days after the battle of the Resia River, Ranma raced along the foothills of Voyes Mountain Range. He had met with a few of Elen’s troops rotating through the Dinant Plains to Alsace and had been told that she and the others were meeting at a small mansion Elen owned at her land’s southwestern borders. The mansion was an equivalent of Elen’s vacation home, almost, but Ranma wondered why it was so close to the borders of her lands and so deep into the foothills of the mountains too, since that removed it from a lot of her territory, barring, Ranma had learned, a nearby town that itself served as a tourist spot.

Coming to the edge of the mansion's lawn Ranma leaped down, startling a guard walking around the property, who backed away rapidly before he recognized Ranma. "Yo! Great day, isn't it?"

"Um, yes, milord," the man said slowly, not at all reassured by Ranma's manic grin. He had seen Ranma around before this and even had gotten used to his physical abilities, but the face Ranma was now showing wasn't normal.

"Exactly! It isn't raining!" Ranma replied, leaping off to land in the courtyard below.

Heading into the mansion, he was ushered up to the mansion's dining room, where he was told he would find Elen, Tigre, and Lim, all of them having returned from Silesia and Alsace to meet together here. Kicking the door lightly enough to open it without shattering it, Ranma grinned and shouted, "Honey, I'm home!"

"Who's your honey, you bastard!?" came the twin shouts of Tigre and Elen as one, while Lim just smacked her face with a hand, groaning.

"And where exactly are the men I gave you, Ranma?" Elen asked archly, though she still had a grin on her face from Ranma's exuberant entrance. "Unless they are outside taking care of the horses or something?"

"Hah, no. I left them in Aude with orders to remain there until we head out to join them and march on to wherever we'll be going at that point. I figured I'd run them into the ground, and they deserved a few days off," Ranma replied, moving over to sit next to Tigre, smacking him on the shoulder. "I also sent the Alsace boys home. They should be good to go, but boy was I right about the need to keep our enemies off balance."

Tigre nodded. "Thanks to your efforts, Ranma, I was able to gather more than a dozen other small-time lords to our cause. Lim and I worked together to bring Lord Augre to our cause, and we moved most of the Leitmeritz troops to his town for now. We left Rurick in command before traveling back to here to consult with Elen further. But I heard rumors as I left the Dinant Plains of some big battle to the west?"

Nodding, Ranma reached into his ki pocket, and, after once more needing to search around in there, pulled out the thick bundle of maps. He spoke about his mission for a time as well as what they had accomplished.

Through this Elen listened intently, letting Lim and Tigre ask questions as she pored over the maps happily. The maps were amazing! They had marks for hills, forests, cliffs, rivers, bridges, places where his men had fought battles, even general elevation. Everything was there and pretty well-scaled too, just like the best cartographers. Plus, the work Ranma had done

was small, but so much small stuff had probably halted any attempt by Thenardier or Ganelon to build a base in the northeast of Brune. This protected the main route for Zhcted troops and would allow her to bring up her army without any interruption.

And my trust in Tigre's been just as well proven! Tigre and Lim had created more allies than his blasé tone would otherwise have indicated earlier, bringing at least four thousand trained armsmen to their army with a further two thousand which might eventually join them too. It would be an issue once they were brought together and forced to work with her own troops, but that was the future. *Their successes make my news even more irritating to explain in comparison.*

She started listening more intently, though, as Ranma reached the tale of the battle against Greast. She questioned that closely while Lim was groaning in the background at the knowledge that Ranma had destroyed a bridge so easily. But both women had looks of disgust at the 'negotiations' that Greast had attempted.

Tigre, too, was horrified and stood up, shouting, "What is wrong with Brune that such men prosper, men who forget why we nobles exist, not just to rule but to defend!?" He fell silent, marching around the table and grabbing a pitcher of wine, drinking deeply as he very visibly tried to get his anger under control.

While Elen and Lim were blinking at Tigre's uncharacteristic anger, Ranma had moved on. "Yeah, he was a cockroach and, like most of that breed, probably survived my attempts to turn him into slurry, more's the pity. But the funny thing is, he mentioned these rumors of me being Tigre's illegitimate sister. How weird is that?"

At those words Elen started to look a little shifty eyed and turned away, not looking at Ranma, who immediately noticed. His eyes narrowing, Ranma growled, "Eleeen. What did you do?"

"Um, nothing bad, certainly nothing permanent," Elen replied with a slightly forced laugh. "Um, but, well, perhaps it's better if I just tell you how it went when I reported to King Victor."

She went on to describe how her meeting with the king and his court had gone, her words slowly drawing Tigre back from his anger at his countrymen. "Essentially, I was able to avoid any punishment, but any conquests we make beyond Alsace will probably, if we keep the territory at all, be turned over to the king for taxation and redistribution."

"What about our allies' lands?" Tigre asked anxiously. "I don't think any of them will willingly cede their land to King Victor or even turn away from Brune at all."

“We don’t know yet what will become of Brune, a matter the court is rather divided on. Some want Ganelon, though I doubt that will last once word of what he allows his army to do gets out,” Elen replied, her pretty nose wrinkling in disgust. “Before the king allowed me to keep working with Tigre, there was a faction that believed Thenardier was likely to become the next king of Brune and that we had to accept that. Some thought to keep the civil war going, but also that interfering this openly a very bad idea. Given that Brune is the textile capital of the known world, and both Dukes have ties to other nobles in Zhcted and elsewhere, I can almost see their point.”

“Yeah, that’s fine and all, but now tell me about what you did to start a Ranko rumor.”

“Hey, you were the one who told me you had gone by that name in your female body!” Elen tried to defend herself, then sighed and went on to explain how she had been forced to acknowledge his female side’s existence and then had had to come up with another reason to ally herself with Alsace.

Having just come in with some tea and biscuits, Titta had heard that and now scoffed as she set the tray down. “As if Tigre-sama would have such a uncouth barbarian for a sister or Urs-sama have had an affair.”

“True on both counts,” Tigre said with a smile, while Ranma stuck out his tongue at Titta, in far too good a mood to let her barbed words bother him, something that made her huff a little before moving to the corner, waiting further orders.

“So what’s this mean to me?” Ranma asked looking back at Elen.

“Nothing. So long as I’m still alive, the fact you heard Arifar laughing doesn’t matter, for one. And, on the other, it might mean we have a bit more in the way of leeway.” At the Brune-men’s looks of confusion she moved on. “Having a military power like Ranma on our side is something the king would like, especially since he’s not a Vanadis. As for the first, Arifar has always been picky, so having a ‘backup’ is always a good thing for the kingdom as a whole.”

Tigre spoke up then, actually scowling at Elen. “I don’t like to hear that kind of talk from you, Elen. Indeed, the idea of you being hurt at all is hard to think about, let alone dying.”

At that Elen flushed a bit, looking down at her hands as they fiddled with a few things on her desk, causing Tigre to flush and look away too. Seeing this, Titta scowled a little but said nothing. She’d had more than a few moments with Tigre when they were checking on the peasantry in Alsace, so she felt she was ahead in this contest for now. *Still, I mustn’t let my guard down.*

While Tigre and Elen were having their moment, Ranma scowled, leaning back in his chair. He wasn't really happy about this, but at least it didn't look like this minor deception would need to be continued going forward. That was fine then. "I'd still have liked you to clear that kind of story with me first."

"Ohoh? Remember, Ranma, you and I still haven't worked out a deal to free you from your parole. Everything you've done since Zion invaded Alsace was to help Alsace, not to pay me back," Elen said teasingly. "Although, come to think of it, maybe there are a few diplomatic missions Tigre's sister could be perfect for..."

"You said a big word there. I'm not certain I know what dip lo Macy is. Is it some kind of dipping sauce?" Ranma replied with a smirk of his own.

"That statement doesn't surprise me at all," Lim said before looking up as the distant chime of the front door tolled. "A guest?"

As she and Titta left to see who it was, Tigre looked back at Elen shrewdly. "Now for the bad news, Elen-sama. You seem far too worried to be concerned just about diplomatic censure or future problems."

Elen sighed and explained about Ludmila Lourie and her family's connection to the Thenardier house and that it might lead to her fighting them in the near future. "Essentially, the king proclaimed his position in such a way that if nobles that had previous ties to Thenardier wanted to back him they could. All that is important to him is that he gets his share of the spoils. Still, none of the regular nobles would be so foolish as to take a Vanadis on. So the only problem is..."

"Other war maidens," Tigre said slowly. "Like this Ludmila Lourie. What is she like?"

"Blech," Elen muttered, her mouth twisted in something like a growl and a smile mixed. "She harps on about decorum and dignity every time she opens her mouth but is the first to forget all that when it comes to confrontations, but more than anything she's like a potato that just starting to put out shoots."

As Ranma and Tigre looked confused by the allusion, the door behind them slammed open, and in walked a short, blue-haired woman, growling, "Who's a potato, huh!?"

As Elen stood up and began to yell at Lim for letting Ludmila in, she paused, her anger at Elen evaporating as she stared down at her weapon, which had just begun cracking up in her mind as soon as she laid eyes on the young black-haired youth sitting beside Elen at the table. Ignoring Elen's anger at her being there and even the bumpkin lord she was here to see for the

moment, she growled and pointed her family's Viralt at the other young man. "You, what in the world have you done to Lavias!?"

Lavias was a short looking spear with a white haft and a bluish colored spearhead. A red jewel gleamed in the center, and two large blades arced up, shaped as two crescents pointed inwards.

Glaring at the weapon in the short girl's hand, Ranma growled. "Nothing yet, but if it keeps freaking laughing at me, I might finally see if I can break one of these magic weapons of yours. Elen won't let me try to break Arifar."

"Bah, as if you could. Of course, I wouldn't let you try either. such would be beneath my dignity as a Vanadis."

"Bah, I still say that's just an excuse. You just don't want to admit your magic weapons can't stand up to my strength!" Ranma replied, smirking as he stood up, flexing dramatically.

Elen laughed at that while Ludmila scowled, rolling her eyes with just a faint blush on her face. They were very nice muscles, after all. To one side Lim simply looked on, a slightly redder blush to her face than Ludmila's.

Luckily for the peace of the small manor and Ranma's sanity, Lavias got herself (unlike Arifar, the laughter sounded feminine to Ranma's ears) under control. Ludmila, though, was still bemused, staring at her weapon like it had just grown a second head without her asking. It was now whispering to her of something just out of sight, something that was causing the normally self-controlled, dignified weapon to nearly break out in giggles.

"What exactly is going on here, Elen? There is obviously no sister to Tigrevurmud Vorn here. Instead we have this odd man who can hear our weapons!? As a merely raised Vanadis you might not understand, but that is unprecedented!" she stated, looking at them all warily, her initial reasons for being there gone from her head entirely.

In reply, Titta, who had been quiet in a corner, took a few steps forward and poured a pitcher of cold water over Ranma, triggering the curse. "Some things need to be seen to be believed."

At that Lavias broke out into open laughter again, while at Elen's side Arifar snickered.

"Oy..." Ranma growled, turning slightly to glare at Titta. "I just spent longer than a week as a woman thanks to that damned rain. I do not want to be in this form any longer, darn it! You, Titta, just earned yourself an hour of tickle tort..." Ranma cut off as she felt someone poking her breasts.

Ludmila's eyes were wide as she poked the redhead's breasts, which were a size larger than her own, with mixed awe and anger. *How did this happen, and why does she, he, whatever it is, have bigger breasts than me!?*

"Gah! What is it with girls and poking me!? Seriously, would you let a guy poke and prod you like this?" Ranma groused, then smirked as he raised his hands, poking Ludmila's breasts right over the nipples, his finger rubbing against it slightly. "How the hell do you like it, huh?"

At that Ludmila once more broke out of her confusion and gave a squeak, leaping backwards and raising Lavi as between the two of them as Elen burst out in laughter to one side, and Lim and Titta both groaned. "You, how dare you!"

"You started it!" Ranma retorted.

"That, that's different, you, you pervert!" Ludmila shouted, ice starting to congeal around Lavi's tip.

"Mah, mah, I think we can say you both were at fault, please," Tigre said, moving between them. "Surely this isn't a reason to come to blows in someone else's house?"

At that appeal to her manners, Ludmila calmed down sufficiently to grunt and look away. "You are correct, Earl Vorn. However," she went on, turning to the giggling Elen, "I still think I need to hear an explanation. Anything that effects our Viralts is important."

At that Ranma sighed and explained her curse again, dumping some hot tea over her head from the teapot Titta, rather shamefacedly, handed her. *Oh, don't think that gets you out of punishment, Titta.*

Elen too was forced to tell the whole story about how they met, Ranma's combat abilities, and the fact that he could only hear Arifar and apparently other weapons. He had not ever shown any ability to talk to them or to call upon their powers. Afterwards she sighed, looking at the other Vanadis. "I'm still not happy about you being here, but at least this way we have another witness who can tell people I'm not crazy once the story comes out."

"So...he isn't a Vanadis candidate, then, not with that curse," Ludmila muttered, staring at Ranma. "Hearing a Viralt is interesting, but he can't be heard in turn, which is the important thing."

"Hey I know I can't talk to them, but I could certainly wield them. After all, no matter how heavy or magical they are, your weapons're just that: weapons," Ranma said, somewhat affronted.

At that both Vanadis burst out laughing, sharing a laugh for the first time ever. Even their weapons joined in the merriment, causing Ranma to growl and make grasping moves with his hands as their laughter reverberated in his head.

Lim noticed this and rolled her eyes, lightly thwacking Ranma's head. "Pervert."

"If pervert means someone who wants to break their precious, dragon-slaying weapons, then yeah, let's go with that," Ranma drawled, causing the blonde to roll her eyes for the second time in as many seconds.

Later, Ranma found himself on the road once more with the others, this time on a horse rather than on foot, as they traveled south of Elen's mansion towards a nearby trade town near the southernmost border of her lands. It was apparently well known for its food and hot springs, which had sold Ranma on the idea even though he wasn't certain why they were going there other than to see off Ludmila.

"So, you wanted to talk to me," Tigre asked as he rode next to Ludmila.

"Well, I wanted to talk to you and your 'sister.' But that part of Elen's tale has been proven to be a bald-faced lie, and one told to the king and his court at that! You realize if you were not a Vanadis you could be executed for lying to the king?" Ludmila said, turning in the saddle to glare at Elen. "And why the heck are you following us, anyway!?"

"We're not following you. We're heading to that town on our own. I've never tried the hot springs there, after all. And why would you want to be alone with Tigre anyway?" Elen asked, her tone suggestive.

"Shameless woman!" Ludmila groused. "You are really a disgrace to the Vanadis name. And I notice that you didn't address my allegations of your perfidy."

Elen waved away the shorter girl's concerns. "Hmhf, the king probably already knows the whole 'sister' thing by this point. As for the court, you act as if no one's ever lied to them before."

Narrowing her eyes at that, Ludmila understood what Elen wasn't saying, and, after a second's contemplation, she nodded, dropping the point. "Very well. If this uncouth barbarian won't give us some privacy, I suppose I will come to the point. While I am...disturbed as well as interested in the pervert and his origins, I suppose I should come to the point."

"Oy! I am not a pervert! I don't go around peeping, forcing myself on women, stealing their underwear, or even ogling your bodies! Ergo, not a pervert, unless I'm misunderstanding

the word and that word you're using really mean's something like weapon breaker or something," Ranma retorted.

"Nope, you're understanding it quite well, but that list seemed to come a little too easily to you." Elen teased, suddenly redirecting her attention.

As he continued to ride next to them, Ranma looked her up and down, then did the same to Lim and Ludmila, shaking his head as they started to blush, and Ludmila growled. "I once knew this old, perverted grandmaster of unarmed combat who had found a way to leech the life energy off women through their anger at his stealing their panties, the prettier the better. He'd be all over the three of you like a shark after blood." Ranma had oddly learned that there were sharks here just like bears and all the other animals he was used to.

As Lim shuddered at the idea, Elen asked, "What happened to him? And you know you're going to have to give me the story about where you're really from at some point, right? The questions about your past keep piling up, Ranma."

Ranma simply smirked at that but answered Elen's question honestly. "Imagine a wrinkled old raisin that comes up to your knee with tufts of hair sticking up from bits of his head, a pointed face, almost, and a literally unholy amount of energy and durability who likes to steal your underwear and call them his 'precious.' He tried to take advantage of my own female form. and I thought I'd finished him dozens of times, but he always would come back, whatever I did to him. Just thank your lucky stars he ain't liable to follow me here."

As the two Vanadis joined Lim in shuddering at the description, though, Ranma was looking around, frowning. Having spent nearly a month moving through all sorts of terrain and keeping himself and his troops unseen, Ranma had honed his heretofore barely decent skills at spotting things that were out of place. And right now his instincts were telling him that there was something wrong.

He wasn't the only one either, as Tigre too was now looking around, frowning. "There's no birds around here?"

Ludmila rolled her eyes. "Of course there are, but we're being watched from the treetops by someone."

Before Ludmila could finish speaking, ten men leaped out from the trees down towards the five travelers. All of them were dressed in black and brown, their heads entirely covered save for a narrow aperture in the front to let them see, and they were all armed with short swords, one edge of which was serrated, the other not. They leaped down, two to a rider, even as others in the trees fired at the travelers with blow darts.

Tigre seemed to be the target of several of those darts, but he rolled out of the saddle, landing lightly, his black bow in hand and an arrow already flying. There was a grunt from within the woods, and then Tigre had loosed two more arrows like thunderbolts from his bow. The two men leaping towards him flew backwards, one being pinned to the tree behind him with an arrow through his neck, the other with a head shot, of all things.

Ranma allowed himself a brief second to admire his friend's skill with the bow even as he caught the darts flung his way. Then he was off, leaping up and kicking out, sending the two attackers above him flying. Flipping himself through the air, Ranma landed in among the trees and found another assassin there, flinging him away with a single hard blow.

At the same time he heard Ludmila mutter some name or other and Elen shouting, "They're paid assassins! Watch out for poison!"

So saying, Elen's blade lashed out, cutting one man in two before sending a blast of cutting wind at another. That man's head flew off his shoulders, though Ludmila growled angrily as his dead body slammed to the dirt close enough to further startle her horse.

But she too was busy, though instead of using only a low-level power from her Viralt, she thrust her spear up, magic coalescing about it as she shouted out, "Cielo Zam Kafa (Freeze the Sky)!" From all around her huge spears of ice suddenly blossomed between one second and the next, impaling three of the attackers leaping towards them.

While Tigre was now concentrating on taking down the attackers still hiding in the woods, Lim killed the last attacker jumping down towards their group. But despite Tigre and Ranma being at work, one of the killers in the woods had a brief second to fling out some kind of snake Ranma hadn't seen yet towards her before Ranma's fist smashed his skull into pieces. "Lim, watch out!"

She turned quickly, her blade flying up with a speed few normal people could match, cutting the snake in two. But the head kept going, hitting the top of her chest. Though dead, the snake's mouth obeyed its instincts and bit down hard on the top of her right breast.

Lim started to swoon and fell out of the saddle instantly, but even Ranma couldn't get back to her just yet, his immediate move in that direction halted by another blow dart nearly taking him in the head and several more attackers closing in on him from the trees around him as more attacked Tigre with blow darts from the woods. It was evident to Ranma now that, while Tigre might have been their primary target, he too was being targeted. They were dealt with within seconds, but those seconds cost Lim, and she convulsed on the ground once before her body started to still, her face turning green.

“Lim!” Elen shouted, flinging herself out of the saddle to go to her knees next to her best friend while Ludmila frowned too but kept an eye out for further attacks.

Tigre, too, took up a guard position, taking only a brief look to diagnose the type of snake the assassin had thrown before turning his attention back to the woods, sighting deeper into it and letting fly. Even as there was a muted grunt from deeper in the woods, he was shouting, “Ranma, that snake was a deathly rock snake! Its poison is so strong even a single drop can kill an ox! You’ll have to get it out quickly or else!”

Grunting, Ranma didn’t reply, tearing open Lim’s shirt slightly, trying to let her retain her dignity but not overly caring, preferring to save her life rather than to concentrate on the amazingly soft, smooth skin under his touch. After hitting a few pressure points to slow the blood flow and thus the poison’s speed through Lim’s body, Ranma leaned in, placing his mouth right over where the snake had bitten. With a bit of ki in his mouth to reinforce it, he sucked hard, trying to get as much of the poison out as he could while, at the same time, his hands started to glow with more ki where he touched the bare skin of her neck and outer thigh, startling Elen. Ludmila too was startled and turned away from her watch, her earlier ice technique slowly dissipating, dumping the bodies of their attackers to the road.

Ranma didn’t notice: he was busy saving the girl in his arms. He spat out to one side, the spit black with venom and poisoned blood, but the poison had worked itself through Lim’s system in the bare minute she had been left unaided. *Fuck! Then it’s down to my ki healing, then.* Putting his mouth back down on the bite mark, Ranma slowly used his ki to flush the poison out of Lim’s blood spitting out twice more before the poison and the blood that was too tainted to be used was out. At the same time his ki was healing or even purifying the rest of Lim’s affected blood, working from the brain down and then out from the heart.

As the others watched in various levels of astonishment, Lim’s body began to glow like Ranma’s hands as he worked, then, slowly, the light began to recede. Eventually Ranma leaned back, holding Lim against him as her chest moved in and out and her eyes startled to flutter back open. “She’s fine now. The poison had nearly worked its way throughout her system, though. She’ll need a lot of food, specifically garlic, meats, beetroots, and goji berries.” Ranma frowned after a second. “Um, not certain if you have those here, but I know you’ve got garlic, and I think I’ve seen beetroots.”

“We’ll find them, whatever we have to!” Elen replied fervently, reaching over to pull Lim from Ranma’s arms, pulling her to her feet and letting Lim lean against her. “Anything. You, you just... That was...”

"I... I was dead," Lim said wonderingly, staring at Ranma with something like awe, making him very uncomfortable. "I could feel my body shutting down from the neck down. Ranma, what did you..."

Sighing, Ranma scratched his pigtail and looked away, unwilling to meet her awed gaze. "Ya remember how you joked that time in the camp outside Alsace that I had magic hands? Well, it's sort of like that. I, um, I can sort of push my own life energy into other people to help the healing process along or, like in this case, purify their bodies of foreign influences."

"...Since I got back from Silesia I've seen reports about some of my wounded men healing faster, but I hadn't made that connection yet," Elen whispered, awe in her tone, then her eyes widened, and she gently pushed Lim to lean against her horse before reaching forward, grabbing Ranma's shoulders and shaking him. "Could you do the same for a disease, a long term one that someone has been suffering from for a long time?"

Ludmila gasped, understanding where Elen was going with this and swiftly joined her, leaning forward into Ranma's personal space. "Well, can you!?"

"Um, unless its something that attacks the brain, yeah," Ranma replied, backing up quickly. "If I can find the symptoms and use them to figure out what's really wrong, anyway. It won't be easy on either me or the patient, especially if the disease has had a lot of time to work its way through the patient's system."

"Even if it's a disease in the blood?" Elen asked, wanting to be clear on this before getting her hopes up further.

"Again, yes. Like I said, it wouldn't be as easy, especially if I have to force the patient's body to create a lot of new blood cells while getting the old ones out, but yes, it's definitely possible. But why is this so important to you?" Ranma asked, having been worried about Elen wanting to lay claim to his healing skills for her army or something similar. But this seemed more personal than that. "Not to put too fine a point on it, but the two of you are as healthy as your horses."

At that insult Elen tried to smack him upside the head, but Ranma dodged, sticking his tongue out at her in an effort to lighten the mood. It worked slightly, but a moment later the seriousness returned as Elen actually got down on her knees and bowed toward Ranma. "Please, heal my friend Sasha!"

Backing away rapidly, Ranma waved his hands frantically. "Enough of that! Gah, seeing you bow like that to me is so freaking wrong it's not even funny. Now, explain this to me from the beginning. The name Sasha sounds familiar, but that's it."

“You mentioned Sasha being another Vanadis, didn’t you, Elen?” Tigre asked. Now that Lim was healed, he was moving around picking up the arrows he’d used, since there was no point in leaving them behind.

“Alexandra Alshavin is the Vanadis of Legnica, also called the princess of the dancing blades.” Ludmila supplied before Elen could speak. “She is the strongest Vanadis alive by a wide margin and was the mediator between Vanadis before she became ill with a blood disease that has been passed down through her maternal family. Even with that, her strength is still above other ours.”

“Sasha’s a dear friend to me, and I, if you can help her, Ranma, I...” Elen paused, choking up a bit and looking away so none of the others could see her tearful face.

“Where is this Legnica place?” Ranma asked, more to buy time than that he really cared. Inside he felt the Tofu-trained portion of his mind warring with the bit of his mind that Ranma sometimes labeled his inner Nabiki, the greedy, narcissistic part of him which only looked out for Ranma rather than caring about what was honorable.

“North and east of Leitmeritz. It’s Zhcted largest and most important port. In fact, it’s the second largest city in the country. There’s a cobbled road that will lead you there, if slowly, from Leitmeritz and most other decently sized cities or towns,” Elen replied.

Ranma nodded slowly and looked at both Vanadis closely. *Well, they both seem to want this, so...* Deciding this time to listen to the Nabiki side of the Force, if only for a moment, Ranma slowly nodded. “All right, I really, really don’t want to be hounded as some miracle worker or anything like that, and, because of that and because you both honestly have something I want, we’re going to make a deal.”

Elen looked at him sharply at that, as did Lim and Tigre, but Ludmila didn’t have their grasp of Ranma’s normal, friendly, and even helpful nature. She just thought Ranma was showing good common sense. “Name your price,” the shorter Vanadis said simply.

“Bah, I don’t need cash or anything like that. Money don’t matter to me.” At that Ranma’s inner Nabiki seemed to scream, but Ranma ignored it easily. There were more important things at stake here after all. “But Elen said your family had ties to Thenardier, and you might feel obligated to oppose Elen on that account. What I want from you, Ludmila, is a promise to not get involved against us on Thenardier’s side. We’re not asking for your help, but we are asking you to leave us alone in turn.”

“Agreed,” Ludmila said instantly, shocking Elen and Lim. Seeing their looks, she rolled her eyes. “While I can see even you peasants understand the ties two noble families can create,

I personally loathe the man. And if Ranma truly can heal our fellow Vanadis, that becomes a matter of further insuring the security of Zhcted and would, of course, take precedence over any personal or familial obligation.”

“And that this lets you keep your pride as a noblewoman and Vanadis both while also sticking it to Thenardier is surely not important at all,” Elen quipped, kind of irritated at the peasant compliment, which she knew was one of the more personal reasons why she and Ludmila had never gotten along.

“Such, of course, need not be mentioned in polite, refined society,” Ludmila huffed. “Well, I agreed to Ranma’s price. What about you?”

When Elen looked at him, Ranma narrowed his eyes and almost glared back at her. “Look, I understand why you couldn’t just let me go, but if I can help Sasha, I want my parole with you paid off. I like ya, Elen, but eventually your king’s going to learn about my skills, and, if it comes down to it, I don’t want any bond of honor chaining me down, keeping me from just walking away. I also want your words of honor, all of you, that you won’t spread my abilities around without permission.” His lips twitched into a wry grimace. “My healing skills, not my combat skills. Those’re already well out of the bag.”

Elen paused, then slowly nodded. Ranma’s healing skills were such that any king would be mad to possess them, and he really could eventually become known as a miracle worker with that level of healing skill. So his fears were well justified on that score. Still... “You say you don’t want to be tied down by honor, but what about friendship?”

“Well, that’s a different thing entirely,” Ranma said with a laugh. “I’m also not about to rush off to this Sasha lady right this second. I’d like a letter of introduction to show her, and I want to see the hot springs of this town we’re going to before anything else.”

The women and even Tigre laughed at that, and the party soon began moving once more. Lim was slumped in the saddle, munching on some hardtack as her stomach grumbled so loudly the horses were skittish, fearing an attack from some animal. For a moment, while riding next to her, Ranma reached over and rubbed her back consolingly before the horse he was riding pulled back and away from the other horse, snorting unhappily at him. “Sorry about that, but it’s a natural outcome from the healing process. I use your body’s own resources during the healing along with my own ki, y’see?”

“I thought it might be something of that nature,” Lim grumbled around a bite of disgusting hardtack. “But you don’t have to apologize, Ranma. Not for anything you did just now. After all, you saved my life.”

“Yeah, well, that’s what friends are for, right?” Ranma asked, looking at her with his head cocked to one side.

She looked at him, still flopped forward over her horse’s back and allowed a smile to appear on her face. “Mmm,” she replied with a nod, saying no more and turning her attention back to keeping the hardtack down even as her ears burned a little at the admission.

Ranma grinned widely at her back, and the trip continued from there. By evening they had reached the town they had originally been heading towards, where, without any discussion, they made their way to the hot springs right off the bat, stopping only to grab several plates of food for themselves, most of which went to Lim’s suddenly bottomless appetite. After losing a game of rock-paper-scissors Tigre was elected to watch the horses.

After taking some time pointing out the foods Lim should be eating to regain her strength faster, Ranma entered what Elen had just pointed out was the male side of the baths, the baths being organized as male only, female only, and mixed. *Not that I would mind seeing any of the gals I arrived with naked, but I doubt they’d like showing off to me in turn.* Pulling off his shirt, Ranma paused, staring down at a certain problem that had popped to attention at that thought and the memory of Lim’s body.

It was kind of irritating to him that, despite his best efforts to concentrate on healing Lim, Ranma still had the memory of what she felt like in his arms. *God, she was soooo soft and bouncy, and her skin felt smooth under my lips, and her hair, that blonde hair in my fingers...*

“GAHHHH.” Grumbling, Ranma shook his head hard, trying to think unsexy thoughts, finally succeeding when he thought of that asshole Greast. Shuddering now, Ranma pulled his pants off and, after wrapping a towel around his waist, opened the door leading into the baths.

The whole place was full of steam, and at first Ranma couldn’t see where he was going. Then, when his vision cleared, he smiled, staring around him at the baths. They looked almost Persian or Roman to him, he wasn’t certain. A second later, however, all thoughts of the baths went out of Ranma’s mind as Ludmila Lourie pushed herself out of the water and turned to stare at Ranma.

Ranma blinked, then quickly turned away, blushing as he roared, “God damn it, Elen!” From somewhere else in the hot spring complex Ranma swore he heard someone guffawing.

“Before that, isn’t there something you should say to me?” Ludmila growled, grabbing up Lavi and prodding Ranma in the side with the weapon.

“Um, ‘Don’t prod me with your magic weapon unless you want me to break it?’”
Ranma quipped, turning back and staring at her now. “And why the hell haven’t you covered up!?”

“Would you feel ashamed if a monkey or animal saw you naked?” Ludmila shot back. But she pulled Laviias back, scowling. “Hmhf, I suppose, though, that in your case seeing a naked female body isn’t all that unusual.”

“It’s a heck of a lot different seeing someone else’s body rather than my own. But if you’re offering?” Ranma asked, maintaining eye contact and amused to see the fury in Ludmila’s face give way to simple embarrassment before he turned aside again. “Although, I got no idea why Elen was calling you a potato, from what I was able to see just now you’ve got nothing to worry about in the looks department.”

“Bah, she is always going on about that just because her breasts are larger than mine, and she’s taller to boot,” Ludmila grumbled, moving away from Ranma and picking up her towel, wrapping it around herself. She really did want to smack him one, but she had enough of an understanding of the enigma that was Ranma by this point to know that would probably result in a fight. And whatever she might have said earlier, she in no way wanted to run around after a boy bare-naked while he was wearing just a towel.

“Well, you’re younger than her, right? So you’ve got time to grow,” Ranma replied, still staring at the far wall. “And breast size isn’t everything, right?”

“...We’re the same age,” Ludmila replied through gritted teeth. “And hearing that from a boy who can have bigger breasts than me with a splash of cold water really doesn’t make me feel better.”

Now somewhat desperate to make the ice wielder girl feel better before she decided to attack him, Ranma said, “Well, come on, then, you surely can’t be the, um, the smallest Vanadis in that area, can you? Besides, I’ve heard that big ones cause back pains.”

Ludmila slumped. “No, not considering the ones I’ve actually met. Although I’ve never met the seventh Vanadis.” Moving off and passing by a suddenly very confused looking Tigre who was about to enter, she grumbled, “Do me a favor, don’t ever try to cheer me up again, Ranma.”

Looking around, Tigre asked, “This is the men’s only side, right? The attendant told me that just a moment ago.”

“Yeah, that’s what I should’ve done too, ask someone who actually works here rather than Elen. Huh, now I’ve got two people who need some punishment: Titta and Elen...” Ranma mused.

Shaking his head at that, Tigre decided he didn’t want to know and simply slid into the water next to his friend.

OOOOOOO

Staring at her wildly chortling friend, Lim shook her head. “That was mean, Elen-sama.”

“Oh, come on, we can’t even hear any sounds of a fight, so nothing bad has happened. Or did you want to show your body to Ranma instead of Ludmila?” Elen teased, wrapping a wet, slippery arm around her friend’s shoulders. “Wanted to give him more of a show than earlier when he saved you by sucking on your breast, hmm?”

Lim blushed, then pushed her friend away, reaching to grab some more food from the floating tray to one side of her. “You know I can’t remember what happened while I was poisoned! And besides, that would be most improper of me. Or are you saying you are fine with Tigre having seen your body that one time back in Leitmeritz?”

As Elen stuttered, Lim smirked. “So, whatever is happening between the two of you, Elen-sama?”

“Gah, turnabout isn’t fair!” Elen retorted before splashing Lim, who retaliated quickly.

OOOOOOO

The next day, while Ludmila and Elen studiously avoided one another, Elen decided it was time to send Ranma off to to Sasha. “After all, the faster you get there, the faster you can get back. We’ve got at best two more months of the campaign season left, and I’d like us to at least fortify Augre and Aude more before the season ends. Defensive battles might be more that potato’s thing than mine, but I can handle them when I have to. If we keep that position on the river to Aude’s west we can completely concentrate on Thenardier in the south.”

“And we can also keep gathering more allies,” Tigre said with a faint smile. “The more allies we have means the more Brune men fighting against Thenardier and Ganelon, making it an army of liberation rather than conquest.”

“Yep! Although, if we can do that, we might have to come up with a new name for our army,” Elen mused, then shook it off. “I’ll think up a name by the time we get back to Alsace. At any rate, I’ve written up a letter of introduction for you, and I’ve also decided to send Lim with you. With Lim there and the letter, no one in Legnica is going to give you any trouble.”

“And you won’t want her here?” Ranma asked dubiously. From what he had seen, Elen was a strategic and tactical genius, but Lim was the one who handled logistics.

“I think we can get by without her,” Elen said repressively, while to one side of the room they had taken over Lim smirked. She, in point of fact, had asked about that very point.

“We actually have already acquired a logistics team from Lord Augre in the form of his son. There is also the fact that we won’t be fighting any actual battles, or not any large ones, anyway,” Tigre supplied. He winced when Elen smacked his shoulder and pouted adorably at him before turning away in a huff. “What was that for?”

“What about Ludmila?” Ranma asked, chuckling inside. *Heh, damn is he dense. More dense than I was...I think. Yeah, again, best not to look at that too closely.*

“She will be leaving this morning to head back to her own country in the south. From there she will be on watch at the borders. Her lands are the closest to Mouzinel, and so she will need to make certain they don’t try to take advantage of our interest in Brune to attack our borders,” Elen said, her mouth twisted into a moue of distaste.

“It’s a pity we couldn’t convince her to come to our side entirely. Another Vanadis would, OWW!” That time Elen’s smack to Tigre’s shoulder was much harder, and he winced, rubbing the shoulder. “Honestly, Elen, what is wrong?”

“That’s my line, darn it! Didn’t you learn anything this morning? You’re mine! Stop making nice with that woman!”

“Oy, you two, keep your lovey-dovey flirting to yourselves, okay?” Ranma mocked, causing Elen to blush and Tigre to frown at him in confusion. “Still, if you two are certain you won’t need me or Lim, then I’m fine with leaving now.”

“Good. That way your own lovey-dovey drama can take center stage,” Elen shot back, still flushing and wanting to spread the embarrassment.

It worked, and Ranma blushed red while Lim shouted, “Eleonora-sama!”

Despite that, though, the two of them were on the road quickly, and, despite Elen's assertions that they didn't really need Ranma or Lim, Lim still requisitioned three more horses when they passed through Leitmeritz to speed their journey. They stayed there a bare day, while Ranma subjected Titta to tickle torture for her watery assault on him two days before. At the same time Elen made arrangements to send some carts west to meet up with the company of pikemen that Valentina had promised. They had been spotted at the edge of Leitmeritz territory, but their baggage train would go no further, as part of Valentina's agreement with Elen.

Having heard a description of those troops, the first question Ranma asked as they moved off was, "So, do all the different Vanadis specialize in different types of troops?"

"Not exactly, though there is a certain amount of specialization, yes. Ludmila-san focuses on defense and heavy infantry because her lands are the main provider of iron ore. Alexandra-sama's troops are mostly marines, trained for maritime duties with light armor and extremely good weapons, since her city is the main port for Zhcted's naval power. Lady Valentina's troops specialize in pike and archery as well as scouts, but that is something Valentina-san herself came up with. Her lands are the smallest and most out of the way of all the Vanadis lands, and she came up with those tactics to keep the losses of her people to a minimum. The other Vanadis do not specialize in specific troops, though they, of course, have preferred tactics," Lim replied.

"Huh. That's interesting. So, have you and Elen worked with them all to know all that?" Ranma asked, somewhat surprised by the depth of Lim's understanding. He also noticed how Lim's form of address had changed when she spoke of Alexandra, or Sasha, as the others had called her.

"Hah! No," Lim barked a laugh. "I've ever only worked directly with Lady Sofy once and Lady Sasha alongside Lady Elen a few times when Lady Elen was still getting used to her position as Vanadis."

She paused then, looking down to where Ranma was running easily alongside her cantering horse, seemingly not even noticing the pace. "I have to thank you. Elen might not have come out and said it, but Sasha is one of her closest friends beyond myself. Sasha-sama took Elen under her wing when she first became a Vanadis. She even mentored Ludmila in how to rule as a Vanadis for a time, hence why Ludmila was also willing to pay your price for helping her."

"So she's something of an older sister?" Ranma asked, imagining a middle-aged woman with something of Kasumi's air about her. "What's she even look like?"

“Yes, but she is more of the teasing yet stern older sister rather than a caring one. That title would go to Sofy-sama, in my opinion. As for Sasha’s looks, she is somewhat shorter than Elen and me, with a build much like Ludmila’s aged upwards and short cropped dark black hair down to the top of her neck.”

So, sort of more like Nabiki, then? Ranma thought, transferring the previous position to this Sofy person, who he had heard about a few times before, and replacing that image with a middle-aged Nabiki. *Makes sense that someone like that would be in charge of a trade city, I suppose.*

But wait, if Elen has Nabiki and Kasumi sister figures among the Vanadis, does that make her the Akane of this world? “Um, as an aside, does Elen cook?” Ranma asked, suddenly looking a little afraid.

Lim blinked, cocking her head and sending her long blonde ponytail sideways through the wind for a moment, a move that arrested Ranma’s attention for a second before her words pulled him back. “Where in the world did that question come from? Well, no, she can’t cook very well, beyond a few campfire meals. She has tried a few items, but mostly she over-spices things far too much.”

“That’s all? Phew,” Ranma said then laughed as Lim’s look of confusion increased. “Um, just trying to make a few comparisons to people I once knew in my mind.”

The conversation shifted from there to the road and the territories they were traveling through, and then to places Lim and Elen had seen during their times as mercenaries. Ranma supplied a few of his own, and, before they knew it, night was upon them.

They camped out, with Ranma standing first watch, and moved off early the next morning. “Are you sure you don’t want to ride?” Lim asked, having transferred her saddle to the third of her four horses. She would ride them two a day at a decent clip so that none of them would get tired out. Since she wasn’t wearing her armor, only a sword, the horses would be fine with this pace even with the added weight of their own feed added to her weight.

“Hah, I’m great!” Ranma said with a smirk, cracking his neck and shoulders. “This is a walk in the park. Now if rabid wolves were after me and I was carrying you and one of the horses, that’d be tough.”

“I am still uncertain I believe your stories about how your father trained you, but very well.” With the ease of a lifetime’s experience, Lim pulled herself into the saddle, unknowingly flashing her rear at Ranma for the second time since she had met him. He stopped, poleaxed

for a moment, watching that rear and the blonde hair lightly flicking this way and that above it before shaking himself and moving off next to her once more.

The trip passed by relatively quickly. Neither of felt the need to stop at inns they just kept going, only stopping at night rather than within the inns. They talked when one or the other wanted to talk, but otherwise simply enjoyed the trip and, oddly to Lim, one another's company. When he wasn't being antagonistic Ranma was a pretty fun conversationalist. (Or even when he was, though you would have had to torture Lim to get her to admit it.) He knew a lot about traveling and could describe a many of the places he had been and the monsters he had fought very well. His tales about his father and their training were hilarious and had her nearly in stitches more than once.

In turn, Ranma was fascinated by the world Lim described. She could paint a scene so well it was like he was there, and she and Elen had seen numerous battles either from the inside or from the sidelines as they traveled with the mercenary band Elen's father had led. She knew a lot of odd, esoteric things beyond combat too, and that was also fun. They even had fun cooking over the fire, with Lim having Ranma laughing as she described the first time Elen had attempted to cook, only to nearly set Lim's hair on fire. And while her cooking skills weren't that good, she could at least help Ranma along.

Even better, she was tough. Lim was no Vanadis, but she was the next level lower, and her body was more than up to handling riding at the pace Ranma set. The horses sometimes looked like they might want to grumble, but Lim handled them easily and never complained, instead just moving on with Ranma next to her. She even insisted on sparring with him every evening before turning in for the night.

In this way they traveled through Elen's lands and then through several other fiefdoms both major and minor for nearly two weeks before nearing the land of the Vanadis of Legnica. Even so, they had to pause one more night on the road and did so in a small copse of trees marked by a small, shallow pool of water. Lim took one look at it and proceeded to order Ranma to set up camp. "We've been on the move for nearly a week now, Ranma. I think I want at least a bath. I know men don't care much about such things mostly, but bathing is rather important to a woman like myself."

"I'll set up camp a ways away through the trees, then," Ranma said with a chuckle. "And I actually might have an idea there. Don't get undressed just yet." He then smirked, winking at her. "Or do. That's up to you."

Lim blushed but laughed, shaking her head. "Not yet for that, I think."

That in turn caused Ranma to gape at her, and she flushed, turning away to lead the horses off, setting them up nearby and placing their feedbags over their noses. That might have been a bit much, she reflected. But it was a fact that, despite getting off on the wrong foot, Ranma interested her. She wasn't certain where that interest was going, but she found she was enjoying getting to know him more, at the least.

Soon enough the two of them had set up the camp, and Ranma had even set up some stew to cook over the fire. Then they went back through the woods to the small pool of water. "You're going to go in with that?" Ranma asked, gesturing down to the sword Lim still had at her side, which rather clashed with the towel she had over one arm and the small glass vial of some kind of soap in the other. "And where did those come from?"

"I've always had them among my saddlebags. As for the sword, one can never be too careful, especially when you are at your most vulnerable," Lim replied, a small scowl at some memory she hadn't yet shared with Ranma crossing her face before she shook it off. "Now, what was this idea you had?"

Ranma didn't reply, turning away for a moment as he thrust his hand out over the pool, concentrating. "Moko Takabisha!" The blast of ki rocketed down into the pool and, like Ranma had hoped, began to heat the water. Two more blasts had the pool steaming like the baths back in the town they had gone to with Tigre, Ludmila, and Elen. "Awesome, that worked out pretty well."

Shaking her head at yet another power Ranma had exhibited that was somewhat similar if very different from that of a Vanadis, Lim knelt down, putting her hand into the water and smiling as she felt the heat of the pool.

She didn't notice that, in so doing, she was giving Ranma a perfect view down her blouse. *Ooooh wow. Fuck, I'm not a pervert, but that is one hell of a view.*

She smiled up at Ranma, not noticing how his face was flushed with something beyond the steam of the pool. "Thank you, Ranma." Lim then placed her bathing things to one side and stood up, making a shooing motion with her hands. "Now, if you could excuse me?"

"What, I was the one who made it and I don't get to use it first?" Ranma quipped. "If it's ladies first just let me go change before I get in."

Lim laughed but stilly shooed Ranma away. After that she spent about an hour just lazing about in the pool as the sun set. She only got out of the pool after the water had cooled down once more, toweling off and dressing quickly before heading back to camp. "Your turn, Ranma. I'll watch the food."

“Go ahead and eat. I already had my share,” Ranma said, standing up and moving past Lim, smiling at the smell of her hair for a moment before shaking that off. Soon enough he was by the pool, heating it up again in a welter of steam before shucking his clothing and diving in.

Ranma too intended to while away half an hour or so in the pool, but, unlike Lim, his time in the pool was rudely interrupted. “Tsk! Pity that babe by the fire wasn’t taking a bath; this’d be a lot more fun if so.”

At the sound of this gruff, unknown voice, Ranma lazily turned in the water to see several men standing around the pool. Four of them had bows out and were aiming at Ranma. Another one had a spear, pointing it his way. The sixth was kneeling by his stuff, searching his pockets and slowly looking confused as he reached into the ki pocket in Ranma’s leggings. That pocket would continue existing for several hours even without being in contact with Ranma thanks to the ki he had used to create it in the first place.

The man with the spear spoke up again, while, in the distance towards the camp, Ranma could make out more silhouettes moving in the darkness, their forms only seen as black blobs against the fire of the camp. “Now you just stay right there, lad. We’re after your valuables and some time with the girl, not your lives. It won’t be nothing she hasn’t probably already lost, after all, and your lives are more important than any amount of money, right?”

Ranma stared at the men deadpan as screams began behind them, causing two of the bowmen to turn and stare. “Seriously? You fools really don’t know who you’re dealing with, do ya?” Ranma suddenly pushed off the bottom of the pool, which, though muddy, was enough to give him some impetus.

He landed on the shore of the small pool, his hands flashing and grabbing at the arrows that were fired at him before he hurled them back at the shooters. He didn’t even grunt as the spear-tip slammed into his side, shattering against his skin. Ranma then grabbed the haft of the blade and pulled the wielder close, smacking out with a single blow that lifted the man off his feet and hurled him backwards.

The next instant he had crossed the distance to the two remaining bowmen, knocking them out. But this let the man with his clothing turn and race off through the woods towards his fellows around Ranma and Lim’s small camp.

But if he had thought to find aid there, he was to be disappointed. He barely broke out into the firelight and opened his mouth to shout when Lim finished the last of the seven men who had attacked her, her blade having claimed each of their lives one after another. “Everyone, that bastard in the pool, he, oooooh, fuck me.”

“Nah, you’re not my type, man,” Ranma said from behind him. A punch to the back of his head sent the bandit into la-la land before Ranma looked past his comatose form to Lim. “Hey Lim, you ok?”

“I am fine Ranma, though I...” Lim began turning from her last opponent to look at him only to stare, a blush quickly suffusing her features.

Ranma was standing there bare as he had been born since the last bandit hadn’t even left his underwear behind. While this wasn’t the first time Lim had seen an almost naked man—privacy on the march was oftentimes impossible—it was the first time she’d seen the entirety, and even next to trained soldiers Ranma’s body was something to see.

Despite his harsh life there were few scars visible on Ranma’s body, and those she saw there were small and added to the total package rather than took away from it. His abs were chiseled almost beyond belief, so hard they looked like they had been carved out of granite, and, while his body wasn’t musclebound like too many soldiers seemed to think was the best way to be, there was not an ounce of wasted flash on him in any way, his muscles like cords of steel, each of them raised to a level of perfection Lim had never seen save perhaps in Elen. His waist was a little thinner than even Lim’s own, and as Lim’s eyes drifted below that...

“Big...” As soon as she spoke aloud, Lim realized what she had said and was seeing and turned away with a shriek, shouting, “Put some clothes on, darn it!”

“WHa, oh Gah!” Ranma shouted, leaping back behind a tree. “Sorry, Lim, didn’t mean to. That guy grabbed up my clothing, see. Um... Could ya toss ‘em to me?” Then his tone shifted into the slightly teasing tone Lim was slowly getting used to. “And y’know, you could just think of that as me paying you back in like coin for our near miss back in Leitmeritz.”

“Oh, shut up and get dressed,” Lim groused, still blushing as her traitorous mind seared the image of Ranma in his natural form into her brain. After tossing Ranma his clothing she moved around, checking each dead body and looking for anything that could identify them, but she found nothing. They all dressed something like pirates who had been forced ashore. *But so far inland? Odd, but unimportant.*

After the two of them gathered the bodies together she shook her head and addressed Ranma, pointedly not looking at him. Lim just knew that if she did her mind would replay that image from earlier. “I think we shouldn’t stay here, unless you want to go to the trouble of burying them?”

“Nah, let’s just get going. I’ll tie up the ones I left alive, and we can go,” Ranma said, also not looking at her.

But that comment caused Lim's head to snap to him so quickly it actually hurt her neck a little. "What?! You left a few alive?!"

"They weren't a real threat to me, Lim, even if they had all attacked me at once. And I try not to kill if I can get away with it," Ranma sighed. "I never had to kill before coming to Brune, and I'm still not used to it."

"I suppose I can understand that, but, Ranma, these are ex-pirate bandits, the lowest of the low," Lim replied slowly, thinking that sounded even more ludicrous than everything else she had learned about the time before Ranma somehow—he and Tigre hadn't explained how—had come to Alsace. "I don't mean to imply they would ever be a threat to us, but this is the life they chose: a life based on killing, enslaving, and murdering others, taking their property for their own. They don't deserve mercy."

"But that doesn't mean they deserve death either." Ranma smirked evilly. "Don't worry, I'm not going to let them go without punishing them. I can do a lot of things with pressure points and such like, after all. Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to find a small pebble..."

Having used pressure points to make certain the survivors of this attack remained unconscious, none of them responded as Ranma used the tiny pebble to smack one particular spot on their lower backs. When Lim asked him what he was doing he smiled a wintry smile. "Let me keep some secrets, please."

Lim huffed, her nose wrinkling at that, but Ranma didn't give her any information. Soon he was done with the remainder of what Ranma had come to think of as the moron brigade, and the two of them turned their attention to the camp, dousing the fire and setting off quickly into the night. Just as they were about to leave, though, Ranma paused, sniffing the air. Then he leaned over, sniffing at Lim who backed away hurriedly. "What are you doing!?"

"Oh, sorry. Um, there was just this odd smell in the air. Thought it might have been that soap you were using." Ranma backed away, sniffing the air and frowning. It smelled like some kind of flower-based perfume, but Ranma couldn't figure out where it was coming from. There had also been an odd sound which had almost sounded like snickering on the wind, but mainly the smell had distracted him. "It's a nice smell," he mumbled before looking at Lim, who was just looking confused. "Weird. Well, whatever, let's get going."

OOOOOOO

As the two travelers moved out of sight, out of the darkness of the copse behind them a small tear in reality appeared, out of which stepped Valentina Glinka Estes. She was blushing slightly as she stood there, looking after them as, behind her, the rift closed. *Good grief, that was a bit too close. I would never have thought that that young man would have been able to smell my perfume. But thankfully he didn't spot me before I could teleport away.*

“And you were not helping at all, Ezendeis! Mou, what was with the snickering, hmm? You go weeks without saying anything to me, oh silent one, and then you start snickering all of a sudden?” Valentina asked aloud as she glared at her scythe, stamping a foot down in pique.

The crystal set into the flower that was, in turn, at the center of the meeting point between blade and handle on Ezendeis flashed. As it did, images of Ranma and a redheaded female came to Valentina before overlapping and then collapsing into nothing once more.

“Ah, I see. You can sense the magic in him, and it amuses you?” This time Ezendeis didn't reply, falling back into its normal incommunicative manner. Still, Valentina wasn't concerned. Her Viralt had never made a hint that it disproved of her or her actions; it was simply the strong, silent type.

With that mystery solved, Valentina turned her attention to what had brought her here in the first place. “Mm, so that is the one called Living Trebuchet. And yet, the reports I have gotten of his strength and endurance hardly do him justice,” she murmured to herself.

Valentina had several specialized agents she used to gather information, and one of them had moved to Aude in Brune long before the battle of the Dinant Plains. The owner of a brothel there, he learned practically everything there was to be learned in terms of rumors. And, thanks to what Elen had told her when they met in Silesia, Valentina had asked him to look into rumors about Ranma and, after that, had asked her spies to inform her of his movements if he made to head deeper into Zhcted.

“He is entirely immune to normal attacks, moves faster than anyone not a Vanadis, and has knowledge of the human body enough to use a technique based on something called pressure points, the idea of which I've never heard. Yet it is obvious they exist,” Valentina continued to muse to herself as she moved through the small copse of trees.

She stopped in the shadows of a tree, staring at the tied up men who had attacked Limlasha and Ranma. They had been hired for the task by one of her contacts, posing as an agent of Thenardier. Since the man did actually work for anyone who paid him rather than Valentina alone, she had purchased his services in turn through an intermediary, and she doubted that anyone who looked into it would be able to discern the truth.

She cocked her head, frowning before she picked up a stick and threw it at one of the men, smacking him in the head. Even that didn't wake him up immediately. *Interesting, very interesting. A 'pressure point' which can knock people out so easily. I would assume it is in a hard to reach spot so it isn't all that useful in battle, but outside of battle? For assassination and other shadowy sort of missions, it would be very useful.*

Valentina was still thinking about that as the bandits started to move and groan about four minutes later. "What the hells happened?" asked one of them loud enough for his voice to carry to Valentina where she was hiding.

"I'll tell you what happened," groaned a second one. "We got our asses kicked, that's what!"

"What the hell are we tied with, fishing line?" mumbled a third. "And why do I feel like someone smacked me in the face with a stick?"

The fourth didn't bother speaking at first. Instead he simply stood up and tried to break the thin rope holding them. It didn't work. Scowling, he tried again. "Hey, whatever this is, it's stronger than it should be."

"You must be barkin', mate. Let me try." This man was able to stretch out his arms ever so slightly, but even so the thin rope didn't give way. Eventually they were able to find a knife, though, and free one another. Still muttering they moved back through the copse of trees to find their companions and looted their bodies.

It was while watching this and idly wondering if she had learned all there was to learn when Valentina noticed something. *Hmm, either these men are the runts of the crew, or...*

The men too slowly started to realize something was wrong. "Um, is anyone else noticing that rolling these bodies around is a lot harder than it should be?" asked one of the bandits worriedly.

"Come off it, our arms are just asleep is all. Now, come on, let's get out of here." Making no attempt to bury their fallen comrades, the four survivors moved off to their horses, all ill-cared for beasts but still fitter than their previous owners, it seemed, as, one after another, the men failed to be able to pull themselves up into the saddle.

At that Valentina's eyes widened, and her breath hissed out in a loud gasp of shock. The men heard it and turned, and she lashed out with *Ezendeis* almost absentmindedly, sending a slice of dark energy out which covered the distance between her and the men swiftly before cutting all of them in twain. Another wave and a series of small rifts opened up under them, dumping them over their former fellows, deeper into the forest.

Even though the second spell took a bit of effort, Valentina's mind was elsewhere. *I am so glad that I sent the pike company. I might wish to reinforce them further in order to get on Elen's good side more. Not for her, of course, but to get me an introduction to Ranma. His abilities are too numerous and too game-changing to not try to bring to my side or, at worst, remove.*

Moving away, she frowned, staring towards the road the two travelers had taken, now speaking aloud to herself once more. "Ah, but they are going to Legnica. I will signal spies there to be on the lookout, though I wonder why they are heading there?"

Valentina's agents in Leitmeritz had only heard that they were, and, having been in the area, dealing with one of the local counts who the king had started to push away from the court, Valentina had decided to set up this little test. But she had other spies in Legnica. While she respected Sasha a great deal, she was too dangerous not to watch very closely. *It is a pity she is so ill, she would make a magnificent addition to my contacts, even if she is rather suspicious of me in turn. But there is nothing I can do about that, alas.*

Stepping through the woods, she paused, having put her foot in a small puddle. Looking down, she realized she was standing where Ranma had been when he had knocked out the last bandit, and a blush began to suffuse her features. For all that she had long become a master of manipulation of all sorts, used to moving in the shadows, even using her body to a certain extent to control and influence people, she was still a young woman, and she had never before tonight seen a fully naked man before, though she hadn't had as good a view as Lim.

And what a specimen he was, too, the black-haired woman mused, licking her lips lightly as she stared at nothing. And he liked my perfume too. That was the first time a man has said something about me without looking to flatter me. Hmm... Perhaps when I can somehow introduce myself to him I can come up with a much more pleasant way to bring him to my side rather than simple coercion...

OOOOOOO

Entering Alexandra's territory about mid-morning the next day, the two travelers ran into a band of patrolmen. Lim was immediately recognized and welcomed immediately, and they were given some bread and water along with their travel permits before being let on their way.

About two days after that, Ranma paused as they crested a hill to stare ahead of him at Legnica itself. “Wow,” he breathed.

Legnica was walled like Leitmeritz, with a castle visible in the center, rising up out of the rest of the town on a small man-made mound. But there the resemblance ended. Leitmeritz was a largish town with a lot of room to grow, even inside its outer walls. Legnica was a city, a massive trade center, easily the largest place Ranma had seen in this world. There were lots of docks, and ships moving on the ocean in the distance beyond the city, and Ranma could see a large caravan leaving the city even now to head inland. The outer wall was fully built, and Ranma could see large towers, almost like small castles, rising here and there along its length, most of them concentrated near the distant ocean where the walls spread like wings to encompass the port.

When they entered the city, Ranma found that it had wide, very well organized cobbled streets. Lim said that this was to allow the movement of troops easily, but the original reason didn’t matter. Because they allowed for a lot of movement from the thousands of people crowding the streets, walking, marching, shouting out their wares, and everything in between. Sailors, soldiers, citizens, merchants, artisans, you name it, Legnica had them all.

Ranma also noticed when they entered that, despite how bustling and full the city was, areas around the walls on the inside were maintained as clear ground save for smaller warehouses. “Huh, it looks like this city’s had to defend itself.”

“It has in the past,” Lim replied, pointing out to sea. “Pirates and Asvarri raiders often have attacked this city since it is one of the richest prizes on this side of the continent, and the port is easily the best, hence why Legnica is here rather than at the mouth of the Valta River.” She smiled thinly. “Of course, Sasha-sama shows such no mercy.”

“Yeah, the river. Ya mentioned it had, like, nasty currents and shoals around its entrance, right? And then after that was controlled by another Vanadis, Elizabeth something,” Ranma said as they moved through the city, with Lim leading her string of horses. The number of horse she was leading was causing some attention, but a lot of people seemed to recognize Lim. A few guards nodded at her before looking at Ranma quizzically, obviously wondering what Limalisha was doing here with a black-haired young man rather than the Lady Elen. “But tell me more about these pirates.”

Lim did so, though she didn’t have much current knowledge. The pirates came from several large archipelagos out to the north and west of the main continent as well as from one huge island—Ranma thought of something the size of Australia—which was ruled by Asvarre, a country on the continent to the west of Brune like Sachstein, but which only had a small strip of land in relation to Brune’s borders. She was more clear on when they had attacked in the past

and what had happened when they did: rapine, reaving, and slave-taking. "Selling slaves to Mouzinel is actually probably their most lucrative act," she finished.

"Slaves, right..." Ranma growled, cracking his knuckles, a sound that made Lim think of the sound of stones slamming into castle walls for some reason. "I keep being reminded that slaves are a thing. Makes me want to go on a walk, a very brisk walk."

"Is that another phrase from your land? Because, if so, I don't get the meaning," Lim asked curiously.

"Oh, sorry," Ranma replied, his angry look fading into a sheepish one. "Erm, it means going out, looking for trouble, and maybe causing a lot of it. Enough, in this case, to maybe overthrow the slave system somehow."

"How?" Lim asked skeptically.

"Kill the King of Mouzinel then as many of his ministers and nobles as possible. I might not like killing, and I couldn't likely massacre every slave owner, but starting from the top and also wiping out an army here or there would hopefully get my message across," Ranma replied grimly.

When Lim looked at him, she saw Ranma was dead serious. She thought about asking about what he meant when he said wiping out an army in so blasé a manner, but decided against it, and the two kept walking in comfortable silence. Besides, she knew there was no way for one man to overthrow the slave system in Mouzinel. It was the bedrock of their economy and society.

Soon enough they were at the entrance to the castle, where Lim's presence got them an immediate entrance. After seeing to their, or, rather, Lim's, horses, they were shown into the castle to a small waiting room while a maid went to see if Alexandra Alshavin would see them.

As they waited, Lim shook her head. "I still can't believe you kept up with my pace all the way here."

"Heh, wasn't it the other way around? Don't ever doubt my endurance, Lim. That, I think, is the one area I win against Elen hands down, my ability to keep going and my ability to take punishment, of course."

Lim nodded, trying to keep the image of Ranma from that night in the woods out of her mind as she wondered what else his endurance might be good for. Thankfully, or perhaps not so thankfully, her attempts were aided by a new voice coming from the door leading into

Alexandra's rooms. "Ara, what is this, Limalisha? I come here expecting to see you with some random guard officer, and I find you talking to this young man like old friends?"

Ranma and Lim turned, and Ranma blinked at the sight of Alexandra. She was a woman who came up to his nose in height, making her rather short, with short black hair that fell to just the start of her neck, a thin, slightly pointed face, and dark blue eyes much like Ranma's own. But she was also way younger than Ranma had thought, being somewhere in her early to mid-twenties at best rather than middle-aged.

Sasha wore a dark black bra-blouse thing which covered her bust but left her stomach and most of her waist bare at the front but, presumably, not at the sides or the back, with leather straps on her arm and thighs. With that Sasha paired a very short skirt on which she had two scabbards.

In those scabbards were two daggers, or perhaps short swords. Their blades were thick and lightly curved, colored red and gold with tiny guards for her uppermost finger. Set into the hilts where they met the blades were gold and ruby-colored gems.

Taking in her appearance, he muttered, "So not what I expected." *Although that little smirk she's wearing matches the Nabiki-mode for sure.*

"So, is this young man your 'that?'" Sasha asked as she held up two entwined fingers and winked at them.

"Guh, Sasha-sama, it's not like that! You know I've dedicated myself to Eleonora-sama's service!" Lim protested, blushing hotly as her mind once more replayed that image of Ranma's body to her.

"How is that a universal gesture but none of my sayings are?" Ranma asked, then groaned as he became aware of a new background noise that had begun as soon as Sasha had seen him. "Oh my God, are all the magic weapons of this world going to start off cackling like madmen when their owners meet me?"

Sasha blinked, stopping her good-natured teasing of the younger, if taller, Lim, to look to her side. "Wait, you can hear them?" She had been aware of her weapons guffawing, but they often 'talked' to one another when they were bored, so she had thought nothing of it until they started to be so loud. "Could you two quiet down, please?" she asked aloud, resting a hand on each dagger.

They immediately did so, and she looked up at Ranma expecting an answer to her question from a moment ago.

Grumbling, Ranma nodded while Lim handed over the letter of introduction. "Yeah, I was able to. Just don't expect me to talk to 'em or anything. All I ever hear from any of them is their laughing at me. First Arifar, then that frigid...staff...and now your weapons too!"

"And what did they sound like?" Sasha asked dubiously, taking a seat by the fire in her small room with some relief on her face. She had never wanted a huge room, just a small, homely place, which had scandalized a lot of the castle's staff when she took the Vanadis position. Although thanks to her illness, these days this room was becoming more and more like a prison. Still, she couldn't hide from the fact that even that little bit of movement she'd just done had been somewhat exhausting.

"Like two little kids. Can't tell their gender, though I'd guess boys; not certain I could explain why," Ranma said with a shrug.

"Hmm, so you really can hear them," Sasha said with a smile, pulling out her Viralt and placing them on her lap, caressing them lightly before opening the letter from Elen as she asked, "But why exactly are they laughing at you? Even now they are sniggering at the back of my mind like bad little boys who have overheard a dirty joke."

"I think it would be far easier to just show you, Sasha-sama," Lim said, and then, as Ranma sighed but nodded agreement, she moved over to a nearby table and picked up a pitcher of cold water, dumping it over Ranma's head.

As the change occurred, Sasha's partners began to laugh loudly again, but she paid them no mind, staring at the suddenly female person in front of her, the letter in her hands forgotten. "What, what just happened?"

Sighing Ranma pushed her wet hair out of her face, and introduced herself before explaining her curse, going into her now well-rehearsed spiel about what it was, the changes, and the fact that, no, her mind didn't change. "And whenever I freaking change in front of Arifar it keeps laughing at me." Then she sighed. "Still, given what I'm here for, I suppose that my being in this form is fine."

Thankfully for her sanity, Sasha's Bargren had fallen back into sniggering rather than outright guffawing. So she was able to quickly read the letter of introduction before turning her attention back to Ranma. "This letter says you're a healer Ranma, yet I have had numerous healers on staff, and none of them were able to find a way to cure me. It's a familial disease, you see. I'm sorry, but you've wasted a trip."

"As a Vanadis, you know about life energy, right?" Ranma asked.

“Of course. It is how we Vanadis bond to our Viralts, and, in so doing, our life energy is immensely enhanced,” Sasha said with a slow nod, wondering where this was going.

“Ya see, I use my own life energy to enhance your body’s healing ability, to find the problem and target it. I’ve used it to mend bones, cuts, even torn internal organs, poison, and a lot of other things. Even if I can’t help your disease I can guarantee you’ll be leaving my care a lot healthier than you were entering it.”

“...From what I know of life energy I won’t doubt that last statement, although I’ve never heard of someone being able to control their life energy to that extent,” Sasha mused, a feeling of hope suffusing her for the first time in a long while, although she did doubt the use of a foreign word in there that she had never heard before. She looked at Ranma speculatively, wondering about him, or, rather, her, at the moment. *But if Elen trusted Ranma enough to tell her (or him) about my sickness, that speaks volumes on how trustworthy she, he... My, that is irritating.*

“Very well, I will agree to see if you can help me, Ranma. And you can return to your male body if you are more comfortable that way. I’m not so shy that I care about the gender of the doctors looking after me. And if you do cure me, well...it would probably be best you already be in male form.”

The two maids who were among her most trusted servants giggled, all too easily remembering what Sasha was talking about. She winked at them but turned her attention back to Lim when Ranma nodded and walked out the door. “So, Lim, tell me where this Ranma...fellow? We’ll go with fellow, I suppose. Where did he come from?”

“That is quite a tale, but for myself and Elen-sama it starts after the battle of the Dinant Plains when we were surveying the battlefield afterward. We were searching for any group or noble we could capture and, further, wanted to make certain that no one tried to reform the army. We spotted a few men moving as a unit a ways to the side of the main camp, making back towards the forest on Brune’s side of the plains. We had nearly reached them when we found ourselves set upon...”

Lim hadn’t finished the tale by the time a now male and somewhat dry Ranma returned. “Right, let’s do this! First, I think ya need to get comfortable, so either there or in bed, which ever. And tell me your symptoms.”

“Immense tiredness, lack of energy, I sometimes cough up blood which is routinely black. My bones ache, and, if I attempt to exert myself, my heart feels as if it will burst. My body is simply shutting down,” Sasha listed off while standing up and moving to lay down on

her nearby bed. "I haven't been able to perform my duties as Vanadis for over two years now, and I rarely can get more than three hours of work done a day in total, never mind all at once."

"Okay, that's bad," Ranma said with a nod, sitting next to the bed in a chair. "But hey, it's nothing like getting stabbed in the lung and being ordered to heal yourself, right?"

"What!?" Sasha asked, startled, while Lim blinked and the maids gasped.

"The old bastard who taught me most of my medical knowledge was a sadist at times. Still, can't deny that healing myself helped a lot when I started to heal other people."

He looked Sasha over from head to toe for a moment then, laid a hand on her shoulder. "Now, first what I'm going to do is use my ki to sort of feel out your body. Since you have some knowledge of ki, er, that is, life energy, you might feel it, but I don't know what it will feel like to you since I've never used this skill on someone who knows about life energy before. The procedure itself, however, is something I've done more than a thousand times by this point, although most of the time it's quick scans, since the problems are so obvious. This one might go on for a while and be a lot deeper than any of the others I've ever tried to do."

Sasha nodded and closed her eyes, actually wanting to see if she could feel something from whatever it was Ranma was about to do. She also wanted to make certain her Viralt didn't go crazy at a man touching her, as they had a few times in the past.

Breathing in then out, Ranma started to concentrate on his own ki, then slowly started to infuse it into Sasha, his eyes closed as he concentrated on what his ki was telling him. And what that was was almost immediately very odd to Ranma's mind, because Sasha had ki, a LOT of it. More than Ranma knew himself to have, and it was controlled even more tightly than his too. *That's both incredible and fucking scary at the same time. To think someone her age could be so strong! I might have just met the one woman even Happy wouldn't have wanted to screw with.*

If push came to shove and, heaven forbid, he and Elen ever had to fight to the death, Ranma knew he could beat Elen so long as he could dodge Arifar's magical attacks. He had only been mildly impressed with Elen's pure physical abilities. But now, meeting Sasha, he knew that that was because Elen was a relatively new Vanadis, and that they could be a heck of a lot stronger than he had expected.

Yet even after only a few seconds, Ranma could tell more than Sasha's inner strength: he could feel the sickness within too. *Her blood really is weak... But, but there is something wrong here...*

For her part, however, Sasha too was surprised by what was happening. It was like a warmth moving through her from Ranma's touch, giving her an almost fizzy feeling at first. Then it started to make her feel very, **very** good. It was like someone was giving her a massage everywhere all at once, inside and out. *Oh my word, what the heck!?* Sasha couldn't help it, she started to blush, then let loose a little whimper, biting her lip to keep from moaning, her body reacting.

"L, lady Sasha?" Lim asked, blinking as Sasha stated to writhe on the bed, her legs rubbing together.

"N, nothiNG!!" Sasha replied in a squeak before shaking her head. "Um, nothing. Don't, don't worry about iTTT, it just, it doesn't feel bad. It feels really, um..." She broke off, biting her lip again as a moan attempted to escape before she could stop it. She shuddered a bit, then whispered, "Oh my yes, definitely going to go through that vow I made a year ago..."

Staring at their mistress, the two maids, who were both slightly older women, began to blush. Their blushes were joined by Lim as Sasha let out a loud moan and her hips came off the bed for a second before settling down.

The voices and the feeling of Sasha moving on the bed would normally have bothered Ranma enough to break his concentration, but he was too busy coming to grips with the mystery he had found within Sasha's body. *Okay, so this blood disease is something like a case of lymphoma, except it affects her marrow first. Hmm... Tofu might have taught me some of the more scientific names for diseases, but nowhere near all of them. This one is variety I haven't seen before.*

But that isn't all. With her ki, that wouldn't be enough to cause all her symptoms, and it certainly shouldn't have gotten to this point even if she can't consciously direct her ki to aid her. No, this is something else on top of that, helping it along. Then he found it, a foreign element in her blood stream that shouldn't be there. *Fuck, that is a slow acting poison! Why can't it ever be simple?*

Coming out of his trance, Ranma slowly ended his ki probe and looked up at Sasha. "All right, I got good news and...oh, shoot, I'm sorry. Was it that painful?" he asked, breaking off what he was going to say as he saw Sasha's sweaty, heavily flushed face and half-lidded eyes.

"N, no. It, it wasn't unpleasant, at all, just, um, have you... You have never done that deep a scan before, correct?" Sasha asked, trying to get her beating heart under control along with her breathing, which was not at all fun, though even that brief touch had helped her, and she felt a little better than she had been for a long time.

“No, like I said, I’ve only ever needed to surface scan other people. The difference is like um, umm...” Ranma searched for a description that would make sense and finally snapped his fingers. “Lim and I saw this jeweler in the city examining a gem with a magnifying glass to check for impurities or whatever in the city. Holding it up to the light would be what I normally do, examining it closely under the light of the magnifier would be what I’m doing to you.”

“Hmm, so you’re comparing me to a jewel now?” Sasha said with a laugh, which increased to a laugh as Ranma blushed and waved his free hand trying to imply many things all at once and failing. “Well, that’s nice. But I think you should be very careful on who you use this technique on.”

Cocking his head, Ranma was about to ask what that meant, but Sasha quickly changed the subject, asking him what he’d found. Ranma winced. “Okay, good news first, I can heal you. It will take a while, and it won’t be pleasant. Essentially what I’ll be doing is healing first the cause, then all the parts that have been damaged. And you were wrong: the sickness isn’t just in your blood it is in your marrow too and will have to be cleaned there. I will clean it from the blood all at once, which will be extremely tiring for both of us, and you’ll need to take in a lot of fluids afterward. Repairing the rest of the damages will be tough, but won’t be as debilitating.”

“All right, then what’s the bad news?”

Ranma slowly shook his head. “Your disease is most like something called lymphoma where I come from. Without my special techniques it would be fatal in the long term. But your ki **should** have slowed the disease down. You might not believe me our disease is being helped along by a poison someone has fed you over time that further diluted your blood and thus your body’s ability to combat both the original disease and any flu or other simple diseases that came around.”

Hearing that Sasha’s post-orgasmic good feeling disappeared instantly and she bolted upright, shock and horror overcoming the past few moments of bliss. “What, who!?”

“I’ve got no idea. Although if I heal you and it gets out, well, then whoever has been doing it might act. Beyond that, it’s someone else’s problem. Healing you is mine,” Ranma said.

Frowning, Sasha nodded, struggling with the idea of someone in her employ—it had to be someone here in the castle: she had never lived long enough anywhere else—would have done this to her. She looked at the maids, who also looked horrified, and then to Lim. “Lim, go to my captain of the watch. Tell him to lock the castle down. No one gets in and no one gets out.”

Lim raced off at those words, and then Sasha turned to her two maids. "Natasha, go down to the kitchen and prepare a light meal. As you are doing so, talk about this young man and how he has told me he can heal me. Look at everyone's expression as you do and see if you can spot anyone acting worried or out of the ordinary. Let's see if we can startle the person who had betrayed me into doing something foolish."

The maid called Natasha was the older of the two maids, a matronly woman with a dumpy sort of body but the eyes of a schemer behind a pair of small glasses. "Of course, milady. Any requests for the meal?"

Looking over at Ranma, she asked, "Do you need anything for this?"

Ranma nodded, standing up himself. "We'll need water, several pitchers of it, but I'll get those myself. Some oranges and a meal with garlic in it would be good, a light one for now, then a heavy steak or something after we're done." He snapped his fingers. "Oh, and a change of bedding will be needed at that point too, but first towels, a lot of them, and maybe a bucket or something. You'll be sweating to get rid of the bad muck I can't cleanse that way."

Honestly, Ranma was just guessing as to what would happen on Sasha's end here, never having healed someone of something so major before which affected the entire body. But he felt it was a good guess.

Sasha nodded at the second maid to show Ranma where the water was and to send someone with some towels. By the time Ranma was back with two large barrels of water, Sasha had changed and was now lying naked on her bed covered by several towels. At the sight of that Ranma blushed and looked away. "Um, are you sure you're all right with that?"

"Certainly. I don't want to ruin my Vanadis uniform, after all," Sasha said with a smile, pleased with Ranma's reaction. She wasn't interested in Ranma, not as something permanent anyway, he was far too childish seeming. But if his healing her affected her body the same way his 'scan' did, then she was going to go through with her vow of sleeping with the doctor who healed her she'd made a year ago, come what may.

"Wait, that thing was a uniform? You know what, never mind," Ranma said, shaking his head and setting the barrels of water down against the far wall between the small bed table and the row of bookcases. "Let's do this."

Sasha wordlessly nodded, and Ranma sat on the bed next to her, noticing that her Viralt had been moved to lay on the bed next to her head, their blades crossed. They gleamed with some kind of light as Ranma glanced at them, but stilled as he turned his attention to Sasha. "All right. I'm going to start now, okay?"

Flushing, Sasha found her body tightening up in anticipation, and she nodded. "Do it."

An instant later Ranma's ki was flowing into Sasha, the warmth it brought rising within her, sending tingles throughout her body from his hand. *Oh my word, yes...* She bit back a moan, her head lolling back as she felt her body beginning to heat up.

While Ranma's ki did have the effect Sasha had felt the first time, that was not all. Her body temperature rose dramatically as if she was having a full body fever, and she began to sweat madly, like someone had tossed her into the world's hottest smithy. Yet, as the heat rose, so too did the feeling of Ranma's ki, and she began to moan, her body twisting this way and that, the feeling she was getting now well beyond what she had felt the first time.

For his part, Ranma was again blind to this. His eyes were closed and he was concentrating on directing his ki into her body. First he sent a pulse towards her heart, cleaning it of any taint and reinforcing its strength for the duration of the operation. Then he moved to her lungs, doing the same there, then her intestines, and finally he began to slowly clear out the poison and the bad shit in her blood.

At that point Sasha had already reached completion twice, but the feeling of her blood being cleaned like that was not nearly as pleasant, and she groaned as she turned to the side, regurgitating a very nasty looking kind of black and red paste from her mouth into the bowl that her maid had brought.

Immediately her second maid, Jayne, rushed forward and held the bowl for her until Sasha stopped, then moved it away and helped her drink some water from a glass. Then fifteen more glasses, then even more as the feeling of Ranma's ki running rampant through her body once more began to make Sasha whimper in pleasure. Jayne quickly changed out the now drenched towels with fresh ones and began to bathe Sasha's forehead with another, blushing all the while at the sounds her mistress was making. *My word, maybe I should feign some kind of illness to get Sir Ranma to use the same technique on me.*

This process was not simple, and it was not quick. Ranma and Lim had arrived at around noon. By the time Ranma was done, it was deep night out, and Sasha had basically gone through every towel in the castle as well as both barrels of water. She had even eaten, somehow, mainly thanks to Jayne. But, despite that, her body was now feeling better, almost keyed up to a degree. *Oh my word, my body feels more energetic and fitter I than I've felt in three years! And I know just what I'm going to do to with my newfound energy too...*

Ranma finished cleaning out the marrow throughout Sasha's body of the illness and the poison before doing a final check from head to toe, making certain he hadn't missed anything,

ignoring once more Sasha's shaking under her grip. *Only a little more, Sasha. I'm sorry it's been painful, but we're almost done.*

At the same time this had all been going on, two people had been caught trying to leave the palace. One of them was caught, while the second got away escaping over the side of the wall somehow. Under Lim's harsh questioning, the man, who was a worker in the kitchen, admitted to being in the employ of the man who had gotten away, a young scribe. He had been ordered to add the poison in very clear, explicitly delineated amounts over the past few years. At first he hadn't known it was poison, but he had figured it out of late, and the only thing that had changed was that he had demanded more money. The man would be executed for treason once Sasha was up and about enough to look into this event further.

That night, however, such things were as far as they could possibly be from Sasha's mind. She looked at Ranma with half-lidded eyes as he smiled and opened his eyes.

"Well, I think we're in the clear, though I'd like toooo...." Ranma trailed off as he stared at her, a blush rising to his cheeks as he finally realized that those noises he had heard hadn't been caused by pain as he had thought.

Sasha lay there, her hair in disarray, sweat matting it to her forehead and the pillow. Her face was flushed, her eyes half closed, and at some point the towels covering her had slid off, exposing her body, which glistened with sweat in the light of the nearby lamp. Her breasts, smaller than Ranma's female form, were high and firm on her chest, capped by light pink nipples which were hard and distended. Her waist was thin and toned, and below that a tuft of dark blue hair winked at Ranma before he tore his eyes back up to her face.

"Mmmhmm, I can tell, Ranma. My body feels amazing~~." So saying, Sasha reached up both hands to Bargren, which blazed with fiery light for a moment as if shouting their joy at her recovery before she set them down on the bedside table with a languid hand. Then, fast as lighting she reached up and pulled Ranma's face down toward her own, kissing him hard.

Ranma flailed for a moment, gasping, but this only allowed Sasha's tongue access to her mouth. His arms windmilled for balance but Sasha just pulled him down easily to land on top of her, not releasing her grip on the sides of his face. Eventually Ranma's flailing ended, and he started to kiss back.

One part of him was kind of startled by this, but the rest of him was going, *She's hot, willing, and you don't have any obligations to anyone, Ranma. Go for it, man!* An image of Lim flashed across his mind for a moment, but, even there, they hadn't gotten beyond the getting to know you stage, so, whatever this was, it shouldn't get in the way of something happening there in the future. *And besides, given the fact I might've been helping her reach the clouds and*

rains several times over the past few hours, I really don't have a leg to stand on when it comes to refusing to do it the old fashioned way.

But there was one thing Ranma had to know. Putting his hand down to either side of Sasha's head, Ranma pushed off the pillow and pulled away from her needy, questing mouth just long enough to ask, "This, where do you want this to go?" kissing Sasha between each word.

Sasha replied in the same fashion, kissing and licking at Rama's lips and neck. "I promised myself years ago that I would sleep with the doctor who healed me, Ranma. Then you came along with that darned ki technique of yours! I need this! My body is still feeling like it's on fire and I **need** you right now!!

"As for after," Sasha pulled back a little, breathing heavily. "I'm not interested in a long term thing, Ranma. I've got too many duties, too many demands on my time. *One of which will be to find who had a hand in poisoning me!* "And you have your friendships with Elen and this Vorn fellow pulling you back to Brune. So I have no designs on you beyond this night."

So saying, Sasha's hands moved from Ranma's face to his shoulders and twisted so that Ranma was now under her rather than vice versa. The sight of her breasts, swaying above him just stopped all his higher brain functions, allowing Sasha to continue speaking without interruption. "But that is for later. For tonight, I want you, and," she smirked, grinding her hips against Ranma's lower half. "Mmm... I think you want me. Isn't that enough?"

"Ghhmmm, I guess if you put it that way, yeah, it's enough." Ranma said, grunting a little at the sensations Sasha was pulling from him. "But, um, this, this is my first time..." he admitted, looking away rather shamefaced at that admission.

Sasha's face softened noticeably at that and she reached down with a smile that mixed tenderness with pure lustful wickedness in a way that Ranma would never have thought possible. "In that case, Ranma, look on this as a learning experience on many levels. After all, you've already learned your ki scan can have some interesting effects. Let's see what we can learn together, all right?"

Leaning down, Sasha licked and nibbled at Ranma's neck and ear. "Don't worry, Ranma. I'll be gentle," she breathed out onto his ear.

For a moment, Ranma blinked. "Um isn't that supposed to be the guy's line in moments like this?" Then Sasha kissed him, and Ranma decided he was done thinking for the night.

End Chapter

Chapter 4: Tactics, Politics and Wood Whacking

When Lim and Ranma had left to head to Legnica, Elen had been determined to use the rest of the campaign season as best she could. Tigre too, although reluctant, had been convinced of the need for more warfare against Thenardier as well as Ganelon. He had been convinced that regardless of the fact, Thenardier attacked him first, and he had no territorial ambitions.

Both lords would see his rising strength, his alliance with Elen, (Elen called it a relationship,) and the number of minor lords and merchants who had flocked to his banner around the Dinant Plains and Alsace, as a threat despite the fact he could raise barely four thousand men all told. In comparison, Thenardier alone could raise forty thousand. Ganelon could field an even larger army, but his army was slower, less well trained and equipped.

But Tigre also knew that any real campaign against either Duke was going to be long and bloody, and they had barely two months more before the rain and mud started to turn to snow and ice. So even though Elen wanted to push for them to take on Ganelon right now across the Resia in the west, Tigre insisted it wasn't possible, especially with there being no bridge to cross the river in question. No, what Tigre wanted to do was continue his campaign to claim that river as a natural border between his and his allies' territory and the battles certain to restart between Ganelon and Thenardier soon.

The Resia was a deep gully for much of its length from the center of Brune up from the south on a slightly western heading straight across that segment of Brune to the ocean. Barely a few weeks back, Ranma had destroyed the main bridge connecting the two sides of the Resia. Without that bridge, there was no way for any large body, or even a small number of troops, to cross without extreme difficulty to the north and west of the central lowlands of Brune. A thousand scattered peasant archers could secure the river, using it as a natural border for the counts, earls, and margraves who wished to remain neutral in the war between the two Dukes.

Into the center of Brune, however, there was no such geographic defense. There the Resia broke up into many smaller rivers, many of them wide and deep, but without the vast canyon to make crossing utterly impossible.

Worse, Thenardier's base, the city of Nemetacum, was in the distant south of Brune, east of Nice. Thenardier couldn't move hastily though, since between his forces and Ganelon's there also wasn't any natural defense either. And he had to consider the borders of Sachstein, which his territory abutted to the west, and Muozinel to the southeast, although the shared border there was small and through hazardous, extremely rocky, mountainous terrain. Still, there was also the ocean to consider there. But if he did eventually move, Tigre would find himself facing the might of the greatest military force in Brune with little in the way of natural defenses.

But Tigre had been making diplomatic inroads with a few margraves, earls and viscounts east of Alsace, the most important of which was the Viscount of Augre whose family controlled the town of Territoire. That town gave them a great logistical base and could be, as Elen put it, "The lynchpin of our moves into central Brune." And from that family and the maps Ranma had supplied them, Elen and Tigre, had learned they could make use of the river Resia and the smaller streams that merged into it to once more create a defensive position straight west of Territoire towards Nice.

To do so, they wanted to grab a specific castle, although calling it the castle was a bit of a misnomer. It was called Eagle's Tower, and that was all it was really: a simple Motte and Bailey tower. But it was situated in an extremely strategic place. The tower was at the point of a small peninsula of land between rivers five of the smaller rivers that made the center and northwest of Brune so fertile, two of whom were so deep and wide you needed to cross them at fords or bridges. The 'castle' commanded that peninsula, and wide areas on either side of the rivers.

If they could take it, they would be able to have a good defense against the dukes, both of whom held lands on the other side of Nice, towards the west of central Brune. Simply destroying the bridges could hold off enemy armies for much of the year. That was an idea that they would leave in reserve though since it would also ruin the land for farming.

The united Silver Meteor Army moved on foot, something Elen was currently regretting as she heaved herself forward, grumbling irritably as she looked down at her legs. "You know, this moving on foot thing isn't what I signed up for when I became a Vanadis."

"Did they actually tell you what you were signing up for?" Tigre asked interestedly.

Elen laughed, shaking her head. "Not really. It was more of a spur of the moment, out of control sort of thing. When a Vanadis dies and the Viralt finds its next wearer, it usually comes as a shock. Heck, I wasn't even a Zhcted citizen, not really, just the leader of a mercenary band allied with them against a Mouzinel army on their borders."

Reminded of those memories, she looked around them and through the woods as men and several donkeys moved with difficulty through the woodland and scrub around them. The difficulty did not come from the density of the forest in this area, it was quite light actually. No, this area was mostly farmland, but the road was not paved and had become so muddy it was almost unusable. Thankfully there was no snow on the ground, it wasn't nearly cold enough on this side of the mountains just yet for that, unlike in west of Zhcted. So despite the mud, they were still making a lot more progress than she had thought infantry forces could.

And that, she realized, was down to the training that the Alsatian boys had been put through. All of them were able to keep going, pushing forward through all kinds of terrain that would have made a man on a horse quail. *Their scouts are good too, very good.* So good she was thinking about copying their training for her own troops in the near future. Having troops

that could move that fast over uneven terrain and who were that good at hiding themselves could be an extremely good idea in the future. *Although it is annoying how long it would take to train them to that extent.*

Nearby, one of those selfsame scouts whistled, two long hoots that sounded like an owl, followed by a chattering noise like a squirrel. Elen and Tigre moved in that direction, quickly coming on the man who had climbed a tree. He was Gaston, and Tigre exchanged a smile with his fellow hunter as he climbed up to join him, with Elen a step behind him. Gaston gestured out through the brush of the small copse of trees they were in. "We're going to break back out into open territory lords," he said, flipping himself down further. "But I don't see any patrols out there just yet."

Elen and Tigre looked out, not breaking through the foliage, that would have given their positions away, but hiding in amongst the leaves and trees to stare across the open farmland towards the distant tower. Or what should have been farmland, ripe with the last wheat or corn to be taken in with dozens of peasants out in the field.

Instead, the terrain in front of them was ruined. The fields had been either burned or trampled under, large segments of it churned into mud. Several farmhouses had been burned, although thanks to the rain that had marked out the past week occasionally had made sure it hadn't spread. Here and there in the fields were spears, on which heads were stuck.

Elen had better eyesight than most, but Tigre's put hers to shame. He was not studying the ground, the scout had said it was empty of scout patrols, so Tigre would believe him. No, he was concentrating on the top of the tower about half a league distant. The top of the outer wall would be just about at Tigre's bow range from here. There the reason for this change was simple to see. The banner of Duke Thenardier flew from the corners of the square-sided, short, outer wall and from the center of the larger, four-story tall square tower.

"I see..." he paused counting them off, "fourteen men under Duke Thenardier's armor there. On a tower of that size, that's not many is it?" he asked, looking over at Elen. "And they're walking around too, rather than staying still on guard."

Elen frowned thinking before replying, "We might have actually caught them by surprise then." She looked up at sky, nodding decisively. "We'll attack tonight."

That night, Elen with her hair under a cap, so as to not stand out, followed Tigre as he led the way, out of the woods and into the ruined farmland. He moved so silently and swiftly over the ground that even Elen was surprised. His scouts were almost as good, and what should have been impossible, crossing muddy, burnt and ruined farmland without being spotted even at night, was actually accomplished far better than she had ever anticipated.

Then they were at the door to the tower, a small outer wall, scaling up it quickly with ropes which had grapnels on the end.

The clinking noises they made when they hit the stone above them made Elen twitch, but she went up the rope like a spider monkey and was on the parapet before anyone within could sound an alarm. There were men down in the tiny courtyard around the tower, four men with horses, and eighteen infantrymen armed with swords, and at least three of them were awake. All three turned towards her, but she leaped down towards them even as they shouted, "Gah, they're here, the traitors!"

She cut down one and then the other two were taken down from above. Tigre then turned his attention to the top of the tower, loosing arrow after arrow, to the sound of screams above even as the men there tried to turn their own bows toward him. Yet Tigre was so much faster, the instant they tried to stick their heads and arms over the tower's parapet, that man would die. Four men died within a few seconds and the others stopped trying to use aimed fire, and instead just shot in an arc over the edge of the tower. Tigre then jumped back over the wall hiding in its lee.

Grinning at seeing his skill, Elen raced the tiny distance between the outer wall and the inner heavily reinforced door and portcullis, shouting out the attack. "Ley Adimos!"

She didn't use a full-powered attack of course. She didn't want to wreck the tower after all. But the attack smashed into the door and the portcullis, shredding the door, metal bars and everything else. Then she was in, as others opened the door of the outer bailey, letting in the infantry as they moved forward as fast as they could, racing after her and up onto the outer wall to take the men there. Some had to raise shields against the sporadic fire from above, but really, the defenders had been caught so much by surprise, it was a foregone conclusion.

An hour later, the tower was theirs. The interior of the tower was sparse, but clean and well-organized. "It would make for an excellent forward command post," Elen mused to herself as she watched a few of her men removing the bodies of their tower's former occupants. "How did Thenardier's forces get this far northwest from his own lands?"

"I suppose that Duke Thenardier also recognized the strategic position of this castle," Tigre sighed. "That's not good."

"You know what that means don't you," Elen asked hesitantly, reaching out and squeezing his forearm upper arm.

"This tower is only important in a strategic sense because it can defend from this point any enemy trying to come up from the south or around the Resia to our west and northwest." Tigre shook his head slowly. "And I am not so foolish as to think that Duke Thenardier took it in order to simply keep Duke Ganelon from taking it. No, he took this tower as the first ploy of taking the fight to me and mine again. His son's death certainly assured we would eventually go to war, his taking this means he was much closer to acting on that than I feared."

With that in mind, Tigre and Elen headed up to the top of the tower, where Elen pulled out a valuable spyglass, she had been given as a birthday present by Sofy, staring out around them. There was a lot of good farmland to the west of the tower, and that area hadn't been despoiled as the area they'd traveled through during the attack. The roads though were just as muddy and nasty out there as it was to the north and east.

She could also see the reason why this tower, despite its less than impressive defenses, was such a good position. About forty yards away from the outermost wall to the west where the rivers began, coming up from the southwest. There it shallowed out into a ford. There was a bridge to the east and another to the west. The tower's placement allowed it to dominate all three of the crosses and beyond to other, smaller rivers. And in this season, the rivers were heavy with rain, deep and flowing fast, which meant horses would have major issues crossing the first two anywhere but the fords, and men could be swept away. "Do you know what lord built this tower?" she asked idly, looking at a few peasants who had noticed the change of flag occurring upon the tower.

Tigre shook his head and Elen made a moue of faint annoyance. "Pity, he certainly had an excellent eye for terrain. With enough archers, this place could hold off an army for a season."

"We have other men and donkeys coming up with arrows but what we really need is information and to disrupt any chances of people trying to push us out just yet," the reluctant commander replied.

"Agreed," she said brusquely. "I'll push out mounted scouts along our side of the rivers, to either side. We'll torch every other bridge we come across in every direction, though Ranma's notes say we shouldn't find many, it's mostly fords. I'll also be overseeing the repairs of this place. Whatever Duke Thenardier's ideas, I doubt he wanted this place so rundown. His men really didn't do him any favors here."

Tigre nodded. "In that case, I'm going to get some sleep. I'll start out with the scouts early tomorrow morning."

Elen nodded, "Me too." Then she smirked, holding up her hand like a child. "I get to use the Lord's quarters!"

Groaning Tigre nodded once more. "I'll bed down with the troops."

"What, not even going to complain? Or tried to insist that you should sleep there as the face of the Silver Meteor Army?"

"No, I feel that would give you too much fuel," Tigre said, shaking his head in embarrassment at the idea of the name Elen had slapped onto their joint army.

“You’re no fun,” Elen said with a laugh. Tigre was a great deal of fun actually and Elen had enjoyed herself a lot over the past two weeks on the road. So much so, she knew Lim would have been on her case about her general attitude being not in keeping with her position as a Vanadis.

At that thought, her eyes turned back to the northwest, frowning. *I really hope that Ranma was able to help Sasha.* She snorted, *Not that I’d be able to hear about it quickly even if he did.*

The next day, true to his word Tigre was out of the tower before the sun was up. His men moved over the farmlands like ghosts, while behind them, the new flag of the Silver Meteor Army flew over the tower. At each farmstead he left a single arrow and a message: if you flee to the northwest, you will find shelter. Most of the farmsteads around the tower didn’t take that message seriously, not having felt the lash of war. But the message spread west over the next few days, as Tigre and teams of the raiders that Ranma had trained under Claus and Gaston, were sent out in every direction.

These were what Elen called cutting out expeditions. Where she got the term Tigre didn’t know, but their goals were relatively simple enough to understand. He would meet with the locals, the villagers and so forth, tell them his message of safety. And if they found any of the men of either duke, the raiders would attack from ambush. This included knights, earls or counts who were known among their people to either prey on those people or be leaning towards one duke or the other.

And, since the Eagle’s Tower was within a few weeks’ travel by horse of the central territory, the three hundred leagues around Nice, the capital, there were many minor lords wishing to back one Duke or the other. Those lords had, mainly, already left their holdings behind, taking the majority of their trained fighting men, leaving behind only enough men to lord it over their peasants in the case of those looking to Thenardier. In the case of Ganelon’s forces, many had driven their peasants in front of them as slaves to be sold to Ganelon’s men and in particular, any women. It was a true example of making war on their own people as fiercely as they would the enemy. Any such troop Tigre found was attacked, but not once did he ever fight a face-to-face battle. That was not his strength. Instead, arrows would slash in on them during the night, or their horses would be spooked by sudden fires, or people would just sneak up and murder the guards at night. There were dozens of little ways that a guerrilla force like this could make trouble, and Tigre and his men did them, freeing dozens of estates and columns of slaves.

In this manner, Tigre’s message of safety was spreading far, far faster than he had actually anticipated. Within a day of them having conquered the Eagle’s Tower, Elen was staring out at a group of two-hundred refugees crossing the farmland around them looking over their shoulders all the time in fear.

The next day, there was a group of four hundred, mostly from a column of would-be slaves Tigre had freed. The day after that, dozens of small families from a single hamlet had decided to just up and leave, when they heard the forces of Duke Ganelon were heading their way. Those forces were not heading towards Tigre's Tower, they were instead heading further east for another clash with the allies of Duke Thenardier.

Tigre came back with that group. He and the scouts he was currently with, had run out of arrows and needed some time to recuperate.

"It's going well," Elen said with a laugh, staring at the number of civilians that were now camped on what was now their side of the river. Those refugees wouldn't stay there for very long, there wasn't enough food for them in the area. They would continue on to Territoire and beyond where they would be put to work either on farms, or the smithies that had been set up to help the army. Those who worked to keep up the war effort would also be paid wages. Since the Silver Meteor Army had captured the war chest that Duke Thenardier had given to his son for his campaign into Alsace, they had enough money for that.

"True, at least in terms of protecting Brune civilians. We haven't been doing as much damage to the forces of either duke directly as I would've liked," Tigre said with a sigh. "We're denying them allies and victims, but that doesn't seem enough given the tales of major battles going on to the west of us."

"Do you have any idea why they are so eager to flock to our banner milord?" Claus, who still lead the Alsace men asked, coming up and nodding to Tigre. Your quivers have all been filled, and your troops are getting some much-needed rest milord."

"Good, they need it. Even after being put through Ranma's paces traveling over that ground for me and mine is a killer." *Hmm... and it could be made worse very easily,* Tigre thought suddenly, looking down at the map on the table. That map was continually expanding, updating every time a team of his scouts came back to report what they had run into. *Something to keep in mind for the future.* "As for why the people in this area are flocking to our banner, it's not just the people in this area." At the confused looks from his listeners, Tigre elaborated. "Until the last week and the heavy rains hit, the roads were more passable, and a lot of peasants from the west and central Brune were on the move, trying to get away from Ganelon." He scowled angrily. "I've said it before, but Ganelon is making war on anyone who doesn't support him as viciously as an invading army would. And peasants aren't stupid, they need to be aware of rumors and army movements as any lord. So, of course, those who can are running."

"They aren't running from Thenardier?" Elen asked.

"Not as much. He doesn't care about the peasants. If their lord joins him, he leaves them entirely alone. If not, the yeomen are conscripted and sent to the mines and the lord's manor and men-at-arms slaughtered. The women he normally leaves alone." Tigre's mouth

twisted into a scowl. "Or at least his soldiers are not abusing them on order from him. If they do, so long as they maintain discipline, it doesn't seem to matter to him."

"Have you heard the nickname they're giving you?" Elen asked elbowing Tigre in the side as she changed the subject. "The Kind Archer?"

"And you're the Silver-Haired Maiden," Tigre taunted back, his lips quirking out of his scowl into a real smile.

Elen laughed, ruffling her hair with one hand even as she blushed and looked away. Something in Tigre's eyes there had caused her to become aware that that was an actual compliment and she didn't know how to deal with it.

"But the other rumor I've heard about the most is about the Angel of Mercy, which is just hilarious," Tigre said hurriedly, trying to change the subject himself. "Ranma an Angel of Mercy. The mind boggles, but I suppose it does fit given his healing skill."

"And the fact that he was routinely female when he went about the peasantry out there, leading missions like yours," Elen said with a nod. "I'm not certain I will ever get used to how rainy it is here in Brune in autumn," she said with a sigh. "It's nowhere near as cold as it should be, but the rain is kind of depressing."

"I'm sorry you feel like that," Tigre said, shrugging his shoulders. "I've always enjoyed the rain, before. Not so much now when I have to trek through it so much, but before, when I was a hunter, this would be the season where I would have the best luck against several of the larger game that make their home in the Voyes mountains."

"Hmm. You're going to have to take me hunting sometime you know. If you kill it, I'll clean and cook it," Elen replied with a smile as Claus bowed his way out of the room.

"That sounds like fun. I have to keep reminding myself that despite being a Vanadis, performe a noblewoman, that you're not nearly as squeamish as that breed normally is. You're so down to earth. It's nice." Tigre suddenly grinned. "Although I doubt even you would like to clean and carve up some of the things I've downed in the mountains. That's messy work, and it would be a shame to get your pretty hands so dirty."

"Oh, you think my hands are pretty, do you?" Elen teased.

A second later she blushed rosily as Tigre replied simply, "Of course, they are a part of you, aren't they?" It was a rather awkward response, but the implication set her pulse racing.

Their conversation was interrupted by Gaston rushing in, "My lords! My scout team and I have just returned from downriver and we have some dangerous news!"

Elen tsked, but turned towards the man willingly, although Tigre could've sworn, he heard something like, "and the mood was getting so good too," before she did so.

"What is it?" Tigre asked getting to his feet.

"Milord, there are at least two companies of horsemen, and some infantry coming towards us. They seem to be from Duke Ganelon's army, at least they're flying his flag along with a few others I didn't recognize. There could be more after them, but I decided to break contact and return just in case they had their own scouts out."

"Details, man!" Elen barked, who seemed to be in a sour mood for some reason Gaston didn't understand. "How many in a company, are they actual men-at-arms, or peasant levies?"

"Men-at-arms for the horseman, each of them is led by a different bannerman though like I said I didn't recognize who they were. Memorizing heraldry weren't 'mong my talents 'fore Lord Tigre asked me ta sign on fer a soldier. Mixed armor on the lot, but they had some and they was all armed with real weapons too," Gaston reported, coming to attention as best he could. "One cavalry troop had been spread out in a skirmish line, but they hadn't spotted me or mine. We were hiding in a ditch, covered with cloaks and mud."

Cavalry was almost never good at scouting. Not even Elen's light cavalry was all that good at it, and the heavy cavalry mad Brune men were much worse. Even the light cavalry acted sometimes as if they were heavy, as if merely being on a horse made them the next best thing to invincible. *And there's also the contempt that has always been pushed on archers here in Brune. Hmmm, I wonder how that began?* Certainly it didn't make much sense to Elen, who when it came to warfare was a very practical sort.

"Calvary as scouts?" Tigre exclaimed, shaking his head. "Whoever is out there is arrogant beyond belief."

"I thought the same thing," of the scouts said, shaking his head. "But they actually were doing an okay job of at least keeping people's attention on them."

Tigre nodded at the man to continue and he went on. "Whilst Gaston here were pulling back milord, I stayed put. Had to, was up a tree near a ruined out hut, weren't any way to get clear. But back a t'ose were a hand and a finger's worth a' group of men, each of 'em led by a different banner. One of 'em the size of one of lady Elen's infantry companies. They e'en got archers, two large clumps, and a sorrier lot I never did see. But one of t'ose infantry groups, the last one I saw, were well-armed and armored." The man shook his head. "T' difference was pretty plain even ta a hunter from the hinterlands Milady."

Elen smiled at the Alsatian calling her milady like that. It showed his people's opinion of their interactions plain. *And I thought I would have an upward battle thanks to Titta being the local girl. And the fact they are so willing to speak plainly to me and Tigre shows again what a*

good leader Tigre is. Most lords wouldn't even listen to a peasant's opinion at all, let alone trust them with something important as scouting.

However, she quickly shook those thoughts off, concentrating on the here and now. "They're coming to the tower? Heading upriver towards us I mean?"

"They've got siege equipment and lots of other stuff. Yeah, they're coming to the tower," Gaston replied with a nod, which his men all agreed with, going into detail on what they had seen: lots of grapnels, a large tree that could be used as a battering ram, and larger shields that could be used against arrow fire.

Tigre scratched at his chin thoughtfully, before muttering, "I'll need to make sure I shave some time soon."

"Yes you will," Elen said, shaking her head. "As handsome as you are, I don't think a beard would do anything for you."

She then blushed, realizing she said that out loud, while Tigre also blushed, looking away. "I, um, I'll be sure to shave at the newest opportunity then."

A cough from the scouts brought them both back to more important matters. "R, Right. Gaston, you and yours need to rest, but tell the peasants that are still camped outside that they'll need to get moving. Claus," Tigre turned to that man, "I want you to take your men out now. They're more rested than Gaston's. I want to make certain we have eyes on this group and see if you can launch a night raid to destroy their supplies, if they have any. If they are living off the land, see if you can set up any traps. If you can't sneak in to destroy their supplies, stay hidden. See if you can set traps. I don't want them to know you're there unless you can make a decisive move."

"Aye milord, I'll see it done," the youngest son of Alsace's blacksmith replied, nodding his head firmly. "You're not going to try to meet them?" Elen asked, a simple question rather than a reproachful observation. The Silver Meteor Army was Tigre's show. If it wasn't, the army of liberation would become an invading army in the eyes of the peasants, which they could not afford. Tigre shook his head. "No, they've got too many men for us to meet in the field just now. Most of our forces are still straggling this way from Alsace or guarding the peasants heading the other way." While their forces numbered around five to six thousand men all told, most were irregulars, peasant men or poor men-at-arms and equally poor earls who could arm their troops but not armor them. This was especially true since Elen had not reinforced her initial troop strength with, which they had freed Alsace. She couldn't, since again having a large number of foreign troops would make the locals turn against them, especially after the debacle on the Dinant Plains. Tigre had flatly refused to put most of those volunteers into the field without proper armor. For that, they were being rotated through Territoire and then down to Aude for armor and weapons, paid for by Zion's war chest. He had also assigned Rurick the task of

training up groups of new archers, as well as those archers they already had and those hunters who had come forward to fight against the corruption of the two dukes.

All of this was why Tigre had agreed with Elen that they needed to take the offensive for a few months and had pushed to take the Eagle's tower. Once the cold hit, no one would be willing to make war in Brune, and they could use that time to train and arm their army.

"We'll need to let them get close with us here in the tower. Besides," he said smiling grimly as he patted his bow, "Artur said they've got archers out there along with siege equipment. But if they think that's going to be enough to take this tower from me, I want to disabuse them of the notion that quantity can overcome quality."

Half a day later, the first sign of the forces allied to Count Ganelon marched into view from the top of the tower. But they didn't immediately attack. Instead, they seemed to have been thrown by the tower's change of ownership. The cavalry milled around out of what they thought of as archery range, and while sending a few men back to the rest of their men, sent in an envoy to treat with Tigre. "My Lord Margrave Ceres wishes to make a deal with Earl Tigre!"

Tigre shook his head irritably. "As if after what Ranma reported of Ganelon's offer I'd have anything to do with him or those who follow him!" Still he raised two hands to his mouth and shouting, "I am Earl Tigre and I will not deal with Duke Ganelon or any who have so lost their honor as to serve him willingly. He has broken the laws of morality, the laws of Brune, the laws of nobility!" Tigre stopped realizing he was actually getting quite heated, before shaking his head and shouting again. "The Silver Meteor Army holds this tower, and we will not yield, not to those who would despoil their own lands and those of their neighbors as if they were pirate or slaving scum instead of nobles of this fair land!"

There was a shout from all around and Elen roared out, "Three cheers for the Heroic Archer!" At that cheering broke across the entire tower and down the walls.

"Then you will die in that tower, Earl Tigre! My men will take it and despoil the corpse of the whore from Zhcted that you have wooed to your cause!" the man shouted back, before turning his army aside, with that the envoy retreated.

"They don't know we were here," Tigre muttered to Elen as he held her back from launching herself down towards the buffoon. "Come on Elen, he's an idiot, no one who knows you would ever think that! Please just grrah, calm down!" He nearly found himself pulled off his feet as Elen took a step towards the side of the tower's roof, turning his head to the other men around them. "Darn it you lot, help me here!"

"Sorry Milord, but you're on your own for this one!" said one man, which caused the others to laugh and Tigre groaned but continued to try and convince Elen not to use Arifar to slaughter the attackers. There would be time enough for that kind of thing later after all. The attack commenced the very next day. It was a very quick assault, which seemed to indicate that

they hadn't actually changed their plans all that much despite the Silver Meteor Army being in control here rather than Thenardier's army. *Perhaps that's because they didn't really know how good archer Tigre is* Elen reflected as she watched Tigre. Her part in this battle would come later, when the enemy broke.

He stood at the side of the tower nearest the enemy, an arrow pulled back to his ear on his family's Black Bow. He waited a brief second, then fired, then had another arrow in the air faster than even Elen could blink.

"Why did you wait that first time?" she asked curiously.

"One of the men's horses was in the way," he muttered, even as he fired a third shot. "The animal's haven't done anything wrong, and besides, we can round them up after the battle is over. No need to target them here."

He shook his head sadly. "Gaston was right. Duke Ganelon apparently doesn't believe in armoring his infantry at all. Not even the commanders."

Elen blinked at that and looked in the direction he had been firing. Even she had to gape at the four targets he'd hit, as the infantry quickly began to spread out, pulling back away from the tower, abandoning their shields and the battering ram. "You hit all of their officers?" she asked almost incredulously. *I know he's good, but that good!?*

He shrugged, aiming to one side, where Elen could see several heavily armored cavalymen beginning to gather for a charge across the ford. "It seems like the best idea at the time. And it looks like it worked too."

A second later Tigre fired again, and this time Elen tracked the shot and watched it slam into the open visor of a knight or nobleman. He collapsed out of the saddle, his horse going one way, his body the other, tangling up several other cavalymen who had been racing towards the Fords. With that, Tigre switched his attention to the other flank, doing the same to two riders on that side. By that time the other flank had composed itself, and he shot three more out of the saddle there.

At that point, the infantry had closed enough with the tower to start shooting back with their arrows. But to Tigre and his men, their archery was pitiful, a wild hail with no aimed shots. Tigre coolly sidestepped the one arrow that looked as if it was going to hit them, as he aimed, before ducking aside as more archers came forward. "Your turn," he said looking over at Elen.

"Hmmp, so cavalier when addressing your mistress," Elen laughed, stepping forward, raising her weapon above her head before bringing it flashing down. "Ley Adimos!"

Her attack slammed into the incoming arrows, shattering them all and continuing on to crash into the field of infantry, tossing them this way and that. Then Tigre was up, raising a hand as he shouted, "Loose!"

From all around the circle tower other archers pulled back their bows and fired, some aimed, others simply using arching fire. Regardless, their arrows slammed into the reforming archers, and the charging cavalry. Several dozen more men fell from the saddle, and horses began to die too, messing up their charge over the narrow ford. The river wasn't deep enough to stop a man from crossing around the ford, but it was deep enough to slow them down badly, which made them easy pickings.

One area Elen had Tigre beat flat out when it came to battle was experience. Tigre had only fought in four real battles before this and lacked her instincts for when to change tactics or when the enemy was close to breaking. She felt that moment now and shouted over the edge of the tower to those men of her own Leitmeritz, who were here, two hundred infantrymen. Most of her cavalry was elsewhere protecting the peasants or guarding caravans of supplies or being retrained under Rurick in Viscount Augre's lands. Elen shouted for those unclear to sound the charge. Her men, all in light armor and short swords raced out, getting in close and stabbing, not just at the riders, but at their horses. None of them had the time for Tigre's niceties in close combat like this. The cavalry retreated in total disarray, while the infantry behind them was little better, having retreated from the arrow hail from above, the Brunish disdain for archery having come to bite them in the rear.

As the cavalry retreated, they might have been able to reform, and then retreat. But then Elen was among them, along with fifty mounted cavalymen, smashing straight through their scattered number and on to the infantry. Infantry who were mostly without officers, without armor, and without much training. The whole battle became a farce at that point. Most of the infantry simply fled the field entirely, while others tossing down their arms, going to their knees with their hands above their heads and shouting "Quarter, mercy, quarter!" Only about ten or so of the cavalry were able to reform and they slashed their way out of their own troops away. At that point, they were met by Claus's scouts, who shot them down from the saddle.

"Well," Elen said, setting her sword on her shoulder as she strode up to Tigre who was still standing on the tower's roof. "That was fun. I wonder if the next group to attack us here will be so stupid about it, or just make up their own mistakes instead."

"We should be so lucky," Tigre replied, frowning pensively and staring down the river Resia. "I wonder what Ranma would be able to do with that monstrous strength of his to shore up our position here."

"Hmmp, at least you mentioned his strength rather than his skill. I think I can match him in skill, but not raw strength." Elen bit her lip, her thoughts suddenly flicking to Sasha, not for the first time since they left Leitmeritz. "I hope Ranma was able to help her..."

“Your friend? Don’t worry, he will do the best he can for her. I have a lot of faith in Ranma’s healing abilities.” Tigre paused frowning. “His sense of decorum and ability to be polite, not so much. So if he heals her but also starts a feud with your friend, I’ll apologize in advance and say I had no part in it.”

Elen giggled, then tried to stop herself. Giggling was so not something she wanted to do while on campaign and she could feel the grins of the men around her at her expense.

OOOOOOO

Sasha woke up slowly, stretching and almost but not quite moaning in delight as she felt utterly **deliciously** sore for the first time in far too long. It was almost like she had pushed her body as hard as she could possibly go in a battle or training exercise, but much better, much deeper. *Good grief, but that was good* she thought to herself complacently, before breaking out into wicked giggles.

She then turned, taking in the room as she slowly edged out from under the torn, shredded and wet sheets, not wanting to wake Ranma up. He who was still out like a light, splayed out on the battered bed, snoring lightly.

The sight caused Sasha to flush a bit, licking her lips before shaking her head and laughing at herself. *Enough of that, remember this was a one-time thing. He’s too young for me to have a serious relationship with, and he isn’t a noble either, nor a Zhcted citizen.* Sasha thought as she looked around the room again. *Although, if he could somehow teach other men to have his endurance, that I would be so totally down with!*

Sasha had two lovers before this, both more experienced than Ranma. Her first lover had been a ship’s captain from the far north. Large, blonde, hairy and quite a bit older than her, he’d had quite a bit of stamina although nowhere near as much as Ranma had shown last night. He had been killed by pirates about a year into their relationship.

As Sasha stretched in place, her smile of memory turned into something far more vengeful and wilder than anyone who ever had met Sasha since she became sick would ever have thought possible. *Oh, the vengeance I took on them!* Sasha knew the pirates in the Orlinas Archipelago still told tales of her vengeful march through their islands and fleets. It wasn’t her best memory. Sasha wasn’t a cruel person by nature, but that campaign had been the sight of violence and carnage that few who hadn’t been there would understand.

I wonder, if they know about my sickness, I’ve seen too many reports about them pressing into our waters to think otherwise. But I wonder how long it will be before they hear

I'm cured? I might want to take advantage of that, maybe spread rumors that I am dying instead before the rumors of my being healed can spread, lure their men in, then slaughter their fleets? As kind and gentle as Sasha normally was to those who knew her, she was still a Vanadis. Her mission, her job as a Vanadis was to think about the defense of the country, and how best to make certain the city of Legnica and the lands around it stayed safe. *At times, a penny's worth of prevention is worth a pound of defense after all.* If Sasha butchered enough pirates this season, they would be too frightened to make much trouble for several years.

In the bed Ranma moved restlessly, breaking Sasha out of her somewhat cold, calculating thoughts to look at him as he turned on his side, mumbling. The sight of his rear caused Sasha to shiver, her mind turning to the memories of last night instead of future problems, comparing Ranma to her second, and last, lover.

He had been a nobleman who had been her mother's best friend, an older man, much like her first lover. Despite the difference in ages being a little more than seventeen years, they had actually been preparing to marry. But then her disease had flared up. They had backed away from their plans at that point for that and a few other reasons. But like her first lover, the noble in question had been a very experienced man.

With Ranma, it was the exact opposite. *I had to do a lot of work before Ranma got into it, but afterward, by all the gods and saint!* He was very much a virgin, very quick to pop, but Ranma had both size and endurance in abundance, as well as physical strength. Also, as a Vanadis Sasha had to hold back her strength with her previous two lovers. She had not had to do so with Ranma.

Although, I suppose I'll have to replace a lot of the furniture in here. As she stood there the smell was also starting to get to her, the whole room smelled of stale sweat and other fluids, a heady, musky and not at all pleasant scent. Other details now registered consciously to her, and she flushed as she saw all the evidence of her, or rather their, passions.

The bed had collapsed at one point, the legs shattered underneath. The mattress looked as if it had been used as a Dragon's bed, with several dents very visible in the mattress, which were not reforming as they should, as well as tears where the stuffing had leaked out. The sheets were more shredded scraps than actual sheets at this point, and discolored badly to boot, so wet even now they stuck to Ranma's legs. The table had been shattered although Sasha couldn't honestly remember how that one happened, and several actual dents had been made in the walls. *Good grief is that why my rear is kind of sore?* she thought with some relief. *I thought that... well that's better than the alternative anyway.*

With each look around the room, Sasha would remember the damage happened, except for the table. Despite that minor mystery, the string of memories was almost enough to make her want to start up again. But she wouldn't. Now that she was fully awake, Sasha knew it was time to set aside the night of passion and think clearly about what to do, both in the short term and in the long term. She resolutely moved over to the cabinet, pulling out some clothing,

dressing as her mind worked. *Short term, I have to wonder what my captain of the guard and Limalisha has found. But who would benefit from poisoning me?* Sasha snorted, her normally kind face twisting into a scowl. *Bah spoiled for choice really. The pirates of Olinas, Asvarre, heck, anyone trying to weaken Legnica could be behind it. Or it could be that anti-Vanadis cult, although I doubt they have the reach or the patience to use such a slow-acting poison, even if they didn't want to take credit for it.*

The anti-Vanadis cult was an odd group of mid-class nobles and clergymen of some of the gods, particularly those of Perkunas, Dirge and Radegast, who felt that women should not wield magic. Indeed, many of them felt that women should not have any power and should be relegated to the home. And all the clergy had issues with the near veneration the Viralts were given as they had been gifted to the kingdom by the Black Dragon, rather than any deity. This, needless to say, cut into the power the churches could wield in Zhcted. The true anti-Vanadis cult was small in number and very much a fringe group thanks to the average Zhcted citizen's awe and respect, even love at times, for the Vanadis though.

Hmm... perhaps one of my neighbors, but no, every nobleman in Zhcted knows that if a Vanadis dies, another will rise to take up our Viralt and any short term gains they made would have been completely reversed upon her ascension to my position. Unless, it was a foreign power, and they were prepared to follow up on the weakness my death would have caused Legnica. Hmm... so it could, in fact, be pirates, or perhaps their normal employer in Asvarre given how they have been testing our waters of late. But still, something about that idea feels off. No, my instincts are telling me, this has to have been a personal attack for some reason.

As she was thinking, Ranma woke up behind her, causing her to turn towards the bed once more. He stretched and yawned, muttering something in a foreign language that she didn't understand. The way he was clenching his abs though, and then gently touching himself lower, told the real story there. 'Heh, sorry about that. I think we got a little carried away,' Sasha said drawing his attention to her.

Ranma looked up blinked, then blushed looking away as he very visibly remembered what they had been doing last night as well. "So this... I mean you said this didn't matter r, right? he stammered. "Um we're not married or anything? I mean you're pretty and all, but I don't even know you very well, and well I got friends back in Brune and..."

"It was a onetime thing," Sasha said, feeling a little better about things now that she put it in verbally. *Although why in the world did he think we would be married because of last night. I told him this was a single night of passion.* "Don't worry about that, Ranma. Just think of it as a learning experience. I'm actually more worried right now that this is going to put an end to whatever is building up between you and Lim."

Ranma blinked, then nodded, a wan smile appearing on his face. "I hope that too. I mean, I guess maybe there could be something there but after this, I don't know. She seems

the kind of lady who will have a lot of trouble about what happened last night, even if we haven't gotten past the getting to know one another stage."

"Well let's find out," Sasha said brusquely. She wondered why he seemed so uncertain about romance and women in general given his other form and his abilities as a healer, but Sasha reflected it might even be caused by his curse. *Perhaps he's had problems with women because of his curse before?* she paused, her letting her eyes rake up and down Ranma's form as he'd sat up in bed. "That means you need to get dressed. Sometime soon anyway. Not that I don't appreciate the view."

He yelped, quickly rushing over to his clothes almost faster than she could follow, turning away to the wall to get dressed, only to pause as he visibly winced and found his body was unable to move as well as he was used to. She chuckled and moved toward the door. "Join us when you can, although could I ask you to do a few things for me?" Ranma made a noncommittal noise behind her, having paused in getting dressed, wincing as his muscles betrayed him. *My reserves must be next to nothing if they can't heal sore muscles! I know I used a shit ton of my ki to heal Sasha but even so, did she really wear me out that much last night!?*

"First, I'd like you and Lim to stay here for at least a week. I want to make certain that I really am on the mend. I'd also like to talk to you about life energy, what you call ki. I think both of us would benefit from that." Sasha waited until Ranma had nodded before going on. "But right now, could you open the windows. I'm afraid it's rather rank in here." With that and a laugh at Ranma's full face blush, at once more being reminded of the night's activities, Sasha exited the room.

Outside Sasha found her two chief maids, Natasha and Elissa, looking both worried and, in the case of the older Natasha, intensely amused. To one side her captain of the guard, Marti, was standing to one side, leaning against the wall his eyes closed as he catnapped standing up, a feat Sasha had always secretly envied in the man. Lim was there too, sitting on a chair in a corner and honing her sword with a whetstone, her face dark. *Oh dear, that does not bode well for Ranma.* For a moment Sasha wondered if she should say something to the younger woman but the gasps of delight from her servants put an end to that thought.

"Milady you're walking! How are, I mean, you look so lively!" Sonya said, moving toward her.

"You certainly sounded lively last night," Natasha cut in, winking at Sasha as her comment set the younger maid to blushing. "Finally found the cure for what ailed you then Milady?" Natasha had been Sasha's maid for her entire life and took liberties not even Marti or her majordomo would have allowed themselves.

Sasha laughed, hugging the two women to her for a moment, before pushing them away, looking at Marti and Lim. "How long were we in there?"

“Three days milady,” Marti said dryly. “Was healing you so onerous?”

“From what I can remember, yes, I think that, ahem, aspect took a full night, maybe slightly more,” Sasha replied before changing the subject. “Yet I am awake, and well now, which means we have work to do. Has anything happened?”

The man nodded and gestured for Lim to speak. Lim nodded and spoke about how she and Marti had locked the castle down and captured one of two spies. They told Sasha how they had questioned the man, a cook’s assistant, closely, and found he had been the second of the conspirators, paid to add the poison to her food. “The other man, a scribe, got away before we could catch them. For that I apologize,” Lim said, her tone stilted and formal, even more so than she normally was. And she was not meeting Sasha’s eyes either.

Oh, dear, I'm going to have to do something about that, won't I? But first things first. “I would like to question this man closely, but first, I would like to walk around my gardens unaided for the first time in many a year.” Sasha began, looking over at Marti. “Captain, please move the prisoner to the council room. I will meet you there. Natasha, Sonja, if you two could make certain the kitchen staff is on call, I think that Ranma mentioned once that he would need to eat quite a lot to make up all of the magic he used to heal me. Limalisha, I would rather like to hear more about what Elen has been up to, so if you would not mind accompanying me, I would appreciate it.”

She might have worded that last as a question, but her tone told everyone it wasn’t and reluctantly Lim set her sword aside and moved to walk beside Sasha. The two of them were quite until they were out into the gardens situated at the back of the castle. There Sasha waited until they were far enough away from the doors leading back into the castle to keep anyone from eavesdropping, then began. “Lim, have you ever had Ranma heal you as he did me?”

“I did. I was not conscious of his healing me, however,” Lim allowed, even as she retained a controlled, icy expression. “I had been struck by a snake, it’s venom was working through my body and my mind had shut down. But I have seen him at work often enough before.”

“But if you were unconscious, then you don’t know what it feels like. Lim, Ranma pushes his own life energy into his patient, you know that yes?” Lim nodded, and Sasha went on. “The greater the wound, the more life energy he must push into the patient’s body to heal it. In my case, he also had to imbue his life energy into my body to discover what was wrong in the first place. I, I could feel what he was doing to me, could feel him healing me, and it was like, like getting a massage on the inside and out, it was euphoric and left me in such a state, well, you saw me right!?” she nearly shouted, actually embarrassed.

Lim blushed as she remembered watching Sasha react to Ranma's healing, but Sasha continued, her voice quieter but no less sincere. “There was also my pledge to reward anyone able to cure my ‘disease’ by sleeping with him.” Lim's face turned even frostier at that, but

Sasha went on undaunted. "I was desperate at the time I made that vow, and indeed was still somewhat desperate when you two showed up at my door. I would've been willing to lay with the ugliest, most depraved man in the world if he could heal me. It just so happened that I didn't have to and the relief of that, the relief from being healed in the first place, and coupled with the feelings Ranma's healing I could not have controlled myself even if I had tried. He made me reach the cloud and rain twice during his examination of me for goodness sake!"

Sasha took a breath and made an effort to calm down. "I know why you are angry, and before you say anything about him taking advantage of me, it being beneath my station to act in such a manner or it being none of your concern, realize that I was the one who initiated things. He worried about it about what you might think."

"There is nothing between us anyway," Lim muttered, looking away.

"But there could be, so long as you don't muck it up," Sasha said, reaching out to take Lim's hand in one of her own, squeezing. "Ranma's special. I'm not talking about his healing powers, and I'm not actually talking about his skill in bed, as amazing as those were. I'm talking about the whole package. Don't let him get away just because he and I had a few days of passion, all right?"

"If he is so amazing why are you..."

"I am a noblewoman and Vanadis both," Sasha said with a famous shrug of her shoulders. "And I am a Vanadis whose territory has been steadily eaten away by her neighbors. I'm in no position to even think about becoming serious with anyone. And if I did, well there were a few candidates already lined up before I fell ill, including one I might well have started to fall for before I fell ill."

Lim's eyes narrowed, and Sasha shook her head. "Don't blame him for not going through with his suite. He was a noble, and nobles have to play the game. And in the game of families, emotions play very little part."

That didn't stop the blonde from scowling and Sasha smiled, flicking the girl's nose. "Whereas with you, they can. If you really want them to."

Finally, **finally**, Lim began to unbend, a faint smile appearing on her face as the tension left her shoulders. "I will take your words into consideration, my lady. Of course, there really isn't anything between me and Ranma so..."

"Not yet~," Sasha caroled, causing Lim to flush a little and look away.

From there the conversation shifted, and Sasha led the way back into her castle. "Who was the man who escaped, did Marti tell you his name?"

“Yes, he was a scribe named Bernard, Marti said. He was on the palace staff for ten years?”

“Bernard... yes, I think I remember him. Odd, he is a rather mousy fellow, I would never have thought he was the type to be able to spy on anyone, let alone use poison.”

“Technically, he only provided the poison, it is our prisoner who used it,” Lim quibbled. “But I take your point.”

“Hmm... I meant that he too could be a middleman, certainly, he didn’t originate the scheme...ten years...hmmm...” Sasha murmured, then shrugged her shoulders. “I will have to discover why he was hired, I remember signing the contract I think, but I don’t know where he came from or anything else off the top of my head.”

Lim nodded, then supplied, “Captain Marti told me that he had originally come from Silesia. But that is all he could tell me.”

“Marti’s only been captain of my guard for two years, he was a lieutenant before that,” Sasha replied, falling silent as she thought about that, and about other things along the same lines. *The capital, is it? But who recommended him? I know for a fact, no one works in my palace without a recommendation that wasn’t born in Legnica. And if he was behind this, was he planted that long ago? To spy on me, perhaps? And if so, what changed? Not that I have anything to go on, drat it.*

“Tell me, did you and Marti search Bernard’s rooms for anything incriminating?” Lim nodded her head to Sasha’s question but stated they hadn’t found anything. That served to only deepen Sasha’s frown.

Moments later they arrived at the council room where the prisoner was waiting under guard by three of Sasha’s men.

The questioning of the prisoner didn’t last very long at all. As Lim had said, the man has simply been paid to add something to her food. The poison was a slow-acting one, whose name the scullery worker didn’t know, which had been found to imitate the illness her family had sometimes been diagnosed with, a little faster acting than that illness, but still extremely slow. The man had needed to give Sasha weekly doses before it built up in her system to a dangerous level. Of course, since Sasha also suffered from her family’s illness, it built up in her system at about twice the rate it should have, so he had pulled back on that. The man didn’t know who was paying for the poison, didn’t even know why they wanted Sasha dead. He had simply been blinded by the coins Bernard had offered him.

“How did he know to come to you anyway?” Sasha asked.

The man fell silent, and Sasha sighed, laying her daggers on the table. They flared into life and the man backpedaled despite the weapons being nowhere near him or indeed pointed at them. The fear of the Viralt did the trick all on its own. "Ahh!!! N, no! I, I had a gambling problem! He, Bernard found out and, he offered to help. I didn't know what it was at first..."

"That is just an excuse," Sasha cut in coldly, her normally kind face closed down in an expression of cold anger. "Adding something to the food of the castle would have been bad enough, adding something to my food alone? You knew what it had to be." She waited for a tick, then leaned forward, deliberately putting her hands on Bargren's dual hilts. The only way you will gain any leniency here is to tell me everything you know about Bernard. Did he say anything about why he wanted to poison me? Did he mention where he got the actual poison from? Did anyone else ever give you the poison instead? Talk, and I might be merciful." The man simply stared at Sasha, his eyes wide, and after a moment of silence, she shook her head in a twitch before looking over at one of the guards. He obeyed the unspoken order quickly, smashing into unconsciousness by a single blow from his club. Sasha stared at the unconscious man for a second, then sighed and stood up. "Hang him," she said simply.

Neither Lim nor Marti so much as blinked at her decision. The man had betrayed his liege lord and his employer all in one. There was no other recourse but to have him hung. Anything else would seem like a weakness. And no feudal lord could ever be thought of as weak, especially a Vanadis whose position had been weakened as much as Sasha's had during her illness.

"Now, show me this Bernard fellow's room. And get me my chief scribe, we need to know more about the man and quickly. Canvas the guards Marti, see if anyone can tell us if he left the castle at a set time every week if they had seen him around the city, anything!" Sasha said as she strode off.

OOOOOO

Later, while Sasha was seeing to her household and not being needed any longer, Lim went in search of Ranma. She found him in the kitchen of course. Even after so short an association, she had learned that his abilities cost him in terms of how much he had to eat to sustain his body. Ranma paused in his destruction of all entire roasted haunch of lamb to stare at her as she entered, and quickly pushed himself away from the table, bowing to her. "I'm sorry. I'm very, very sorry.

"Sorry for what?" Lim asked, somewhat thrown by Ranma's quick admission of guilt.

“Well a lot of things really,” he stammered. “I mean I kind of did take advantage of her, you know? And well I, that is I didn’t want that, I mean... I know there isn’t, but I’d...”

Lim began to chuckle, shaking her head. “Enough,” she said with a long drawn out sigh, releasing much of her anger. “I can understand what happened, and why on both your parts. And it isn’t as if you and I are in a relationship, or even have an understanding that we are moving in that direction.”

“Well that’s just it, I mean do you that is, do you want there to be?” Ranma asked, sheepishly, scratching the back of his head. “I mean I know I should be making this all romantic and stuff, but I don’t exactly have experience with that kind of thing, so I figured plain speaking might be better.”

What Ranma could have said was that romance stuff had never worked in his favor during his time in Nerima with any of his fiancées. It was almost as if trying to do something romantic acted like a magnet to drag in every bit of chaos in the area toward him. But he had decided to leave his whole fiancée trouble behind him the moment he arrived in this world and this conversation was one perfect example of why that was a good idea.

Lim blushed hotly, looking away as the stammer curse transferred to her. “I, I am uncertain. There is much about you I am interested by Ranma. At the same time, there are some things that bother the heck out of me.”

“The curse,” Ranma guessed glumly.

“No not your curse. Your curse I could live with. But your general attitude is growing on me and I’m not sure I like that. I also have my loyalty to Lady Eleanora to consider whereas you have no loyalty holding you bar friendship. But I...” Lim frowned thinking looking away tapping one hand against her thigh then looked back, almost coquettishly. “I think I would like to see if there could be an understanding between us. But do not expect anything to happen quickly,” she hastened to add as his eyes lit up.

“Right, um I mean you’re in charge of the pace and everything, but well that’s just, just great,” he said smiling happily.

She laughed, shaking her head at that, and then looked back at the meal as Ranma's stomach growled. “I think your lord and master needs you to finish that right now.”

Ranma laughed again and turned back to his work. And Lim sat to one side as he asked: “So, did you all catch the poisoner?”

After basically eating the rest of the morning away, Ranma found himself outside in what looked like a garden that a really rich manor house would enjoy, complete with gazebo, bushes growing along a walking path, and a very neatly laid out well-cared-for lawn. However,

there was evidence that this was also the yard of a Vanadis in that the gazebo was right next to a training area, there were targets against the far outer wall of the keep, and a dedicated weapons locker set to one side of the entranceway Ranma spotted, while he walked out into the gazebo.

“And you’re telling me,” Sasha was saying with a giggle in her voice “That Elen wouldn’t ransom this young boy back only because he is so good with a bow?”

Lim nodded her head. “He also seems to be quite good as a tactician,” she said, grudgingly. “I’m not certain I like how much respect and responsibility Elen has given him, but I cannot deny the fact that he and Ranma both were well worth the time to get to know.”

“Gee, thanks,” Ranma mumbled, shaking his head.

As he moved to stand across from Sasha. She had finished some the majority of the work she’d had to do today to get back into the swing of things in terms of the castle and had already set up a working dinner with her local lesser nobles and merchant houses, to apprise them of her newfound health. She had decided that attempting to hide her renewed health would be useless, as rumors would no doubt get out. Sasha had instead decided to tout her good health as much as possible. That would hopefully do well enough to warn off the pirates from continuing to escalate their attacks on shipping coming from and going out of Legnica’s ports.

Closer to home, Sasha’s recovery would have a severe impact on the running of the city, which had gotten used to her being more hands-off than she would’ve preferred. In particular, several injunctions against waste, crowd management, and worker’s rights had been allowed to fall by the wayside as had her laws against price gouging. *Not, thankfully anything to do with defense*, Sasha thought to rather tartly. No one in their right mind in this city would ever think about stinting on defense. Not with the pirate kingdoms of the Orlinas Archipelago so close and the giant island Asvarre to the southwest of Zhcted.

Now, however, she wanted to put her newfound health to the test. *After all, there is a vast difference between sex and combat*, she thought to herself, flipping her daggers in her hands in a wide twirl that was so fast Lim could barely see the actual blades. The maids who had followed them out with tea and crumpets could barely see the spinning blur.

Ranma grinned as he stood across from her, his hands and forearms covered in gauntlets, although he had disdained them first. Sasha had insisted though. She wanted to spar the first time for half a year, at the least, with her weapons Bargren in hand. “If I don’t, they’re going to complain to me so much,” Sasha had said shaking her head patting the two daggers at her hips of affectionately. “Honestly, you two are such children sometimes.”

For his part, Ranma noticed the two daggers were laughing again. But it was a more sinister sort of laugh, like someone who knew one joke and found it funny but was about to play another joke that wasn't going to just be funny but also humiliating to someone else.

Sasha stopped twirling her daggers, holding them in a combat position, one dagger thrust down from a position close to her chest, the other one held forward, its tip pointing towards Ranma. She wagged that dagger invitingly at Ranma, a small but very toothsome smirk appearing on her face.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Ranma said, cracking his gauntlets together. "I mean, you have only just recovered."

"I'm positive," Sasha said dryly, "now come on."

Ranma sighed, but complied, without warning kicking off the ground and leaping into the air flipping himself upwards and around, coming down hard with an ax kick that should have taken Sasha by surprise. Instead, she simply flipped to the side and then back lashing out with her own kick. Ranma blocked it, then caught her leg and tried to throw her, but she twisted so hard she broke his grip and then was lashing out with her daggers.

The exultant shriek of those daggers nearly took Ranma aback as flames appeared searing towards him. But Ranma was able to dodge them still, and the attack flashed on for a second before cutting out abruptly. Then Sasha was in his face, twin daggers flashing in and Ranma could barely keep up.

Ranma had gone into this fight thinking that Sasha would be, generally speaking as skilled as Elen, regardless of her *ahem* endurance or far larger ki reserves. Now he knew his error, and he quickly compensated, moving faster, hitting out stronger. He quickly began to also try to utilize the Thousand Needle techniques, trying to deaden her grip on her Viralt. But Sasha was even faster than him, something that was going to take Ranma a **lot** of time to get used to.

Bargren's edge instantly began to cut into the metal of his gauntlets like butter, scoring welts on his skin underneath. He took to the air, lashing out faster and faster, his legs and arms going at Amaguriken speed, but Sasha matched him, leaping into the air too, laughing wildly as she saw his momentarily flummoxed expression as Sasha used the momentum of his own attacks to rise higher in the air.

They were three stories in the air before they stopped, using one another's momentum, and just began to wail on one another slowly falling back to the ground, daggers flashing along with fists and feet. "Did you think you are the only one who used aerial combat? My city is a seaport, and I have done most of my fighting in ship-to-ship action, where the ground is always suspect."

“Duly noted,” Ranma muttered, flicking his head back to avoid a slash that would’ve opened up his nose at the very least. But that had overextended Sasha just a little bit, and he grabbed her arm, clenching his hand around her grip on her dagger. Her arm started to heat up under his grip, but it allowed him to get a punch through, which battered into her face, flinging her head back.

But she moved with the motion, her legs coming up and grabbing him around his waist, her other hand coming up and flashing out with a blow that would’ve stabbed right into Ranma’s chest if he hadn’t blocked it as Sasha rolled them both in the air. Then they were nearing the ground and Ranma found himself planted there headfirst, with Sasha rolling away.

He flipped himself back to his feet, but she had already stopped her roll and come back towards him in charge, shoulder checking him hard.

Ranma grabbed her, twisted and now was her turn to gasp as she’s was slammed headfirst into the ground. She still pushed off with her clenched daggers several boxing blows of jabs landing, hurling him away. She then rolled herself upright twisting around, her daggers already in a defensive position, as Ranma got to his feet.

“I think I’ve done with my warm-up now,” Sasha said, and Ranma had barely a second for his eyes to widen in shock before she was charging forward again even faster than before.

What went on after that was not so much a spar as an ass-kicking. Ranma had very, **very** rarely been overmatched so badly before. Oh, he had met opponents who were stronger than him, even occasionally very, **very** occasionally faster than him, like Cologne and Happy. He didn’t rate Sasha’s skill as high as either of those shorty oldsters, but even so, she kicked his rear six ways from Sunday. She was faster, stronger, far more durable and she routinely drove Ranma into the ground over the next few hours.

But Ranma didn’t give up, getting back up each time until his stomach began to roar at him again and his wounds stopped healing. Because in style, he could beat her, and in ki, she had no equal to some of the tricks he could do. She might’ve overwhelmed him, but he had made Sasha sweat to do it, and that was enough to put a smile on his face as he limped to the tea-table under the gazebo after Sasha called a halt.

For her part, Sasha was astonished. *When you factor in his healing ability, Ranma’s durability is just crazy!* She thought ruefully, staring down at her daggers, who are no longer chuckling, evilly or otherwise. They were sated for now and gave the impression of young boys happy with what they had done for their older sister, hugging her legs tightly almost as she put them away.

She patted them companionably, wondering once again if all of the Vanadis weapons were as emotive as hers. *Or perhaps it was just my sickness talking, that force me to treat them as humans to such a degree.* Sasha set that aside though as she sat down, wincing slightly as

one of her ribs tweaked. Ranma had gotten in a few shots and then had started to concentrate on that area as if he'd realized it, despite her best efforts to hide the fact that she had been hurt. And unlike Ranma, Sasha didn't heal so fast you could actually watch the process in a matter of seconds.

His ability to learn is higher than anyone I've ever met! And he's already a dangerous threat with that bag of tricks. Ranma had used what he called his 'ki' attacks during the second level of their sparring, and his pressure points attacks combined with the surprise of his distance attacks had actually given him the win for the only time that afternoon. *With his learning curve I'd give him about a year, maybe less before he's at the level I'm at now. On the other hand, he's taught me just as much as he probably learned from me. Consciously using my life energy like that, that is going to be a very interesting area to experiment in going forward.*

Still, right now I'd say he can go toe to toe with any of the Vanadis and beat them, maybe even Sofy. The blonde Vanadis was the second strongest amongst them, but she just didn't have the endurance, either in terms of stamina or durability to fight someone like Ranma.

Yes, she thought to herself as she sat down, smiling happily as one of the maids set her favorite tea and small dainty in front of her, thanking the girl profusely even as her thoughts continued. *Yes, Elen was extremely wise to tie this one to her, I just hope that lasts, now that by her own words he's free of his honor obligation to her. On the other hand, his and Lim's interest in one another could be another type. As could his friendship to Tigre, who Elen might be interested in. Hmmm, I wonder what they are up to over in Brune?*

OOOOOOO

Roland, the great Knight of Brune stood, leaning against his horse as he read a scroll that a royal courier had handed to him. Roland was a giant of a man, equal in size to Duke Thenardier, if a bit slimmer, although despite that he was far stronger than the Duke physically. He wore black armor, had a giant black sword strapped to his back and black hair. Roland's face had also often been described as handsome, although marred by a wide scar along his face directly below his eyes that cut into his nose.

Having finished reading the message he crumpled it up, scowling as around him his troops continued the work of cleaning up the bodies of their last battle. The battle had been relatively simple. He had tricked the enemy into thinking that he and the Knights of Navarre had pulled away from the border. When they had crossed the border, he had attacked ruthlessly, shattering their logistics train and then encircling them in a series of skirmishes to make his numbers appear far larger than they were. Then when they had been in disarray, Roland and his order had reformed and attacked full-bore, with him in the lead and his infantry closing

around them, penning them in place up, so they could not use their greater numbers. With Roland to crack their lines like an eggshell, his men had poured through, and the entire expedition force of seventeen thousand men had been routed in two weeks of battle. Some of them would get back over the borders, he hadn't pursued them all that hard after their army broke, but every noble had been found and put to the sword during the rout. With that, Sachstein would take years at a minimum rebuilding their forces along their border with Brune.

Which is a very good thing Roland thought, sardonic humor edging his mental tone *considering that I have been called away. Curse it!* "I have been ordered to the capital, and then to deal with this Earl Vorn fellow and his seeming alliance with Zhcted."

His second-in-command, a blonde-haired fellow named Olivier frowned heavily. "Are you certain that this is the case? With all of the influence they have in court, Thenardier or Ganelon could possibly have influenced the King. As far as rumors go, Earl Tigre is doing nothing but defending those who come to them, after successfully beating off an attack by count Thenardier to ransack his earldom."

"He has reached out to the Vanadis of Leitmeritz for aid," Roland retorted, mildly however. Indeed, it was more a question than a retort.

"Perhaps, but perhaps that was the only ally he could find. And he **had** already been captured."

"Captured and turned," Roland replied, his voice still mild.

"That doesn't match the rumors."

Roland shook his head. "It might not, but as a Knight, I cannot listen to rumors."

His second-in-command shrugged his shoulders, taking the rebuke, if that was what it was with equanimity and Roland went on, "We will prepare to march, yet you are correct. If we are being ordered to interfere in Brune's internal affairs, which is directly against the remit of Our Order, I can request an audience of the king himself, and get the reason for the change of policy from him. Will that suffice to put your worries to rest my friend?"

Olivier bowed his head this time in a gesture of respect, and turned to shout out orders, readying a group of men to escort Roland to Nice.

OOOOOO

News of Sasha's recovery spread quickly, and in the main, there were four responses. Shock giving way to happiness among the peasants and middle-class who heard it. Awe at the recovery of the one of the Vanadis. Indeed not just any Vanadis, but The Vanadis who everyone believed was the strongest of this age. Joy, in those who knew her personally. As an example, Sofy heard about it as she was on her way to Elen's Leitmeritz and through to Brune's capital of Nice on a diplomatic mission. She instantly turned aside, using her power twice to speed up her journey to see her old friend.

And then there was the fourth response: Fear. Not fear in Zhcted's enemies, who had yet to hear about it. In these Medieval times, information and rumors could only spread so fast after all, and more importantly spread far slower between countries than internally. Rather, it was those whose plans for the future, which were suddenly upended who felt fear, a great deal of it.

In an undisclosed location deep in Zhcted, several men met at a pre-chosen but secret location. This was in a hidden basement which was made to look like a council room. Or would, if there was any real light to see by beyond a single candle set in the center of the table.

One man slammed a heavily beringed hand down on a table, the rings visible for just a second in the light of before he pulled it back, an angry voice bellowing, "How is this possible!?"

"There is some confusion on how she was healed," said another voice, almost conciliatory, but wary at the same time. "Apparently, a new healer arrived, sent to Alshavin from Viltaria, one of the people who had interested her in Alsace."

A third man scoffed at that, shaking his head angrily. "We should not be involved in that, that cesspool! The moment Duke Ganelon began to grow powerful and the royal family did not step on him or Duke Thenardier, they tolled the death knell of Brune as a united country. Their civil war is going to go on for at least a few years, and it will be bloody and dangerous beyond belief."

"True, but there are others that are going to start fishing in those troubled waters," said the fourth voice. His voice was almost crackling with age, yet sharp for all of that. "Mouzinel for certain is going to start probing Duke Thenardier's borders and those of the east of Brune. And Sachstein has already tried. They were rebuffed."

The man laughed, the sound a cackle. "There is a reason why the Great Knight Roland is so rightly feared. He's already smashed the majority of their expedition force and has cut off their entire army. I imagine within a week that army will either sue for peace or just surrender outright. A force of seventeen thousand men surrendering to a force of less than six. If they don't, Roland will crush them. He has no pity for any enemy of Brune."

"A pity that he could not be the Prince then," the first voice said angrily. "We could do with such a powerful ally on our borders especially with Mouzinel making expansionist noises

once more.” He paused, obviously reining in his temper if how his hands clenched and unclenched around one another on the table was any indication. “Regardless, let us concentrate on the topic at hand. I was told that Alshavin would never recover from the poison we were feeding her. How could any healer no matter how skilled reverse the effects of that poison after it’s been in her body for so long?”

“We don’t know. We know only that the man arrived, with Limalisha, Viltaria’s second-in-command. They spent about an hour meeting with Alshavin before she acquiesced to his attempts to heal her, a process we don’t know anything about. At that point, the man also seemingly figured out she had been poisoned, and Limalisha and Alshavin’s captain of the guard started to lock down the castle. Our mole barely got out ahead of the lockdown and had to leave the actual poisoner behind.

“And then, three days later, she walks out fully healed. There are rumors going around Legnica that she went through with her promise to sleep with the doctor who was able to heal with her and that that took up most of those three days,” said the elderly voice. “There’s also rumor that he then fought her in a sparring match in her garden. He didn’t win, but he certainly put on a show for her guards and servants.”

“That’s rumors,” the second voice said sharply to the fourth, one hand making a chopping motion, only vaguely seen in the light of the candle. All four of them were very careful to keep their faces from showing to one another. Of course, they all knew one another, but this way, there were no names or faces exchanged. After all, what they were contemplating was arguably treason against the laws of Zhcted.

“What is more important is that the Vanadis are not going to be as malleable and isolated as they should be,” the man with the many rings said, scowling angrily. “Obertas alone we could have planned around kept the others at each other’s throats. But now that Alshavin is on the mend, she will keep that from spreading further. The balance of power in Zhcted is going to tip in the Vanadis’ all too soon, especially if this power grab in Brune works out for Viltaria. Luckily, we forced Viltaria to admit those lands would become crown lands, but that is a double-edged sword.”

“The Vanadis have always had divided loyalties,” said the third voice speaking up once more, a sneer in his tone. “Their loyalty is to their Viralt first and foremost, then their own lands and then finally to the nation as a whole in the form of the king. That is a recipe for disaster, I’ve said it before. We should have pushed for the laws of Zhcted to be changed years ago. Those magic weapons are a necessary evil, nothing more. Give them positions in the army but no lands, and they will lack a true power base from which they can challenge the rightful...”

“That has never been within our abilities and you know that Spiritualist,” the first man interrupted slamming one hand down on the table. Underneath the rings that hand showed distinct signs of age, even if the voice did not. “Concentrate on what we can do, not what your imagination would wish us to do.”

“Still, perhaps we should take this with a grain of salt,” said the creaky voice. “After all, there have been whispers of the pirates spreading out and something going on within Asvarre. Alshavin’s being back to full strength would guard our borders.”

“Perhaps Diplomat, but Alshavin is already far too strong for me to like still being around. We must find some way of corralling her if not outright control her.”

“To control a Vanadis is not all that simple, that’s why we tried to poison her in the first place. But, there are ways. Ways to make certain that she does not leave Legnica if nothing else,” the second voice murmured.

“Smart thinking, Spy. And we can levy a new tax on Leitmeritz and another tax on Viltaria’s newly required lands. After the conflict, there has simmered down with the onset of winter at any rate. To do so now would be shortsighted in the extreme. In the long term, it will make those new lands far more pliable, or start an insurrection against Viltaria and her local tool.”

“But more importantly,” the first force went on, his hands coming visible again in the light of the candle, “Nothing can be found that can link Alshavin’s poisoning back to our cabal and in particular me. Have Bernard disappear. Have his handler disappear, have everything and anyone connected to this disappears.”

“Leader,” one of them said hesitantly, “They could perhaps remember that Bernard was recommended by the royal palace’s majordomo. Is that...”

“I said every connection,” the man with the rings said coldly. “Did I stutter?”

Unseen in the shadows the others blanched and the one called Spy muttered. “Yes Leader, your will be done.”

OOOOOO

Because Sasha wanted to make certain that her newfound health didn’t falter again, she asked Ranma and Lim to stay for at least a week in Legnica. Although that was more due to the worries of her people than she thought that her new health would desert her. She also wanted to load Lim up with gifts for Elen for sending Ranma to her, and for little Ludmilla, who had agreed to it.

“Actually, I’ll be sending more gifts to Ludmila if I’m honest,” she said with a laugh. “Bending on her own personal honor to not come in against Elen in favor of Duke Thenardier

must've been a wrench. I want to show that I'm proud of her for putting the security of our realm and frankly reward her friendship with me."

Thinking of the short blue-haired girl, Ranma chuckled shaking her head his head. "Yeah, I can see that having been a major issue there. About as prickly as a cactus, that one."

Elsewhere in Zhcted, Sofy had heard about Sasha being healed once more. Thanks to Zaht's power of teleportation, Sofy arrived in Legnica within a few days of the rumors hitting the court in Silesia, having turned away from her present mission to Brune to do so. Ascertaining the health of the king of Brune, and returning with their current envoy to the enemy country's court, as well as checking on the war effort, took second place in her mind to seeing if this rumor was true.

In her office, Sasha frowned as there was a commotion at the dorm, but smiled as one of her servants entered, and informed her another Vanadis had arrived to speak with her and moments later, Sasha smiled in amusement as her friend Sofy walked, almost ran really, into the room. "Good day Sofy, how are you doing?"

"That is my line!" the other Vanadis replied, practically running across the floor towards Sasha where she pulled the slightly older woman into a hug. "So it's true!" she said, before gently pushing the other woman away to stare at her face and then up and down her body. She had felt the strength and vitality and the other woman's hug, and smiled, raising one hand to wipe away tears. "So, you are healed! Completely?"

"Well it's only been a week, but yes, I think this is permanent," Sasha said with a laugh. "If you have any doubt about that, you can watch Ranma and I later today practice."

"Ranma? The same boy who Elen found that could fight on an equal level with a Vanadis?"

"Exactly yes. Elen sent him to me, with Lim to help do the introductions. Beyond his combat skills he is also an extremely good healer. Although I doubt that anyone has ever mentioned the upside to it, at least for us Vanadis," Sasha finished ruefully.

Sofy made an interrogative noise and Sasha laughed, moving back to the table she had been sitting on and gesturing Sofy to sit next to her. "You know about life energy of course."

Sofy nodded since that was the case. Every Vanadis knew about how their weapons tied directly into their life energy, the built-up vitality within them that allowed them to use the weapons in the first place and to perform many of the magical attacks that came with those weapons. Sofy's own weapon, Zaht, was not nearly as powerful offensively as the others, but defensively and in terms of magic it was actually more powerful, given its ability to teleport herself and a few others any distance she wished. There were limits of course, and that spell was draining, although not as draining as Valentina's equivalent. But she knew about life energy.

“Well, Ranma’s healing ability basically...” to her shock Sasha found herself blushing. “Um, he basically pours his own life energy into the person he is healing. And as a Vanadis, well I can feel that happening. It was like getting a massage inside and out all over your body. It was easily the most erotic thing I’ve ever had happened to me.”

“Is that why there’s a rumor going around that you...how should I put this?” Sofy said, a wide grin on her face now almost a cherubic grin as Sasha continued to blush. “That you made good on that little promise of yours? Did you have the two of you have to be rescued from dehydration?”

“Yes and no actually, he was quite able to keep up with me, but after three days...”

“Really?!” Sofy interrupted, her eyes widening. Unlike Sasha, she was a virgin, although she was somewhat experienced with everything up to that limit. Sofy had been a noblewoman much like Sasha although from an extremely minor house, and her family had arranged a marriage for her when she was very young. The man had been handsome, pleasant, and randy as all get out, especially because Sofy had ‘blossomed early.’ She had enjoyed his attentions immensely even if they never went so far as to dishonor her.

And then Zaht had chosen Sofy. Instantly the man had decided that he would rather not be involved with a Vanadis since that raised her status well above his own, and their relationship had ended. Since then she had never been interested in taking up with another man, although she had learned to use her body to get men to follow her advice at need.

Sasha just nodded, still blushing as she looked away. “Yes, well, he um, had the stamina anyway. But he, er, was um, a virgin so I had to do most of the work. Looking back on it that wasn’t my finest hour really, but sheer relief and the fact he’d used his life energy to heal me, which sort of acted like the world’s best massage, well I couldn’t control myself,” she confessed before very obviously changing the subject. “But he is an even better fighter than he is a healer.

“Oh, is he as good a fighter as Elen said?” Sofy replied, deciding to let her friend off the hook for now.

“You’ll find out later on if you wish to stay and watch us spar,” Sasha said, and almost dangerous grin appearing on his face. He is quite good, and an extremely fast learner two. He’s been here for a week since we um, finished, and we’ve sparred every day since. Ranma’s already gotten used to my style and normal tactics and my Bargren’s less destructive attacks! He can’t do much about them at times, but he’s won twice out of the fourteen spars we’ve had. Which is better than most of my fellow Vanadis,” she teased, causing the blonde Vanadis to pout, putting her arms under her enormous chest which thrust that chest out all the more.

She and Sofy had never actually fought, Sofy was not a frontline combatant. But Sasha had crossed blades with three of her fellow Vanadis. Even while she was sick, none of them had

been able to best her. Even working together occasionally, as when she stepped in to stop Ludmilla and Elen from fighting, they had failed miserably.

“So, what was your illness?” Sofy asked as she set down the cup of tea a maid had given her, smiling in thanks to the woman who bowed her head deeply and retreated.

Sasha waited until the woman was out of the room, before turning back to her guest. Not even her handmaids knew of her concerns about the origins of her illness, and she wanted it kept that way. “It wasn’t an illness,” she said bluntly. “It was poison. Ranma was able to tell that within about two hours of examining me that was the case. It mimicked the properties of my family’s normal illness, but it wasn’t.”

“Wh, what!? Who would poison you!?” Sofy stammered in shock.

“It was one of my own servants actually. He had taken money to add something without actually knowing what it was from another servant, a scribe named Bernard. Then after that, obviously he was an accomplice. And had to keep doing it even if he wanted to stop.”

Sofy shook her head, regaining her equilibrium with the ease of several years as a politician. “One of the other countries? Some pirate prince? But that makes no sense, I would they get the money to the man. Surely you have people watching your servants as well as...”

“I know precisely who in my city has dealings with other nations, and yes they are all watched,” Sasha cut her off, watching the other woman carefully.

Sofy frowned, thinking. “Some noblemen you threatened or whose honor you impugned? No most nobles would sneer at the idea of poison, even against a Vanadis who they thought had honorable issues with... So who?”

Sasha sighed, then shook her head. “I can’t tell you that.”

Sofy blinked, then leaned forward abruptly the movement setting her breasts to jiggling in a way that had Sasha been the sort to become jealous or annoyed by another woman’s beauty would’ve set her off. “You know who was behind it!? Tell me! Together we can...”

“We can do nothing. I only have supposition and suspicion at the moment. And I refuse to share that with anyone just yet. Not without proof. It would do more damage than good to Zhcted,” Sasha replied with a firm shake of her head.

Sofy bit her lip, then slowly nodded. “Just tell me if you have any suspicion of it being another Vanadis.”

She breathed a sigh of relief when Sasha shook her head emphatically. “No, I don’t suspect any of our sisters.”

“Thank goodness!” Sofy said leaning back. She had suspicions about Valentina. Although she hadn’t ever really thought that even Valentina would go that far, it was the first thought that had come into her mind when Sasha refused to say anything. *But if it isn’t another Vanadis... oh... OH... right. Not going to speculate on that any further.*

Sofy deliberately pasted a smile on her face then. “Well, if you’re not going to tell me anything, I won’t speculate needlessly. Instead, tell me are you going to reclaim your position as the moderator among us Vanadis? Let me tell you, I would cheerfully give up that duty.”

“No doubt,” Sasha laughed. “But I won’t be doing so just yet. Legnica has gotten far too used to running itself and must be taken back into hand. And then, I’m going to probably have to prove to the pirates and others that my health has returned entirely.” Bargren began to flame up at that and she smiled lovingly at them patting each dagger hilt. “I’m looking forward to that.”

Sofy nodded, reminded once more that Sasha was a perfect example of the weapon choosing women whose temperament matched their own. Sasha was warm, friendly, almost demure at times, but when she flamed up in anger or violence, she tended to burn all around her to ash. *No wonder her nickname is the Princess of Luminous Flame.*

“Now come,” Sasha said standing up, “if you want to see Ranma in action, I am in a sparring session with him in a few minutes.”

“Mah, he’s still here?”

“I requested that Ranma and Lim remain until I was certain that I was on the mend permanently. “They both agreed, and I’ve taken the time to load them up with gifts for Ludmilla and Elen in thanks for setting their own issues aside to send Ranma to me.”

“Well, at least let me finish my tea first,” Sofy said.

Sasha laughed and gestured to a window. “You’ll be able to watch us from there you tea addict.”

Sofy nodded agreeably to that, and as Sasha left, sipped at her tea pensively for a few moments before she heard the sound of battle outside. Then she stood up, still carrying her tea - she was not a woman who liked to have her tea interrupted - and went to the window Sasha had indicated to look out over the garden at the back of the palace.

There she saw the palace’s owner and the young man in question doing battle. This was not a spar, this was a full-on, if you make a single mistake you will be scarred for life or dead, battle. She wondered idly on why Sasha had called it a spar, her weapon coming into her hand, as she prepared to teleport herself down to help her fellow Vanadis.

But then the grins on the two people registered, and she calmed down slightly watching intently. The boy was good, seemed to be as at home in the air as on the ground, and was incredibly flexible and tough if the damage he was taking from Sasha was any indication. She then watched one punch he landed on Sasha cleanly, without her being able to move with it floor the woman, causing her to stumble back, her head ringing as the sound of something being hit repeatedly reached her. *Hmm, what was that?*

His follow-on kick though was caught, and the boy found himself on the ground. A mule kick freed him, but Sasha was still able to land a blow of her own that sent the boy flying backward like he was shot out of a catapult.

Ranma rolled with it, kicking off the outer wall in a move that was so smooth it looked as if he had practiced it a million times, coming back in even as she charged forward. The two of them exchanged blow after blow, dodging, ducking, blocking, redirecting, thousands blows, their movements becoming so fast that Sasha was having trouble keeping up.

“All right,” she muttered to the empty room, “He is able to fight on an even footing with a Vanadis.” She shook her head with a laugh. “Oh, but that’s going to make some waves.” She didn’t care about the implications of that to national security or anything else though. If it was true that this young man that helped heal Sasha, then not only Legnica but all of Zhcted owed him a vast debt.

And so do I for healing my friend Sofy thought. She watched until she finished her tea, then moved over to set the cup down by the saucer,

After that, she walked through the palace and out into the garden, arriving in time for the battle to end. Both of them moved over to a table, where Lim was already sitting, going over a list of something or other. The woman was known as an incredible organizer, Elen’s right-hand woman, and Sofy had no doubt that Sasha had taken the opportunity to get some use out of Lim herself. Sasha saw her coming, and smiled over the young man’s shoulder at her, gesturing her over.

As she walked towards them, Zaht let out a giggle but Sofy didn’t let it distract her. Her Viralt was always laughing at something. She sensed it was laughing at Ranma, but even that didn’t bother her as she looked at him with interest.

At the mental sound of laughter, Ranma turned, frowning as Lim looked up from her work, quickly rising to her feet and then bowing formally. “Lady Sofy, I’m sorry, I didn’t realize you had arrived, or I would have greeted you already.”

“Oh that’s quite alright Lim, you’re not in my service after all, and I’ve never been one for formalities outside the court,” Sofy said with a laugh. “And this must be Ranma,” she went on, her gaze turning to the young man. “I have heard so many rumors about you. Although

from what I just saw, at least one of those rumors was a simple fact, and I understand from Sasha that I have you to thank for her healing?”

With a faint smile Sasha did the introductions, waving her hand grandly to Sofy. “Ranma, of no last name he’s shared just yet, be known to Sofy Obertas, Lady of Polesia, Vanadis of Zaht and current go-between us all.”

Ranma, nodded his head slightly, although unbeknownst to him, his eyes had widened, and there was a faint blush on his face as he concentrated on the woman carrying the magic weapon that had been laughing at him. His eyes had traveled down once before he was able to pull them back upwards, but that one glance had been one heck of a treat. *Oh my God! That must be the biggest chest I’ve ever seen! And blonde hair too, um, wow... so I do apparently have a type...* “But gods she’s gorgeous...”

Ranma frowned then looking at their faces and groaned, holding his head in his hands blushing hotly. “I just said that allowed, didn’t I?”

As Zaht’s laughter ended, Sofy giggled, while Lim fought to keep a scowl from her face. “Don’t worry, you’re not the first person to give me compliments like that. Although that was much more heartfelt than most.” She actually had to give the younger man some credit. When meeting her for the first time most men, especially young men, would have been staring at Sofy’s chest for an appreciable amount of time, maybe even after she coughed to get their attention if they were particularly uncouth. Ranma didn’t, he had glanced down once, then concentrated on her face.

Actually, is he looking at my hair? Testing the theory, she raised a hand to her blonde curls and played with them with a finger, and watched his eyes twitched sideways to the movement, his blush deepening slightly before he turned his gaze back to her face. *Hehe, oh my this could be fun.*

“Although I am surprised to see you still here Lim,” Sofy said, before turning back to Lim. “I would’ve thought you would be at the front with Elen.”

Lim shrugged her shoulders. “It was decided that Ranma would need more than a letter of introduction, given what fantastical abilities we were trying to convince Lady Sasha to believe in. I was assigned that duty.”

“Ouch,” Ranma muttered, “well excuse me for being a duty.”

Lim flushed and kicked out at the boy’s shin, thankful that she was wearing her hobnailed boots as normal. That cushioned the impact on her part, even if Ranma didn’t so much as let out a grunt at her kick. “You know that’s not what I meant.”

Giggling, Sofy drew Ranma's attention back to her deliberately shifting in her chair to see if she could get his eyes to track down again. To her surprised respect, he kept his eyes locked on her face. *Hmm, so, a tremendous amount of self-control as well.* "What can you tell me about yourself Ranma. As the go-between of us Vanadis and the King's voice occasionally to the others and vice-versa. In that position will have to make a report formal of Sasha's recovery to the court eventually. After I finish the mission I interrupted to come here at any rate." Sofy felt a little guilty at that admission but not overmuch. Sasha's recovery was just too important.

Ranma winced. "Do you have to? I really don't want any more attention paid to me by the powers that be than I have already."

"Why ever not?" Sofy asked, confused.

"Because I don't to be tied down and made the Royal healer or some such shit," Ranma said bluntly. "I want to be able to move around on my own, not be tied down to anyone. In fact, this whole thing with healing Sasha was because Elen said that she would consider it a payoff of my parole as her prisoner. I mean I would have healed her if I knew her regardless of that, but I wouldn't have ever heard of it without that deal being offered so..." he stammered, but Sasha just waved him to silence, shaking her head and saying she understood what he meant.

"Even without considering my desire to not be tied down, I'm not a doctor," Ranma went on. "Not as my people would use the term anyway. I can walk the walk, but it's not really my choice of profession. I'm a martial artist, a fighter. That's the skill set I want to make the most use of."

Sofy shrugged. "I suppose I can understand that. It would be different if you were a citizen of Zhcted, but you aren't." She looked at Ranma shrewdly. "Hmmm. Nor are you from Brune, Mouzinel, or Sachstein. You could be from Asvarre, though I doubt it."

Ranma blinked. "Did Elen tell you that?"

"No, but I can tell. You don't talk like anyone I've seen before, you don't have the natural respect or awe of a Vanadis and your looks don't match anything I've ever seen in Sachstein or Asvarre. As the Vanadis of Zaht, I have been a special ambassador for years, so I have seen both those countries. I haven't been into Mouzinel for obvious reasons, so I suppose you could be from there, but your coloration certainly doesn't match the men of Mouzinel."

"Erm, well would you be angry if I said I'd like to keep where I came from a secret? Until we get to know one another anyway." Ranma added hastily, "Erm, it's just, I don't think you'll honestly believe me, and I don't want it to become common knowledge."

"That's perfectly fine. Still, you will need to give me some information on the poison you found in Sasha's system. I will need to report on that." Sofy held up a hand as Sasha made to

speak. "I heard a few of your city's merchants talking about that as I walked up to your castle, Sasha. It will get out. Which means I need to make a formal report on it."

Sasha scowled but nodded. *Darn it, there goes trying to downplay that or act as if the poison wasn't found. Still, that was a long shot at best.*

At Sasha's nod, Ranma began to describe the poison, where it had started from – her stomach, and its symptoms. He then spoke about Sasha's original disease. At first, he tried to downplay what he did to heal her, but Sofy wouldn't let him, and Sasha gasped at the amount of work it had taken to heal her: clearing her marrow, basically using his own life energy to empower her body to replace all of her blood since it was tainted, while forcing out the old blood, and then clearing out her lungs, hearts and other internal organs of the poison. There had been more than just his being a guy in his letting Sasha have her way with him: he'd been too tired to fight her.

Sofy took several notes on the poison but didn't do so about his ability to heal her. That she would keep to herself unless she was forced to share it in some fashion. *In fact, I might not mention the poison either. It will be interesting to see if I can spot any reactions to that if someone else brings it up and I try to play it up afterward.*

Shaking herself out of her musings about that, Sofy finished writing her notes. "And are you satisfied with your health, Sasha?"

Sasha nodded and then winked at Lim. "I'm even satisfied with the number of gifts I'm sending to Elen and Ludmilla. Why are you asking?"

"Well, I will be heading to see Elen soon, I diverted to see if the rumors were true about her health, but I really do need to get going. The king has decided what to do in terms of her becoming involved in this Brune Civil War. And I need to see the Brunish King on that point and others. And you did say you'd tell me more about yourself if we got to know one another," Sofy teased.

"So you're saying you want to travel with Lim and me?" Ranma shrugged while Lim stiffened very slightly, something Sofy and Ranma missed but which set Sasha to smirking slightly. "I suppose that's fine, although you'll probably slow us down a bit, horses are always slower on the long run."

"Only in comparison to you," Lim replied tartly, shaking her head.

"Hehehe!" Sofy chuckled behind one hand. "Don't worry, I imagine I'll keep up quite well. And we're all going the same way, so it just makes sense traveling together." She was actually looking forward to seeing this young man's reaction to her teleportation. People always reacted differently, and she had yet to figure out a way to discover how they would react, one way or the other. And this boy was so self-possessed the idea of making him jump or panic or

become sick amused her greatly. "Besides," she said laughing lightly as she clapped her hands, "I want to see Lunie."

"Who is that?" Ranma asked brows furrowed.

"Lunie's Lady Eleanora's cherish dragon. Sofy loves the little creature," Lim supplied.

"Oh, him," Ranma nodded. "Yeah, I like the little guy too. He seems to hate Furry Little Devils just as much as I do."

All three women present cocked her head to one side asking, "Furry Little Devils?" in the same tone, as if question marks had appeared around their heads.

Ranma shuttered, shaking one hand wildly in front of his face "Never mind, let's move on."

"I suggest you leave tomorrow morning. It looks as if it's going to rain soon. Probably one of the last rains in the season," Sasha mused. "Winter's almost here in Legnica."

The three prospective travelers nodded, and Lim stood up, picking up the list she had been working on bowing formally to each of the Vanadis and smiling at Ranma, far more warmly, Sofy realized, than she had seen before on her face. "In that case, I'll separate the goods for Ludmilla out of from those for lady Eleanora now."

"I think I'll explore the city one last time," Ranma said cracking his head his shoulders and neck explosively. "See you tomorrow morning." With that he turned and raced for the outer wall, hopping up onto the battlements and then over to the other side.

Behind him, Sofy giggled. "My word, he is a most energetic young man, isn't he?"

"...Why does that sound dirty coming from you?" Lim asked, honestly perplexed.

"Ara, it's just your imagination, Limalisha, although knowing your mind works like that is somewhat interesting, isn't it?" Sofy replied, giggling behind her raised hand as she turned back to Sasha while Lim gaped like a red-faced fish. "So, what are your specific plans now that you're healed? I assume that you will be sending a note to Elizabeth warning her off?"

A few hours after, the rain hit, forcing the two Vanadis inside, where they continued their discussion about current politics, their fellow Vanadis, Legnica's traditional duties, and other things. Then after a very pleasant time with Sasha, Sofy availed herself of other Vanadis' bathes, smiling and cheerfully humming to herself as she entered. She paused then seeing a redhead standing there. She was dressed in, oddly enough, what looked like random bits of silk clothing, grumbling under her breath.

And at the sight of her, Zaht chuckled, much louder than it had earlier that day. Zaht was normally a fun-loving Viralt at the best of times though, so his laughing once more didn't surprise Sofy. Although she was surprised that Zaht again didn't share what was making him chuckle. She got the distinct impression through their connection that she would enjoy a surprise soon though, so she didn't bother questioning it.

Ranma had not had a pleasant time out in the city. First, he hadn't honestly spotted anything that he wanted to spend the money Sasha gave him as a kind of allowance. Oh, there were a few cool weapons, but none of them looked strong enough for him to use for very long. A giant war hammer from the far north looked cool, but the shaft was being replaced at present. Everything else he found was mostly in the way of supplies rather than anything he bought for pleasure. And halfway through this search, the sky decided to piss on him.

And it kept pissing on him for the rest of the night, forcing him to buy some clothing that wasn't quite as formfitting to avoid the looks of the men still moving around the rainy port. By the time she got back to the castle, those clothing too had been almost ruined by the rain. *Damn me if it doesn't remind me of Cambodia or Vietnam*, Ranma mused, remembering how he (it was before Jusenkyo) and his father had traveled to those countries to learn Muay Thai and Bokator. But a hell of a lot colder and way more unpleasant. *It really does feel like winter's just around the corner.*

Just as she was about to enter the baths, the sound of someone laughing at her reached Ranma and she turned as a light, female voice said "Ara, hello. My word, you don't look well at all."

"Gah!" Ranma blinked, flushing slightly. "Er, um, hello, er, I was just about to get a bath miss." Ranma couldn't honestly remember if Elen had told him that Sofy knew about her curse. But nothing she had said earlier that day indicated so one way or the other. And old habits, in this case hiding her curse, died hard.

"Ara, excellent, I always prefer to have company when I bathe. You can wash my back for me," Sofy said, divesting herself of her clothing quickly in a small hamper to one side.

Ranma had been about to refuse when Sofy began changing, only for her still completely male mind to freeze at the sight. *Holy shit...*

Sofy was a lot softer around the edges than any of the other Vanadis Ranma had seen, but that didn't imply she had much in the way of excess curves anywhere but where they did her the most good. Her rear was oddly both small and pert yet soft looking, her legs were powerful and long, without a single blemish, and she looked to be a bit thinner than Ranma's female form. Her back showed a deceptive amount of muscles, and her hair, undone, fell down to either side of her. And her breasts! Even from behind, Ranma could see them swaying as she leaned down to pull off her panties. Ranma was in no way a pervert, but even after having spent three delirious days with Sasha screwing the living daylights out of him, he couldn't turn

away. There was simply a limit to any man's self-control, and a naked Sofy backside was it. *God, that's like a freaking work of art! To whichever god made Sofy, fuck if you didn't break the mold.* Ranma could actually feel her body reacting, her nipples hardening as arousal worked its way through her body.

Finally, though as Sofy pulled on a towel, Ranma, with a surge of something far too much like regret at her body getting covered, turned away. Almost gibbering now at what would happen if Sofy found out about his curse, or rather when given the whole hot water for a bath equation, Ranma moved quickly to the doorway leading out of the bathing area. "Erm, gah, um, well I don't, that is, it would be beneath you to bathe with such as..."

"Nonsense!" Sofy said, suddenly behind her wouldn't hear the word of it, grabbing her arm and dragging her back towards the inner door. "You can't be going around the castle like that you look like drowned rat. And I've never been one to put stock in stations and such in the bathhouse anyway. Now, let's get you washed up."

Still protesting, Ranma found herself stripped rather adroitly by the older blonde. It might have had something with the feel of her towel-clad breasts pressing into her from various angles though as she pulled Ranma's clothes off her. Or her fingers poking at Ranma's stomach and side. "Good grief, you have some muscles on you. Are you a guard here?" Something about the redhead and Zaht's initial laugh at her was causing Sofy to think she was missing something, something she had been told, but she couldn't quite bring it to mind. Setting that aside, Sofy pushed the still protesting feebly redhead into a chair the large bathing area, smiling as the steam hit her from the bath, which was about fifteen feet to a side, lined with small, multicolored stones and tiles. "Now, you don't need to be washed off given how wet from the rain you already are so... EY!"

With that exclamation, Sofy pushed the still off-balance redhead into the bath. Surprisingly the redhead tried to fight back, twisting and grabbing at Sofy, trying to push up off her arm and into the air. She almost did so, but Sofy had almost automatically fought against that 'attack,' grabbing at Ranma as she overbalanced, sending them both into the bath.

Sofy was blinded by her own hair for a moment as she grumbled pushing the redhead up against the side of the bath, finding herself sitting in her lap. "Mou, what did you do that for, I hadn't even washed off yet... actually I never did...get... your..." Sofy stuttered to a halt as her brain registered what her hands and other senses were telling her.

Soft chest? Nope. Hard muscles, though, quite a lot of those, yummy. Feminine grumble? Nope. A male voice, currently muttering about how he was too young to die? That there certainly was. Slowly, with one hand still on that nice, hard chest, Sofy raised a hand to push back her wet hair in order to see and found herself staring into the eyes of the young man from earlier that day. And just like that, what Elen had told her about Ranma finally came back to her. "Oh, oh! I, I completely forgot! red hair and, and turning into a girl with wet hair and back to a boy with hot water!"

“Um okay, s, so you did know about my curse. Does that mean you’ll forgive me for not, y’know, opening my eyes at the moment and maybe find it in yer heart to not maim me too bad? Heck, maybe just let me go?” Ranma asked, hope tinging his voice.

Sofy paused for a moment, her one hand still on Ranma’s chest taking her attention. Those muscles were not the massive type she saw all too often on nobles in the capital who thought that looking strong was all they needed to do, prancing around with the massive claymores they had never used in real combat. In contrast, Ranma’s muscles were slim and corded, the kind of muscles of a man who used them every day, solid as a rock under her fingers, which started to spread and caress without any order from her mind. Her eyes stared at that chest then further into the water, where they saw the six-pack, the side muscles, taut and strong, again showing these were the muscles of a man who used them constantly. And below that... *big... very, very Big. Um, that is really flattering actually. Oh my...* “A...a...actually I won’t,” she said with a pout that very nearly covered her blush, moving backward away from him, taking one last glance at Ranma’s hard muscles and below into the water, biting her lip before speaking once more. “I have a towel, so it’s not like you’ll see anything. I don’t see any reason why we can’t both enjoy the baths together. Besides, I am immensely curious about your curse! It is so fascinating to see your curse in person. How did you get it? What happens if you are in a cold or hot mist, is that enough to activate the curse? I can see it’s a full-body curse, but does it affect your mind or taste buds? Or even how you deal with what happens after you eat? I know women and men need to eat different amounts of healthy food and such even if everything else is equal. Ooh, what about colors? Men and women see colors differently too, don’t we?”

Ranma blinked at her questions while keeping his eyes on her face even as Sofy leaned deliberately against the side of the bath in such a way that brought attention to how formfitting a wet towel could be. “U, um, are ya sure this is the time for that?”

“Hehehe why not? Surely, you’re not objecting to being alone in a bath with me, are you?” Sofy asked, then released her deadly anti-male weapon: she pouted. Her bottom lip actually quivered as her eyes seemed to glisten more than the steam should have allowed for. She then added a slight bounce to her chest, almost looking like her breasts would pop out of the towel.

Despite knowing how bad a situation like this would have gone in his past dimension, Ranma had no defense against this, and he folded like wet tissue. “Er, um... do, don’t be like that, er, your questions right! Let’s see, it depends on what the mist is like. If it’s heavy and a real mist, then yeah it’ll trigger my curse one way or the other. Er, as to how I got it...”

What followed was easily the strangest bathing experience Ranma had ever had: bathing with a woman without her shrieking pervert. Without another woman coming in to shriek ‘pervert’ or to attack him.

Sofy, after the initial moment, didn’t even flirt with him – or so Ranma thought anyway - she simply asked Ranma her questions, then asked about his training, getting the impression he

wouldn't talk about where he was. Sofy also believed him immediately about how his father had trained him when he was younger, saying "part of becoming the Vanadis of Zaht allows me to be very good at reading people, it's why we have always been used as diplomatic envoys."

In turn, Ranma, despite being tongue-tied by his gorgeous interlocutor more often than not, questioned her about the world at large and Zhcted. Sofy made this worse by little movements, shifting this way and that and stretching occasionally while complaining about a sore back or shoulders. It was all she could do not to giggle when Ranma nearly sank into the water at seeing a bit of side-boob at one point when she moved through the water to grab at a amphora of wine that had been set to one side of the bath.

And when she spoke Sofy didn't bother painting Zhcted in as good a light as she could though, she instead simply told it like it was, emphasizing the beauty that could be found, the good people she met, rather than pointing out how Ranma's abilities could have earned him a noble title somewhere or enough money to live on for the rest of his life. No, she had learned already Ranma had no interest in money for its own sake. He also had no loyalty to country, and certainly none to any king. What loyalty he had was given to his friends.

And after talking to Sasha, seeing what Ranma had been able to for her, seeing his abilities, Sofy had decided she wanted to be Ranma's friend. Now, seeing what else he had to offer, Sofy was wondering about perhaps something more.

OOOOOOO

While the news of Sasha's recovery hadn't quite spread beyond the capital or those towns connected by road to Legnica, there was one other Vanadis, who heard about it beyond Sofy, because she had agents of her own throughout the country.

Finished reading the report, setting it down, and smiled in utter delight. *Excellent! Most excellent. With Sasha's return to full health, Zhcted's ocean border is secured! No small consideration judging from what I've discovered about what might be brewing in Asvarre. And this way Elizabeth will not have any ability to cause trouble with Elen again through Sasha, which in turn will keep Elen in Brune until the war there is done. Good, very good indeed.*

She looked down at a map of the kingdom, her hands flicking as she moved pieces this way and that, one hand coming up to rest on her brow at the pieces seems to disappear, teleported from place to place by the magic of her Viralt. For some reason, while it disdained using teleportation powers to transport other people, and even small objects, Ezendeis made an exception when she was playing games like this. It seemed to sense that they were more important somehow.

Finally, the pieces were where she wanted them, and her fingers tapped them one after the other as she spoke aloud, a luxury she only allowed here in her personal sanctum. “Elen and Tigre, one piece whose value is easily understood, and the other whose value will go up as long as this war continues, and he continues to excel beyond his humble origins. And of course, there is the rumor of his having shot down a dragon, although Elen didn’t tell Sofy or me about that when we met her in the capital.”

She touched another piece, her eyes softening slightly as she did so. “My own men sent in to aid Elen, and more directly hitch myself to their cause. Whatever that cause might end up being. I do hope she looks after them,” Valentina muttered, her smile going flat and dangerous.

While in the course of playing the great game of politics Valentina could be as cold as anyone, when it came to her own people, she was decidedly protective. Perhaps it stemmed from the fact that there were so few people in Osterode in comparison to the great fiefs of the other Vanadis. Or perhaps it was because of all the effort she’d put into bettering Osterode’s position. Regardless, that was the case.

She then moved her hand to the king tapping it thoughtfully but saying nothing, before moving on to a piece carved to resemble a woman much like the piece that resembled Elen. “With Sasha at full strength once more, Elizavetta’s provocations into Sasha’s territory will end, I am certain. She is no one’s fool and despite her recent power-up, the reason for which I **still** haven’t found, she will know she is no match for Alexandra.”

She paused as her sacred weapon whispered something into her mind, and she shook her head. “There is no evidence of that my dear. Until there is, I cannot act. Once I have that evidence, perhaps. If it is in my interest to do so.”

Flicking from one piece to another, Valentina continued her verbal musings. “Ludmilla, hmmpf, she will not move from her icy fastness now. But she might, if the rumors about Mouzinel wishing to expand are proven true, serve best there. She won’t take part in any internal issues regardless. And the holder of Muma is still unknown, roaming the plains somewhere. Ugh, that girl! I don’t know which one irritates me most, Ludmilla with her airs of self-importance just because Lavias has passed directly down the matrilineal line for so long, or the holder of Muma for being so irresponsible.”

That the Vanadis of Brest not being there had allowed bandits and the horsemen who lived on the plains beyond Zhcted’s northern borders to assault through Brest into Valentina’s Osterode was left unsaid. Those problems had made her people stronger, but she still resented the need to deal with them in the other woman’s place. *On the other hand, I have claimed much of Brest’s lands for Osterode, so I suppose it is a bit of a wash. I would still prefer to have my western borders stable and safe though.*

Her hands moved to Sasha, fingers lightly caressing the piece she had designated the first the other Vanadis. The piece of the Queen. Normally she would have used that piece to

denote herself. But if Sasha had indeed returned to full health, there was no other piece worthy of the woman. The respect she garnered from every other war made, including Valentina herself and her raw power made it so. "That, that will send reverberations through the halls of power within and without Zhcted. Hmm... I wonder..."

Shaking that unvoiced thought away for a moment, Valentina then tapped the two small pieces next to the Queen, the one that designated Ranma, a horse, or Knight, and the Rook for Lim. Neither piece had been carved to match the individual, being simple chess pieces, but they did, she felt, matched their personalities. Hard and unyielding tower of strength for Lim, and the wild in both appearance and how he moved Knight for Ranma.

She then tapped several other areas on the map, frowning heavily before going back to Tigre and Elen, her hands twitching back to Ranma, Lim and Sasha. Her thoughts at that point were too jumbled for her to give voice to. Then Valentina stood up, abruptly decisive. "This Ranma character and what he has already done has made me change a few of my long-term plans. And he is allied with Vorn and Elen. Hmm...I should probably distance myself from the other side of the ongoing issue in Brune. In that way, if I can bring him to my side there won't be a preexisting conflict of interest."

She ignored her Viralt's sudden joy at that, Ezendeis speaking into her mind for one of the rare times it did so. Ezendeis had never been happy about her creating trade deals with Ganelon, sensing something inhuman about the man. But before this, his trade had helped enrich Osterode, so she had gone against her Viralt's warnings. But now, while it would hurt to cut those ties the payoff down the line would more than make up for it. "But I need to know for certain. I need to know how Ranma healed Sasha, and, Sasha's own political views. If she is against me..." With a scowl and a shudder, Valentina stood up abruptly and grabbed Ezendeis. "We are going on a trip, my dear. A very long one. Or at least," she said with a giggle, as she opened the dimensional doorway, which would carry her halfway to the capital "we'll be going a long way."

OOOOOO

"What do you mean I cannot see the King?" Roland growled, crossing his arms and staring hard at the three men in front of him. They were Ganelon, Thenardier and the king's chief minister, the portly, extremely mustachioed Pierre Badouin.

"The king has not been himself since word of his son's passing reached him," Badouin said, scowling and shaking his head. "It has completely eroded his mind and health Roland. He has something like an hour a day where he is sound of mind and the rest of the time... nothing. He is either somnolent or completely insensible, shouting and shrieking all the time."

Roland scowled, looking to first Duke Thenardier, then Duke Ganelon. "And why are these two here? I have heard of their ongoing conflict between them, that kind of thing is almost close to treason."

Duke Thenardier simply stared back, unafraid, while Duke Ganelon smirked. Pierre, however, shook his head. "Perhaps, perhaps not. But, with the Prince dead and with the king in such a state," he shrugged his shoulders. "The kingdom needs a strong ruler, however he claims the throne."

"Besides, you shouldn't listen to rumors," Duke Ganelon said. "Yes, we're vying for control but not in open war. Our allies are more boisterous in making their own allegiances plain of course, but not our own men." *Do these men take me for a fool?* Roland thought. "While my position on the frontier might remove me from politics and rumors, that does not mean I do not hear them, certainly not when called back to Nice like this." He sighed then, shaking his head. "But with no clear threat, or break of the laws of Brune, I cannot act against either one of you. Not without my King's leave."

That was alas the truth. While Brune was indeed a nation, it was a very feudal nation as a human from Ranma's world would have put it. The king ruled, yes, but he ruled due to his lands being the largest city, Nice, and the areas around it. Most of the men of Nice, King Faron's own men, had died on the Dinant Plains with Regnas. Nice was still a power itself through wealth and goods, which gave Pierre a power base, but not a military one.

The king ruled through the respect and traditions his nobles paid him. A tradition that said only the strong could rule. And King Faron was no longer strong. The king ruled through family connections, yet both Ganelon and Thenardier had a connection to the royal family, with Thenardier being the closer and Ganelon's being in the past. One of the two had to become the next king. The king ruled through the will of the gods. But given what had happened to Regnas and now king Faron's own weakness, it was obvious the gods no longer favored his direct line.

As all this went through Roland's thoughts, Pierre sighed, moving over to a desk nearby. He picked up a piece of paper wrapped in parchment and sealed with the king's own royal seal. "A few days ago, the king was well enough to be told of Earl Tigre treason, his working with a Zhcted Vanadis, the same Vanadis whose army killed the Prince. Perhaps it was that which drove him into true madness. But regardless, he was well enough at the time to write this Letter of Condemnation against Earl Tigre and his forces. They are officially in revolt against the crown, a clear and present danger to Brune. They must be dealt with."

Roland slowly took the parchment, staring down at it, then up at Pierre and then over to Duke Thenardier. Duke Ganelon he had no time for whatsoever. Yes, the man was a Duke, but the rumors of his debauchery and vileness had spread, well before rumors of his power-grabbing had. But Thenardier was different, he was a renowned war general, and a powerful warrior in his own right. So though he disliked him, Roland also respected him. "Is this true?"

Duke Thenardier shrugged his shoulders. “The Vanadis was the one who led to the attack that shattered our army on the Dinant Planes, whether or not she killed the Prince herself or simply one of her soldiers is immaterial. Their alliance is why I sent my own son against Vorn’s people, but they stole a march on me, having forces already in place able to ambush and overwhelm my son.”

One rumor that had not reached Roland was that Duke Thenardier had used dragons in that campaign. That would have moved the seriousness of his assault on Alsace to an entirely new, indefensible, level. Roland would have been forced to act against Thenardier for use of dragons against Brunish citizens.

But he didn't know that, so he simply nodded his head, scowling. “In that case, his treason is clear. Yet I still have my duty on the borders.”

Duke Thenardier snorted. As do I elsewhere against Sachstein and Mouzinel.” The two men exchanged a hard look at that ignoring the others in the room. Anyone who studied politics and geography in any detail knew the true threat to Brune and it wasn’t the threat that route Roland had been assigned to. Yes, Sachstein was powerful, but it was not the great power of the continent that Mouzinel was.

“Yet this internal thread is dangerous as well. If we turn our backs on it, it can be the spear that takes us in the spine, while we still defend our borders elsewhere. Vorn has convinced others to join him in his treason too, the count of Territoire, the count of Aude, several Earls. But, if we smash the Vanadis’ forces and bring Vorn to heel, that should force the others to give up their treason. We will have to be practical in their cases perhaps, but that would be best for the nation,” Duke Ganelon interjected.

Roland’s eyes shifted to him like a hunters on a rabbit, narrowing in disdain. *I wonder if anyone has ever told him to his face that he resembles nothing so much as a small frog, or perhaps a lizard. One of those that scurries for cover whenever it sees people.* There just was something gross and disturbing about Duke Ganelon, it was as if the perversions depravities and dark deeds that had become synonymous with his name had given him their own aura.

Alas, that did not mean that the man didn’t have a point. “Very well. I will need up-to-date data on this Silver Meteor army’s movements, and I will need remounts for the men who came with me. I might’ve left most of my men in the Northeast, but the ten that I brought with me rode our own horses near to death to get here. Beyond that, I will need supplies prepared and, on the road, to meet my Order as we march and at least a dozen scouts who know the land as well as can be expected.”

“How long before you think you can take the field?” Duke Thenardier said nodding his head to a nearby servant who rushed off for those preparations.

Roland scowled. "I will leave two thousand men on the border, five hundred of my heavy cavalry, a company of scouts, and my infantry. In this season, moving them would take too long and not doing so will free up my baggage train. A week and a half to bring my light cavalry and the majority of my heavy cavalry down from the Sachstein border into Brune proper. A day or so to get the lay of the land and then travel time to wherever I can hurt this Earl Tigre. I will not give an estimate of how long that will take, as I have never served north or east of Nice and have no idea of the terrain there. Still, once I do, I can bring him to battle easily enough."

He smiled thinly, looking over at the map of Brune that of was affixed to one wall of the Kings council room, large, though only vaguely detailed that map might be, it showed every town and village and hamlet, and his eyes rested on one in particular, before flicking back to the Dukes and then Pierre. "Anything else will depend on the roads, the weather and other conditions on the ground. Before that, may I at least give my regards to my King? I don't have to speak to him. I only wish to see him."

Pierre nodded, wild Duke Thenardier and Duke Ganelon simply stood stoically. "So long as you're not wishing to hear a response that is fine. But only you, Chivalrous Knight Roland." The man said, his beady eyes flicking to Ganelon then to Thenardier. Thenardier simply shrugged, while Ganelon snorted, but neither said anything and the man turned, leading Roland the short distance to the king's personal bedrooms.

In the next room, Roland stood in front of the four-poster bed within lay the king. But he was not the king that Roland remembered. The last time Roland had seen Faron he had been large, not a giant, like Duke Thenardier or Roland himself, but still a tall, decently built man, stooped with age perhaps, but still strong. He had personally used Durandal before giving it to Roland and raising him to lead the Knights of Navarre. That did not match the man on the bed. The king's cheeks had become sallow, his body was emaciated, almost to the point where for a moment Roland wondered if he was even eating at all, since Regnas's death. His beard was wild and unkempt as it lay on his chest, and his eyes were closed, his face a rictus of pain and grief as he tossed and turned weakly.

"The wasting illness has been horrible," Pierre said from behind Roland, shaking his head. We knew that the king was somewhat ill before Prince Roger took the field, it was why Roger had to take the field in the first place, to show his mettle to our lords. Instead...you know what happened. News of his death against the Vanadis broke something in the king."

Roland nodded, then knelt by the bed, his sword, the great treasure of Brune called Durandal in front of him. This was a large black claymore with an extremely wide blade with golden veins formed into a cross that spread down, widening into a broad pommel beyond a ruby inset into the golden veins. The sword was extremely magical and had been bestowed to the first king of Brune by the gods Perkunas, chief of the pantheon worshipped in Zhcted and Brune, and Triglav, the god of war.

Still kneeling there, Roland then kissed the hilt of his blade and formally held the hilt out to his liege lord in token of supplication. He held that pose for a full minute, before rising, turning to Pierre. He had his duty and he had his orders. That was enough.

Outside, Pierre locked the door firmly behind him, tucking the key in one voluminous pocket, before looking at the two Dukes narrowly. "It's done. I hope with this that your own issues can be sorted out quickly? Brune must have one ruler, one strong leader whoever that might be. We cannot afford to continue to war amongst ourselves. I estimate we have at best, the rest of this campaign season, and two, perhaps two and a half months next year after the thaws before Mouzinel at the very least invades in force."

"And it is only because of Roland smashing the probing invasion of Sachstein that we have even that much time. Do not worry Pierre, this power struggle will be finished by the start of summer," Duke Thenardier said with a nod. He then sent a sneer toward Duke Ganelon and strode off.

Duke Ganelon allowed himself a little chuckle, a gurgling, almost vile sound to Pierre's ears, as he too turned away. *Thenardier might think himself so powerful and learned, but really, he's quite easy to manipulate. With this, either a Vanadis will die and this Earl Tigre's forces shatter which will allow me to sweep up most of the pieces afterward, regardless of what Thenardier thinks. Or Roland dies. Roland's death would serve my true purposes even better in the long run. And all it took to get Duke Thenardier to agree with me was the mention of it being an expedient move and the loss of a few thousand humans in a vain attempt to take that tower. Now I need only sit back and watch the fun begin.*

OOOOOO

Valentina arrived in Legnica a day after Ranma and his companions had left. That made her moue in annoyance but knowing what little she did about what was going on in Brune, she wasn't going to complain. *Besides, if Ranma becomes involved in the little skirmishes that are occurring around Eagle's tower, then my pikemen might see him in action. Which can give me more information about his combat abilities. That leaves it to me to find out what I can about Ranma's healing skills.*

After hearing the other Vanadis' name from her majordomo in her office, Sasha frowned. She didn't know Valentina well. In fact, she barely knew her at all, but there were a lot of rumors about the woman. *Still, I suppose a face to face will tell me all I need to know about her one way or the other.* "Please, let her in," she said before correcting herself. "Actually, escort her to my gardens please." *If this becomes violent, at least that way I won't be destroying my own castle.*

Valentina found Sasha there, sitting at a table with tea for two. She smiled at the gesture and sat down across from her. "Mah, I take it that the rumors about your recovery were actually true. I'm very happy to hear that."

"Your well-wishes are warmly received, Lady Estes."

"Valentina please," Valentina replied. "We are both Vanadis after all. Surely we can be informal if it is just the two of us?"

"Valentina then," Sasha allowed. "Tea?"

"Yes, please, with one lump of sugar."

Sasha nodded and waited until her senior handmaiden Natasha poured the tea and left, gesturing around her as she made small talk to allow Valentina time to drink. "I like it here. I might've started funding these gardens when I was sick, but it is truly a nice, calming place to be."

Valentina nodded, looking around as well while sipping at her tea. "It is indeed, and now you have your health to enjoy it with more before winter sets in at any rate." Here in Legnica, it would never be quite as bad as it would get elsewhere in Zhcted thanks to the hot winds that continually came off of the ocean, but it would still become far too cold to enjoy being outside. "And yet, that leaves the question of how your health deteriorated in the first place and how you recovered."

Sasha smiled thinly, sitting down her teacup. "If you wanted to meet Ranma, he left yesterday to head to the front in Brune. He left with Sofy, and of course Limalisha."

"That's quite all right, Valentina said with a smile. "Oh, I would have deeply enjoyed meeting him, for many reasons. But, I am also here to meet with you."

"With me?" Sasha asked artfully. "Why ever would you be interested in me?"

Valentina giggled as if Sasha had said something amazingly funny, giving Sasha an arch look as if to say, 'Really?' in response Sasha laughed too, although hers was a little forced and Valentina asked bluntly, "Were you really sick lady Sasha, or was it something else?"

"Why do you want to know Valentina?" Sasha asked instead of answering directly, crossing her arms. This, not at all coincidentally, put her hands close to the hilts of Bargren. "What's your game? I've heard rumors, bits and pieces here and there, your alliances with this or that noble. On the surface, all you seem interested in is making Osterode more prosperous. Yet somehow, I just cannot believe that is all you intend. What is your game? What is your goal?"

Valentina leaned back, removing her hand from around her own Viralt, where it was leaning up against her chair. Instead, she used both hands to hold the teacup to show that she was no threat, saying. After a moment Sasha uncoiled, but she was still looking at the younger woman sternly. And Valentina smiled thinly as she finally replied. "My game is the only game that matters, the game of ambition, the game of nobles."

"And what exactly does that entail?" Sofy asked, scowling. "If you think to ask me to..."

"Oh no, I know better than to ask you to join with me in whatever I am planning. No, I would much rather ask you what your opinion of Ranma is."

"Why? And speak plainly Valentina, while I can do the whole political doubletalk, that does not exactly imply that I enjoy it."

Valentina smiled again and then sipped at her tea. "You tell me something and I will tell you something."

That caused Sasha to frown, but she nodded. Unless she wanted to physically threaten the other woman, they were technically equal in rank. Yes, Sasha was the senior Vanadis and that counted among them but not to the extent of simply demanding answers. "Realizing there are some things I will not tell you, what do you want to know?"

"Was it poison?" Valentina asked very bluntly. To this Sasha scowled, looking away but that was answer enough and Valentina frowned. "I see, interesting."

"I thought so too when I found out," Sasha ground out through gritted teeth.

"Very well," Valentina said before Sasha could get any angrier, changing the subject abruptly. "I will tell you. Ranma is a power. He is also an unknown. Yet already he has affected the not only our own country, but Brune to a lesser extent. He might have been remained hidden in the grass before he healed you, but now he is going to be standing on the stage in no uncertain terms, whatever is going to go on in Brune. He will be approached, seduced, treated with, threatened, anything anyone can do to woo him to their side. I would like to see if I could get him on my own side or at least neutral."

"Neutral in relation to what?" Sasha asked her arms moving back into a cross under her chest that put her hands once more near her Viralt's hilts.

Valentina realized that Sasha was very close to drawing on her, and decided that for once, she could not afford to tell anything less than the total truth. "I wish to be Queen," she said simply. "Not now, not so long as the current king reigns. But I wish to rule."

She saw something flicker in Sasha's eyes, but was it anger, a flash of some memory or... satisfaction? Valentina didn't know what to make that and watched Sasha leaned back, once

more uncrossing her arms, placing her hands around her own teacup as Valentina had, from which they had not moved since.

“The king is a good honorable man,” Sasha said as if by rote. “He has led our country well, strengthened our balance of trade, strengthened our defenses, enlarged our borders to the north.”

“And yet, he has allowed some knots of internal strife to fester, has allowed several of our Vanadis to be nearly ostracized from high society, and our foreign policy is held together by spit, wire and Sofy’s gentle graces,” Valentina replied smoothly, before shaking her head. “I am not here to argue whether or not Victor is a good king, I simply wish to succeed him. With Ruslan dead, through another rare disease...”

“DO NOT mention him!” Sasha nearly roared, her voice low but so intense it set a rumble through Valentina’s body. At her side Bargren flared up as well, sending out a blast of heat that simmered in the air around them. Valentina’s eyes widened and she didn’t need Ezendeis’ sudden warning in her head to know that Sasha was now seriously contemplating murder. Everything else had been simple bravado, this most decidedly was not. “I, I apologize. I did not realize you were **acquainted** with Ruslan.”

“...There is no reason you should have. Our, our relationship was against his father’s wishes. Yet we were close to announcing a formal engagement when I fell ill. At that point, we knew we could never have children and mutually broke things off.” When talking to Lim, Sasha had implied that it had been the fact he was a nobleman that had forced her possible husband to end their engagement. That had been a white lie, made to avoid discussing the true facts.

Ruslan Volk Estes Tur Zhcted was the son of King Victor, the only son in point of fact. He had been well-regarded by the nobility and peasant folk alike and had even had friendships among the Vanadis, and in his early thirties was reckoned both a fantastic diplomat and general, having beaten back an Asvarre invasion fleet and an invasion of nomads from the northern plains with help of the Vanadis, one of whom had been Sasha. He had married in his early twenties, but his wife had died in childbirth. After that, there had been rumors of his being involved with several noblewomen, but nothing ever came of those rumors. He was still a bachelor four years ago when he contracted a disease that drove him mad before killing him within a few weeks’ time.

For her part, Valentina was astonished and somewhat annoyed to find that there had been something to those rumors, even if they had never mentioned Sasha by name. *Drat! If I had known that at the time, I would have changed some of my own plans in regards to Ruslan.* She almost shivered in fear as her thoughts went to several different, very scary places. The thought, *oh my word, Sasha must never find out I flirted with him!* was followed by *good gods, what a ruling pair they would have made! My ambitions would have become next to impossible with the two of them waiting to take the reins of the kingdom.*

Yet that thought did not stay in Valentina's mind for very long as she remembered how she had personally investigated Ruslan's death. She hadn't been ordered to do so by the king. No, Valentina had investigated Ruslan's death because she had genuinely respected Ruslan, and while she had not had any passionate desires to him, she saw him as someone she could have learned to love, not just as a tool for her ambition, although he would have been that too.

I eventually decided it was a natural illness simply because I never found evidence for it to be anything else. I still haven't. Yet someone was able to poison Sasha and would have gotten away with it cleanly if not for Ranma and his odd abilities. If so, then perhaps the crown prince was not beyond their reach either. The timing is also extremely suspect. That thought made Valentina very, very afraid, and for a moment she was going to blurt out her concerns but decided against it. I have no proof after all, and the last thing I want is for Sasha to go on a rampage, either directed at me, or in an effort to find the truth so far after the fact.

Across from her, Sasha had not noticed Valentina's introspection, lost as she was in her own thoughts. At first, these were dominated by her memories of Ruslan, then she forced herself to think about what she knew about those in a position to be chosen as Victor's successor. Victor was old, pushing seventy-five or so, a remarkable age. Yet he had to name a successor soon, and there were a few men of proven ability and lineage who could be named so.

None of them had a very large following, however, and moreover, while the two men she was thinking of had military experience, one of them had far more and even had friends among the Vanadis, while the other was more popular among the nobility. Neither was popular among the merchant class or the peasants though. Beyond the two of them, in a direct line, there was only one grandson, whose name was Valery. Sasha remembered him as a toddler, but had not met him since 'her family's illness' had hit her. "Valery... I don't think I know much about the boy. Understandable of course since he was barely seven or eight when I became ill."

"Valery's a darling child," Valentina said promptly, looking almost amused as the interruption brought her back to the here and now. She set her darker thoughts aside but did not forget them as she tried to concentrate on the here and now. Sasha looked up at her, one eyebrow rising, and that might be why she shared a bit of what she had learned about the youngster in question. "He's bright, quite energetic with all the inability to sit still of a ten-year-old boy, and has the most amusing crush on Ludmila."

"Wait, what?" Sasha asked, the thoughtful and dangerous Vanadis falling to the wayside as the young woman who loved to gossip came to the fore. "Truly?"

"Indeed, you should've seen Valery when last he was at court. Ludmilla was there at the time. It was almost quite cute the way he blushed and stammered when she was around. His eyes hardly ever left her even when the King was holding court."

For a moment the two women simply giggled, forgetting their previous conversation and the tension that had grown between them. The sheer cuteness factor found in puppy love was one of the things that united every woman, much like the idea that they had first right to any baths.

Then Valentina brought the tension back with a bump, "And of course if I make him my heir when I take the throne, I won't have to provide an heir of my own body. He is no threat to my ambitions, and his crush on Ludmila could be encouraged, using his marriage to a Vanadis to the next generation of the throne."

"You realize that if you seize power, the balance of control in Zhcted is going to come crashing down," Sasha retorted, scowling as she was forced to concentrate on something so serious once again.

There had always been a very tenuous balance of opposing strengths in Zhcted. The first and least organized were the merchants and nobles. Sometimes they were the same people - a noble also being a merchant - but most of the time not and they **very** rarely moved in lockstep. But they were the ones who truly ruled the purse, and provided a large number of goods, and services throughout the kingdom and had a massive voice in the laws and trade regulations of the nation. It was a noble's duty to maintain the majority of the roads in their lands, while it was the tax on trade and merchant goods which helped maintain the central government. Nobles also provided men in times of war of course and the merchant's goods.

Then there was the King and the King's Army. This was a hard-bitten professional force of around ten thousand men, who maintained the King's peace and the King's royal roads and the King's taxes. The king also had his Excubitores, his spies and agents. Of course, the king's army was also called upon to defend Zhcted's borders, if the country was facing a major invasion, and given their professionalism and organization, could have a major impact well beyond their size.

On those borders were the Vanadis, whose loyalty to the king had to be sacrosanct, bolstering his power against the nobles. Yet they also offset one another's powers and influence with the king and the country. Also of course, there were numerous nobles who resented how powerful the Vanadis were, not only in terms of land but simply being women who could wield power that could shatter armies. In addition there was also the fact that with the Viralt came noble status and not just noble status, but the highest of noble status, the equivalent of Dukes, powerful ones since three controlled cities.

Even the Louries, down whose line Laviyas had passed unbroken for centuries would not have been noble without that. Of the current Vanadis, only Sasha and Valentina had been born to even medium rank nobility. Elizaveta had been born to a bankrupt merchant house. Olga Tamm, the absent Vanadis of Brest, was borne to the horse-riding nomads of the north. Sofy to a very minor earl's house. Elen had been a mercenary and daughter of mercenaries. To say regular nobles often resented the Vanadis for being set so high above them was, to put it mildly.

If a Vanadis became the reigning Queen, then that balance would break. The stability of Zhcted, which was one of its strongest points in relation to its neighbors, would break. "I don't really call it a balance. I call it a sliding scale, and given what you just implied, I hardly see how you can talk," she ended huffily. "I would have been his queen, but while I would perhaps have had influence over Ruslan I would not have been reigning as his co-ruler," Sasha replied.

"Perhaps not, but you would have still had that influence you mentioned. As for the balance of power, power comes and goes, waxes and wanes. Two-thousand years ago, we had a weak King, and the Vanadis rose to prominence. Leitmeritz and Legnica were allowed to grow into cities for the first time. Two hundred years ago, it was the opposite, the Vanadis of the time were not needed as it was a time of peace, thanks to a great plague spreading throughout the continent making everyone far too busy to make war."

"And now, we have a... decent king. Not a great king, but a decent one," Valentina trailed off, her voice becoming lower, so much so that Sasha had to strain to hear her. "A paranoid one, one who has never truly liked the Vanadis or our positions of power as they come from what we become, rather than any preexisting status."

Sasha stiffened, and Valentina smiled, waving her look away. She had hinted at more there, not only in terms of Sasha's poisoning but Ruslan's. "Mah, don't worry, I won't do anything. What would be the point?"

Sasha ground her teeth, looking away. "Just so long as no hint of it gets out, I do not... understand that..." she paused again changing how she was going to say what came next. "Regardless of how well you could reign or why you wish to be queen, I would say that the most dangerous thing for our entire country would be for us to cause a civil war between the Vanadis and the king. I refuse to let that happen, whatever my... suspicions."

"That is the last thing I want as well," Valentina said honestly. "I would much prefer a peaceful transition of power." *After all, I not only want to be queen but conquer other countries too.*

Sasha stared at her for a time but saw nothing in Valentina's face or eyes that she was lying. "And what will you do about Valery?"

"Nothing. Valery is too young to choose a regent for himself and with the Mouzinel and Asvarre as strong as they are, a mere Regent would find his powers too limited. This will leave me to deal with several other issues of course, such as support for my own position, removing any other claimants, of which there are a few, and of course doing so without anyone knowing it was me. Just like any other lord would."

A regent could rule the country for an heir who was close to his age of majority. Yet they could not call the nobles to war. They could not declare a trade embargo, or change policies, only keep existing policies going. With Valery's being only ten, eight years was far too long for

anyone who was able to understand the shifting tides to want to chance a regent ruling Zhcted. This meant that if she wanted to be queen, Valentina would have to deal with the two men who were in a position to be named the king's successors, but the very fact one hadn't been chosen yet showed there was room to maneuver there.

Sasha scowled, looking away again before nodding reluctantly. She would normally have been against what Valentina was proposing, most particularly the fact she basically implied she would be using underhanded means to secure her throne.

But that was before Sasha herself was poisoned. That was before Valentina hinted at one of the very thoughts that had been plaguing Sasha's mind since her recovery: that perhaps she hadn't been the only one poisoned, perhaps Ruslan had been killed in the same manner. If there really was already a cabal acting behind the scenes, then a queen who could beat them at their own game and claim the crown as her prize was perhaps the best thing for their nation. *If this cabal was so blinded by their own goals as to weaken Zhcted by killing Ruslan and myself, who knows what else they have done, or what their final goal could be.*

"Very well. I won't join you, I lack the means to do so in that shadow world. But I won't attack you either. I will retain my position here in Legnica and deal with any threats from the ocean. But anyone who threatens my city or my nation from **any** direction I will burn them to ash!" she said, and Bargren flared into life at her sides, flying into her hands. When she laid them down on the table which began to sizzle at the touch, while Sasha leaned forward, her eyes staring daggers into Valentina. "My city," she repeated, "my nation. If they are threatened, I will act. Am I clear?"

Valentina's licked suddenly very dry lips but did not remove her hands from where they were around her teacup and she did not look away. Most decidedly she did not even think about reaching for her own Viralt. She couldn't show weakness or the fact that she was actually quite frightened at the moment but neither would she look away. "That is more than acceptable. Indeed," she said with a smile that was actually quite unforced. "It is always good to know that our back will be guarded by such as you." Sasha hesitated, then leaned back, and Bargren extinguished themselves.

Then Valentina asked, "But you won't get in my way when I approach this Ranma character? Or Elen and Tigre?"

"Elen probably won't want anything to do with underhanded schemes. She's never understood politics or backroom deals. I rather think Ranma will be the same, but no, I won't get in your way. So long as you don't act against them anyway. If they need my help to deal with you at that point, I will give it to them."

"I won't act against them unless they act against me first," Valentina replied calmly. "I cannot personally see that happening."

Sasha looked at her searchingly once more, her eyes narrowed but then she nodded again. "I believe we have an accord." She reached for the teapot holding it out towards Valentina. "More tea?"

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"My lord, scouts have just sent a messenger from upriver north and to the east. They report a large, well-equipped and armed body of men moving along the rivers up towards Territoire."

Frowning, Tigre nodded, getting to his feet quickly. He looked around at the refugees, then looked over to the man he had chosen as this group's leader. That man was grim-faced, and Tigre nodded. "I'm afraid Martin but you're going to have to get your men and women moving again. I'm sorry, I thought you might've had more time to recover, but if this force is trying to cross the rivers northeast of here, they might be able to cut us off Territoire so you're going to have to go somewhere else. Follow the river for a few days west, then cut North toward Aude. You'll probably meet a few of our scouts along the river, and they'll help direct you."

The man nodded, looking afraid, while Tigre stood up brusquely, moving away to find Elen. The two of them had been moving with this group of refugees for a few hours, basically making certain they all knew that they were safe, and they could eventually find both refuge supplies and work here until they might be able to return to their old lives if they ever could. Most of these men and women were, surprisingly, refugees twice over. They had retreated from around the Dinant Plains after the Brune army had been smashed and the pieces had basically taken to mass banditry to return to their lords. Then they had barely begun to try to settle in new jobs down towards Lutetia when the conflict between him and Thenardier went from cold to hot. They had been the first from that area to start fleeing, but a lack of resources had also made them slower than many others. He found Elen and a few of her men, staring down at the detailed map that Ranma had given them, as well as the newest members of their group, the captain of the reinforced company of pikemen. He was sitting down, resting his legs, but he was still wearing the chest plate of the pikemen and his massive weapon was leaning against a tree nearby. Twice as tall as a man, with a heavy bill hook for him, it was a disturbing weapon to look at, more disturbing to know that he was but one of several hundred, and that the men who were trained with it worked as a true, organized unit of men rather than a collection of individuals.

The man's name was Odell. He had fair skin, black hair, and dark black eyes. He had proven himself to be both intelligent and a good leader since he and his men had shown up four days ago. And right now, he was doing what only the smartest would think of doing when

they were the newest member of a command team: staying silent and listening, taking everything in. He was the first to spot Tigre and straightened up, a cough and a jerk of the chin grabbing the other's attention.

Elan looked up at Tigre, frowning. "What's wrong?"

Tigre told her about the message, and she scowled. "North, and east? Are they going to strike at Territoire or us at Eagle Tower?"

"If they had any sense of Territoire but I don't know. We'll have to get scouts out, along that area of the river. We've been careful not to move it into that area, since its dominated mostly by Knightly Orders, all of whom have professed their neutrality between the two Dukes, but we need to make certain."

"Does that mean you'll go out with the scouts on your own?"

"I'm afraid it must." Tigre replied apologetically.

Elen scowled, but she couldn't argue. Tigre was an incredibly good scout, able to blend into any kind of natural environment like an animal himself almost. Even with all the training that Ranma had given the other men and women of Alsace, he was still better than them. "Fine, but make sure that you protect yourself okay?"

Tigre nodded, and turned, but Elen grabbed his arm, pulling him back and kissing him on the cheek. She then pulled back, a ferocious blush on her face, matching the one on Tigre's face now. "For luck," she explained, before turning away, ignoring the knowing looks and smirks on the men around her.

The next day found Tigre and Claus and Gaston, Tigre's two best scouts staring out of a bit of scrub brush onto the small army that was moving across the forest towards them.

"Three thousand at a bare minimum, at least two thousand heavy horse and a thousand light," Tigre murmured, his mouth barely moving.

"Three thousand four hundred, Lord," Gaston said frowning. As usual he had climbed up a tree, trusting in his ability to stay hidden. Tigre wasn't so sure he would be able to remain unseen up a tree this time of year given his red hair, so he had hidden in a pine bush. "There is at least four-hundred infantry behind the cavalry, I can't make out what they're carrying. I think they could be archers, but if so that's the most well maintained and organized group of archers I've ever seen."

As Tigre well knew, archers of any sort were disdained by Brune nobility of any stripe. Those who had them in their army, men who were solely archers, treated them abysmally. They were in fact treated worse than Ganelon treated his conscripted soldiers and that was saying

something. "Regardless it's not a good sign. It's got to be some kind of Knightly Order with that kind of makeup. Darn it, I was hoping all of them would extend their neutrality to include waring on us, but I suppose that was wishful thinking," Tigre mused. "Can we see..."

Tigre was interrupted by Claus hissing and pointing. The redheaded hunter turned, staring in the same direction only for his own face to tighten noticeably. "Is that the symbol for the Order I think it is?"

"If you think that's the sign of Navarre Knights, the Knightly Order lead by Roland, then yes my Lord," Claus replied, scowling. "They must have gone down south then east before coming back up north to bugger our asses good."

"Well, that's not good," Tigre said mildly, although he was very very worried right now.

Barley a few hours later, the three of them had rejoined the main force coming out of Eagle's Nest. They had pushed out as far and as fast as they could, with remounts for the trio of scouts hidden in the woods well back of their hide.

"Roland? I've heard of him. Isn't he supposed to be Brune's strongest Knight?" Elen asked.

Tigre nodded. "Yes, he is. Of course, I've never met him, but I've heard of him. His deeds are legendary."

Elen frowned. "Well, if push comes to shove, I can fight him I suppose. It'll be interesting to see how he stands up against a Vanadis. But his army is the main problem."

"Exactly. We can't let that much cavalry get into our Territoire even if they won't target the refugees, which I'm pretty certain they won't, Roland is known for many things, but cruelty certainly isn't one of them, certainly not against Brunish citizens. But he could destroy our supply lines, maybe even take Territoire, and without Territoire, we'd have to pull back, and we lose our nice little border."

"Is there any way we can drag them into a fight at Eagle Tower?"

"That was my thought too. We just have to hope that Roland isn't cool-headed enough to ignore our provoking him, and the chance to take my head too. In that though, his concept of chivalry and possibly his desire to return to the border with Sachstein will work for us." Tigre outlined a brief plan, both to bring in the heavy cavalry and to make them fight a set-piece the battle, here around the tower.

"But we'll need to get our sappers past them, and that's not going to be very easy either with how their mounted scouts have been spreading out."

“And if he doesn’t take the bait?” Elen asked. “Or comes on so strong we can’t get back to the tower before he catches us?”

“Ahh, but we have a Vanadis,” Tigre said teasingly. “I’m certain between us, you and I will be able to grab Roland’s attention.”

She chuckled at that but nodded anyway.

Later that day, Tigre left once more, seemingly tireless, showing an endurance Elen was frankly amazed by. It was evident that not just his people but Tigre himself had benefited greatly from Ranma’s training. With him went four hundred of her light cavalry and their hoarded horse archers. There were more than three hundred and twenty of those now, Rurick having been busy training them up to the point where they could fire in the saddle since they had left him behind in Territoire at first. They weren’t very fast, or very good just yet, but any arrows from a cavalry force would come as a surprise, since they had yet to use them in battle.

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“Lord Roland, we have incoming horsemen!” shouted one of the new his light cavalymen, cantering up to the man. “Six hundred maybe more, coming toward us at a good clip.”

Roland frowned. The smart thing for Tigre to have done would have been to fort up in Eagle Tower, and then reinforce Territoire. Territoire was the more important strategic target, his logistical hub here near central Brune. But it wasn’t nearly as defensible as the tower, but thanks to the vagaries of weather and land, Roland had to come closer to Eagle Tower than he would’ve liked to get across the rivers separating the lands there.

He had wanted to cross the rivers at one of the large dams, which were called The King’s Fingers. Instead, he was forced to go well downriver thanks to how swollen the river was at this time of year. *And, the roads are pathetic in this area! By the goddess Mosha, what have the local lords been doing when they should have spent money on their upkeep!? Worse than the maps warned me by far.* Roland was used to the roads around the borders, and the King’s Road which lead from the borders to Nice. All of the roads near the borders were cobbled, with large thoroughfares on either side for horses and were kept clear and in good repair year-round by the Royal Road Service. This was why the forces on the border could always make good use of having interior lines of movement against Sachstein and even Zhcted by the Dinant Plains. Even the roads around the passage to Mouzinel in the east, which lead through the almost impassable mountains, were paved up until the start of the incredibly dry, rocky mountains.

The rest of the roads in Brune, however, were not nearly as good. Indeed, most were so bad they more resembled the paths of animals through a forest. And even near the center of Brune, there were many roads that at this time of year were more mud than solid earth. Despite having nearly as many horses as he did men, those roads had slowed him down tremendously, and between that and the two fords above the King's Fingers being washed out, he had been forced downriver towards Eagle's Tower.

Still, if he doesn't know our numbers, pushing out a force of cavalry on a spoiling action makes some sense. Vorn might've heard reports about an armed band coming towards them, but not our composition. "Regardless," he said aloud, "we are going to run them down. Pull back the light cavalry. Turner, form up the heavy cavalry for a stuttered charge." A stuttered charge was the Brunish term for a charge, which was broken into parts. Each company of cavalry would smash into and through the enemy before peeling off, hitting the enemy one after another with enough time between blows to shift the point of contact. In a battle between heavy and light cavalry with surprise on the side of the heavier horse, the move could shatter the enemy's cohesion.

He turned to another man, smaller, without any armor on him, but with heavy, thick shoulders. "Arden, get your men back. We don't want any of you unnecessary casualties."

"Of course, Lord Roland," the man said, saluting crisply. His men might not be regulars, but they were still soldiers and they had been trained to an incredible degree by Lord Roland upon his assumption of command of his Knights of Navarre being stationed at the borders. Roland had, in a sharp change of policy from other nobles, understood the importance of logistics, thus his creation of the Siege Craft unit, which did a lot more than just siege craft for his order.

Ahead of his column, the enemy soldiers came on, spreading out and even slowing as they did. Which was foolish, Roland thought, moving to the front of his own line as it compressed, marching order replaced by the tighter, organized lines of a charge. They don't have the numbers to envelop us and they all look to be light cavalry. Realizing the error of taking on heavy cavalry in close they should've tried to concentrate, to break through his line at one point, and keep on going as fast as they could before we could finish organizing to receive them. *Unless they think they can still take us by surprise, but that would be criminally stupid.*

But then, the enemy pulled up right outside charging range, and then arrows were flying. Roland's eyes widened as three men in vanguard dropped from their saddles, and arrows began to hammer into his men. "Mounted archers!"

"Dishonorable dogs!" shouted one of his men, galloping forward even before Roland could give the order.

"Wait!" he barked, but too late. The man fell out of the saddle, an arrow through his helmet's eye slit.

One of the archers was firing almost too fast for Roland to watch his hands fly, whereas the others were slower. But all of them were firing and wheeling away, firing again as his men charged forward, keeping the range open, never allowing his men to close. Behind one man with red hair and another with a bald head, they weren't causing many deaths just yet, but it was obvious they could keep this up all day if need be.

"Sound the recall! Heavy cavalry only. Light Cavalry to take over the pursuit but spread and hold in line!" Roland shouted kneading his own horse into a run. His stallion was of a special breed, worth any five of the other chargers in his Order combined and had the endurance to match. He could keep up with his own light cavalry forces as they ran this force into the ground.

Or so he thought. But Roland had never faced this kind of tactic before and neglected to think about how much extra distance the ability to fire from the saddle would give these their enemies. Even in comparison to his light cavalry, the mounted archers were lighter and faster. They disappeared into the woodlands seconds before his men could finally get in among them, the woodlands proceeding to break up his own men's lines, as the archers turned in their saddle.

They didn't fire as quickly anymore, but they fired very accurately. And one among them was a true monster with a bow, Roland raised his shield up, blocking an arrow that would've struck him in the face, and then thrust forward quickly with his sword to deflect another that would've taken his horse in the head. He glared across him towards the enemies in the woods, shouting out "You are only delaying the inevitable Earl Vorn!"

"I am only delaying you from making a mistake Lord Roland!" came the shouted response, though the other man was smart enough not to actually show himself as he replied. "Did you actually get your orders from the King himself? And if not, how can you be so certain that what you are doing is just!"

"This coming from a man who allied himself with our enemies!" Roland roared in reply.

The response came quick, easy and without a hint of trying to downplay the actions Roland had just referred to. "To protect the people of Alsace from wrongful subjugation I would've allied with the devil himself."

Roland roared and kneed his horse into motion once more racing deeper into the woods with his men following after him.

He then felt it, a buildup of magic. One of the abilities Durandal gave him was to sense when other people were using magic nearby, and he scowled, pulling his sword blade out and flashing it forwards across his horse's withers as he shouted out, "For Brune!" From his sword, a blast of piercing yellow magical energy flashed out like the blade of a giant, intercepting the attack launched at him from nearby.

The air attack slammed into his attack, which sliced it in two before continuing to cut into the woods all around where the air attack had originated from. It sliced several of the horse archers in twain, along with dozens of trees all around them. This destroyed much of the cover sheltering a dozen others, and his men rode down the horse archers who were thus revealed and couldn't get away.

But they did not slay the woman with silver hair, who had pulled her horse aside ducking under the attack with a speed that was remarkable. She slew two of his men who came close with a single blow each before pulling back into the woods.

Vorn hadn't been near his target, and arrows flew again, taking out men on either side of Roland and then aimed at Roland himself. He barely got his sword up in time to block them this time and noted that they hit the same place on his shield that the previous arrows had. "How did he do that!?"

Ignoring that mystery Roland smashed his shield against a nearby tree to rid it of the arrows, as he cantered on through the trees.

They were soon through the woods, and out the other side of the little copse of trees, staring as the enemy horse archers put their stirrups to their horses' side, racing on towards what Roland now would be Eagle Tower. "Dammit." Roland had to smile thinly. "Well, this skirmish goes to you, but you are a rabbit in a copse of trees, Lord Vorn. You can hop about as much as I like, but once I push you back to your burrow, there's nothing you'll be able to do."

"What were our losses?" he said not even turning around as his second-in-command rode up behind him. He had taken command of the horse heavy cavalry when Roland charged forward with the ease of long experience.

"Not very many for the number of arrows they shot," the man replied. "About fifty-four dead, eleven of whom were the heavy horse. We have far more wounded, however, about two hundred and thirty men, more horses. I've already ordered them to break off, and for camp to be made. Judging by the map we have, I think we're far enough away from Eagle tower to make any attack on a basecamp here untenable. We seem to have slain at least seventeen of them, maybe more."

As a professional military force, Roland's knightly order knew how to set a camp: with a short palisade, a row of stakes outside that, and a ditch along with it. The camp would be safe from any such attacks. But their army on the move was a different matter. "I think so as well. Curse it, we should have better maps of our own lands than this, we shouldn't have to have come this close to Eagle Tower in order to pass the rivers!" It was a noble's prerogative to map his own lands or not, and like so many other rights, the nobles guarded it covetously even if they themselves did not map their lands. He knew that Thenardier had well-made maps of his own area, and he Ganelon did as well. Unless he didn't because then someone would be able to know how he treats his people... Roland broke that all thought off, shaking his head "I'm a

knight, he muttered to himself. "My duty is not to cast judgment or aspersions on our noble Lords. Mine is just to obey my orders."

"The King's orders, not those of his ministers," his second said softly.

Roland glared at them but knowing no one else was within hearing range let him get away with the blatant disrespect. "You saw her, the Vanadis. The same one who killed our Prince."

The blonde man shrugged but didn't gainsay that. It was true after all. *Wasn't it?* Roland scowled, shaking his head of these doubts.

When men met on the battlefield some of them could gain insight into their opponent. Since he was but a young teen, newly given the Durandal, Roland had known his ability in that area to be higher than most. It was why he trusted Duke Thenardier to do what not only what was best for do Thenardier, but for the nation when it came to their foreign enemies. It was why he had loved the King so, having seen the innate goodness in the man after sparring with him.

And though Roland had never faced an archer like Tigre, the man's abilities, how ferociously he thought, spoke to Roland. There was no treason in that man, a part of Roland whispered, but he silenced it, turning away. "Come. We will set up the camp, and then..." he frowned thinking, "and then I think we're going to change up our order of march and pick up the speed. As well as change the target, curse it. We can't let those Horse Archers attack us with impunity and we can't split our forces either."

"Push the light cavalry out more?"

"No. They'll be picked off if we do that, and besides we don't need them as scouts before us, our route is set. Instead, spread the light cavalry out to our flanks, so we aren't surprised by any attacks. Especially towards the river understood?"

"Not really, but I'll follow your orders."

Roland barked a laugh at that but continued to give out orders as more men joined them before racing off. "The heavy cavalry will form the center of the formation. Rotate the men through the front line, the horses at the front will wear full barding, and the men use well the heaviest shields we have. Against Vorn I don't know if even that will be enough, but hopefully, it will. At the very least will keep our casualties low until they are forced completely onto the defensive at Eagle's Tower."

Elsewhere in that same copse of woods, four of Tigre's scouts were hiding about as desperately as men who knew their lives depended on it could. They had been dropped off the instant the light cavalry had entered the woods, their horses pulled away by their fellows. Now

those woods were being combed by extremely competent, well-led soldiers and the scouts were learning that facing true professionals was a very different story from the mix of men-at-arms and peasant levies they'd faced previously.

Yet they had chosen their spots well: deep in the bowels of a hollowed-out tree, up in a lightning-damaged tree, in a sudden ditch in the land that looked as if some animal had created a borrow there, and finally, under a massive amount of mud near the river. Because of this, all four men, Gaston, Claus, and two other men of Alsace were still there as Roland and Knights of Navarre marched on.

They waited until deep night before finally revealing themselves, moving out of the woods altogether, signaling one another with hand signals until they were close enough to have a whispered conversation, "Well, that was about as nervous making as it anything could be wasn't it?" Claus asked rhetorically. He had been put in charge by Lord Tigre, and he aimed to make his Lord proud.

"Truth. Why did we volunteer for this again?"

"Don't remember volunteering," said one of the others grunting. "Remember being volunteered by a certain someone."

Claus shrugged. "If I have to do this, I want the best scouts with me. That's you three. Besides, don't look at me like that, haven't you always wanted to destroy something big and expensive?"

The blacksmith's son smirked suddenly. "There is that to be sure. But I do reckon that living through the experience would make it even better. So let's be moving on, yeah?"

OOOOOOO

Not knowing how the fortunes of the Silver Meteor Army had changed, Lim, Sofy, and Ranma took their time traveling back to the Eleanor is Estates. At first, that was because Ranma's reaction to being teleported was everything that Sofy could imagine...

Flashback:

What do you mean we're going to teleport?" Ranma asked with a scowl.

"I mean just what I said. We will disappear from where we are now and reappear elsewhere. It is one of the spells that my Viralt allows me."

Ranma gulped. "Yeah, that's what I was afraid of. But what exactly does that mean 'teleport'? Does that mean just fly through the air really quickly or does it mean actually you know our bodies and molecules coming apart and appearing elsewhere, because let me tell you, I always thought that was kind of freaky when I saw it in sci-fi movies."

"I don't know what a movie is, skify, or molekul," Sofy replied with a giggle, leaning her head against the side of her prayer staff. "But it is a magical thing. I simply disappear from here and reappear as far in the direction I am facing as I wish."

"...Okay," Ranma said holding his head for a moment. "Okay, magic, right, fine, we'll just assume that because it is magic that it makes sense suddenly and nothing bad can happen."

"You're taking this rather more poorly than I expected," Lim interjected, looking at Ranma quizzically.

"Yeah well, I didn't do so well in class, but I knew enough science to know what was really going on with those Star Trek teleporter things."

"Again, you're using words we don't understand," Lim said, smacking him upside the head very lightly. Of course, even if she smacked him upside the head hard, Ranma probably wouldn't have even noticed. But she didn't want to give the impression she was actually angry at him. To add to this lack of impression, she began to rub at his neck, causing him to slowly close his eyes and murmur, "Oh, that feels good."

Lim smiled, a faint blush on her face as she asked, "Now are you calm enough to try this?"

"I suppose," Ranma muttered still looking disturbed, but much calmer.

"Ara, that's good! EY!" Before Ranma could turn, Sofy had playfully pushed Ranma into Lim with a hand to his back as she reached out to touch Lim with the end of her prayer staff. "Mirashem!" ("Particles of Light, Come to My Side!")

In a blinding flash of light, the three of them disappeared from there only to reappear twenty-five leagues down the road. The instant the spell faded, Ranma reeled away to become sick in the bushes nearby.

Lim stumbled back, shaking her head woozily. "That was an unnerving sensation, but I think Ranma is taking this far worse than me."

"You get used to it, eventually," Sofy replied smiling pleasantly at Lim over the sounds of Ranma being sick in the woods.

End flashback

Of course, Ranma had some surprises for Sofy too, as she learned the first evening on the road.

“We’re not going to stop at an inn Lim?” Sofy asked, quizzically as the other two kept going past an inn. True, there it was only a little past midday, but there wasn’t going to be another hostel they could stay at until well into the night. And traveling at night was not something Sofy did unless she was in a massive hurry.

“Don’t worry, trust me, you’ll like camping out with Ranma.”

“I doubt that, considering that he isn’t able to provide warm water. Unless that’s part of his curse, he can just create it out of thin air?” Sofy asked, pouting. She was a woman who greatly liked her creature comforts, and that included hot baths as often as she could get them.

“Actually, he can, in a way,” Lim laughed. “You’ll just have to see.”

Sofy fell behind the others as she continued to grumble, but later that evening found the two of them on a ridge overlooking a very tiny pool, which fed into a small stream. “That looks nice, but also quite cold.”

Lim, however, was already moving over into the woods to undress, her armor laid out nearby, her sword still in her hand even here. “Watch,” she ordered over her shoulder.

Shrugging, Sofy did so and watched as a blast of cerulean energy flashed out from Ranma’s hand into the pool. Two more followed, and as the third hit, the water began to steam. “Oh my! Instant hot spring!” giggling, Sofy moved over, clasping one arm around Ranma’s. He turned to look at her, blushing at the contact as she addressed, “Lim, could I borrow him for a bit?”

“I’m uncertain what you mean,” Lim said, frowning.

“Hehehe, I just want to borrow him for a bit,” Sofy said not going into detail about what she meant by ‘borrow.’ “You’ll get him back clean as new, possibly.”

Ranma flushed under her very direct and interested gaze no more than a foot away, backing away two paces, and blushing hotly while Lim scowled. For a moment, her interest in Ranma and her somewhat tough girl exterior warred with one another, and by the time she had, they had finished their quarrel, she had finished changing into her bath towel, with which she marched out, pointing regally at Ranma. “You, off.”

“Yes ma’am,” Ranma said not arguing about the whole assumed ownership of the hot spring thing, grateful to get away from Sofy’s eyes.

Sofy pouted, shaking her head. "That's no fun. I thought Ranma and I could bath together again."

"That would be most improper and... wait, what do you mean 'again'?" Lim asked, and after that Ranma was thankfully out of earshot.

Whatever Sofy said however had not angered Lim overmuch towards him. Ranma had earned himself a slap upside the head, but again, it was a very gentle one.

And so the journey of the two blondes and Ranma continued. They stopped and saw the sights, they talked almost constantly as Sofy set the pace, deliberately slowing down in order to get to know Ranma more. In turn, Lim learned more about Zhcted politics at the highest level and Ranma got to know Sofy as well as he had gotten to know Lim on the trip out.

Yet, even so, the total round-trip took only about five days, at least to reach the outer edge of Eleanora's territory. From there, they slowed down even more because Sofy wanted to take a brief trip to the town in Elen's territory famous for its hot springs. She was about as addicted to hot springs as she was to tea, and since it got colder with every day they stayed on road, Ranma had no trouble agreeing with the idea. He could deal with the cold easily, but that didn't mean he enjoyed it.

While Lim would have argued with Elen, she was not about to argue with another Vanadis, especially one senior to Eleanora. So they made a brief stopover and stayed there for a few days as it had begun to snow as they had reached the town. From there, they sent word to Leitmeritz of course, using a series of messenger pigeons that Eleanora had set up in her time in her towns and villages in order to send word quickly.

Ranma did not get into the Hot Springs with Sofy despite her continued offers. Instead, he had to spend time in the men's only section.

Today he was leaning against the wall the two baths shared, listening to Lim and Sofy as Sofy teased Lim relentlessly, about her body, about Ranma and her relationship if that was what it was, and about Sofy wanting to borrow him, as well as jokes about Eleanora. Those at least Lim enjoyed and gave as good as she got.

In fact, Ranma reflected that if Elen ever learned how much Lim had shared about her thanks to the nice Hot Springs and copious amounts of alcohol bought for her by Sofy, Elen would probably be almost embarrassed enough to die. *Hmm, might keep those in reserve just in case Elen goes back on our agreement and she doesn't let me off the hook on the whole parole thing.*

His thoughts were interrupted by a call from the changing area. "Erm, sir Ranma, there's a message here from Lady Titta..."

Not two hours later Ranma was leading a very drunk Lim tied to her saddles as he, Sofy and Lim raced on towards Leitmeritz. There they found one of Elen's captains there running the city in her absence, while a group of scribes saw to what bits of logistics had to be seen to here for the Silver Meteor Army. Hearing that and seeing how many of her lady's men were within the city, made Lim somewhat furious until Sofy calmed her down, saying that had been ordered by the king. Knowing what she had learned over the past few days about politics, she had to nod her head in acquiescence but was also determined to send what help they could. *Surely another company of cavalry wouldn't be enough to make this...*

Lim's thoughts ground to a halt at that, and she turned to stare at Titta and the two men ruling in place of her lady. "Wait, what was the name of this army Lady Eleonora and Earl Vorn are leading?"

"The Silver Meteor Army," Titta replied, while both men looked a little dyspeptic at how over the top it was.

"What...my lady," Lim groaned. "UGH."

"Hehehe, I rather like it," Sofy giggled. "It's a bit over the top perhaps, but it gives the impression of strength and beauty too." "Right, whatever, setting aside the name Titta, what do you mean they're having trouble?" Ranma asked, his arms crossed as he stared across the table at Titta.

She waved her hands wildly before squeezing them together looking between Ranma, Lim, and Sofy, her face extremely worried. "They're having trouble that's all I know. Lord Tigre hasn't let me come forward to serve him in the field, but we've been getting rumors of late here. According to the last men that came through on rotation the Great Knight Roland has been ordered to put down our rebellion. But were not rebelling, only fighting against the two Dukes!" she wailed. "I don't understand, why would king Faron..."

"It probably wasn't Faron," Sofy said shaking her head sadly. "That's part of why I am heading to Nice, remember? No one has seen Faron personally in more than two and half months and I am to discover if there is any truth to the rumors of his passing."

"Yeah, well, it wasn't like this Faron guy was doing all that good a job as king as it was. Or else Lord dragon-shit and Lord Pervo wouldn't have been able to grow as powerful as they did. Or at least their policies wouldn't have spread as far as they did. Frankly, I have to wonder if Faron was dead even before his son was killed at the Battle of the Dinant Plains."

"That is true, but he was still respected at that point. But since the news of Regnas' death reached Nice he has not been seen for more than a few hours. And even that ended about a month ago. No one but his chief minister and perhaps the two dukes themselves have seen him. So my king wanted me to find out the truth before deciding on what to do in regards to backing Tigre and Elen more than just agreeing to let Elen work with him."

Ranma growled irritably, annoyed as he remembered the talk among the nobles in the army camp on the plains, how envious they were of the two dukes, and wanted to follow them. But he said nothing on that score, at this point with these girls there would be no point. "Who is this Roland character?" he asked instead.

"The greatest Knight in Brune, a warrior whose strength and abilities put even most Vanadis to shame," Titta replied her tone somewhere between worried, awed and respectful.

"That is still supposition. What is known for certain is that he and five thousand men have kept an entire border of Brune free of incursions from Sachstein to the west and even Asvarre on the western-most peninsula. In fact, recently he destroyed an army of seventeen thousand men in barely two weeks," Sofy said with a faint frown. "Although if he is facing Elen we might learn soon enough how he really fares against a Vanadis."

Ranma shook his head. "Okay, so that just means we have to get there fast. How many times can you teleport?" he asked looking over at Sofy.

"Four times a day, I can cross twenty-five leagues maximum four times a day. That won't even get us to the Dinant Planes for three days. And teleporting that far that often puts me on my back."

Ranma frowned thinking hard. "I think I can run something like a hundred and twenty leagues a day if I push. Not certain, though I'll for sure need a lot of food at the end. And carrying you won't slow me down at all, although two people would." Ranma had never actually measured how far he could sprint in a day, but he was willing to try. He turned to Lim, still frowning but not for the same reason. "Um, Lim, I'm sorry, but..."

"But at the pace are going to set matter how many horses I took, I wouldn't keep up with you, I know," Lim said with a sigh. "Besides, with Lady Elen gone for so long, it falls on me to rule Leitmeritz. Besides at the front, I would just be one more sword and one more sub-commander."

"Yeah, but a pretty damn good subcommander miss flank attack," Ranma teased and praised in one breath. At that Lim smiled almost tenderly at Ranma, a sight that caused Sofy to bite back a giggle and Titta's eyes to widen. "Thank you, but that doesn't change facts as they are right now. Go on Ranma. I will help Lady Eleanora and Lord Tigrevurmud as best I can here, then come forward during the winter with as much winter supplies as I can. You go and help them your way."

Ranma smiled back at her and, feeling greatly daring, pulled Lim into a hug. "See you soon," he murmured into her hair, while she turned a red hitherto unknown to womankind. Then he pulled back, gave her a wink, and was reaching out to a now openly chortling Sofy. She took his hand, and in a flash of light they were gone, while Lim was still gaping like a red-faced fish.

She turned a glare on the giggling Titta and growled out, "NOT ONE WORD." Before marching off in a huff, promising to introduce her sword to Ranma's head the next time she saw him. *The least he could do is have waited until we were alone to hug me like that.* The realization that she wanted Ranma to hug her put a smile on her face.

later that day, Sofy collapsed, only to be caught by Ranma. They had left the horses behind in Leitmeritz, then Sofy had teleported them twice. They had rested after that, while Ranma hunted up a bit of food to supplement the supplies they had been given in Leitmeritz. After that Lim had teleported them again, only to nearly collapse to her knees after the fourth time. "Oh my, that was rather harder than I thought it would be. I wonder if..."

"If? Well, I've noticed over the past few days traveling with you that teleporting you and Lim with me was much harder than I was used to. But it wasn't the first time I've teleported two people at once. That is strange. Maybe... well, the Viralt are always wielded by Vanadis after all, so maybe my teleportation spell doesn't work as well on men, and I have to overpower it?" Sofy asked, pushing sweaty hair out of her eyes, her chest heaving from her exertions.

The sight nearly made Ranma lose control of his third leg, but he looked away, and, thinking quickly said, "Well, um, would my changing into my female form help?"

"Yes, it probably would," Sofy replied, before smirking as she noticed Ranma looking away. She stretched then, making a loud groaning noise, and Ranma's eyes twitched back to her, specifically her chest, where her hair was bouncing off her abundant curves. *Hehehe, yep, I'm getting through to him, I think. Although, is it my chest, or my hair that attracts his attention?* Putting that question to the side, she went on. "I think however it's your turn to make good your boast."

"Heh, fine by me." With that, Ranma knelt down, his back to Sofy. "Hop on." A second later Ranma's blush came back with reinforcements, as Sofy's large chest pressed into his back. "Gababbaa...."

"Hmm, did you say something?" Sofy asked, her tone teasing as she whispered into his ear.

"Grrr..." Fed up by Sofy's teasing, Ranma hopped to his feet so fast that Sofy nearly lost her grip around his shoulders. "You better hang on Sofy, because I am gonna fly." Without another word and barely waiting for Sofy to reclaim her grip – but still blushing as that pressed her large breasts into his back once more – Ranma raced on. Sofy's whoop of delight brought a smile to his face and the two raced on.

OOOOOOO

Roland scowled as he stared up at the tower through the rain from well out of bow range. They had successfully invested the castle on this side of the river, and he already had his siege crews pushing downriver to put his real plan into motion. Arden and his troops were making a series of boats tying them together and then sinking them, whereupon they would start dumping mud and rocks on them to make a ford. From that, he could start crossing downriver and then strike either at Territoire, Aude, or the Dinant Plains and beyond into Zhcted to raid Leitmeritz. With Tigre and his main forces at Territoire and Eagle's tower they would be playing catch up to bring him to battle, and he would be the one deciding on when and where, with only the onset of winter being a factor to how long he could string Tigre and the Vanadis along.

The work was already close to finished. And yet, there was something going on. For someone who had created those horse archers, a kind of trooper Roland had never seen, and lead them in four stinging attacks on their march here, along with an attempt to get at his supply train – limited though it was - Vorn was suddenly playing a very conservative game. That made Rowland's battle instincts tingle. *Earl Vorn is planning something. Something...*

"My Lord!"

At that shout Roland turned sharply, staring to one side as a messenger reached him. "What is it?"

"The scouts from upriver are coming in, and, my lord they are waving the yellow flag!"

On campaign Roland's men routinely used differently sized flags to single different messages to one another. It wasn't a perfect system, and few were actually trained in it just yet, but his unit commanders, men who led teams of twenty, knew it, and would never use a wrong color or be exaggerating. The yellow color was for 'danger, disaster,' and he frowned, wondering about that and why they would be reporting in person. *They should've simply sent a single rider back.* About a minute later, Roland was standing in the center of his rather muddy camp as the scout commander skidded to a stop in front of him. "Lord Roland, the man shouted as he fell off his lathered horse. "The river, the rivers are flooding!"

"What? What river!?" He barked, grabbing the man and shaking him. "How are they flooding?"

"I don't know my Lord, I didn't go that far upstream, our horses..." The man stammered, "The mud it's everywhere, we couldn't make any headway along the riverbed at all. The area between the two rivers is just flooding out." He looked down at his feet, which Roland, following the gesture, thought with a sinking feeling was a lot muddier today than it had been yesterday,

Roland scowled, thinking about the map, about what could've caused this, and his eyes widened. "The dams..." he breathed. "They've damaged or destroyed the King's Fingers! This area is going to be a single river soon!"

"Surely not, that's..." Olivier fell silent. "I was going to say impossible, but at this time of year..." he whispered.

"Exactly. Normally, there would be no chance that the waters could spread all that much, but this area of Brune is lowland, it's why this strip is the start of the most fertile area of our nation. If all the rivers around here flooded at the same time... water will seek water, and everything between them will become mud." "We'll be stuck here, our horses unable to make any headway, our heavy cavalry useless!" Olivier groaned, shaking his head, a wry smirk on his face. "A bold stroke." "An insanely bold stroke. If they have actually damaged those dams, this area will never be the same." Roland replied ruefully, shaking his head. "I'd thought Vorn had suddenly become conservative, all the while he was lulling us into complacency with one hand, while preparing the strike in the other."

"Still, our scouts noticed in time, and he doesn't know about the bridge builders." Roland's own archers had seen to that after they had finished putting up the camp, scouring everywhere around the river delta, fighting small, vicious battles with Tigre's scouts, which left ten of them dead and the rest retreating at the cost of twenty-seven of his own. *I thought they were fighting harder than irregular scouts should! They were trying to blind us, buy time for this to work.*

"Prepare to move the entire army," he ordered, as his second-in-command wheeled away, already barking orders, while Roland continued to roar out his own, "Four groups, light cavalry with me now! Second heavy cavalry, third, you'll be the guards for our supply train and will be pulling out directly west trying to get out of the delta. Fourth group, stay here and follow us after a turning of the sun. It will be your task to keep Vorn and the Vanadis' attention on our camp here."

As Roland was barking out commands in his camp, he was being observed by Tigre from on top of the Eagle's Tower. "They've discovered the rivers. This is a really marvelous device you know," he said smiling at over at Elen who had loaned Tigre her spyglass. "How much do they cost?"

"It was a birthday gift from Sasha and I'd imagine quite a bit," Elen said, grabbing her self-control with both hands as she forcibly dragged Tigre back to the most important thing. "What do you mean they discovered the river?"

"They're already packing up everything. And I mean everything, we tremendously underestimated how well organized Roland and his Order would be."

"What are we going to do then?"

Tigre didn't answer for a moment, studying what the enemy was doing. Already he could see several companies of light cavalry leaving the camp, along with a few dozen men who did not ride their horses nearly as well. The sight bothered him as did the sight of more men of the same type hurrying after the first. "That infantry of Roland's, they've not been a part of any of the attacks we've faced, in fact, they haven't even been near the front of the battles. Do you remember seeing any of them actually doing any fighting?"

Elen shook her head, and Tigre continued to frown. He scanned through the campsite, counting horses and men, and scowling. "And there aren't a lot of them in the camp any longer. When did that happen?" He turned his attention back to the groups that had already left the camp, watching as they moved downriver rather than just away.

Concerned turning into crystallized thought, he turned and handed the spyglass over to Elen. "I think they stole a march on us. I think... I think that those infantrymen were simply peasant workers or something of the sort. I think, they're downriver from us and are creating a crossing somehow even as we speak. Gather your cavalry units and the light archers again, and then get the pikemen moving. We'll have to use them to block whatever bridgehead they are going to try to create. I just hope we get there in time."

Thanks to his incredible eyesight and quick decision-making Tigre and Elen's march paralleled that of Roland's men. They arrived in time to push the initial light cavalry company back across the river with their horse archers, although this fight forced the horse archers to stay and just pepper their enemies rather than retreat and counter as before. Elen became involved at that point. She smashed aside the Brunish light cavalry, taking control of the makeshift ford, which had been created by tying four riverboats together and partially sinking them into the riverbed.

But then Roland was there. His first blow slaughtered a dozen men, at the head of another group of light cavalry and Tigre's eyes widened. "Elen! We have to get him away from that bridge! He'll slaughter our pikemen!"

"Rurick!" Elen shouted, her voice slicing through the din of battle with the ease of long practice. "Take command of the cavalry, pull back and east then around, you and the pike will have to reclaim that bridge! Keep his Holy Order from crossing! Tigre and I will deal with Roland." She turned to flash a smile at Tigre, but he was already firing.

Four arrows one after another aimed at both his horse and side flew straight and true, but Roland used Durandal to slice them into pieces with an air attack that, while more diffuse was just as powerful as Elen's attack. It shattered the incoming arrows and sent forth a shockwave that smashed into men and horse alike, sending them sprawling, if they were lucky. If they weren't, it set them flying, to crash down with bone-crunching life-ending force or just in pieces already. Still, Tigre had Roland's attention now, and he turned his horse toward the archer.

Elen urged her horse forward, and the two met sword-to-sword while Tigre moved to the side, waiting for a shot. He shot two arrows, quick as quick, one straight at Roland's head, the other at his horse again while Roland continued to trade blows with Elen.

If Tigre hadn't seen it, he would never have believed it was possible. Not even Ranma would have been so negligent dealing with his arrows while at the same time fighting Elen. But Elen was soon smashed from the saddle, sent tumbling to the ground as her horse raced on. She instantly righted herself and brought up her sword, shouting out her attack, "Ley Adimos!"

But Rowland's sword crashed down through the attack, as he sent forth his own, a bright blast of yellow energy that Elen barely was able to dodge.

Three more arrows fired in quick succession interrupted Rowland's charge towards Elen, and he turned, charging instead towards Tigre. "That's right! Though you are a traitor, at least we can die like a nobleman of Brune!" he shouted, blasting apart two more arrows.

Then, he was on Tigre slashing him from the battle, or so he should have. Instead, Tigre had flipped himself up and around his horse, actually belly-riding for a moment, as he fired his bow straight up.

Then they were past one another, and Roland turned, shifting the horse around quickly. But Tigre was already by Elen, grabbing her up into his saddle, and Roland stared past them at the ongoing battle by the ford his men had created. Through great effort and sacrifice, the horse archers and cavalry from Eagle's Tower had killed or pushed the Navarre Knight's light cavalry out of the way, and now a solid square of men wielding giant spears had pushed into the gap, killing many of his horse and then turning to present a bristling front towards his heavy cavalry, who were too late. *Pike!? Where... somewhere in Zhcted no doubt. Still, pike I can deal with later. If I kill Vorn and the Vanadis now, he could probably get the rest of the men to surrender, not only ending this rebellion, but not creating any atrocities that would have instigated a greater war with Zhcted.*

With that thought in mind, he charged forward. Just as Elen leaped out of the saddle to engage him from the ground and let Tigre race on without her, a boot slammed into the side of his head.

OOOOOO

Ranma arrived at the front at a dead sprint, having dropped Sofy off with a band of refugees, about fifteen leagues back. He had been sprinting as hard as he could since leaving Leitmeritz, a run that would have put any wolf to shame for endurance or any leopard for speed.

He only slowed down a little to view the battlefield, whistling as he took it in from the northwest in a large tree on a tiny hill that rose out of a forest several leagues in every direction.

The entire area around the river was a muddy, bloody bog, with the pikemen holding in a formation on one side of the original riverbed. In the river he could barely make out bits of wood still sticking out of the mud of what must have been a makeshift ford. On that ford, their horses bunched together and now starting to panic were a heap ton of heavy cavalry, but their lances couldn't reach the pike, and those pikes were reaping a horrible toll, even as they simply stood there, barring the enemy's path.

To one side of this battle was an intense cavalry melee between men who were wearing the armor of Leitmeritz and clumps of light cavalry with the colors of Brune on their baldrics, accompanied by another symbol Ranma didn't recognize. Horse archers, an idea that Tigre had been pushing for when Ranma led out his scouts that first time, were also milling around, far too close to the enemy, but unable to pull away. Still, they were doing their job by making certain the pike didn't have to split their attention.

Out of that melee came Tigre, with Elen riding behind him. A second later five men were blasted out of the way of a man with dark black hair, black armor, and a truly massive sword, who raced after the two of them. On the other side of the battle, Elen's horse continued to run, turning only slowly to come back to its mistress. That was about enough Ranma decided. He raced forward once more. Just as the man dealt with a few more arrows from Tigre, Ranma announced his presence by smashing a foot into the man's head. To his surprise though the man was barely rocked by the kick and he twisted around faster than most could have followed, bringing his crazy-huge sword down. "And who are you!"

But Ranma leaped over it, aiming a kick at the man's face. He ducked backward in his saddle, only being grazed, as he twisted his sword around to slice at Ranma again. "Names Ranma man, you!" Let it be said Ranma always preferred to know the names of the people trying to cave his head in with a giant slab of metal. As he spoke, Ranma dodged, hammering a blow into the man's chest.

It was like hitting the side of a battleship, and the guy only flinched backward before bringing his sword down again in an overhead arc. "I am Roland, Knight of Brune! And you will pay for invading our nation!"

Ranma sidestepped, flinging himself up into a roundhouse that the man blocked with one arm, his attempts to grab at Ranma's leg though missed. Ranma was too fast for them, used the momentum of the block to come around again from the other side, only for the man to raise his sword to block it this time. Ranma pulled back midair, causing the man's eyes to widen, before Ranma's hands flashed forward, his ki flashing out in a blast of blue gold power redirecting Roland's blade backward but doing no real damage.

But Ranma's next attack caught the man full force, hurling him backward off his horse at last. He slammed through a tree but was rolling even as he did and stood up with a roar lashing out with his sword. The air pressure wave, this attack caused was like being hit by a tornado, picking Ranma up and hurling him through the woodlands, crashing through several trees on his own now.

Even so, Ranma rolled with it, coming up and charging forward just in time to see Elen lashing out at the man with one of her air attacks. He shrugged it off, his blade slicing through it with his sword, and nearly catching Elen on the backswing, but she rolled away, staring in shock at the man.

By that point though Ranma was near enough to throw another punch, and the man stumbled as the punch landed on the back of his head, going to one knee, but grabbing behind him for Ranma, even as he twisted around to bring his massive sword around in swift slash.

Ranma lifted himself up, over the sword, landing on it lightly, wincing as something within the sword stung his feet something fierce, even as he struck out hard.

The man grunted again and again as Ranma's blows landed, before shouting "Useless!" and tossing Ranma away from his sword, lashing down with the sword a second later. Ranma then pressed his attack, keeping to the air, dodging the man's blows. But eventually, those blows were coming too fast, creating air pressure all around the man that acted like a shield, blasting Ranma off his feet again, as he roared out once more, "I am Roland, Brune's greatest Knight!"

"Yeah?" Ranma grunted, rolling as he hit the ground to come back up on his feet, his hands up in front of his face in an attack stance. "As I've heard. Funny then that you're attacking someone who's only been protecting Brune's peasants from their so-called betters who treat them like shit or enemies to be preyed upon!"

The man scowled, putting his sword on his shoulder and "You are no Brune-man. Why do you care? Why do you fight me here?"

"No, I'm not, I am friends with one though and that's enough. Ta my mind, that gives me a far better reason to fight than any half-assed reason you might have." Ranma then raised his voice into a shout get out of here Tigre, Elen! I've got this. See to the rest of your Army!"

Elen was about to protest this, when Ranma charged forward again, lashing out with another kick. Roland blocked it with the side of his sword, then went for a chop, but instead of dodging upwards as the man had anticipated, Ranma rolled underneath the attack, coming up and aiming his next punch not towards the man's body, but towards his upraised wrist. His fingers slammed hard into Roland's wrist, deadening the man's hand, and causing him to drop his sword as Ranma lashed out again towards the man's center, going for power strikes that tore the man's metal armor apart yet did no damage to the hard form underneath.

But this slowed Ranma enough so he wasn't able to dodge the next punch which came in fast and hard, a jab to the face from Roland's other hand that broke his nose and sent Ranma flying backward. *Shit!! I have never been hit that hard before, not even Ryoga or Taro. This guy is insanely tough.*

Even so, Ranma rolled lashing out with a kick that caught the sword, sending it spinning away before the man could grab it with the same fist that had just hit him. He grumbled, then slammed his own fingers into the same point Ranma had a second ago and instantly feeling returned to his hand. "Interesting trick."

As Roland was doing this, Ranma reached up to his nose and reset it while his healing ability kicked in, as he grinned impishly at the other man, taking note of his actions. "Heh, I got thousands of tricks dude. But I gotta wonder, how well will you fight without your giant overcompensating toy?"

Roland guffawed, bringing up his own hands, in a boxing stance. He was, despite the fact he knew his Knights of Navarre had probably been forced to retreat by this point, enjoying this fight. "I'll have you know my sword is proportionate!"

Ranma roared in laughter and then without any warning, both men charged forward. Roland and Ranma traded blows, but almost immediately Roland seemed to realize that without his sword, he wasn't going to do enough damage to Ranma. His blows hit like sledgehammers going at fifty miles an hour, (Mousse had created a technique once he called Heavenly Cannon, not fun,) but Ranma had dealt with worse pain before and he was far too fast to be hit all that often.

For every blow that Roland landed, Ranma landed fifty and that was without counting the times his fists seemed to disappear right upon the point of impact, and Roland could feel hundreds of hits that one targeted area. Some of those hits were attempts to get through the man's quickly deteriorating armor to land pressure point attacks. But the man was so heavily muscled he had to put in a lot of effort to get through to the pressure point, and every time he did, the man would move entirely on the defensive as he released the point. Eventually, the man seemed to be able to discern, which attack was pressure-related and would move so they didn't hit, just enough to throw off Ranma's aim.

Still, Ranma would probably have won the exchange eventually just because he could take more punishment if not for the fact Roland was both quick, and nowhere near normal himself. Between one second and the next he slammed a foot down on the ground, he created an earthquake just as Ranma was about to land from a hop over a kick causing the boy to stumble. Another high kick caught Ranma and hurled him to slam into a tree so hard he actually shattered it and the rock behind it. But even then, he rolled with it, coming back in.

Yet unbeknownst to Ranma, Roland had been moving their battle towards where his sword had flown since the get-go. Now he grabbed it up, pointing the tip towards Ranma even

as he shrunk it down into its smaller form, the metal of Durandal sliding smoothly as it did so. The youth was just too fast for its true shape. He flung it around in a figure-eight trying to cut Ranma into pieces with one hand, wielding the still heavy blade almost as if it was a rapier while keeping his other arm in close for defense or lightning fast jabs. The two men continued to trade blows, moving across the landscape deeper into the woods that had previously been set to one side of the battle, neither of them pulling their punches any longer. Each dodged attack caused enough air pressure to shatter trees or gauge out huge divots in the ground as they danced and ducked, dodged, weaved and struck.

Ranma was still landing more hits than he was taking, but Roland was hardened well beyond anything Ranma had ever dealt with, even Pantyhose Taro's Minotaur form. He shrugged off Ranma's blows even his Amaguriken hits easier than any opponent Ranma had previously faced. Worse, with his weapon now shrunk, Roland's speed was closer to Ranma's own, and though the edge of the weapon wasn't sharp enough to Cat-Ranma, he was still doing a lot of damage with each hit that landed, breaking bones and arms.

Ranma dodged another blow, watching as a wind attack sliced through the trees behind him, slamming a kick into Roland which sent him hurling backward, then he shouted out his own distance attack, "Moko Takabisha Arashi!" launching them from his clenched fists.

The energy spheres were blocked, redirected then dodged, and more trees died before Roland charged forward again, his blade enlarging for just a second to lash out hard at Ranma, but it failed. Ranma had flipped himself up and over the man, bringing a punch crashing down towards Roland's neck, his ki flaring into his limb to add to his strength.

"You will never defeat Brune!" Roland roared, his sword shrinking back down into its shield configuration, while he raised it up behind him to block the blow. And when Ranma's blow landed on the shield instead of the back of Roland's head, he found himself catapulted backward, all the punch's force returned to him. He found his bones breaking from his fingers on up to his shoulder while he was hurled back like he was just shot out of a cannon.

His flight only ended when he slammed into the muddy side of a hill on the other side of several dozen now shattered and broken trees. "Okay, that was a new trick from you," he muttered, pushing himself out of the rubble of a tree, grabbing up bits and pieces of it and tossing it at Roland. "Catch!"

Roland stopped, smashing them out of the air, allowing Ranma to get to his feet. With a wicked grin, Ranma grabbed a nearby rock, tore it out of the ground and with both hands above his head tossed it forward. "And I am the Living trebuchet! Eat rock!"

Roland twisted and seemed barely able to block the rock with the flat of his blade to one side. But to Ranma's surprise, he smashed the rock to pieces. "That's one hell of a sword. No wonder it's doing so much damage whenever it connects. I hate magic," Ranma muttered. Ranma then kicked up, into a tree, and then away.

“If you wish to play hide and seek, I will come find you!” Roland shouted. He had completely forgotten about the larger battle, too interested in dealing with Ranma, who he knew now was as great a threat to Brune and the king as any Vanadis. Instead of coming after Ranma though he began to launch massive blades of force everywhere, yellow shaves of magical energy which shredded the forest all around Ranma even as he dodged.

When the boulders started flying back at him along with massive jagged spears of shattered timber, Roland thought that Ranma was becoming desperate. “Just because you’re the living trebuchet does not mean that you’ll be able to take me down so easily!” he shouted, smashing each boulder in turn.

But Ranma had planned for that and closed under rocks and debris that he had thrown and was in Roland’s face. Before Roland could do anything to set himself, he had taken four hundred Amaguriken speed punches to the face and chest, and he felt a tooth come loose under the blow to the face as he staggered backward. Ranma then grabbed his head, and jerked it down into his knee, shouting “Amaguriken Knee Strike!”

Now it was Roland’s nose which shattered, followed by his temple, and he reeled back, blood frothing around a ruined mouth, but he grabbed Ranma by the leg with one hand holding him there, before the younger shorter man could get away. Ranma just barely avoided getting his head chopped off by that sword coming in toward his neck.

He carried the blade off to one side with one hand, lashing out with a punch to Roland’s already fucked up jaw with the other, but Roland simply moved with it, already dealing with the pain of Ranma’s earlier attacks, and still didn’t let go of his grip on Ranma’s leg.

But instead of trying to get free, Ranma kicked off the ground with his other leg and mule-kicked Roland. Roland was strong, very strong, but his grip wasn’t as strong as Ranma’s leg and Roland’s grip came off of Ranma’s leg. Roland flew backward, and Ranma continued to flip himself before landing back on his feet and launching himself forward.

While in midair Roland also rolled, bringing his sword around, but Ranma dodged it with all the proficiency in midair combat. The next blow he landed smashed Roland into the ground, despite Ranma’s best efforts not to, yet Ranma didn’t back away. He slammed several dozen blows into the other man’s back as he tried to get his feet under him, but Roland twisted around even as Ranma struck blocking the blows with his sword, but thankfully in sword formation it lacked the blowback magic that the sword formation had. At the same time, his fist flew forward in a jab so fast Ranma couldn’t dodge. Then it became Ranma’s turn to go flying, his head ringing from the blow.

Roland twisted, grabbed up his sword, and turned around still on his knees shouting, “Soaring Hoof!”

Ranma barely had a second to dodge to the side as the energy wave hit, shredding the ground and several trees that had been behind him. He was then in Roland's face again, exulting as he **finally** was breaking through the other man's durability. Every blow now was telling, and Roland was reeling away, while Ranma continued to dodge nearly every blow he threw in turn.

Roland was good, strong, massively durable, but he wasn't used to fighting a warrior like Ranma, someone who could dodge his best, someone who could hang with him for this long. His endurance was lacking and Ranma was still going strong.

Ranma dove underneath a blow instead of above it or dodging to the side. He had only done this once before, and Roland had fallen into the dangerous habit of thinking Ranma would leap above attacks if he had any choice rather than dodge blow. And instead of attacking Roland's main body, Ranma went for Roland's leg.

One leg of the larger man had been slightly outstretched from the other, just enough to allow him to strike without opening himself up in turn. He grabbed the side of Roland's knee and hammered a blow into the side of his lower leg at Amaguriken speed, shattering the bone there into so many pieces, Roland roared in pain in fury and Ranma rolled away from the hilt strike that would've caved in the back of his head.

He came up, kicking off the muddy ground, but the mud gave under him just a tiny bit more than he had anticipated and Ranma's lunge backward became a stumble. Roland instantly took advantage of it, bringing his sword around, and Ranma grimaced as the blow landed on his shoulder, breaking his bones, dislocating his shoulder and hurling him away. *Fuck!!! That hurt! The edge ain't sharp enough to break my skin, but the thing doesn't need to slice skin to fucking kill me.*

Roland used his sword to push himself to upwards after having nearly fallen back onto his rear, limping badly his leg ruined, grimacing in pain and anger. Without both legs to steady himself, he wouldn't be able to give to put his full strength into any more blows like that.

Across from him Ranma groaned, reaching up and setting his shoulder, holding it as he stood up, making certain that the bones would heal properly, as Roland stared at him shaking his head. "You're good," Ranma said cracking his knuckles and thankful beyond all reasoning that the wet mud underneath him wasn't liquid enough to transform him. That would've just ruined the whole fight in his opinion. "But not quite good enough."

Roland grunted, pulling a hand off the sword hilt to give Ranma the finger, which apparently was a universal gesture across dimensions. "Fuck you, and the donkey who rode you!"

"Huh, that's a new one," Ranma said with a laugh, even as he crouched down. "Unfortunately, I think it's time to finish this."

Roland didn't bother replying with words, instead he swung his sword up above his head and brought it down roaring "I am Roland, my king's greatest Knight and I will not yield!"

With that shout, he sent a blast of energy through the ground straight towards Ranma faster than most people would've been able to dodge, wider than even Elen would've been able to leap away from. Ranma wasn't most people, but Roland had gotten used to that too. He leaped upwards over the strike, only for Roland to lift his sword up again and lash out once more sending another energy blast towards the air.

Ranma cursed realizing that time it been his falling into a habit that time. The blow slammed into Ranma, and he howled in pain, sent flying once more before falling to earth, rolling and slamming into tree after tree after tree, each tree smashed into splinters by his fight, unable to stop himself. Roland didn't let up, coming on hard, sending two more blasts towards where Ranma had rolled, unable to move quickly but still able to launch his long-range attacks with ease.

Still, Ranma was able to dodge most of them, while his body began to heal from the damage already done to it instantly, his ki flowing away like water. He hurled his own attacks back, once more tossing downed trees like throwing spears rather than giant trees, and once more, Roland was forced to destroy it, unable to dodge thanks to his ruined leg. That was enough, and Ranma was away, dodging freely, while behind him Roland continued to send out blast after blast.

How much ki does this guy have!? Ranma shrieked in his mind. If Ranma had been sending out ki blasts, especially of the size of the ones that Roland was tossing around he would have exhausted himself quickly. If he kept going, Ranma knew he could've killed himself.

Despite that though, Ranma was once more able to get in close, twisting and coming in from behind after launching several trees at Roland's front. With his mangled leg, Roland was unable to turn fast enough to keep Ranma at range and when next he struck, Roland fell backward, gasping in agony as more of his weight was put on his ruined leg. Frankly, Ranma was astonished the man was able to do anything with his leg that battered.

Off-balance and falling to the ground Roland couldn't dodge or redirect the next blow which slammed into the side of his shoulder, the pressure point attack deadening his shoulder from that point down. But he didn't even try, instead, he grabbed at Ranma's leg once more which had pulled back just a little too slowly, dragging Ranma in and down with him.

An upwards blasting knee blow landed, and Ranma felt a few ribs go, but a hammer blow to the top of the head sent Roland staggering down, just long enough for Ranma to concentrate again. Ranma's next blow took him in the eye, causing him to bellow in pain.

And that should have been it. Roland was crippled his leg, no longer working, one arm useless and blinded in one eye.

Perhaps that could explain why Ranma made his next mistake. Ranma closed in from Roland's blindside, intent on knocking him out permanently, and his blow did land, straight in the side of Roland's face.

But Roland had been prepared for it already flung up his hand just in time to catch Ranma's fist as he pulled back. He yanked Ranma in, slamming him down into the ground, burying him in the mud for just a second, as he roared, lunging forward ignoring the pains in his legs, to actually straddle Ranma. Blow after blow landed, and the two young men rolled in the mud, first one gaining the other hand then the next, blows fit to shatter castles slamming into flesh with enough force to create shockwaves in the mud around them.

But despite this final trick, the damage Ranma had already done to Roland finally began to tell. His blows came slower and slower and finally Ranma twisted them around, pulling the other man down onto the mud, slamming a blow into Roland's face again and again, no longer able to concentrate enough to use the chestnut roasting fist or any of his ki attacks.

Finally, Roland's defense faltered, and his arm slumped back, and Ranma stopped, leaning away from him, staring down at Roland, his own face a bloody mess, even as his little remaining ki began to work on them. He then fell to the side, gasping. His eyes closing dimly.

As he fell, he felt something inside, a distinct scraping feeling and he gasped. *Freaking Oden and his insistence on breaking bones to show me what it feels like. Who knew that'd be actually useful?* Realizing one of his cracked ribs was cutting into his lung, Ranma reached down and with a grimace felt at his side. He grabbed what little ki he had left, slowly using it to pull his busted rib out from within his lung. That done, he healed his lung and then threw up all of the gunk that had built up in them, his blood flowing down from his chin in rivulets.

"Well, t, that hurt," Ranma muttered, then allowed himself to collapse into unconsciousness.

This was how Sofy found them a few minutes later: Roland unconscious, his sword sticking in the ground to one side, kicked away by Ranma after he had knocked the other man down into the mud. Roland was unconscious but was still breathing. Ranma was also laid out comatose next to him, looking much less battered save for his shoulder and arm on one side, which seemed to have been broken in numerous places.

She looked at the two men, then around, torn between horror and shock at the amount of damage their battle had done not only to one another but to the surrounding countryside. "There, there used to be a forest here, wasn't there?" The blonde woman bit her lip, but then began to move quickly, gathering up Roland's sword. The thing was so heavy that a normal woman with her build should never have been able to lift it, but Sofy managed, carrying it over to lay on Roland's chest. With both arms broken and his face more a mangle of black and blue than an actual face, she doubted he would be able to move let alone wield the blade, which she recognized as one of the treasures of Brune.

With that done, Sofy closed her eyes and pictured Elen. When the image came to her easily without her having to try and force it, she knew the other Vanadis was within range of her teleportation spell. Kneeling in the mud between the two men, she held Zaht out letting the length to either side of her rest on their chests. "Mirashem." ("Particles of Light, Come to My Side.") With that, the three of them disappeared from the mangled bit of countryside that had seen the defeat of Roland, greatest of Brune's Knights.

The Silver Meteor Army, with help from its allies, had beaten the Knights of Navarre. A fact, which would cause reverberations through the lands of Brune and beyond as winter began.

End Chapter

Chapter 5: Surprises and Plots in Equal Measure

Once more, Ranma woke up in some pain, although as they flooded back into his mind, the memories of how he did so were not nearly as nice as the last time. No scratches down my back, no line fractures in my hip bones because someone forgot their own strength. Huh, and not nearly as much pain in general. That was his first thought. On its heels was the thought, Oh good, it looks as if Tigre or Elen figured out that I needed to be fed in order to power my healing ki.

For a moment he lay there, not trying to move as he concentrated on his ki. His ki was nowhere near as high as he wanted it to be, in fact, it was barely a fiftieth of where it should be. But, all of his more serious wounds had repaired themselves. His rib, which he'd had to set back in place, was healed, along with his face, everything else. That's a trade-off I'll take, he thought to himself, and slowly opened his eyes just as he felt the mattress underneath him shift, a new weight pressing down on the right side near his head.

He opened his eyes and stared at heaven. Utter heaven. A vast expanse of healthy pink skin forming a deep crevice between large hills housed in a dress that hugged the underside of those hills like a second skin, but which was open from the top to Ranma's appreciative, if still sleepy, gaze. Oh mighty Empress Takahashi, you never built them like this at home! Shampoo came closest, and not all that close either.

Then those hills closed with Ranma's eyes which widened as those soft pillows of feminine flesh swayed closer, actually pressing into his face. Ranma could hear Sofy whisper an apology while trying to reach for something, then evidently succeeding in grabbing whatever before pulling away. Ranma had to bite at his lower lip to keep from blushing. I'll go straight from heaven to hell if she finds out I'm awake now! I do not want to find out what the Vanadis equivalent of a mallet is!

Sofy sat back in her chair holding the carafe of water and moved to pour herself another drink, then frowned as she noticed that Ranma's expression had changed. Oh my, was he...Blushing slightly, she reached out with her foot and prodded his side. "Ranma, are you awake?"

"If I say no will you hurt me less?" Ranma asked, his eyes still scrunched tightly shut. Don't make eye contact, that's the way.

"Ranma I'm not going to hurt you," Sofy, even as she blushed. Yes, Sofy could be a flirt occasionally, when she found someone interesting, or when she wanted something out of some man as part of a mission. But that was a far cry from almost literally pressing her chest into his face like that.

"Are you sure?" Ranma asked. "I mean, I er, I didn't do it on purpose or anything, but I thought, that is..."

"I don't solve problems with violence at all if I can help it. If I was that kind of maiden, I wouldn't be the diplomat of our group or the king's own diplomat either. And I'm not one to jump to conclusions either." Sofy suddenly smiled. "Besides, you saw quite a bit more than that when we ran into one another in the baths when I was changing, or don't you remember?"

"You've got a point..." Ranma sweatdropped as he remembered that incident. As if I'll ever forget, damn, although I suppose I should have expected she'd be okay with it, so long as it wasn't on purpose. With that he opened his eyes, locking them on Sofy's face. She smiled at him, and he blushed again, staring into her face as he poked to his fingers together.

"So," Sofy whispered, leaning forward a little, and winking at him, hoping to gain some of her normal equilibrium at Ranma's expense. "How did it feel then?"

The words slipped out before Ranma could stop them. "Like heaven." Ranma belatedly clapped both hands over his mouth looking away. In so doing he missed the sight of Sofy's porcelain cheeks turning a light rosy hue. "S, sorry, I think I was waking up just as you were doing whatever it was."

Still flushed very slightly, Sofy held up the carafe. "I, I was reaching for this. And If I wanted to take revenge for you're being awake as I accidentally did that, I'd use water instead of violence..." Thinking that a brilliant idea at the moment, Sofy instantly suited actions to words, pouring some of the cold water over Ranma's head, giggling all the while.

"Gah!" Ranma squawked. The now-redhead glared at the blonde Vanadis, then laughed ruefully. "Alright, that's fair I guess."

"Good." Sofy looked away for a moment, sitting back down and touching her Viralt's shaft with one hand, somewhat bemused to find her chest still thumping in her chest.

Sofy routinely used her body to make men's minds turn into mush, as her friend Sasha once put it. It was just another weapon in her arsenal as a troubleshooter for King Victor. But setting aside her own reactions to Ranma's body, being around Ranma was just plain fun. Ranma was often hilariously

tongue-tied in her presence, but when he was able to communicate, it wasn't about praising her or showing himself or his abilities to the best light he could. He wasn't trying to overawe Sofy or woo her or anything. No, over the weeks they'd traveled with one another they had talked about any topic that came to mind.

And whenever they did, Ranma listened to Sofy, not just because she was a Vanadis or even Sofya Obertas, but because she was Sofy, a distinction that while subtle was all too rare. Ranma seemed to genuinely like her as a person, as a whole individual rather than as a Vanadis or simply for her body. On top of that, the way Ranma controlled himself - even now he was simply looking at her face rather than down at her chest or the rest of her - and looked at her more like he was staring at a great work of art rather than as a woman he wanted to possess, was beginning to affect her on the emotional level.

No wonder Lim is falling for him when he acts like that. Unfortunately, my own position is much less free of constraints than hers. I thought back when we met up in the bath that teasing Ranma would be a lot of fun, perhaps even pursuing a physical relationship. But if my heart is really going to get involved in this, that might not be the safest thing.

After all, Sofy was not just a Vanadis. She was the special diplomatic representative of King Victor, she had just too many oaths got controlling her actions, too many demands on her honor and time, to be with a man long term. It was a weakness and a personal demand on her time that she could ill-afford.

"How are you feeling?" she asked, more to distract her own thoughts than she believed Ranma was still injured really.

"I'm tired, and I need food. Other than that, I'm good," Ranma said bluntly. "My own healing factor is extremely well trained. So long as I've got ki, I can heal myself."

Sofy smiled at that information and the fact that she believed him too. "Good. I'm glad you're all right."

"Well thanks," Ranma said, then feeling greatly daring, reached up to her face. The redhead used a gentle finger to trace up the side of her jawline and then push a lock of her blonde hair behind her ear, causing a shiver to go up and down Sofy's spine. "What about you? Did you get involved in the battle?"

"N-no," Sofy replied, her voice a little tremulous even as she kept her body from reacting, pulling away from Ranma's touch to sit back down in the camp chair she'd been using a moment ago. Good grief, and that's with him as a girl. How did Ranma know my jawline's one of my sensitive spots?

Ranma actually hadn't known any such thing of course. Like in so many things, she was just going with his instincts. That, and the lock of blond hair falling down the side of Sofy's face had been distracting her something fierce.

Shaking her head very slightly, Sofy determinedly turned her mind to answering Ranma's question in greater detail. "I arrived as your battle ended. The Knights of Navarre had already retreated from the pikes, leaving their commander, the man you fought Roland, on this side of the river. If you hadn't attacked him though, he could well have turned on them, and completely destroyed their formation. With that, his own knights would've been across the river, and this whole war could have been turned on its ear."

"Can you tell me what happened? I mean how long have I been out, and what's been going on?"

"Well, for one thing, you've been out of it for three days."

Ranma started at that, shocked. Damn, that long? I know Roland pounded me like a pancake, but even so... ouch.

Unaware of Ranma's thoughts, Sofy continued. "The campaign season has officially begun to end. You might not be able to tell, because of the fire over there, but outside this tent, it's getting incredibly cold. Freezing in point of fact." She gestured to one side where a fire was burning in a small well-created pit in the center of the tent, and several heating stones were at the bottom of each bed.

Ranma blinked as she realized there was another bed in the tent, but ignored it for now looking back at Sofy. "Because of that, and because you captured Roland, the knights have been forced to retreat several leagues away from the other side of the river to get out of the area before it could turn to deep mud thanks to a trick Lord Vorn used apparently. Instead of pursuing, Elen and Lord Vorn took the opportunity to pull back to their own winter quarters."

"That's basically meant reinforcing the tower and that one town to the northeast. They've also been throwing up what Lord Vorn calls scout towers." The blonde Vanadis giggled, "That man thinks more in terms of archery than any other commander I've ever met. But I think it was a good idea, nonetheless. What he's done is to split up those scouts that you apparently trained, into teams of three. He calls them fire teams for some reason and has assigned them to put up what amounts to child's treehouses. They are spread out all along the portions of the river, which could possibly be cross in wintertime, or even in summer. Each fire team was assigned a horse to carry messages. It was an ingenious idea really."

Her giggle trailed off, and Sofy winced. "And a very good one in terms of the changes that are going to be occurring very shortly to the makeup of the Silver Meteor Army." She shook her head sadly. "I'm afraid I'm going to have to inform Elen of some uncomfortable realities soon. I've been putting it off due to the fact she hasn't been around much, but she just returned this morning from that tower. She's not going to be happy."

Shaking her head, Sofy went on determinedly keeping her tone upbeat. "Anyway, another of infantry is going to be kept in the tower, and the main force of cavalry at Territoire. There's also going to be a training range for the archers to be set up there as well. Lord Vorn wants to incorporate at least several hundred more archers into the Army before the next campaign season begins."

“That’s nice and all,” Ranma interrupted, at last, shaking her head. “But not all that interesting to me. Sorry but I’m not a general. What about my friends?”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Sofy said with a laugh. “I sometimes forget that you’re not a Vanadis yourself, something made much harder given your current gender.” She winked at the redhead and giggled as Ranma blushed looking away. He is so fun to tease, regardless of his current gender, Sofy thought, even while part of her was telling her that she shouldn’t do so if she was going to try to make a clean break of it.

“But yes, our friends are fine. Elen broke a bone in her side when she was tossed off her horse, but she was still moving around and seems energetic enough the few times I’ve seen her. Lord Vorn took a slash to one arm, but not a large one. I don’t think I’ve heard of anyone being mentioned as your friend other than those two, so I’m afraid I couldn’t tell you if you are asking about anyone else specific. Oh, except for those scouts you trained. Lord Vorn mentioned they had all come through this latest campaign in good health.”

Ranma shrugged. “That’s fine, it was those two who I was worried about. The scouts I’m not as close to.”

“The two of them are out and about in the camp at present if you want me to get them for you.” She sobered, shaking her head. “The main issue right now is the refugees. I hadn’t realized how many of them there were, but I think in this camp alone there are at least two thousand, maybe closer to four thousand men, women and children. And this is but one of several camps spread out in the area Lord Vorn and his allies have taken over. This is the largest one admittedly, but a lot of people have fled from further to the west, and even down south towards Thenardier’s territory. On top of the refugees that had been displaced by the retreating forces from the Dinant Plains too.”

“At least those have already been returned to their lands, but that still leaves a major issue. There have been small allotments of food and clothing arriving since Lord Vorn set up this camp. One major one came in today with that young maid, Titta, hence why Elen and Lord Vorn returned. But I don’t know if it’ll be enough to get most of these people through winter.”

Ranma grimaced, shaking her head his head. “That I can help with at least, once I have some energy back. Knocking down enough trees to make log houses is actually kind of easy.”

“Oh, I know you can do that at least,” Sofy said with a laugh. “You’re already proven to be quite the deforestation expert.”

Ranma blinked, then remembered the mess that he and Roland had made of that forest they’d fought in. He then gulped asking “UM, this might sound weird, but that wasn’t any kind of religious site or anything like that, was it? Only, if it is, I want it on record that at least two-thirds of that destruction was Roland’s fault.”

“Did someone say my name?” Roland groaned from the side.

The other two looked at him, and Roland blinked, opening his eyes. The first thing he saw was Sofy, who began giggling as he muttered, "Am I in heaven?" following Ranma's earlier comments and thoughts. Then her face actually registered along with the Viralt beside her and he winced. "Lady Obertas I presume?"

"So, I'm a prisoner then," Roland guessed, before looking across at Ranma in confusion. "Who is this? Another prisoner? Red hair... I have heard talk about some kind of maiden of healing."

"Yeah, no. That maiden of healing thing doesn't exist. It's just me. I'm Ranma, dude." Ranma replied, shaking out her still-damp hair.

Roland just stared at her for a second, then turned to Sofy. "I believe there are healers that are supposed to specialize in mental trauma in Nice. Perhaps you should send for one for your friend here."

Rolling her eyes, Ranma reached for the carafe, finding it only had a tiny bit of water, causing her to scowl.

Sofy however, giggled. She might have asked Ranma to keep his shape change a secret from the Brunish Knight, but since it was Sofy's fault that he was in his female form, to begin with at present, she felt the least she could do would be to help explain it. "I'm afraid my redheaded companion is actually telling the truth. Ranma has a magical curse that turns him into a woman when he is splashed by cold water. Which I did a few moments before you began to awake."

Seeing that Roland was now gazing at her skeptically, Sofy stood up. "I will prove it to you. A moment please."

She left the tent, and there was an awkward silence as Roland looked anywhere but at the female Ranma, whose wet top was clinging to her leaving very little to the imagination. For her part, Ranma was looking away too. He hated introducing his female form to people. It was getting old really quickly even in this world where she didn't have all the various issues with other people reacting negatively to it for one reason or another. Huh, come to think of it, only a few of Elen's soldiers have reacted negatively to my curse. Well them, and that one ass from Tigre's village who tried to hit on me when it was pouring rain once. None of the people who I've actually gotten to know have cared much about it one way or another.

Thankfully for the silence between them, Sofy was soon back with a full carafe of cold water and a goblet. "It's camp water, don't worry," Sofy said to the worried looks from Ranma and Roland both. She then poured some water into the goblet before handing it to Ranma and stepping back.

Ranma held a hand up above the goblet, then sent out a teeny tiny pulse of ki, instantly warming the water to boiling. Ranma then poured it over herself, hissing slightly at the pain of it, but then smirking over at Roland's wide-eyed, gape-mouthed stare. "Heh, told ya. Let's see, um, no, my mind doesn't change much including my preferences if ya know what I mean, taste does, but that's it. Yer a little old to ask ta see my bits but no I won't show them to ya, and it's a full-body change, yes. Cold

equals girl, hot equals man, and no I'm not going to tell you how I got it, ya wouldn't believe me. Any other questions?"

"Er...no, no I think that's about all I want to know, thank you," Roland muttered, looking a little queasy.

The two men stared at one another, and for a moment Sofy thought that now that Ranma was back in his male body they might actually start fighting again. Then Ranma shook his head. "Now that that's been explained you gotta tell me something. Why the hell do you have so much magical energy or whatever? And if you tell me that it's because of that sword of yours, I'm going to call you a freaking cheat!"

"I cheated!? What about that superspeed technique that you could use, I've never even heard of the like. Gods, that felt like a hummingbird the size of the mule was running into me constantly. And you took far more punishment than someone your age or size should be able to take.

"Hey, don't diss my size, it's not my fault I'm short for my age. Damn Pops and his gluttony. And maybe you could take as much damage as me if you were a little younger yourself!"

"I'm not even going to deign to respond to that one. And who are you calling old punk, I'm barely in my thirties!"

"That just means you're over the hill!" Ranma shouted back and the two men stared at one another, then began to laugh in unison.

Sofy had watched this exchange, her head twisting back and forth from one to the other, but now she simply sighed. "Men. Giant children, the lot of them if they get the chance."

There was some truth resigned exclamation, but for men such as these, it went further than that. Some people could just understand other people better after exchanging blows with them. Roland had always been able to do that. Something he had felt during his time-fighting Tigre and Elen had crystallized during his fight with Ranma: Whatever else, Ranma is not someone who would serve a conqueror. A liberator perhaps, but not a conqueror, Roland thought now, staring at the laughing young man across from him, then over to Sofy and back again as his thoughts went to Tigre and their initial clash.

"I still can't believe I couldn't get under your skin," Ranma said, causing Roland's attention to twitch back to him. "I could've sworn I'd at least be able to use my taunting technique to get you riled up." Ranma snickered then. "Fair dues though, your reply was just hilarious, threw me off my game something fierce. Come on, calling that sword of yours proportionate. You didn't come up with down the fly, did you?"

"Do you have any idea how many people have tried to get under my skin by insinuating I'm overcompensating with Durandal?" Roland replied drolly, before adding reluctantly. "However, it did take me some time to figure out a reply to such blandishments."

The two of them were interrupted by that point by Sofy, who both of them had sort of forgotten was still in the tent. "Hmmm, I've actually seen that sword in both its forms. So I have to wonder if you mean is it proportionate to the large, or to the small? Or is that your way to say you are a grow-er, not a show-er?"

Roland coughed, looking away with an embarrassed look on his face while Ranma nodded, decided to shift away from that subject. "Note to self, never make comments up like that in front of women, they are brutal."

"Girl, please," Sofy replied, laying a hand on her chest. "I am a Vanadis, a maiden by definition please."

Both men looked at her, with Roland actually going so far as to look her up and down before looking back to her face, and both of them said as one, "Woman."

She blushed at that, as well as the fact that Ranma hadn't looked away from her face instead the man had been looking into her eyes, his blue eyes almost enchanting. That's not fair, I'm supposed to be the tempter, the flirtatious one. He shouldn't be able to make my heart race like this, certainly not after only a few weeks, just by looking into my eyes! Maybe I really do need to stop flirting with them.

The thought saddened her, but it was true. In a desperate attempt to shift attention away from her own blush, Sofy grabbed at the carafe and splashed Ranma. "Meanies have to be punished a little bit more I think."

Grumbling, the once more female Ranma was about to respond to this effrontery, perhaps by tickle torture or a dose of Noogie Hell, when his stomach began to let out a loud gurgle. Shaking that thought out of her head in order to concentrate on more important things, Ranma hopped to her feet, patting her stomach. "Right. The master must be fed, and then, are any of the refugees or soldiers injured?"

Sofy nodded and told Ranma to look for the larger tents near the center of the camp marked out with white crosses, and Ranma turned to Roland. "Will you give us you that parole thing?"

"Parole thing?" Roland muttered, shaking his head. "Where do you come from that paroles aren't a normal aspect of warfare?" Ranma said nothing, and Roland chuckled. "Fine, keep your secrets. But yes, I will give you my parole. I'll even do it again to Lord Vorn and Vanadis Viltaria."

I do like a man of mystery, Sofy thought, as Roland gave his oath, wondering much the same thing as the Brunish knight, and not for the first time. However, as Ranma left, she looked over at Roland, setting Ranma and anything to do with him aside. "I have a small question, Lord Roland if you don't mind?" When he nodded, she went on, still smiling that almost airy, what Ranma would have labeled a Kasumi-like smile. "I have a message from King Victor to be handed directly to King Faron's hands. Is he well enough to receive visitors?"

Roland immediately clammed up, but even that was a response of a sort and Sofy continued to smile pleasantly even as she internally scowled. "Thank you, that was enough of an answer." She quickly got to her feet, heading towards the tent flaps herself.

OOOOOOO

Out in the camp, other people were thinking about food, a lot of other people. The Vanadis of Polesia had been understating things tremendously when she said that the situation among the refugees had gotten bad. Winter had begun over the last few days, the temperature dropped precipitously, something few refugees had been in any position to handle. Only a handful had died of the elements as yet, the oldest among them and one very young baby whose mother had yet to be found, but if they didn't get in more heavy clothing soon, that problem would get worse as the days went on.

Added to this issue was the fact that Tigre and his allies had no idea how many refugees would be coming over the river into their territory, so no one had set aside enough food to feed this many new mouths. This problem was made worse by the fact that most of the tilled land towards the Dinant Plains hadn't been worked since the campaign against Zhcted had begun. That was the richest arable land on this side of the rivers, and of the rest, only Lord Mashas' and lord Hughes' land could produce more than they needed to feed their own people. Territoire could possibly eventually supply the needed clothing, but they could do little in the way of food.

Alsace was fine and had even begun to create a small surplus for the refugees that had already reached Tigre's original earldom, as had several of the other more prominent lords. But the rest, this main camp and six smaller camps spread out everywhere around the Silver Meteor Army's territory, they were in a bad way. And it was only thanks to Titta leading a large group of supply wagons to them recently that had allowed the formation of this larger camp in the first place.

Now Tigre and Titta stood together as part of a long line of cooks. Most lords would have disdained such work, looking down at it as beneath them. But Tigre believed that his first and foremost duty was to the common man, to see that they were protected from any enemy, including hunger. With that in mind, he had embraced the idea of giving out food to the refugees rather than giving out arrows to their attackers. It was a much cleaner kind of duty in his opinion. So, he smiled and exchanged a few words with each of the refugees as he worked.

Tigre never noticed that one of the refugees was staring at him. This refugee was short, nondescript almost in a large hood pulled down low over her face from a cloak even more dirt-encrusted and ratty than most, and larger than the body of the refugee underneath. The only thing hinting at the refugee being a 'her' was the individual's general size and the fact that he or she was being so careful to not let his or her gender be correctly divined. No matter where you were, refugees of all types tended to try to hide such things as a defensive measure. Even other refugees could become predators, after all.

Most of the time this woman would disappear into the crowd or into the rest of the camp, before moving towards one of the women in the cooking line. Or perhaps she would try to wait it out then take a bowl from someone else who had set down for a moment, no matter how little it might

contain. Much better than mingling with this large crowd, which jostled and bumped into her from every side. However, not only was this woman desperate for a full meal, rather than scraps, but she had finally heard the name of the individual in charge of this land, the one who had risen up against Duke Thenardier and Duke pervert: Tigrervurmud Vorn, Earl of Alsace.

Now she stared at that young man, feeling an odd feeling within her. It was a feeling she had not felt in several months, ever since her time on the road as a refugee had begun. But the feeling was fleeting, so tiny and weak she couldn't discern what it might be.

Hesitantly the young woman made her way forward, moving through the crowd even when she had to move against it until she was directly in front of Tigre. She held out a hand, and Tigre obligingly poured some soup for her into a small bowl. But she hesitated, an old fear appearing in her eyes and he asked, "What's wrong?"

"Are you going to eat?" the young woman asked. Her low, squeaky yet dulcet tone indicated her gender to Tigre's ears.

He looked at her quizzically, head cocked to one side. "Well I am kind of hungry, but only later, not until everyone else has been fed."

She then sat the bowl down and backed away without a word. Tigre frowned and asked, "Is something wrong?" but by that point, she had moved well back into the crowd. He was about to call out to her when the bowl was quickly picked up by one of the other refugees, who was in turn replaced by another. Four refugees later, Tigre had almost forgotten about the strange incident.

He never noticed that he was still being observed by the girl from the shadows between two nearby tents. She froze as Elen moved through the crowd, looping one arm around Tigre's, and whispering something into his ear. He nodded back but made no move when Elen tugged on him gently. She muttered something loudly enough that the woman nearby heard it now. "You really don't have the proper attitude for a servant to you."

"Well, you might own me, and Alsace, but that doesn't necessarily mean I'm your servant."

"Oh yes it does," Elen joked back. "An important one, but still a servant."

"Excuse me but it most certainly does not!" Titta barked from Tigre's other side. "Tigre still is a Lord, even if he surrendered himself and Alsace to you. If you need someone to act as a servant Viltaria-sama, that is what I am here for. You don't have to pull on Tigre like that!"

"But I want to," Elen mock-whined.

Titta scowled, shaking her ladle at the Vanadis without any sign of fear. Watching the two young women tugging on Tigre as if he was some kind of toy, the watching woman felt another emotion well up inside her an emotion she didn't understand for a moment. Annoyance. Anger. Emotions that had been not fit into her life full of, running, always running, never trusting, harried, poisoned, hiding as best

she could, forgetting nearly who she was, in order to hide. But now, she felt that those emotions, and didn't understand why.

Then her eyes locked on Tigre's face as a female voice shouted, "As hilarious as it is to see you three flirting, you got some hungry people here and some injured people. And the sooner you feed me, the sooner I can help deal with that second issue."

"Ranma!" shouted all three as one, and girl in hiding watched as the crowd of refugees parted, like a crowd in front of a nobleman as this Ranma person appeared. She had heard of this one too, rumors only about the Maiden of Healing, and for a moment the girl scowled. I know Earl Tigre didn't have a sister, so where did this redheaded slattern come from?

Ranma was short, almost as short as the girl in hiding, but also busty, which the girl in hiding was not. Indeed, she looked almost to be as busty as the Vanadis, although that might have been her clothing, which looked wet, clinging to her slightly. Her clothing looked extremely high class as well, being silk or something similar, and was incredibly well-crafted too, the girl in hiding could tell. Raiment fit for a high lord or lady for certain, but pantaloons and a tight shirt? And it looks as if the size isn't quite a good fit for her either.

Even more oddly than the cut and the clothing was how this woman wore it casually, not caring about the dirt that was getting on it, or the mud she was slogging through in the center of the cold camp? It was odd, very odd. Although, thankfully, he doesn't seem to be looking at her like a romantic interest either, judging by the look in his face. Wait, why am I thankful for that?

The woman in hiding kept on finding her eyes switching over to Tigre, as he exchanged arm clasps with the woman as if she were a warrior like the Vanadis. Their voices were now muted over the sound of the crowd as it once more shifted forward to the food, so she could not make out any of their words.

But behind the mysterious Ranma, came another Vanadis. This one was lady Sofy, who the woman had seen before from afar, another lifetime ago, before her world changed. For a moment the sight made the girl in hiding a smile as she remembered better times, but she had to shake that off. Another Vanadis? Does, does this mean Tigre really has sold out Brune? But... if so, is that really any worse than what Thenardier and Ganelon have done and plan to do?

With that thought, she slunk backward through the camp, dodging around all of the tents, until she found a small one that she and a few other women had been assigned. She moved inside, grateful to find that the others were gone, and huddled there, trying to gather up her courage once more to steal some food as her mind worked on the main problem. What should I do now?

OOOOOO

After eating more than any four men could have, Ranma had gone around and healed the worst of the refugees and soldiers. Most of the wounded refugees had minor wounds like cuts and gashes that had become infected. Ranma could use her rejuvenated ki to burn out the infection and even heal the

wounds, but that left the severe malnourishment and lack of energy. It would be up to them if they would pull through. The wounded soldiers were easier to handle, their wounds more recent and well looked after, even a few who had taken wounds to their guts or heads were easier to deal with than the infections. Only one soldier's wounds, a head wound that had crushed his eye and shattered his skull, pushed Ranma to her utmost. Still, by sundown, she was done with the worst wounded.

The rest would pull through. After Ranma had finished shouting at the sawbones and so-called nurses on how to handle them anyway. "And if any cloth that hasn't been soaked in alcohol to kill the germs comes within a foot of your patients, I will rip out your fingers one by one and then stab you to death with them!" Ranma snarled, staring at the three now completely cowed so-called healers.

Two of them were barely wet nurses pushed into doing more, old folk remedy healers who had no idea about much beyond herbs and poultices. They were okay with those, but neither of them had been the primary healers for their communities, those worthies had been rounded up by their lords for their armies. The other was one of the healers who Ranma had worked with after the battle against the dragons and had waaaay less excuse for the state of the tents which had been turned over to the wounded.

"G, germs?" that worthy stuttered.

"GRAAHAAH! Germs, yes, little dangerous things that can't be seen," Ranma growled, grabbing her self-control with both hands so as to not go through with his threat. "The same reason why you never drink water from a stream near an army camp or eat meat that's gone green. Constant cleaning of the wounds. Small, freaking small stitches. Find a few womenfolk with solid stomachs who know their way around a needle. That should be the first thing you do when you set up shop! And remember, boil and clean every tool, every needle, every saw or dagger that comes near them."

The two wet nurses slowly started to nod, understanding the point as the man with them was too cowed to do so. "But, but what about our poultices and herbal remedies?"

"...I would love to say I knew something about them, but I don't. If you think they can help, and they don't interfere with anything else, then try them out. I don't know anything about healing plants or anything like that. Not around here anyway. But you better watch them, and if they don't seem to be getting better, you'll need to stop. This ain't about proving your tonics work, it is about the patients. Understand?" Unlike when she threatened the idiot 'healer' Ranma's voice was a lot calmer as she spoke to the two wet nurses. It wasn't their fault after all they didn't have the knowledge their job needed.

After a few more dozen questions mostly about specific patients, Ranma finally was able to leave the three of them behind, having put one of the wet nurses in overall charge. A no-nonsense sort of young woman, she seemed to have taken heart the most from Ranma's direction. And she hadn't completely tossed out everything Ranma had taught her earlier either like the 'healer' had.

Later that day, after Ranma had healed a few of the more wounded refugees, and a few of the soldiers, Ranma was sitting across from Sofy and Elen in another tent, as Titta pattered around them. Roland had been fed, and his parole repeated earlier to Tigre and Elen. The two of them had accepted it before letting the older knight, who was still nursing his own wounds, to fall back asleep.

But for now, Sofy held the attention of Elen and Tigre with the news she had been ordered to pass along from the king of Zhcted. "What do you mean I'm being ordered to return to Leitmeritz!?"

"I didn't say you were being ordered to return Elen, don't put words in my mouth," Sofy said calmly, sipping at her foot at her own soup. "Mah, this is quite good."

"Thank you milady," Titta replied, curtsying towards her. "It's a family recipe."

"Answer the question Sofy," Elen scowled. "Although I do agree the tea is good."

"As a nation, Zhcted will not take part in this civil war of Brune's. So says the King," Sofy said, subtly emphasizing the two words. "That means, that the majority of Zhcted's troops must be pulled back across the border. Only you and a personal guard of five hundred can remain to protect your new investments."

Ranma held up a hand, taking a sip from his own teacup after having used the water to turn back into his male form. "Wait a minute. I thought Vanadis generals are Lords of their domain. That means all of the troops that she can raise on her land are her personal guard, right?"

"Not exactly. Defensively, she or any other lord can raise as many troops as they want. Indeed, we Vanadis are required to do so. But this is not a defensive action. This is offense, taking part in another nation's civil war. A civil war that the king is afraid will bog down into turmoil chaos and strife. In cases like this, the king can forbid a Vanadis from using her full might. He's worried that strife will then pass over the borders into Zhcted and refuses to let it happen."

Not unless Zhcted as a nation can profit, and grow tremendously, Sofy thought, keeping her feelings of disgust off her face at the thought of how blatantly self-serving the king's actions were in this. On the one hand, cutting Elen's participation off at the knees so she personally won't profit overmuch, while at the same time sending me to discern whether or not Brune can even be called a nation any longer, and thus can be seen as being vulnerable to direct invasion. The king's political machinations impressed her since they at least somewhat served Zhcted and its central government but they also appalled her.

"So, limiting my forces is the king's way to make certain that doesn't happen. He's not ordering me home though?" Eleanora asked, looking at over at Tigre. "I want to stay and protect Tigre, erm, that is my investment."

"The King has acknowledged your receipt of Alsace and Lord Vorn as payment for your intervention in the unreasoned assault on Alsace via dragon by Duke Thenardier. It will be added to your personal holdings, although a special tax will be levied against it and any other lands that wish to switch

loyalties. However, the king does not want those lands to be added into Zhcted unless, a new border, a new solid border can be created.” Sofy shrugged. “And you have to admit, His Majesty has got a point.”

“A new tax to be levied isn’t all that bad,” Elen said thoughtfully, calming down somewhat now that her worst fears had been allayed. “How much?”

“Ten percent.”

“Again not horrible,” Elen muttered after thinking it over. “Heavier than it should be for a newly acquired territory, but not all that heavier.”

“It’ll hurt, especially the timing of it, but my people can pay it. For those who can’t pay I will take up the burden,” Tigre interjected.

Elen looked at him, but he just nodded his head, and since his Alsace, along with the area called the Dinant Plains, would be the two areas most affected by the new taxation, she had to take his word for it. Her next words though cause him to nod in agreement with her in turn. “Fine, we can handle that. The rest though... The king wants us to play a defensive war? Why?”

Sipping at her tea bought Sofy time to school her face. The truth on this point was much murkier than she could reveal to Elen. Elen wasn’t a political beast save by necessity and didn’t understand King Victor’s distrust of the Vanadis. She had no idea that the man would want to cut her down to size after she had acted without his leave. And since that was something Sofy knew from interacting with Victor, it became a secret she had to keep.

“At the moment, Zhcted’s borders with Brune is by far the easiest to defend, thanks to the Voyes Mountains being impassable for most of their length. If we take all this land that you’ve been fighting over, that changes. The border becomes wide open, and the logistic aspect of seeing to both the defense and administration of our new lands is much more difficult to see to.”

“And I have to remind you both that while this has spiraled out of control, only myself and my earldom has changed allegiance. And even then, it wasn’t the king of Zhcted who helped me defend my people but Elen alone,” Tigre cut in, first almost glaring at Sofy then sending a conversely warm look toward Elen. “I doubt that any of our allies, including Viscount Augre or Earl Mashas would go along with the idea of their territories being so absorbed by Zhcted.”

While Sofy just continued to smile placidly at that, Elen coughed slightly and looked away, a faint blush on her face. “What’s so important about your mission?”

“I have a message that I must deliver directly onto the king of Brune stands from the king of our nation. No other hand may see it, no other man may open it. It bears his seal, and that is all I know,” Sofya said firmly.

Elen frowned, then her eyes widened. “Oh, that, that, ooh that’s dirty, both cautious and grasping at the same time. And that after he orders I send most of my troops home this winter?!”

"I don't get it," Ranma admitted.

"No reason you should, it's a subtle thing. King Victor is using Sofy and this message to, to sort of check to see if Brune can be considered to be a nation in reality."

"That makes no sense."

Sofy thought of how to explain it to Ranma, while to one side Tigre was frowning heavily, his jaw visibly working. "A kind king, a weak king even is fine so long as there was someone visibly wearing the crown, the central government will keep working and you can trot the king out for special occasions or write special correspondence and so forth. If so then Brune remains a nation. A nation divided at present true, but still a nation. The king could appear in public and rally the nobles, including Duke Thenardier given their familial relationship, and perhaps even Duke Ganelon, along with the Knightly Orders against invasion."

"The Knightly Orders, just like the Knights of Navarre," Elen supplied morosely. Having them to their new territories direct southeast, a border that had no defensive point short of Territoire's walls, was enough to make her worry. "Combined they can field seven-thousand of the best, most well trained, experienced, organized and armed men in Brune."

"Men who will otherwise stay out of politics entirely, so long as they can tell themselves that they are still doing their duty to their oaths to defend those lands from Mouzinel. If Brune is no longer a nation though, without a centralized government and a leader able to rally every power block within it, then it becomes simply disparate bits and competing pieces, no longer able to provide the people with the stability they crave. In that case, an invading army from Zhcted would become not invaders, but saviors to the people," Sofy concluded.

"And in that kind of messed up situation, a shrewd fisherman would try to catch all he could," Ranma replied, likening it to what he knew of the Thirty Years War in a way, and not liking the comparison at all. "I'm beginning to not like this Victor guy, just as much as I don't like Ganelon and Thenardier."

"Exactly. If however the king is still alive and will recover from his illness, then it makes more sense to not get bogged down in a war that would occur entirely on another nation's home soil, and which will, therefore, be an invasion of conquest with all that entails. Zhcted is as strong and prosperous as it is because we have not been bogged down in such for generations. King Victor is ambitious, but wise in this I feel. Double-dealing and very cynical, but wise," Sofy said, pouting at her own words.

"And counting his chicken before they hatch!" Tigre shouted suddenly losing his temper completely for the first time since Ranma had met him, let alone Elen who looked taken aback by his sudden vehemence. "My being indebted to Elen is one thing. But I will not be a party to, to this attempt to conquer by fiat! Nor will any of my allies! If we must fight against Zhcted as well as Thenardier and Ganelon, then we will do so!"

While Ranma chuckled at that but said nothing – he had no national affiliation one way or another after all – Sofy sighed and took it upon herself to answer. Elen wasn't going to be any help, given the stare she was giving Tigre. "What about if they really do become saviors. Accept your ranks and your oaths to his house instead? Do you really think the peasants will care what flag waves over them so long as their lives are protected along with their families?"

Tigre growled angrily but Sofy went on calmly, "Besides even if that occurs, this will not automatically mean that your allies' lands will be added to Zhcted proper. They would simply become autonomous, allied to Zhcted, but not part of it."

"Puppet states you mean!" Tigre snorted. "How is that any better than being incorporated entirely into Zhcted? Either way, we lose our national identity!"

As Sofy explained, Ranma tuned her out somewhat. He hadn't really studied a lot of history, but he had studied warfare, and history leading up to and directly after the World Wars back on his old planet. The idea of a buffer zone wasn't something new to him after studying the history of the USSR. "Just as long as he doesn't have any plans for me," he grunted.

"The king doesn't know about you," Sofy said, breaking away from arguing with Tigre and looking at Ranma with amusement clear in her face. "And he wouldn't be able to command you in any event. You're not a citizen of Zhcted or Brune."

"So long as you and he don't forget that," Ranma replied, a hint of real warning in his tone as he scowled. "I follow Elen and Tigre because I'm their friends. I'm not their liegeman, I'm not sworn to their service. What I do, I do for friendship's sake and because of my Code, which tells me to use my abilities to defend those around me." He then smiled, and it was possibly the most ferocious, shark-like smile that Sofy had ever seen on a human being. Except perhaps for Sasha at some point in the past when they talked about pirates. It was a tossup really. "And my Code steps states that I will be helping him against Duke Sadist and Duke Dragon Buggerer."

While none of them had heard the term 'buggerer' before, they all understood the term thanks to context and laughed while Tigre smiled at Ranma, and there was nothing of a predator in his smile, simply one of friendship.

Titta actually went so far as to hug Ranma from behind for a very brief second, before moving back over to tend the tea, as the argument continued.

Eventually the two of them, Tigre won the argument thanks to Elen weighing in on his side. She had gotten a feel for the lords and knights they worked with. In the face of both of their arguments, Sofy agreed to pass on their opinions to the king but did not agree to halt her mission. "And I wouldn't be so quick as to disparage the idea regardless. who knows what the future holds after all?"

"Agreed. That's an idea I can get behind anyway. Let's get through the winter first, then make grand, probably doomed from the start plans, yeah?" Ranma said, speaking up for the first time in a while.

His words caused everyone to laugh, and the tension disappeared with the conversation turning to the recent campaign and what Ranma had been up to in that time, much to his chagrin. "So, what's this I heard from Sofy that you slept with Sasha?" Elen teased. "That's not what I'd call healing what ails her you know."

Ranma's blush and stammered embarrassment were all she could have asked for.

OOOOOOO

About a day after returning to Leitmeritz, Lim was able to put together what she thought of as a relief column. It really wasn't, since it wasn't a military force, but rather a large supply convoy, carrying necessary foodstuffs and clothing into Brune for the refugees. Most of that had already been prepared, it was simply the command-and-control aspects of it that needed to be hammered out, as well as a few logistical matters in terms of paying for the material, finding enough mules and drovers, and assigning an overall commander for the nonmilitary side of things and the military side.

Lim handled all that with easy aplomb that reminded everyone involved once more why Eleanora output such stock in her and why she was so highly placed in Elen's command structure. Indeed, she didn't actually have a formal position. It was simply "She's in charge after me," as Elen put it. That was it. Not exactly a military rank even in a Vanadis' land normally, but it worked here.

She also decided to send two dozen cooks, such as were available, along with Titta to command the nonmilitary aspect. She wanted someone on hand that was Brunish, could be trusted to keep a level head, not play favorites and was also connected to Tigre. All those pointed to Titta and no one else. She would have sent medical personnel too, but those which were in Eleanora's service at this point were already with her, notably in Alsace from last reports.

At first, Lim had wanted to go with them. But the need to get supplies into Brune as quickly as possible negated the idea of waiting until all of it could be prepared to go in one large convoy. Instead, she split the supplies in two and put one of her own aides, a man named Jacort in command of the forty cavalymen and ten archers she sent along as protection against bandits.

Work on the second convoy was ongoing, as what clothing could be bought were gathered from the citizens of Leitmeritz. The food aspect was actually quite a bit easier since a system already existing in place to gather such up for trade around the rest of Zhcted. Leitmeritz was well known for its bread and several of the towns that looked to Lady Eleanora were also known for their bread products.

About a week after Ranma and the others had departed, the second convoy was nearly ready to go. But Lim found her work on that and a few judicial matters interrupted by a messenger from the gates. The message that he brought surprised her greatly. "Lady Valentina Glinka Estes? The Vanadis of Osterode? She's here?"

"Can't be anyone else?" the messenger replied, a rueful shake of his head accompanying the words. "She's, well, all maidens are distinctive you know."

Lim gave the man a glare, but let it pass uncommented. It was true after all. And what little she knew of Valentina Estes said she stood out physically almost as much as Sofy. However, unlike Sofy, Valentina was a complete unknown to Lim.

And a very deliberate kind of unknown at that. Of all of the Vanadis, the only one who she knew less about than Valentina was the still missing Vanadis of Brest, wielder of the giant axe Muma. All the others Lim knew something of, even if she hadn't actually met them, but Valentina very deliberately kept out of the limelight in many ways.

She didn't participate in military affairs, despite having created the Osterode pikemen, a company of whom were even now serving with Lady Eleanora at the front. She didn't participate normally in political affairs on the national level as far as Lim knew and was reckoned the weakest of the Vanadis given how much of her endurance using the weapon apparently took. There were no rumors about her one way or the other beyond her being soft-spoken, insightful, and, apparently, well connected among the nobility.

All of which makes it very strange that she's here. Although perhaps she's here to check up on the pikemen she loaned Elen? Could the payment for them not have arrived yet? Or... could she be doing her own investigation into Sasha's revival? Regardless, both the laws of the land and good manners dictate that we welcome the woman. "Please show her to my office."

Soon enough Valentina was shown in, and Lim had to fight down an urge to let her eyebrows draw together in consternation. The woman really was as striking as the messenger had said. Good grief, her mode of dress makes Sofy's look banal in comparison yet doesn't quite slip over into outright licentiousness. And in this weather... do Vanadis just not feel the cold? In Zhcted winter came just as quickly as in Brune, but snows began even earlier, and there had been two snowfalls since Lim had last seen Ranma.

She could've sworn she hadn't voiced that thought or even let anything show up on her face, but Valentina giggled. "We don't feel the cold, and before you wonder, no you didn't verbalize that question. It's just amazing how often that question gets asked. May I sit?"

"Of course Lady Estes, forgive me," Lim said, hopping to her feet and gesturing to the chairs in front of her desk or the sofa that leaned against one wall.

Valentina smiled and accepted a seat on the sofa, as well as a cup of tea. The two of them made small talk as was required with moments like this, then Valentina broached the subject she knew was eating Lim alive with concern. "You're no doubt wondering why I'm here."

"If it pleases you, Lady Estes," Lim said, her tone formal as it had been throughout their small talk. That would indeed be one of my questions for you. Of course, if you wish to partake in Leitmeritz's hospitality, I am more than willing to see to whatever comfort you require. But my Lady Viltaria is not here to greet you, and if this is a formal visit then there are constraints on what I can or cannot agree to."

Valentina laughed, a light, little giggle that somewhat put Lim at ease somehow, especially accompanied by the following words. "I'm not here for anything like that my dear. Don't worry, the payments for my loaning you some of my pikemen for this business in Zhcted has already arrived in Osterode. And there was nothing wrong in the report I received from Captain Odell of their treatment, while in Elen's territory."

No, my reasoning for being here is a little more obscure. First, I wish to head into Brune in order to get a feel for myself as to the lay of the land as it were." She held up a hand before Lim began to speak. "This is nothing to do with Sofy's mission, I will not interfere in that, whatever you know of it, or even the ongoing civil war precisely. Although I might wish to talk to this Tigre Vorn to get a Brune native's opinion on a few things. I also wish to check in on my pikemen. This is the first time I have allowed them to work under other Vanadis. I wish to see how they were used, to make certain that they were treated well, and to see how, in point of fact, they were used at all. You realize I've only ever been involved in two campaigns since my creation of that unit?"

Lim nodded, not because she did know that, but because it made sense. Yet somehow, she felt that Valentina was here for something else entirely. She just couldn't put a finger on why. Hmm, perhaps she is something like Sasha or Elen? "Pardon me for saying this lady Estes, but I feel as if you are after more than simply, as you put it, getting a feel for the lay of the land."

Oh oho, this one isn't nearly as lacking in subtlety as I would have thought someone involved with Elen would be. Interesting. Still, I doubt she can't be led astray by a little bit of the truth. Valentina sighed, setting her cup down. "What do you know about Osterode?"

"...scant little I'm afraid," Lim admitted after a few seconds thought.

"I thought so. Most of Zhcted doesn't know much about us. Indeed, I've often heard Osterode be called 'the rump of Zhcted. And there is alas some truth in that. Osterode is historically the smallest territory among the Vanadis lands. We barely can make enough food for our own people, clothe our own people. I have made it my life's work to better Osterode, and it is only recently that our port on the river Valla, my own capital, has been declared a city, with all that entails. But part of what I have been doing is to reach out to lords and nobles in other countries for investment money in a few mercantile pursuits of mine. Recently I was approached in turn by Lord Ganelon. I want to know more about the reality of the individual who I might be doing business with."

Lim nodded at that. "I would advise against that given what I know of events in Brune Lady Estes, but you, of course, should make up your own mind on such things." But her tone made it clear she was after something a little more.

Rolling her eyes mentally, Valentina let out a huff, crossing her arms and looking away. "Fine. If it was just that I could have gone with the rumor mill, after all, if there is so much smoke, there must be a fire underneath it. But I was telling the truth about how small Osterode is. I have barely seven hundred fighting men under my command, and the company I sent to work with Elen is one of my best. Is it any wonder I wish to check in on them personally on their first campaign away from my eyes?"

“Now that, I believe, Lady Estes,” Lim allowed a small smile to appear on her face. “And if I may be so bold, you should not be so embarrassed about showing you care about your people.”

“Perhaps not in front of you, or Elen. But in front of Elizaveta Fomina or several of the nobles of Zhcted, it would be a sign of weakness. One I cannot afford if I am to possibly continue the concept of loaning out my pikemen to my fellow nobles.”

The way she said that made Lim remember that Lady Estes was a noblewoman before she became a Vanadis, though unlike Sofya of Sasha, she had been born into the high nobility rather than low. Isn't she in some way related to the king? Despite that thought though, Lim was satisfied with what Valentina had told her about her reasons for being here and graciously extended an invitation to travel with her and the next supply convoy the following day. Valentina accepted, then asked to be shown the baths.

Later that night, Valentina left her bed, making her way silent and unseen through the castle. This was easy enough for her: thanks to Ezendeis' ability to teleport away and to hide in shadows at need, coupled with the extra senses that Ezendeis gave her, it was almost child's play to stay away from the few people awake at night. She was somewhat amused to see one of those people was Limalisha. Rather dedicated to her work that girl. I wonder how much her mind and loyalty has played a part in how strong Leitmeritz has become under Elen?

She wasn't here to spy on anything of Elen's, however. No, she was here to learn more about Ranma. And one thing that she had learned through her discussion with Elen back in Silesia was that Ranma had stayed here for several weeks as a prisoner. This evening she had been eavesdropping on some of the maids and had discovered that several of his items had remained here when he had left. It was a long shot, but Valentina would take any means she could get to discover more about the new wild piece that was Ranma.

So she moved through the castle until she found the room the maids had apparently been cleaning that day, where Ranma's mysterious items were stored. There were a few guards outside the door, but Valentina didn't need to use doors. From down in the darkness of the corridor beyond the torchlight she locked her gaze, on the door that stood revealed in the light of two torches, then closed her eyes, imagining the space on the other side of it. Then, stepping back around the corner, she used Ezendeis to create the teleportation doorway, passing through it out the other side into the room.

Glancing back at the door, she frowned for a moment, then took a few quick steps into the room, glancing around her with what little light came in from the outline of the doorway. It was a large storage room, but it was very obviously a storage room full of knickknacks, important, personal and just plain odd. This included a few strange looking trophies of past battles, one of which Valentina recognized as coming from the barbarians from the north.

It was a broken huffed horse, missing one leg. The thing was made of steel, but it had been burnished and polished and dotted here and there with tiny, cheap gems. It was the kind of thing that the horse clans gave to those who beat them in battle in return for the safe passage of their women

back to their old lands. Considering that most northern clans were nomadic and took their women and children almost into battle with them, leaving them well within the range of a sudden cavalry strike, this was no small thing. Each clan's standard was different, the style of the odd piece of art different to denote each clan.

Valentina had six of them hanging in a place of honor back in her own home. There used to be two more, from the previous owner of Ezendeis, but when those two clans had attacked Osterode early in Valentina's time as its ruler, believing that agreement is null and void with her predecessor's death, Valentina had shown them otherwise. She was willing to show mercy, once. Just once. You would not get mercy a second time, even if the affront was not to her personally but to her people.

When those two clans had attacked again, in concert no less, they had run into her pikes and been massacred. Then she had led a campaign into their lands, herding their womenfolk and children before forcing them onto the land of other horse lords while poisoning their wells. Those two clans had ceased to exist at that point, with no land they call their own, no warriors to defend them, and with the vast majority of their womenfolk in the hands of other clans.

It had been harsh, but it worked. The horse lords had gone seeking other easier prey and had not crossed her border since in any organized fashion.

Shaking off those memories, Valentina turned to the room at large, cocking her head thoughtfully as she pulled out the tiny thief's lamp she had on her belt, opening the visor just slightly enough to let a tiny beam of light out. Here in pride of place was a sword, broken off near the hilt. There, a helmet, a magnificent piece of artwork, with gold filigree, and encrusted with gems here and there. The fact that it had been nearly chopped in half showed why gold was never a good metal for armor, but it should still have been worth quite a bit. My, I wonder where that piece came from. Another example of Elen's time as a mercenary perhaps?

And of course, there were things that just didn't make any sense at all. A pair of spurs hung up on one wall. Several images, paintings made by children they seemed, each of them pushed up and pinned to the wall with a nail through the rock. A few crushed flowers. Very odd Elen, I cannot make head or tail of most of this.

But even as she thought that Valentina spotted something, something near the back of the room, set aside what looked like a very old, very cheap jewelry case which had despite that been lovingly maintained. The item in question was an odd thing, a small square thing connected by a rope or perhaps metal wires to some kind of headdress.

When she was in front of the odd thing, Valentina shone her light on it, taking in the details swiftly. There were several raised portions on the top, with odd markings on them, tiny, so tiny she had trouble making them out by the light of the thief's lantern. The side had an odd round portion sticking out very slightly from it, which looked almost like the gears on some kind of clock. But it was so small. And what is it made of? She rubbed her fingers around the thin rectangle's front and could find a bit of what felt like metal, but for the most part, it felt like nothing she had ever felt before. The raised

portions were covered in what felt like rubber, something she had seen occasionally, but the rest? She had no idea.

The headdress wasn't nearly as interesting. It looked almost like a muffler for someone's ears, only the muffle portion was far smaller than such should be. They would fit over the ears, but they wouldn't fit around them, in order to protect them from the weather. Strange. And why is it connected to this box?

Looking closer at the side of the thing, she discovered a few more symbols. One looked like the headdress only far smaller. Perhaps signifying this is where the wire needs to be inserted? She gently pulled that bit out and looked at what was the end of the wire, feeling it out. The wire was covered by rubber, she could tell that much, and the end of it looked as if it was covered in gold. Why?

She stared at it, then shook her head and plugged it back in, feeling a small click at that sound. She froze, but only for a second. There was no way that sound could've carried. Above that, Valentina found two of the other marks. One was a minus symbol, and one was a plus symbol.

She put her finger on the strange gear-like object that was between them, moving it this way and that, her eyes widening in understanding. I see, so this controls something, something within, making it lesser or greater? Could this be some kind of clock? She had opened the clock once to see the little gears moving and had been incredibly fascinated by it. Since then, she had tried to convince clockmakers, of which there are only about six or so in the entire country, to move to Osterode. But all of them were quite happy to live in Silesia, preferring to be nearer to their clients. Clocks were expensive, the work of months for a skilled craftsman.

She turned the object over again to look at the front, realizing suddenly there was something else inside a thin glass casing like a clock would be placed behind a protective case. She found a little indent to one side, which allowed her to put a finger in, and slowly opened it. Again, there was a tiny click sound but this time Valentina didn't even respond. Instead, she looked at the object inside. A portion of what she had initially taken as part of the clockwork mechanisms had come away with the small hatch and was now being held there in two well-crafted holders like a treasured weapon would be held on the wall in a nobleman's main hall.

She gingerly lifted it out, watching for anything that indicated it was still connected to the larger box, but there was nothing. Staring at it in the light, she was once more astonished to see what looked like gears inside of the smaller thing, which again had a few clear places like glass, but which was not. And again, they were made of some strange new material that she had never felt before. It was hard, but it wasn't steel or wood. There was no grain, no color, to indicate it was wood, and it didn't feel like any metal she had ever known. She tested the strength of the little thing's front and back, pressing in with two fingers. It gave slightly, but not a lot and Valentina desisted not wanting to break whatever it was.

At the top, there was a thin film of some kind, thinner than a leaf or the finest parchment, pulled taut between two rollers. Valentina was tempted to touch it, to see if she could figure out what it

was made of but decided against it. It was evident that whatever that was, it was meant to pass through the device on an infinite loop, pulled by the gears. She used her nail to test this, twisting her nail in one of the holes and watching as the thin thing at the top moved. It moved slowly, but it did move.

But why? What is the purpose? Valentina frowned, confused and elated at the same time. Hehehe, I love mysteries! Still, there is no way that even when combined, this thing could tell the time. There's no face to it, there are no places for the numbers to go. And yet, all of it speaks of an intense level of craft. It is not some useless gewgaw, now there is a purpose to this creation.

Hesitantly, Valentina tried to put the smaller box back into the larger one, only to realize that the larger box's front wouldn't close properly. She then looked at the top and bottom of the opening, when the smaller rectangle had been removed and found several bits of what looked like metal poking out like dull spikes here and there.

Valentina inserted the rectangle again, closing the thing down, and watched as those tines were paired up, along with two larger gears that would go in the two holes in the smaller rectangle. At that at least Valentina understood. One gear moves against the other, causing that, that thin whatever it is to move alone. But, how? How will they move? She turned it over, staring at the back, then all around it. There is no place for anyone to grab a handle, no place for anyone to put in some physical energy to start up the gears.

That left one possibility and her eyes widened, as she reached it her hands clenching as she stared at the device. It must be magic. Some kind of internal magic. I've never heard of such a thing, but that is the only explanation. But still, what does it do! It must do something, or else why would anyone bother with imbuing the thing with magic?

She stared from one piece of it to the other, then slowly, moved over and picked up the headpiece. The two bits that went over the ears were soft, obviously for comfort, but they were also a thin veneer, which she was able to peel away in order to see what lay underneath. It looked like a honeycomb, with so many different holes, almost as if something was supposed to come out, though she had no idea of anything that could be that small. But the wires...they must be there for a reason. The headpiece is part of this device in some fashion. Some kind of voice tube perhaps? But these are wires, not tubes, and where would the voice be coming from?

Those were used in several nobleman houses of Valentina's acquaintance, allowing the nobleman in his office to pass down orders to the kitchen or wherever. They were long cloth tubes basically, which allowed the Lord to shout down to various levels of his castle without moving. Valentina always thought them rather ridiculous, but it was about the only explanation she could reach. Gingerly sitting the headpiece on her head once more, she played with it a bit before she was comfortable, wincing as a piece of hair got caught for a second.

With that done, Valentina looked at the device, then at the nodules up top. One was marked in red, but she stayed away from that. If Ranma's people are anything like us red could indicate danger or warning as it does in shipyards or other places where dangerous work occurs.

On the other side of the row of what had to be buttons or some kind, there was another one that stood alone marked with a square. She pressed that, but nothing happened except for a low click. From inside the device. She could hear it, but she didn't see any changes.

The others looked like directions, left, right and then a single arrow pointing right on a larger button in the middle. Opening the device again, she stared at the little rectangle, then at the thin thing on top. She twisted it one way using her finger in one of the holes again, watching it move that way, then the other. Going back the reverse to the left, was much more difficult. So it was obvious that thing was meant to go forward to the right. But there isn't an infinite amount of the whatever-it-is. Valentina could tell that there was something at the bottom, that the thing at the top, like a string almost, would eventually end. And then the device will... what, roll it back up? Amazing!

Valentina was practically giddy now, as she inserted the rectangle again and slowly closed the lid, looking over her shoulder all the while at the doorway. But really, the fear of discovery just made this more enjoyable. I love mysteries! Working something out like this with her hands, trying to understand something, especially something that she was beginning to feel was a major find, made Valentina very happy. It was just plain fun. Playing the great game is pleasant as it is a means to my end goal, but this is amusing on its own merits.

So, if this one is to, to return the string let us call it backward, and this one is meant to go forward, what is the center one? That triangle was pointing in the same way as the movement marks pointing to the right, so she didn't understand why there were two of them. Shrugging, she hit the button that told her that it would move the string to the right.

The thing it made a loud whirring noise, an odd noise she'd never heard before, but could almost liken to the sound of feet sliding along on a wooden floor. It was so loud Valentina instantly slammed her finger down on the square button, grateful that it worked as she thought it might, to stop whatever other action was going on.

She stared hard at the doorway, straining her ears to for any sound movement, but there was none, and she breathed a sigh of relief. However, she did set the lamp down and moved over to Ezendeis. So, using that button was too loud, and, though this, could be supposition, but I think it is going too fast. Certainly, there was no sound coming from it as I thought should be the case.

Valentina chewed on her lip for a moment, before biting the bullet, and pressing the central button, the one with the single triangle pointing right. There was a light click, and then nothing. Disappointed, she was about to click the stop button, when she frowned suddenly. The plus and minus gear? What magic does that add to this device?

She rested her finger on that little gear to the side and then began to move it from being straight on the minus slowly upwards. A few seconds later she began to hear music.

Just music, mostly a voice singing in some unknown language, but there seemed to be a certain rhythm to it, even if the background was too drum-heavy for her liking. She had never heard anything

quite like the other noises in the background. But that is to be expected, Valentina reflected as she gently hit the stop button, and pulled the headdress off of her head. Nor is that really important.

What was important, was Valentina knew what this device was meant to be. All that work, all that effort to create this thing, to craft it, and it is only meant to let the user listen to, to music, copied down in some fashion as if a secretary had copied out a note for her lord or lady? Either Ranma's people put much more emphasis on music than we do, or, or this device does not equate to any great amount of time or craft.

That was a startling thought, but it was soon overridden by another thought. Is it actually magic which powers it? If so, then why use the gears or anything else in all? Why not just make a spell to share the music somehow? Valentina was no mage of course. Beyond charlatans, and hucksters there were no actual mages in the world. What little magic Valentina knew of came in the form of weapons like her Viralt and its siblings, or from the gods bestowed upon high priests or particularly holy men.

She began to gently touch the thing all over, trying to discern if there was anything she had missed. On the back of the rectangle, there were a few squares with writing in them that she could feel and then see with the lamp, but they were foreign to her. There were a few small holes, which she realized held screws. So this thing is thus fitted together, not a whole piece. But even so, it is so far beyond any artisan I know it could well have come from the gods themselves.

There was also a second smaller catch on the bottom of the thing. Pulling it open took one of Valentina's nails to get underneath a tiny lip there, but when it was open, it revealed two silver and light blue cylinders of some kind. Using her nail again Valentina was able to pop one free, staring at it from every angle. Then she pushed the play button on the device, and beyond a tiny click of the thing going down into its holder, there was no further noise. So these are the source of its power?

She put them back in, and then press play again, one of the earpieces held up to her ear, listening. Then she stopped again. So made out of entirely new material, a thing of masterful craftsmanship, but one used only to convey music? And it's here rather than on Ranma's person's now? So he doesn't really care about it, it is no prized possession. And the magic, whatever its form, comes from two cylinders that somehow empower all the gears and so forth within the device. However, even that was immaterial.

Valentina felt the sheer thrill of pleasure going through her. As she realized that she now knew, or suspected at any rate, where Ranma had come from. He is from the future, or from some other world perhaps. There is no way that such a wonder as this would not have been known to us in Zhcted if he was from anywhere where our ships can travel. But if so, how did he arrive here?

Yet even that question was drowned out by an even greater awareness: Ranma, Ranma could help me in my ambitions! He could make that road far easier in a myriad of ways. By the gods, even if he isn't willing to fight for me, simply answering several of my questions about his own world would be a major help.

Thank the Gods I didn't jump to conclusions and name him an enemy, Valentina thought as she used her Viralt to tear open a hole in time and space, stepping through to the guest quarters she had been given by Limalisha. Oh yes, I am so definitely looking forward to talking to Ranma in person now!

OOOOOOO

The next morning Sofya made ready to leave the makeshift refugee camp, despite the massive amount of pouting that Ranma was sending her way. "Are you sure you don't want me to come with you?"

"Are you that worried about me?" Sofya asked mock innocently, completing the image by raising her free hand to her hair, twirling a lock of it in her finger.

Ranma shrugged. "You're a friend and I've only got about seven of those in this whole world at the moment, so yeah." To Ranma's mind, balancing going with Sofya and protecting her from whatever might be waiting for her in Nice to the good he could do for the people in the refugee camp was a no brainer. Yes, his Code told him to help those around him, but there was nothing in it that told him he couldn't prioritize his friends.

Sofya beamed at that. Then without any change of expression, she smacked Ranma upside the head with her staff almost faster than he could track, certainly faster than he could dodge, laying him out on the ground. "Ow!" he moaned, while to one side Tigre winced and Elen began to laugh. "Oh hush Silver, or else I'll use a pressure point on ya to make your legs and arms feel like they've fallen asleep."

That caused Elen to pout, but Sofya ignored the byplay, concentrating on Ranma for a moment, a smirk on her face as she looked down at him. "As much as I like the sentiment behind your offer, I am not some naïve young woman or weak girl, that needs you to run to her rescue Ranma. I am a diplomatic envoy of my King and have been so for several years now." Indeed, Sofya had become such the moment she had bonded with Zaht. More than two years ago that had been, and the number of harrowing missions she had been on was quite a bit more than her predecessor had ever hinted could be the case in her notes.

Just her notes. When a new Vanadis bonded to her weapon, there was only one reason why it occurred: the death of the former holder. There had never, as far back as records went, been a case of a Vanadis being able to pass on their Viralt to a chosen successor. Even Ludmilla Lurie's family had never been able to do that, though they routinely had husbands and even sisters or brothers occasionally to help the transition, and they had routinely died in more peaceful circumstances than most other Vanadis could contrive.

"Besides which, I have to speak to the king of Brune in any event. My political duties demand it. And I have to leave now, or else I will miss my deadline," she said leaning down to help him up, once more showing a strength that her soft, excessively feminine form shouldn't really have possessed.

Although of course of all people Ranma should not have been surprised by that, and he castigated himself for it. Come on man, you turn into a girl and while ya lose a bit of physical strength,

the fact Sasha kicked your ass so routinely should've told ya that Vanadis aren't like Akane or the others at home, only so skilled in comparison to the types of people ya run into. "Deadline?"

Sofya waved her hand. "I received word while you were unconscious that the king wanted me to get a move on," Sofya scowled, yet even that was a beautiful expression on her angelic face. "He doesn't normally nudge my elbow like that on a mission, but considering the ramification of this Civil War occurring, and our mission generally speaking, well..." she shrugged. "I can't exactly blame him."

She did sort of hold the cold anger at its timing though. It was almost as if he didn't want her further involved in what he obviously saw as Eleanora's personal self-aggrandizing crusade into Brune. And yet my whole mission is based on possibly taking advantage of those actions. Ugh. I hate politics. Or... well, the way the king plays them anyway.

Ranma nodded, touching his head gingerly. That blow had hurt! Not as much as a punch from Roland of course, but certainly a bit more than anything similar he'd gotten from Elen. He looked at her arms quizzically, then her old body shaking his head as he voiced some of his earlier thoughts. "You know of all people I should know that strength can be deceiving, but that blow..."

She laughed, then held out her weapon to him, hearing the light laughter in her head that was so much a part of being Vanadis to Zaht. "Would you like to try to lift it?"

A second later her eyes went wide as Ranma was able to hold it in place, grunting a little, before lifting it further. "Yeah okay, that makes more sense now," he said mildly, holding it out to her.

She took it back, then laughed again sending her hair to fly this way and that as she laughed. "Why am I not surprised? Men aren't supposed to be able to lift it at all. But apparently you get a pass for your feminine side."

"Oy, I don't have a..." Ranma began, then paused his eyes narrowing, "okay, I suppose I do have one, no matter how reluctantly. Or abnormally."

"Unusually certainly, but I don't think abnormal is the correct term. It's not as if you can get rid of it any longer is it? And does that form still bother you really?" Sofya asked, poking Ranma in the forehead with a gentle finger.

"Not really," Ranma admitted with a sigh, fighting down his normal response to that idea, a natural reaction from his time in Nerima. "Although well there are just some things that men aren't supposed to know you know?"

"Ah, but that makes it so much better for us!" she said with a laugh.

Tigre blinked, looking her up and down not, lasciviously, merely curiously. "Um, you aren't carrying a message pouch so where..."

Sofya smiled sweetly and reached into the opening of her blouse, pulling out the king's letter from within her breasts.

“Because of course,” Ranma said smacking his forehead, “why ever wouldn’t you keep it there?”

Sofy laughed, shaking her head and turning away towards her horse, which Elen had given her, mounting easily. When she was in the saddle she looked back at the others, smiling faintly and trying not to smile only at Ranma, something that was rather harder than it should have been. “Until next time then.”

Elen and the two men bid her farewell, while Titta merely curtsied. Then Sofy tugged on the reins, turning her horse around, cantering out of the camp without another word.

Ranma stared after her, a scowl on her face, and Titta teased, “Ara, are you sorry to see her go Ranma?”

“You two were getting along quite well,” Elen said, joining in the teasing. “And here I thought you had eyes for Lim?”

Ranma blushed, scratched at his nose and looking away but didn’t reply.

This caused Elen’s eyes to narrow, and one hand to fall to Arifar. “If you’re even thinking about leading on my friend, I wouldn’t suggest trying to get involved with Sofy at all. Because before you can I will remove what makes you a man!”

“Nothing like that!” Ranma stammered, blushing. “It’s just well, Sofy is a friend too. Like I said, I don’t have so many of them that I want to see any of them going into danger without me around. No matter how strong she is,” he muttered, raising a hand to his forehead where Sofy’s strike had landed.

Then he shook his head resolutely, staring around at the snow-dusted ground, tapping his feet on the frozen earth beneath them. It had snowed a little under an inch last night, and the ground even where the snow had been scuffed up, was frozen. “Whatever. There’s nothing I can do about her, her own Code is putting her in danger right now. So it’s time for me to concentrate on what I can do. And I think it’s also time to get Roland out of bed. His parole doesn’t mean he can’t do work does it?”

“Rather the opposite actually, so long as the work doesn’t put Roland’s life in danger, and he is well treated. Why?” Elen asked.

“Good.” With that, Ranma moved away, heading deeper into the camp towards the tent he shared with the nominal prisoner.

Confused, Elen and Tigre followed, entering the tent just as Ranma kicked Roland’s bed out from under him, flipping man and camp-bed both. Grunting as he hit the ground, Roland growled as he rolled on the ground, coming to his feet with a growl. “What the hell was that for! I was asleep.”

“Yeah I know,” Ranma said drawling the words. “You’ve been asleep long enough, lazy old man. Get your ass up, it’s time for you to do some honest work for a change.”

“That was rather harsh, but I should have expected such blandishments from one so lacking in height,” Roland muttered, cracking his neck one side to the other, then pushing himself to his feet, so that he towered over not only Ranma but Elen and Tigre. “And what exactly has your small mind equated to honest work?”

Ranma chuckled, then pointed out the door of that tent. “You get points for trying, but I’m surely not going to react to anyone mentioning my height, that’d be just silly.” I will have my revenge you tall asshole! “Now come on, I’ll wager ya can help me smash down some trees for houses for the refugees.”

“I’ll try harder next time,” Roland promised, and the two of them exited.

“Is it just me,” Titta whispered to Tigre, “or did they seem like friends there for a moment?”

Having overheard them, Elen shrugged. “You can become friends with someone after crossing blades with them, just look at me, Ranma and even Tigre.” With that she led the other two out the tent after the two men, wondering what they were going to do. She knew about Ranma’s strength certainly and had seen Roland in action too. But there was a difference between smashing a tree and knocking it down so that the wood was still useable.

“I bet that I put up more houses than you,” Ranma said as he exited the camp, with Roland beside him. The two of them had gathered a bit of a following, Roland being well known among the people of Brune. Also well-known was that he had attacked the Silver Meteor Army, but most didn’t seem to hold that against him. He had been a national hero for more than ten years now, and news of his campaigns had been the tales of many a pub or feast hall.

A few did of course. There were more than a few mutters about the mighty knight becoming a tool for the corrupt nobility, but most kept those opinions to themselves. Others were just afraid of him. One of these was a young woman in a hood, who’s eyes clung to Tigre for a moment, then shifted to Roland, becoming fearful as she shifted back into the shadows, her thoughts a confused whirl of emotions.

“You’re on,” Roland grinned, slamming his hands together, then looking at the nearby forest. “There?”

“Yep. We can either start from here and race there or start from there if you’re feeling like a short run beyond what your old bones can handle.”

“Considering how fast you are, that would give you an unfair advantage,” Roland said marching solidly over to the nearest tree, which was about eighty yards away from the start of the outskirts of the outermost tents.

“Are you sure you can handle this old man?” Ranma taunted. “After all those logs are heavy. You might pull something.”

“I’m going to hurt you for that one brat,” Roland muttered, shaking his head, then grinning at Ranma and pushing him companionably in the shoulder. “Now come on, let’s get this done.”

Ranma smirked back, and the two of them chose out their trees.

Once in front of an oak tree, Roland jabbed his fist forward without any preamble, smashing the tree near its base. Instead of shattering it, this bunch tore out most of the trunk. The rest of the tree fell, and Roland caught it, barely grunting as the weight settled on his hands before tossing it behind him.

He then stared askance at his work, seeing the number of branches that remained on the tree, several of which were keeping it from landing flat on the ground, and then asked, “I don’t suppose anyone has saws or hatchets?”

At her nod, several of the refugees and two of Elen’s infantry instantly raced to get the material needed. By the time they returned, Roland had torn off most of the larger branches and most of the smaller ones. Yet as they moved forward, they realized he had stopped and was staring at Ranma. They too stopped.

Like Roland, Ranma had easily broken off most of a tree’s trunk, although he had first smashed or torn off most of its larger branches, tossing them to one side. Wood was wood after all, and the branches would be useful for roofs, doors, and fires. Once the trunk was on the ground Ranma had then begun to create a long furrow from one side to another of the trunk with his clenched fingers. Those fingers glowed with ki as he cut into the tree.

Roland stared hard, then down at his own hands, before grimacing, his brows furrowing in concentration. For a second they too lit up, blue and yellow in color in contrast to Ranma’s own cerulean energy. “How do you make your magic form into a cutting force?” he muttered.

“It ain’t magic, it’s ki, or life energy as you lot call it, and trial and error mostly,” Ranma replied, wincing as his technique failed mid-strike, his fingers smacking painfully against the wood. “This is a ki scalpel, something I figured out when I was learning with the old bastard who taught me a lot of my healing skills. I just have taken it and mixed it with stuff I learned to do from learning about martial arts construction. It’s not an easy technique, gotta tell ya. Putting an extra sharp edge on a weapon or tool is a lot easier.”

With Ranma walking him through it, Roland was able to add an edge of the hatchet far more easily than he could with his hands, and even Ranma stopped using his hands once the tools arrived, going back to them every fourth tree as toughness training. Roland ignored that since his endurance had proven itself in their fight the day before.

Nor were they the only ones working now. Early on in the contest, Elen had laughed, pointing at the two of them as they continued to work through the forest. “Well, what are you all waiting for? Handouts?” Most of the onlookers needed no second urging and pitched in with a will. Everyone understood that the logs that the two warriors were knocking down could well mean the life or death

for them if they were able to make them into locked cabins. Others retreated, unwilling to work like that or complaining that wood was not their trade.

Tigre noted these men and women out. If they were willing to shirk from work like this, then they would have to find some other way to earn their keep. My duty as a nobleman demands I protect and lead them. It does not demand that I care for them as they do nothing to look after themselves. Shaking that thought off, Tigre marched forward and began to pitch in himself.

Several hours later, Titta tugged at his shirt for a moment whispering into his ear. Tigre turned to Elen, who had been using Arifar to cut branched off the trunks along with a few other people, the magic of the sword flaring out and cutting a dozen branches off regardless of their size each time. Is it just me, or is that weapon enjoying this? "Another shipment has come in from Territoire. I'm going to go with Titta to redistribute it before it gets mobbed. Apparently, lord Hughes has also sent his son too."

Elen nodded, rolling her shoulders this way and that and cracking her knuckles before she turned from the now finished trunk. "You go on, I'm going to catch up to these two if it kills me. No way am I going to let a musclebound oaf and a foreign knight beat out Vanadis when it comes to destruction."

"I thought this was construction, not simple destruction?" Ranma quipped. "And I'm up to fourteen now I think." A few trees had proven to be hollow and shattered, or just dead, and had thus been useless and been deemed unfit for the competition. Ranma, however, had put their broken bits to the side with the rest of his cleared branches and everything else. Indeed, if it was based on cleanliness rather than the number of trunks prepared to be made into walls, then Ranma would be winning, despite being behind Roland by one.

"Fifteen here," Roland grunted as he smashed down another tree so that it crashed into a smaller tree to its side, bringing it down too. "Make that sixteen."

"It only counts when you're finished preparing it," Ranma shot back as he finished the one he was working on.

"I think we will have to surely agree to disagree on that one," Roland said back, laughing.

As Tigre walked off with Titta, most of the watchers had either long since left or pitched in. But one of them, the young woman who had been watching Tigre and Roland earlier, hadn't. Instead, she had stayed in the shadows of the tents, staring at the work going on, her eyes flicking from one of the super-strong men to another. Now she looked from Roland to Tigre and back again, her face underneath her hood scrunching up slightly. Then, she turned and made her way through the camp after Tigre.

She arrived just as Titta and Tigre began to redistribute the heavy woolen cloaks that had been made in Territoire, one to each person, with no exceptions. There weren't enough to go around even then, and priority went to women and younger children. Most of the menfolk agreed with this, but Tigre had to talk down several men who didn't, and then threatened two more when they refused to budge, grabbing at a woman and trying to tear the cloak of her.

The girl who had been watching Tigre watched now as quicker than lightning, he was between the man. In one hand he held up a dagger to the face of one, in the other an arrow with the point so close that if the man blinked, he would cut himself.

"I said," Tigre said in a cold stern, and above all lordly voice, the kind that most people in Alsace had never heard from him before, and who indeed would never have even thought he could produce, "That there is one cloak for every person. You will get yours eventually, if not from this shipment then the next. No one will go without. But women and children have priority. If you do not agree to this, you are free to seek help elsewhere. You won't find it here."

The two men trembled, no longer seeing Tigre as a young, idealistic fool, but a killer, who would willingly stab them both if necessary.

And he would too. Tigre was indeed kind and idealistic, but kindness had its own edge, and Tigre could be as ruthless as any man alive if he felt that his lordly duties demanded it.

The watching girl moved along the line now, as the two cowed men scurried away, and Tigre continued to hand out cloaks as if nothing had happened. She took her cloak from him, feeling its weight, much heavier than the traveling cloak she already wore. She wouldn't be warm with it on, it wasn't that good, and there was no fur in it, but it would keep her alive and functioning. She whispered out, "Ano, where did this come from."

Tigre looked at her, then smiled kindly. "Ah, it's my dinner guest from last night. You know you don't have to whisper, no one here is going to bother you if you speak up. Or if anyone realizes your, um, a woman. I understand that keeping that kind of thing under wraps on the road is really smart, but not here. Not with Elen's troops patrolling the camp with my own men."

The woman under the cloak allowed a faint smile to appear just barely visible from within her hood, before asking again, "Where did these cloaks come from?"

"The town of Territoire," Tigre replied. "Why?"

"The Lord of Territoire is with you then?" she asked quizzically.

"Yes, he loathes Duke Thenardier and Duke Ganelon strongarm tactics."

"And they are the ones who sent Roland after us?" the woman asked.

"After me," Tigre corrected, bemused by the young woman's phrasing. "The King has apparently declared me an enemy of the crown, a traitor to Brune."

"You work with a Vanadis of Zhcted," the woman replied, her tone chilling slightly, but not so much condemnatory as forceful. "Could that be it?"

“No one else could have helped my people,” Tigre said with a shrug. “A Lord’s duty must first be to his own people, especially if it is those who were placed above him that would prey upon those people.”

“I was captured by Elen during the battle on the Dinant Plains,” Tigre began not seeing the flinch the woman gave it that name. “She was enamored with my archery skills and wanted to keep me a prisoner in order to have me train her troops to if not be my equal, then to certainly be better than with their bows than they had previously been. However, during my time with her, we learned of Duke Thenardier’s Zion marching on my lands. I was basically forced by circumstances to beg for her help and in return for that help, I was forced to sell Alsace to her, along with myself.”

“But at the time, she was the only one in a position to help. Oh, my friend, Ranma and I would have done his best, and between the two of us would’ve been able to at least slow down Thenardier’s son, but we could not protect my people, not just the two of us. So it was a good deal of the time.”

“Then you are not rebelling?” The girl asked, her tone shifting into something more skeptical than merely curious. “All this was to protect your people?”

The girl really has an amazingly well-controlled voice, Tigre thought. “If Duke Thenardier and Duke Ganelon were willing to leave me alone, this war would have already ended from my perspective. It isn’t as if lands haven’t changed hands before and conflicts between Brune and Zhcted, so the loss of my little earldom would probably not have meant much in the long run. But Duke Ganelon preys upon the people of Brune as shamelessly as any bandit King, and Duke Thenardier, has never been one to let a slight slide. And since I was forced to kill his son and the two dragons he brought with him, he will never relent in his enmity for me.”

“And the other nobles with you?” the girl gestured around the camp, where the banners of many minor lords could be seen. The Silver Meteor Army was made up of more than just Augre, Mashas, Tigre, and Elen’s men after all, although in this case, the banners barely indicated a few dozen men each if that.

“They have joined me to free their lands of being ruled by such as the two Dukes. It’s that simple really. Honor demands we stand against them and their heavy-handed barbarism.”

Now the woman smiled at him, and Tigre actually found himself blushing a little at how pretty that smile was even if he couldn’t make out much of the rest of her face to go with it. “Then you are no enemy of the state, but a true Earl of Brune,” she said simply, taking the cloak and smiling before moving away.

Tigre blinked at the oddity of hearing those formal words, from a peasant woman but didn’t have time to dwell on it, as a hard finger poked him in the side. “Tigre-sama,” Titta asked her voice as sweet as poisoned honey, “who was that?”

“I don’t know,” Tigre responded, then yelped as an even harder finger poked him in the side again.

"I don't believe you! The way she looks at you, Lord Tigre what have you been up to when I haven't been around to keep an eye on you!?"

"What did I do!?" Tigre yelled, as Titta continued to poke him with a finger that oddly enough felt more like an arrow shaft than a finger.

OOOOOOO

As Sofy left for her mission to Nice, news of the defeat of the Knights of Asvarre was spreading throughout the country. Slowly, since no actual couriers were taking the news, and given the state of war between the three different factions in Brune, word-of-mouth was far slower than it would normally be. However, it did eventually reach the ears of Duke Thenardier and Duke Ganelon. Their reactions to the news were extremely different.

A military man, Duke Thenardier slowly read off a detailed report of what had happened and nodded. "This Earl Vorn is very interesting, isn't he? He thinks laterally, in terms of small skirmishes, strategic targets rather than large-scale battles, which destroy the enemy's actual military forces. Although," he added dryly, looking over to his military analyst Stead, "he is going to get a reputation if he keeps on destroying public works. First that bridge over the Resia, and now the King's Fingers? Amusing."

His military advisor stared down at the map, then slowly nodded. "Do we have any reports about whether or not Roland lived my Lord? He is an extremely important resource for Brune after all."

"None. I imagine that either he or his second-in-command is preparing a formal report, and our man in the palace will intercept and copy it out for us eventually. Although you're right in the long term," Thenardier added grudgingly. "Roland being dead would serve no purpose. Hopefully, Vorn isn't that much of a traitor to Brune that he would kill Roland out of hand if he is a prisoner."

Stead looked at him, cocking his head and Thenardier twitched a finger in response. "Ask your question."

"You seem to have almost anticipated something like this, my Lord. Certainly, you don't seem as angry or worried as most would have assumed you would be."

"I am not. I did not anticipate Roland losing, but really, he completed at least his minimum objective to my mind. Going into this battle, Vorn and the Vanadis' forces had the I believe the term used among the man is hot hand? He had the forward momentum, he had victories under his belt, and the popular support of the people. He could've kept pushing forward, gaining more allies, especially among the Knightly Orders. For all their disdain for politics and refusal to leave their posts, they are not immune to the tide of public opinion."

"Now that is not going to happen. Regardless of anything else, no Knightly Order will work with him against myself or Ganelon after he has beaten off the Knights of Navarre and defeated Roland. That

will have proven his perfidy in their eyes, and though I doubt they will be roused against him, they certainly won't work with him."

Standing, Thenardier moved over to the window staring out at his city of Nemetacum. "Furthermore, it is now winter. No army can move in winter without significant logistical preparations. And judging from what little reports we've been getting about swamped with refugees, Vorn doesn't have that ability."

"I see," Stead said with a nod. "We will have the entire winter for me to train the Army, to set in supplies and for you to gather more allies."

"And for the wizard to train more dragons for us." Thenardier then looked down at the map, not the original map that showed only a segment of the northeast and west of the country. No, this showed the rest of the country in particular, where Ganelon's lands were in the west.

On this map there were several dozen map markers, ranging from small carefully constructed notes, denoting supply points, towns, and whatnot, to a more tentative one that looked as if someone had begun to draw in a specific route of some kind.

"And while everyone else is believing that I will strike at Vorn, we will instead attack Ganelon. And we will do so before winter ends. We will take him completely by surprise," he said, marching the route with his fingers, estimating times and distances once again.

"I will have the Army trained up in time for that March my Lord, depend upon it," Stead promised.

Thenardier simply nodded his head, as if he expected nothing less from Stead. The two men turned their full attention on the map once more, looking at each map in turn, as they discussed the ramifications of what had just occurred and its impact on their plans in greater depth.

If however, Thenardier's reaction was calm and calculating, Ganelon's reaction was anything but. He heard about Roland's defeat about a week and a half after the news reached Thenardier, due to the greater distance, and when he did, it wasn't from nearly as well-written a report. Despite that, the reports did contain the gist of it, including one thing that even Thenardier didn't realize had been substantiated: That Roland had been captured alive.

It was that bit that incensed Ganelon. Dammit! One of the main threats against my own real plans here in Brune is still alive. Although, if he is a prisoner, perhaps they have been intelligent enough to remove Durandal from him. Without that sword, Roland is simply an excellent general and knight, not a demon bane made into flesh.

"The sword," he murmured, "Durandal must be dealt with." In particular, if these reports about the black bow are accurate. I cannot let two demon-slaying weapons exist in this world. One is more than enough.

He thought about what Vorn would do with a prisoner like Roland, calculated the odds, as the shadows around him roiled, bits and pieces of them coming together and flowing out from the rest to form shadows, which almost looked like men crossed with spiders. In front of him, his second-in-command Greast shivered, but did not allow his body to betray him, making no move to flee, protected himself, or anything else. He simply knelt there on one knee, awaiting his lord's orders.

"But I cannot afford people to realize that demons are back in the world either," Ganelon said finally, and the shadows receded leaving his second-in-command to breathe a sigh of relief.

That sigh brought the Ganelon's attention back to him, and he asked shrewdly "How long would it take us to set up an ambush? Or to get people inside Vorn's forces to steal away the Durandal?"

"Where would you like the ambush set up my Lord?" Greast asked bowing his head obsequiously.

"There are only a few things that Vorn can do with a prisoner such as Roland. He is an important prisoner in and of himself, but he has no political power, and the longer he retains him as a prisoner, the more Thenardier and I will be able to turn the few remaining neutral lords against him, perhaps even the Knightly Orders. After all, only a true enemy of Brune would keep a Knight like Roland in durance vile," Ganelon quipped, allowing a flash of humor to appear.

"In that case, the logical thing is to either let him go entirely, with his word of honor that the Knights of Asvarre will no longer fight the Silver Meteor Army. Or, Vorn might use him as a tool to discover what the king was truly thinking, and then to allow the King to perhaps point Roland in our direction. With the truth of Vorn's rebellion laid bare, that he only reached out to Viltaria in order to defend his people, the king might well repudiate his previous letter of condemnation. So, either on the road to Nice or on the road back to his previous position on the eastern border."

"I would hesitate to even attempt an ambush on the road my Lord," Greast responded, showing an honesty that few among the Ganelon's people would ever be able to for fear of displeasing him. But the man knew his position was mostly secured, Ganelon needed a general, a commander of armies and that is what he could do. "The better idea would be to ambush in Nice."

"Trap him," Ganelon corrected. "I already have a few thoughts on that score. There is a room there, that I have already prepared for such. But you do not think we would be able to ambush them at all on the road?"

"Not if he is even alone my Lord. Roland is rightly feared as a Knight and was so even before he was given Durandal. Perhaps getting a team into a position to steal it away while he is still a prisoner could be possible, however. Money after all talks and talks the louder to those who have lost all once already."

"See to that. We could use the extra eyes among the refugees and Vorn's forces regardless," Ganelon ordered. "And then, prepare our fallback plans."

“Lady Valentina has refused our request for asylum my Lord. That only leaves two places we could go to. Either Mouzinel or Asvarre,” Greast reminded his liege lord.

“Mouzinel,” Ganelon replied promptly. “It will be all slightly more harrowing journey, but the payoff will be even greater.” And I will not have to contend with Torbalan or his plans there. He did not say that aloud though. Despite Greast knowing about his demonic status and even taking some comfort from it, there were things Ganelon would not share with him.

“And what should we do with the armies my Lord?”

Ganelon thought for a few minutes, then shrugged his shoulders. “Have them build powerful defensive positions in our own lands. Tell them that we intend to allow Thenardier to come to us, to shatter on those defenses.”

His advisor raised an eyebrow, knowing that Ganelon knew about Thenardier’s plans to tame more dragons, against which no defense they could come up with would matter. Indeed, Ganelon knew more than that too, he knew precisely who was behind taming the dragons for the other duke. Another demon, much like himself.

Ganelon caught that look and smiled thinly. “Do you care so overmuch about the people of these lands?” When his second-in-command shook his head, Ganelon nodded back. “Exactly, let it burn. Let it all burn. After all, what I am after has never been a single slice, but all of the pie. And if I cannot have more than that one slice, why should I not leave that one slice to ruin and move on to another pie?”

OOOOOOO

Once that first supplies of clothing and food had arrived, things became a little looser and more informal when it came to mealtimes. Everyone was very clear about the rules now about both clothing and food. And after Tigre had five men whipped with a cat of nine tails for stealing from the supplies the day after Sofy left, and another one hung for attempted assault the day after, everyone knew that the young Lord Vorn might be kind and soft-spoken, but he had a spine as well.

In the span of five days, nine houses had already been put up, simple log affairs, but thick-walled, and easily able to house at least ten people each, even if they were not permanent houses. They would see the people in the camp through the wintertime, once they had enough of them anyway. Ranma and Roland had stopped their competition that day since they had more than enough logs and wood, and Ranma had begun to teach the older man the finer bits of what he called martial arts construction. With his help on this side of things, they had finished an entire house in one day, an amazing feat.

And for once, Tigre was eating his supper without being accompanied by his friends. He sat at a campfire, surrounded not by Titta, Ranma, Elen or Mashas or Gerard, but a few peasants he was thinking of training as huntsmen. One of the men had been a poacher of some ill-repute on some nobleman’s lands. Another a baker who had an eye for traps, the third hunter already, though one who had lost his bow.

He says he lost it trying to get his wife out of their house, but no ring on his finger or mark, and his paunch speaks of drink too. I'll have to watch him, see if he really can use a bow. But I need to get them trained and others like them quickly to help us add to the food supplies. Four thousand, my god that's more than nine times all the people in Alsace, town, farms, and our tiny mine included! And this is just one camp. The one nearer Lord Mashas' land is well maintained, Elen said so. But that leaves two more to see to and each of them might be half the size of this one.

Setting that aside, Tigre began to ask the three men questions about shooting and trapping. He had decided that the overweight fellow might know his stuff when they were joined by someone else. Tigre recognized her as the young girl who had talked to him a few times before around camp. She was always very careful about not letting any of her face be seen despite his attempts to make her feel safe. Then again given that bastard I had to hang... "Hello," he said kindly, once more shifting his mind onto a new topic. "Would you like to share our fire?"

The girl hesitated, staring at the three men across from Tigre, before nodding, and sitting next to him. She held a bowl of stew that comprised that night's dinner, but seemed reluctant to eat, watching as Tigre took a bite from his own stew, and after chewing happily at the bit of meat in the stew, Tigre looked up at her in confusion. "What's wrong?"

"It's a little hot," she said hesitantly. "Would you mind if, if we switched bowls?"

Tigre looked down at his bowl, already halfway eaten, and then to the girls, which was full. It was indeed steaming, but something told him that wasn't the whole story. Despite that feeling though, he simply nodded. "If you wish, although is that enough?"

She nodded, and the two of them exchanged bowls.

The three men watched this with confusion written on their faces but went back to their own conversation as Tigre began to make short work of the stew again. The girl still hesitated a moment, before seeming to stiffen her resolved, and plunged her spoon into the stew, raising it to her mouth. She chewed and ate methodically for a few moments, smiling slightly at the taste under her hood.

Feeling the silence, Tigre tried to make small talk. "You know, you always seem to come to me for food, even when it's forced you to wait or even disrupt the line. Titta was quite annoyed yesterday about it. Although for some reason I have to think there was something else going on there."

"Titta?" the girl asked cautiously.

"Ah, my maid," Tigre replied. "She's in charge of the cooks and washers around camp."

"You allow your maid to express her anger toward you?" she asked her tone both surprised and hesitant.

Tigre laughed. "Well, while I might be an Earl, Alsace is so small that the idea of putting on airs would be almost ridiculous. And Titta has been my maid most of my life. I think of her more like a sister than anything else, even if she keeps on insisting on waiting on me as a maid as she does."

Underneath her hood, the girl allowed a small smile to flit across her face at that, amusement and something else causing that reaction. She refused to look at that something else too closely, however. "Who is the woman with silver hair to you then? She is the Vanadis is she not? Her treating you as a friend and companion rather than simply client or ally is...strange."

Tigre shrugged, looking uncomfortable. It was true that Elen and Titta tended to follow him around the camp Elen doing so even when she had her own work to do. But occasionally, work did pile up and pull her away from Tigre. In particular, they were coming up on the deadline where she would have to send her troops back into Brune to get them across the border by the time the king wanted them there. And they'd had reports of another supply convoy coming in from Brune. She'd wanted to meet it with some of her troops to help escort them to the new position of the main refugee camp, which was several leagues away from where it had been when Titta had first arrived. They'd moved the camp even as Roland and Ranma had their contest nearer to a tiny stream.

"We've become friends since she took me captive," Tigre laughed. "She's a remarkably straightforward person in a lot of ways, and quite easygoing, just like me. So we get along quite well."

The girl's eyes narrowed slightly in her hood at that but decided to leave that for now. It was obvious that while Tigre wasn't unaware of the Vanadis' interest, he misconstrued it. That was good enough. Now she wanted to see if she could have some other questions answered. "I have also heard rumors about that redheaded girl with the same name as Sir Ranma. Is she really your sister?"

"Hahaha, um, no," Tigre chuckled. "he most definitely isn't. You see, both of them are the same person. Ranma is a young man I met on a hunt once, coming upon him while he was fighting a wyvern bare-handed. I helped kill it, then tended his wounds, and we became friends. Then he decided to stay with me, mostly for the sake of that friendship. That's shifted since."

"The same person!?" the girl squeaked, then leaned forward, feeling greatly daring and placing a hand to Tigre's forehead. "Are you feeling alright?" Then she blushed and pulled away stammering, "It's just, well Ranma the girl is, is very much a girl, and Ranma the boy, well I've seen him with his shirt off!"

The moment when he and Roland took off their shirts had drawn more than a little attention from the womenfolk among the refugees, especially the young girl among them. It had been interesting, although the girl hadn't been as enthused by the view saw many of the other girls and women.

"Ah. Yes, both forms are, um, well. He's got a curse you see, which turns him into a girl when he's splashed with cold water. Warm water turns him back. He thinks of himself as a man regardless of his current gender, but..." Tigre trailed off as the girl's body language, such as was visible through her large, new cloak, told him she didn't believe him. "Well, I'm sure eventually you'll see the curse in action. I understand it isn't something that can be believed without seeing it for yourself."

With the girl still looking skeptical, the two of them went back to eating quietly, with the girl looking at Tigre furtively occasionally, while he simply concentrated on his food, resting after a day's labors. The girl timed her own finishing of her meal at the same time Tigre did, and the two of them stood up as one to place their bowls in a large basket set near the fire.

"M, might, I make a request?" she asked hesitantly, grabbing at Tigre's sleeve.

He blinked and smiled down at her, nodding. "Of course, what do you need?"

When the girl explained, Tigre took her back to his own tent. There inside they found a small fireplace burning, and Tigre quickly set up a pan of water over it, waiting for it to heat, as he pulled his camp bed closer to the fire.

"There you go," he said cheerfully, "you're all set. And I apologize, I had completely forgotten about bathing needs entirely. I might have to see if we can set up a special tent for that in the future. Maybe get Ranma to do something. Sofy mentioned something about him and hot springs to Elen before she left."

So saying, Tigre made for the tent flap, but the girl again halted him once again, grabbing at his wrist with surprising strength. "Wait." He looked at her quizzically, and the woman stammered, "C, could you, that is, could you bathe me?"

Before Tigre could refuse, the girl began to undress, and he quickly twisted away, blushing hotly. What little of her body he'd seen before propriety took over had been lithe, well-formed and supple. She didn't have the curves of Elen, but she had more curves than Titta at the least, and her rear had been magnificent. Certainly enough to make his thoughts wander, even in that brief moment. "W, why would you!?"

Chuckling, the girl gently knelt down in front of the washbasin. "I, I can't get my back after all. So if you would mind..." She watched out of the corner of her eye as Tigre tore off a bit of his shirt and wrapped it around his eyes. Well, that's my last test passed with flying colors! She thought, with some regret. Not a lot though, as it had proved that Tigre was the man, she thought he was.

That was why when he began, she whispered a secret. A memory that she had long kept precious, and which she knew Tigre would recognize. "We met before you know, my lord Earl." Tigre made to interrupt, but the girl didn't let him. "It was in Vincennes. You shot a pheasant we shared together. I'm sure you remember doing so with your prince... or rather, princess..."

Tigre gasped and tore off his blindfold to stare at her in shock, not even noticing the girl had turned toward him or that her breasts, well-formed and somewhat more than a handful, were now pressing into his inner arm. "But, you, how... Regnas!?"

"Regin, please, Tigre," the now-named Regin replied a tremulous smile on her face. "It's been a long time. Both since we met, and since I've been able to go by my real name."

Before Tigre could do more than gape, the tent flap opened and Elen came in.

“Tigre, I...” She stopped in place staring at Tigre and this young girl in his arms before pulling Arifar, still scabbarded thankfully, off her belt. “You. You... what did you do Tigre?!”

Tigre barely had a second to realize what this must have looked like from her perspective before Elen was chasing him around the tent, with Regin gaping in shock at the two of them.

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After Tigre and the girl, or Regin as she was named, finished explaining things, Ranma was howling with laughter, falling to his knees and onto his side clutching his chest as he shouted out, “Oh, my God, I can’t breathe, ahhh, my ribs, this is hilarious!” God, watching this shift from the outside is hilarious! No wonder Nabs was always so amused.

The others who had been called in for this little meeting were simply shocked at the information Regin had just calmly told them, not how this bit of information had come out.

Mashas actually clutched at his own chest, gasping and falling backward, causing Tigre to catch him before he could hit the floor. Gerard was simply wide-eyed at first, then his face turned calculating. A man only a little older than Tigre, he had light brown hair done in a very fancy coif and wore a silk doublet and pants in his house’s colors with a certain elegance. Elen was just staring, as was Titta. Neither were happy at how close Regin was to Tigre at present, or how she had decided to reveal herself.

More to the point, like Gerard, Elen wasn’t certain she believed the young woman was who she said she was. Launching a vicious kick into Ranma’s side, she spoke over his grunt of pain, which itself had halted his laughter. “Not to be too suspicious or anything, but is there any way you can prove you are who you say you are? I’ll admit your hair color and face look like the few descriptions I’ve heard of the prince, but I never heard any rumors that Regnas was a girl.” She frowned suddenly, staring at Tigre. “actually, why are you so quick to believe this too?”

“Aheh, um, funny story there,” Tigre said, scratching at his cheek and looking away. “Regin told me about a memory only Regnas and myself would have known about. You see, my father took me to the festival in Vincennes when I was around six years ago. We met then. I was hunting in the area marked out as a temporary royal preserve.”

Regin smiled. “I had just escaped my tutors to go exploring. I found Tigre and asked if he could really use the bow he was carrying. He then showed me he could by taking a pheasant on the wing. He shared with me some of the meat, and it was one of the best. You gave me some of your fire-cooked meat.” She touched Tigre’s hand lightly. “Later that day, as Regnas, I made him promise to tell no one, not even our parents about our meeting. That is how Tigre knows I am who I say I am.”

While Mashas still seemed tongue-tied and the others frowning for various reasons Ranma had finally recovered from his laughter at Tigre’s predicament combined with Elen’s kick and decided to speak up. “Okay, fine. We believe you’re the prince, princess,” he snarked, leaning back against the side

of the bit of log Tigre used for a chair. "But what the hell happened during that attack? Or should I say, who tried to assassinate you."

"I knew there was more confusion than my attack could have caused!" Elen crowed, flopping onto the log herself, pushing Ranma's head away from her playfully. "A lot of the Brunish soldiers were shouting about how the prince was dead, but I never got troops that far into the noble quarters."

Regin flinched. "I, you know why I was in command. I had to prove my abilities to the nobles, had to show them the royal line was in good hands. Ganelon and Thenardier were gaining too much influence and the royal house was fading. I, I've never before been to war, so my position as heir was entirely overshadowed by my father. Even his own ministers belittled my lack of combat ability and lack of strength. But it was too late."

Her light jade-colored eyes darkened, staring at nothing any of the others could see. "The night you launched your surprise attack Lady Viltaria, my tent was attacked by assassins hidden among the servants of the nobles. My personal guard died to a man defending me, but Agnes and I were able to escape into the night. We, we were followed, however, and Agnes... she, she forced me to change clothes with her, then helped me hide, before leading them off wearing my regalia. She was about my height and had the same build and hair color, so she was able to lead them away. I..." Regin choked back a sob, wiping at her eyes to keep tears from forming. "I found her body the next day, dumped in a river. They had dumped her in the river and just moved on like she didn't matter!"

Regin sighed, pulling herself together with difficulty before going on, smiling as Lord Mashas reached across and gently gripped her shoulder. "I decided that it had to be Thenardier. I saw Zion and his troops, and more of them seemed to have been able to escape the Zhcted assault than I thought natural. So I thought to go to Duke Ganelon." She gulped, shuddering. "A, a marriage to him would bring out my secret, but would also put him on the throne in no uncertain manner. In that way, he could rally all the lords and Knightly Orders against Thenardier. But... but he had already begun holding funerals for 'Prince Regnas,' and moving against Thenardier, conscripting his peasants and abusing those who refused horribly. I fled his lands as fast as I could, linking up with other refugees as I did. That took me back east and then north until we wound up on this side of the river."

For a moment the others were silent, with Tigre joining Mashas in giving the young princess nonverbal support in the form of a hand on her own where they lay crossed in her lap. Even Elen, who was normally quite jealous of any woman being near Tigre, said nothing to this.

But one question made her speak up. "Is it possible that Roland would know about your true gender?"

"He might possibly know the truth," Regin said hesitantly. "Although I was not told he did. My father could have confided in him, but I couldn't take the chance that he didn't know the truth, especially not after he had believed the orders coming from the royal court that Tigre was a traitor without even investigating it on his own. Do you see?"

Elen nodded, but then asked. "What about asking Tigre to believe you. "That was a major risk, wasn't it? Even with that memory you two shared I mean. And how you went about doing so..." from her tone it wasn't clear if she approved of the woman's basic courage or didn't like the fact, she had let Tigre see her like that.

"I, it was," Regin blushed hotly, looking down demurely as she remembered the moment and Tigre's frank awe at her body. For a girl who had been forced to act as much as a boy as she could most of her life, that look had been a great boost to her ego. "But, I needed to get a final, true understanding of Tigre's character before revealing myself. If he was the sort to take advantage of that kind of situation then I would know there was more to his ambitions than what was known by the peasantry." She squeezed Tigre's hand which had not moved from her lap. "Luckily, my archer proved to be a true nobleman. Now perhaps we can move forward together to try to bring this war to a close in some fashion."

Looking up at the girl, how she looked at Tigre, Ranma shook his head. Something told him that the girl wasn't entirely against the idea of Tigre taking advantage of her, but he wasn't about to say that aloud.

"Let's see if Roland can prove you are who you say you are first," Elen said firmly. "Then we can make plans. If he does, that opens up a lot of avenues for us. If not, then I don't know what immediate help openly announcing yourself would be."

When he was escorted into the tent and everything explained to them, Roland stared at the girl, contemplatively tapping his chin. He was never a man to jump to conclusions or anger, even in battle and so did not dispute them immediately or denounce them as cowards. And the more he looked at the girl, the more he thought perhaps there might be some truth here. "I'm not disbelieving or believing you Regnas, or Regin, whichever you prefer. But I was never told of your true gender by King Victor, and thus cannot help you prove you are who you say you are, as Tigre could with that story of your childhood."

The middle-aged knight turned to give the younger Earl a look. "Neither will I take just his word for something so important. I'm sorry Tigre. You've proven yourself a capable leader, a true Earl, and a truer man. But, this is just too fantastical for me to take just one person's word for it. After all, whatever else he might be, Thenardier was the most powerful man in Brune beyond the king himself. Why would he need to assassinate you to get close to the throne? He was already wielding power royal anyway. Indeed, the thing to do would be to have had your gender exposed, so he could convince the king that you should marry his son."

The others, even Mashas and Gerard seemed to take that poorly, but Roland was implacable. "That would have strengthened the throne and the royal family considerably. Furthermore, this is not Brune ..." He looked to the Vanadis, then to the princess, then to Ranma and Tigre. Tell them Tigre, Gerard."

Tigre winced. "Um, he's right very some truth. The reason why Regin's true gender was hidden still pertains. No queen can rule in Brune. Heck, even female earls aren't allowed to retain their lands

unless they are widows, and even then, it's assumed they should marry after a year of mourning so that a man can look after the land. There's no precedent for a female queen in Brune."

"They're right." Gerard had been mostly silent during this discussion, not feeling he was able to contribute anything and feeling rather uncomfortable at being there at all. "Even if we can take the throne, and place a crown on her head, Regin will face a lot of trouble. But, coming forward with news for Regnas' survival would stop Thenardier and Ganelon from open warfare, surely. At least for a time."

"Perhaps," Roland said with a nod. "But only if you were able to prove Regin is the prince, or rather princess. All royal documents that I've ever seen which mentioned him at all called Regnas a Prince, everyone thinks he's a prince, as well as dead. You would have to disapprove that. The only way to do so would be to go to the capital and find the royal birth certificate there."

"Or perhaps the Cathedral of Perkunas in Southport. Doesn't it keep a secondary record of all royal and noble births?" Gerard asked.

"That's a thought. But getting there in winter is going to be the next best thing possible. Not only is it on the other side of Thenardier's territory, but the conditions of traveling are going to be abysmal," Tigre said with a sigh.

"I'm sorry I wasn't able to help prove or disprove this theory that this young lady is the real princess. From what I can tell him how you've run this Tigre, I believe your cause is just but that is not enough to turn me to your side. Nor would I be moved even if this young woman was the princess unless her position was proven by the king himself." He then shrugged and ran one hand through his hair before scratching at his neck as he thought. "On the other hand, I do rather wish to make war upon Thenardier and the Ganelon. So perhaps, getting those documents would be enough. If I myself go, I could persuade..."

"No," Tigre interjected quickly. "First of all, remember that you are still are a prisoner. That would look highly unusual for us to just let you go."

"Furthermore, don't you think that Ganelon or Thenardier would be tempted to take your loss out on your hide?" Ranma asked.

Roland scoffed. "Impossible. I do not mean to sound arrogant, but I am rather an important figure, both among the common people, and among the Knightly Orders. Any move against me could bring the Knightly Orders in against whoever was involved, not just my own Knights of Navarre."

"You're making the assumption that they'd be making I'd bet that decision with their heads rather than letting their pride or anger, or just plain meanness push them into it. I've met that field commander of Ganelon's, I think his name's Greast? And a viler human being you will never find. I don't think either he or his boss are thinking with a full set, you know? Or has any kind of care for Brune as a whole rather than their own positions. And you're a threat to that position. Thenardier might care, I'll grant you, but not Duke Sadist."

“So you will just keep me a prisoner?” Roland asked, scowling. “That will surely turn people against you as well. I am not against the work I have been doing, but even so, being a prisoner chafes when Brune still needs my sword and shield.”

Tigre frowned, but Regin spoke up, drawing everyone’s eyes to her again. She didn’t flinch under those gazes however, simply locking her own eyes with Roland as she said quietly, “You gave them your parole correct?” Roland nodded, wondering where the girl was going with this. She smiled. “In that case, there is a perfect way to use you.”

She said it without any softening of the blow or quibbling about whether or not the word ‘use’ was appropriate for in a way it was. While Roland was a human being with his own thoughts and feelings, he was also a Knight, sworn to his country’s service, if that country demanded he die, then he would be willing to lay down his life, so long as that use of his life served Brune.

So he just nodded again, and the girl turned her attention to Elen and Tigre. “Would you be willing to change his parole slightly, so that he can still fight the enemies of Brune so long as they do not include you?” When Tigre nodded Regin went on, “Sending Roland back to his border post would be the best use for him. After all, Brune is very weak right now, dealing with all this internal strength and weakness attracts vultures.”

“It already did once. Sachstein sent an army across the border. I and my knights dealt with them,” Roland said, his voice simple and matter of fact rather than arrogant as he spoke about what for nearly anyone else would have been a great achievement.

“Surely other enemies will also be circling. But with Roland back on the western border, at least two of those enemies will be stymied,” Regin said, turning a gimlet gaze on Elen. “That would only leave Mouzinel to the south and east, and of course, Zhcted...”

Elen flinched but didn’t look away, while Tigre frowned, nodding his head in agreement even as most of his thoughts were kept off his face. “She’s right.”

Roland smiled at the younger girl, thumping his chest once with a fist. “If you prove yourself the princess, perhaps a queen will not be the disaster than most noblemen might think if you are able to think so clearly in the future... Indeed, if you do become queen, I may be the first to bow to you in that position.”

With that, Roland asked to be excused, so as to prepare and send a message to his knights telling him that he would soon be released.

When he did though, Ranma looked at the others. “I don’t get it. Why the sudden change of tone there, I thought he was dead set against the idea of Regin being the princess.”

“He’s not,” Regin answered before any of the others could. “Roland revered my father to a great degree. But that is not enough to prove that I would be a worthy queen of a country that has never had a queen before. Yet in Brune, strength of arms matters above all. If the Silver Meteor Army, gains not

only legitimacy from being associated with me, but also wins on the battlefield, then it is obvious the gods are on our side. That will bring the nobles to us after we have beaten Thenardier and Ganelon, and Roland can follow both his conscience and the dictates of honor.”

Ranma rolled his eyes. “And that’s why I’m not a knight, folks. That Code of theirs is too convoluted by far for me and with way too much in there about obeying nobles. I’d rather just do what I think is best, thanks.”

The next morning, Roland left with his sword in hand. Regin had insisted on that saying that only Roland was worthy of being the first Knight of Brune, and with it in his hand, he would send a far greater warning to any enemies out there.

Between the two of them, she and Tigre convinced Elen of that, causing the silver-haired maiden to pout and mutter, “You’re all ganging up on me. Fine! Let him keep the darn thing. Just so long as it’s not pointed at me again.” Being smashed out of her horse by what amounted to a light backhand had a profound effect on Elen’s regard for Brune’s national treasure.

The sight of their Lord commander carrying Durandal astonished to his men, and his second-in-command wasted little time as the now somewhat diminished Knightly Order marched back the way they’d come to approach Roland to get the truth. They would not make the same time that they had on the trip out that was certain. “There has to be more to it than Vorn’s just simply releasing you on your parole. How do they know we will not respond to another order from the king? If the king so ordered us, we would have no choice but to attack them again whatever your parole might state.”

“Perhaps. But I would demand that the order be given to be by the king himself verbally,” Roland said, his tone sanguine. “Unfortunately, I do not think the king is able to do so. Even if he was, I would then demand that he do so privately, in order to ask him a few questions.”

“A few questions?” His second-in-command asked, but then shook his head. “Yet even so, why did a Vanadis like Viltaria agree to let you go? Surely there is more to it than believing you would defy the king?”

“Oh, there is more. Quite a bit more, of intrigue, possible lies and possible truths hidden among lies. But none of that will matter in the end if the Silver Meteor Army does not win through on its own merits. And even then, only if it becomes a true liberation army rather than a foreign occupation. That is enough on their end. As for ourselves, we have our duty.”

And perhaps, just perhaps, the future of Brune might be in good hands. Far more delicate hands than I would before, but still, I think perhaps I’m looking forward to the day I can kneel before Queen Regin and take my oath once more. Even if duty and honor compel me hard right raising her to that position in the first place.

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“... So the Silver Meteor Army will no longer be receiving troops but will be receiving clothing and other foodstuffs throughout the winter. Lady Elen will be allowed to remain here in Brune, but her troops will be cut down to a group of five hundred rather than the two-thousand seven hundred that she has at the moment in Brune. Further, unless attacked herself, she has been ordered to remain on the eastern side of the river Resia.”

“While it is nice to hear that King Victor has not lost all his senses, that reduction of troops is not the same as saying that you won’t continue to back Vorn’s rebellion now is it? Even simple nonmilitary supplies still provide support for that military,” Bedouin asked, his fingers working one side of his luxuriant mustache. “And that is a rather large territory, territory that rightly belongs to Brune. You cannot expect noblemen loyal to Brune to let that stand, can you?”

“Perhaps not, but considering the number of earls, barons, and counts who have rallied to Earl Vorn’s cause, perhaps we can. Unless of course, they are no longer fighting against the power grabs of Lord Ganelon or Duke Thenardier but are called to account by the king?” Sofy asked sweetly. “If that happens, and Lady Viltaria’s ownership of Alsace is secured, then I could see the rest of the lands now controlled by the Silver Meteor Army reverting to being loyal Brune lands once more.”

“Harrumph, a ridiculous name that,” the man muttered, looking away seemingly sidetracked rather than avoiding the question on the king. “Whoever came up with it?”

“Lady Viltaria is rather a whimsical young lady at times,” Sofy said speaking as if she herself wasn’t only two years older than Elen.

“No doubt. Still, I can see your message being seen as a positive to many in the court as well as the king himself. As well as your telling me that Knight Roland is still alive. That news, coming after news of his defeat has made the king’s heart much lighter than it was.”

“I’m glad to hear that. However, beyond that point, my message is for the king himself.” Sofy smiled pleasantly and holding the missive she had been given by King Victor. “I have no idea what the message contains.”

“I will take it to him,” Bedouin said reaching out and smiling himself, though inside his guts had just knotted around themselves with fear.

When Sofy pulled the sealed letter back, his worst fears were realized. The gorgeous Vanadis shook her head. “I’m sorry, but I was pointedly told not to hand it to anyone but the king, no matter the circumstances. Surely you’re not asking me to ignore a direct order from my own king?”

“The king is ill,” Bedouin said, allowing a frown to appear on his face. “I cannot let a foreigner in to see him, not for any reason. There was a recent attempt at poisoning that we traced back to Mouzinel’s ambassador, and security has been doubled since.”

Sofy reflected that was probably a lie, but a well-chosen one, which would let the court keep the king under wraps and away from the public for a good deal longer. But it also gave credence to the

rumors of the king being on his death bed. A dangerous game to play, that. Sofy debate whether or not to be blunt about asking about those rumors, or not, before shaking her head sadly. "Nonetheless, I must insist. I am an accredited special ambassador, do you honestly think that I would go against all international mores and attack the king? We Vanadis are war leaders and troubleshooters in my own case. We are not assassins."

She then seemed to cave if very slightly. "I will only need to hand it to him, I do not need to stay in his presence as he replies. I only need to see that it is the king's hand that opens the message. Nor does he need to be alone. You may have me guarded by a dozen strong knights if you wish." It wouldn't be enough if I was here for violence, but it might make Bedouin feel better.

"...Very well. wait here, I will inform the King of your request. If he is up of sound enough body today to meet with you, I will arrange it, but I'll warn you, the poisoning was recent enough, I do not know if that is the case."

Sofy nodded to that, and settled back in her chair, smiling pleasantly at a young maid who came over toward her with another pot of tea. Ahh, the upside of being a special envoy. All the tea I can handle.

Of course, the seneschal did no such thing. The king was not in his right mind, nor was his body more than a wasted shell any longer. His grief at Regnas' death had completely done him in, and then there had indeed been a poisoning. Only that poisoning had succeeded at least in part. King Faron was dying. It was only a matter of time.

Instead, Bedouin reached out to the representative of Duke Thenardier and Duke Ganelon.

Both of them had retreated to their own territories, but Ganelon had turned back at some point. The answer both men gave to them was simple. "We have to kill the messenger. If Obertas does not return to Zhcted, the strength of Brune will be proven. That will force Zhcted to back off, possibly even to recall Viltaria."

Bedouin sighed but knew they were right. Really, there was no way that allowing Sofy to meet the king could strengthen the nation's current position. And there was only so long you could put off the request of someone of such august a personage as a Vanadis. Damn King Victor anyway! Sanctimonious old jackass.

"A pity, that we could not capture her alive. But, Vanadis are notoriously hard to kill let alone take alive," said Duke Ganelon, smiling whimsically. I came to trap Roland if possible, but I suppose I can settle for one of the Viralt-wielding bitches. Or if not, I can find out more about how her specific weapon works. I don't know enough about their various skills beyond the one wielded by the Lurie line. Ganelon had a run-in with the wielder of that blade centuries back but had not fought any of the other Vanadis before or since.

The seneschal shivered a little at the man's tone but agreed with the scheme. "Very well, but how do we do it? Surely, you're not expecting me to order a straight-up attack? The Lady Obertas is still a Vanadis for all she is a soft-spoken young woman."

"Perhaps, but she is not immortal. And I believe there is a certain room that has been prepared for eventualities like this," Ganelon said smiling sadistically.

"... I know the one," Bedouin swallowed his gorge but nodded firmly. It is for the good of Brune. If nothing else, this will buy us a year before Zhcted thinks to challenge our might openly again. "Very well. I will deal with this issue."

Moments later, Sofy was ushered into a small sitting room near to the royal chambers where she was told to wait for the king. She sat down, taking a spot of tea which had been left there for her, after passing Zaht over it, the ringlets on the staff tinkling musically. So it wasn't poison, Sofy mused, taking a sip before looking around the room. I've never used this room before, but then again, I've only been here in the capital of Brune twice before, so I suppose it isn't entirely unusual that I haven't seen this particular meeting. Still, something is telling me to be wary. Is that you? She asked her weapon.

Zaht's thoughts pulsed in her head, the jingle of the ringlets sounding almost discordant for a moment as if warning of threats to come. She nodded, looking around even more carefully wondering if this was some kind of ambush. I did rather back Bedouin into a corner. But even so, attacking me like this will prove that the king is not fit to rule. Unless they think they can truly kill me.

As she thought that, she heard a sound by the door, a heavy sort of rumble like a massive latch being shot into place. Sofy stood up and moved towards it, then held her staff in one hand and brought it crashing down the door. The door bounced but didn't move from its place even as the wood veneer on the inside of the door cracked, crumbling away to reveal the iron underneath. "What is the meaning of this!"

Bedouin didn't reply. Instead, it was another man's voice, a voice that gave oily new meaning in Sofy's mind that did so. "I'm sorry, dear, but your death is necessary. Such a pity too, we could have had so much fun otherwise. But ah well. Such is life." The voice on the other side of the doorway cackled, and Sofy twisted, looking around her as she heard a noise rising from everywhere around her.

From hundreds of hidden holes all around the room bees appeared, buzzing towards her, and she scowled irritably. "Really? This fool obviously has no ideas about the capabilities of a Vanadis, especially me." She held Zaht in front of her, slamming the point down, and a bright light flashed out, blinding the bees and disorienting them, numbing their bodily functions as it would a human's.

Outside the room in a special alcove where the bee room could be watched, Ganelon twitched back from the viewing port, his eyes seared by the light so much they actually began to sizzle. Gahhh, that bitch!! Shaking his head and now wondering if this trap would actually work, he stumbled away, quickly sinking into a patch of shadows in the opposite corner. Better to err on the side of caution now.

Nothing mattered more to Ganelon than preserving his own life, that was why he had lived this long, and that light had hurt him worse than anything he'd felt in a millennium.

Unfortunately for Sofy, that spell had a finite time limit, and the bees were not nearly as disoriented as people would have been, not having the brainpower to be. While the first few hundred had fallen to the floor, their wings moving feebly, there were still more coming out of the holes all the time, an equivalent of an entire forest's worth of bees.

"Tsk." Seeing this, Sofy flung her staff through the air, then held it perpendicular to the ground, as she intoned, "Mirashem!" With that, she appeared on the other side of the doorway, and the bees buzzed around, still incensed by whatever had driven them to fury but without any real target.

There were a few men there, guards mostly, along with Duke Thenardier's representative to the court. He heard the light tap of Sofy's feet on the ground as she appeared and had a second to stare, aghast. Then he was laid out with a single blow from Sofy's fist, the power of the blow hurling him down the corridor. The other guards tried to attack, but Sofy rolled forward, then struck out behind her as she twisted around, bringing her staff will around in a wide arc smash into the lower leg of one of the guards. It didn't just knock him off his feet, but it shattered the bone in his lower leg, dumping him to the floor.

A quick hop backward and she brought her feet down on the man's face, crushing his skull. Daintily she stepped forward, using Zaht to block the blows from the three remaining guards, only the sound of Zaht's warning in her mind telling her there was a fifth guard jumping at her from behind in an effort to grapple her to the ground. She ducked, jabbing her staff upwards, stabbing upward into the man's chest as he passed through her former position before hurling his body forward into one of her attackers

Straightening Sofy sidestepped the lunge of one of the last two men, kicking out and catching him on the knee, which crunched under her slipper. Zaht then came around and blocked the blows of the second man, but he was no match for her.

A quick twist and she caught the blade of the dagger in the tines of Zaht's head, then shattered it with another twist of the wrist, the sound of shattering metal filling the corridor. A kick sent the now weaponless man flying back-breaking some of his ribs.

And before the man who she had thrown his dead companion on could get to his feet, a light rap from Zaht sent him unconscious falling back to the stone floor of the corridor. With a similar tap to the last one, the one whose knee she had ruined, the fight was over.

"I believe I have overstayed my welcome here." Sofy mused, closing her eyes for a moment as her Viralt spun through the air. "Mirashem!"

An instant later, she was walking up to the horse Elen had loaned her in the royal stable. In the saddle she shifted her weapon again through a circle around her, activating her teleportation spell for the third time. The horse reared up in shock as the world reeled around her but calmed down as Sofy

patted its neck companionably and held out a sugar cube. With the horse making happy horse noises, Sofy set the mare into a canter, heading north and east.

Well, that was a wash. The king's hopes were proven accurate, but with Tigre refusing to aid and abet an invasion I have no idea what he will do. Still, I can at least waste time, er, that is, spend time trying to talk Tigre around, and use it as an excuse to spend time with Elen and the others. So despite this little adventure, I suppose this mission is looking up for me.

With that happy thought, Sofy fed her horse another cube of sugar and began to hum to herself, while snow began to fall all around them.

End Chapter

Chapter 7: Winter Annoyances, Summer Troubles

Ranma grumbled in annoyance, moving a hand through her hair in order thinking whether or not it was worth the trouble to stop and transform back into a man. As she passed under the laden bough some snow had dumped on her a moment ago. Mostly slush it'd been enough to trigger the change, which annoyed Ranma to no end. Deciding that it wasn't worth the trouble, Ranma raced on through the woods. *No, my form isn't my problem right now. My main problem right now is boredom*, the redhead thought ruefully.

Ranma had passed the Resia River, which marked the demarcation line of the Silver Meteor Army's territory early the morning before, not even slowing down. Instead Ranma had simply skated across the river with a whoop, before moving on easily, racing like a thoroughbred horse coupled with the constitution of a wolf.

At first, Ranma had been traveling through what was very obviously a depopulated zone, which would normally have a lot of people in it. There had been scattered farmsteads everywhere, the same basic size he was used to seeing back in Japan, fifteen acres of crops with fields fallow at present, and one large single house. But no one had been there, the inhabitants of the area heading North and East into the Silver Meteor Army's territory, or south and west on orders of their liege lords.

After that however, things had gotten annoying. There was a road heading towards Duke Thenardier's city of Nemetacum, but that wasn't quite the direction he wanted to go. So Ranma had split off from the road and made his way out into the fields and then into the forest beyond, heading on a more eastern angle than the road towards Artishem.

It had been four days since he had made that decision and Ranma felt he had traveled something like a hundred leagues through the forest. Even for Ranma traveling in wintertime

was slower than traveling otherwise, and every night Ranma had to make himself a kind of igloo to sleep in at night, which slowed him down further.

Traveling was fun for Ranma... normally. If the scenery changed, if the weather was nice, or, as Ranma discovered recently, the company was good. In fact, that last one actually made traveling a lot more fun than Ranma had ever thought it would, having only traveled occasionally with his rivals and before that with his father. In contrast, talking to Limalisha and Sofya had been a lot of fun. Shockingly enough, their conversations had been interesting even when they weren't talking about martial arts or fighting. Heck the most amusing topic at one point had been fashion of all things, with both girls shocked at how much Ranma knew about that topic, at least in relation to his old world. Their faces when he described some of the material used for clothing back home and the styles had been hilarious.

But neither of them was there at the moment. Worse yet, the weather was classic wintry gloom, with an added chance of snow. And unfortunately, since she had hit the forest, the views hadn't changed much either. Ranma had attempted to take to the trees, moving through the treetops instead of along the ground as a chance of pace, but it had slowed Ranma down and hadn't really helped. Every tree was now starting to look the same, and the sky above was starting to annoy the martial artist with its drabness.

In other words, Ranma was bored out of her mind right now. *Winter travel sucks!*

"Let's see, what kind of training can I do while I travel," Ranma pondered aloud not for the first time in the past few days. Before this though, Ranma had concentrated on working katas into her running, thinking up ways to incorporate her pressure points skills into her style further. Now, looking down at her body, Ranma suddenly smirked, and began to meditate as she ran along, concentrating on a portion of her body, while allowing the rest to remain at the temperature it was now.

The objective is to see if I'll ever be able to do Hiryou Shouten Ha on my own without needing to rely on the hot ki of my enemies, she thought to herself as she leaped from one tree to another. She then resignedly dropped down into the snow beneath as she noticed the surrounding trees had become pine, all of which were full of snow and too many small branches to make easy headway.

When she landed on the forest floor, Ranma scowled in annoyance as it came up to her hips before she leaped up onto it, then away. *And do a better job of landing without sinking into the snow too.*

Later that day Ranma was perched on the tallest tree she could find and looking around, scowled as she realized she might have left the road a little too far too her left. *Crap, I thought that I was paralleling it, but I can't see any sign of it. Damn it, the map I looked at isn't worth shit! That road's the only freaking landmark I can use to find my way until I hit that one town, what was it, Lego, or something? This shortcut of mine might add to the time.*

Looking up at the sky and then around, Ranma's breath puffed in the wind as she considered. *Still, so long as I can keep from being notice by Hard Ass and his goons, I suppose I've got time to waste. We've got at least another two, maybe three months of winter. And then another month when most of the roads won't be worth crap due to the mud.*

Moving in the direction she had last seen the road early the previous morning, Ranma traveled for more than a few hours by her estimation before she saw it in the distance. With that done Ranma paralleled the road and kept to the trees just out of sight until she realized that even her abilities to move silently wasn't up to this task. Looking behind her, Ranma could see the trees still moving from her passage, and a lot of the snow on them displaced. *And I don't think they have anything like monkeys or anything like that in this area* she thought ruefully, dropping to the snow-covered floor of the forest once more. *Still, I can keep out of sight from the road easily enough on the floor too.*

A roar got Ranma's attention just then, and she turned to what the martial artist had initially discounted as a large snow mound which opened beady eyes and stood up as she watched. The creature was something like a polar bear, but it had a different hand structure from the bears back home, something Ranma had quite a lot of experience with thanks to his father. It also had a much bigger fangs, almost like a certain extinct species of furry devil.

But it was clearly more bear than furry devil and Ranma cocked her head quizzically at the bear, then grinned spreading her arms wide. "Finally! Come on then, let's have some fun."

The giant bear thing didn't take well to this seeming-challenge and charged forward, going on all fours for a few seconds before rearing back up and lashing out with a swipe from its front paw that would no doubt have snuffed the life out of any normal person had it connected. Ranma however simply reached up and grabbed it, then twisted around, and tossed the bear entirely over her shoulder in a classic judo throw, grinning as it smashed into a tree. It growled angrily but pushed himself out of the broken remains of the tree, roaring in challenge and racing towards Ranma again.

"Excellent! I like to have my playmates be durable."

What followed would have, if it had lived through it, been easily the most humiliating moment in the polar-tooth's life. It was continually tossed around, until finally, it began to dawn on the creature that it was in over his head. Then, when it tried to leave, Ranma smacked one fist into the palm the other hand, exclaiming "Oh, wait, furs. Forgot about that."

For some reason the noises the man-thing had just made terrified the bear, and it took off, trying to get enough distance to use its natural camouflage to disappear into the wintery woods. This alas failed, and the last thing the polar-tooth felt was something smacking into the back of its head.

Looking down at the paralyzed bear, Ranma smiled thinly, seeing that some pressure points worked on all mammals. Then he reached down and snapped its neck with a single, brutal twist of his hands. He then bowed his head slightly, clapping his hands in prayer. Normally he wouldn't have bothered with that for an animal, but Tigre had taught him to be thankful for every animal he killed while hunting.

After creating an igloo to one side of the corpse and gathering enough wood for a fire and a hanging rack, Ranma pulled out a small extremely sharp dagger from her weapons space, kneeling down next to the bear-thing. "Thank you, Tigre, for teaching me how to do this!"

Before meeting Tigre, Ranma had just followed his Pop's direction when it came to skinning animals, which was very much a brute force approach. It worked for them, because they had force to spare, but it wasn't tidy, and it wasn't quick. Tigre however had taught Ranma about a much better method, and then had given him a knife too. Within ten minutes, Ranma had the skin of the bear off and then in and out of his ki space, to kill off any lice or anything else. He then hung the bear up outside to bleed out, whistling as she began to make a fire for the evening.

The next day, with the meat of the bear stuffed into his ki space along with the coat, Ranma was on his way once more, having taken the time to transform back into a guy during the night. Ranma very much preferred to sleep as a man when he had any choice in the matter, remembering all too clearly some of the nightmares he'd had as a woman thanks to Kuno in his off sessions.

By midmorning the next day, Ranma had finally exited the forest out into more developed lands, marking where Ranma supposed, the lands looking to Hard Ass started. Here and there were farms of various types, sheep farms, cattle farms, crop farms. Most of the cattle was gone, probably taken into the city for the winter and the rest of the fields were fallow, but Ranma could see a few lights on in the various farmhouses ahead of him.

Unfortunately, as Ranma had kind of supposed would happen, Ranma found herself once more wet enough to have caused change, as another bough broke over her dumping snow onto her head faster than she could dodge. Shaking her head, Ranma muttered, "Well maybe they won't haggle as much with a poor innocent hunter girl rather than a guy?"

With her new fur coat covering her, in order to avoid any questions about what Ranma was doing out and about in short sleeve silk shirt and silk trousers, she made her way forward, knocking on the door. The noise inside halted instantly, and then Ranma could hear a furious jabbering for a moment from various people, at least seven distinct voices, all men, with a whimper of three women at least in the background, wondering. One of the women's voice rose over the tumult, asking, "Is it the Lord's men?"

At that, one of the male voices spoke up louder than the others. "Foolish wench, they don't knock! Still, get you and the others upstairs. Or into the kitchen. The rest of you, grab up some knives or anything else just in case."

Ranma called out a clear, controlled voice. "I can hear you, you know. I don't mean any harm! I just want to trade."

Hearing a female voice from outside seemed to cause the noise inside to pause as everyone within looked at one another in shock. However, a moment later, the door was opened and a face peered out at Ranma, staring down at her warily. The man on the other side wasn't all that large, but Ranma wasn't exactly tall either, especially as a woman.

The man was rough, unkempt, but wearing a decent looking peasant's outfit, somewhat well cleaned, or as much as it would be anywhere on this world. As Ranma had noticed, bathing regularly was not a thing here among the peasantry, alas, which was kind of sad. *I wonder if the people have Alsace have noticed any increase in their general health.* Ranma had hammered in the needs for basic cleanliness into their heads over the first winter he'd spent in this world.

Clearing her head of such thoughts, Ranma held up her hands peaceably, smirking slightly. "Look, no weapons. Does that put you at ease?"

"Where's the rest of your band then girl? No way a woman, particularly your age would be out and about in wintertime alone," the man growled, attempting to sound threatening.

Ranma shrugged completely at ease, the effort utterly useless on her. "I'm alone, believe me or not, I really don't care. Will you trade with me?" She reached behind her back, and as the man tensed, slowly removed a portion of her the meat from the bear-thing, holding it up.

At the sight of the pound of prime meat, the man's eyes widened, staring at it then to her. "Are you some kind of Huntress then?"

"You might say that," Ranma nodded. She then gestured over her shoulder to the woods. "I have more where that came from, so long as we agree on the price." No way did Ranma want to leave any memories of her passing if she could help it, and that lie kept her from having to figure out some way to carry the meat in a more visible fashion than her ki space.

"At least we can let you warm you up by our fire," the man answered now acting smarmy as he gestured Ranma inside.

Inside, Ranma found most of the men inside leering at her and she heard more than one man wondering if they should offer to put her up for the winter. "She could warm many a bed belike."

One of the other men slapped that one on the top of the head shaking his head. "And you think me wife or the others'd put up with that kinda dung!? More like we'd put you out than let you do that."

"You people really need to realize when you'll be overheard you know," Ranmagrowled, and suddenly she was holding the skinning dagger. There wasn't anything in here that didn't look too breakable to prove her strength on, so she figured the dagger would work best. She twirled it around her fingers, then up in the air, catching it without looking, making to throw it at the man who had been making the most ribald comment about her. He twitched in fear, and she subsided, holding it lightly in her hand. "I'm no one's easy toss! I've come to trade. You don't want to trade with a woman, I'll go to one of your neighbors."

The man who answered the door chuckled. "Most of me neighbors are right here miss, but aye, I'll trade with you."

An older woman, obviously the man's wife came out then, carrying what looked like actually a very old-fashioned kind of scale. "What you be wanting for the meat then?" the woman asked, lisping quite badly.

Still, Ranma suppose that was to be expected from peasants in this world unfortunately. *Education, reading, writing, arithmetic. These things I took for granted*, she thought ruefully, as she sent the meat on one side of the scale. "Stuff for stew if you have any," she began without preamble. "Any dried jerky you have, bread and a map of the area if you have it, I kind of got lost out there in the woods," she added with a shrug.

"And where is home for you, then?" the woman inquired, staring at the scales. She then, with Ranma's permission, sliced off a bit of the side of the meat, staring at it before holding it up her nose, sniffing deeply.

"My family lives near a river way down east, on the near side of Duke Thenardier's land," Ranma replied mildly, smiling cheerfully as most of her face was hidden behind her polar-tooth cloak. It made lying quite a bit easier for Ranma than it would otherwise be. "And I'll give you a piece of meat half that weight for the map, straight trade."

The woman grinned cheerfully at that, nodding her head firmly. "We've still a bit of jerky, which we'll replace right quick with the meat you sell us, bread, a bit of cheese, and some preserved vegetables. How much meat are you looking to sell?"

"How much do you want?" Ranma shrugged nonchalantly. "Like I said, I've got most of the rest of the carcass out by the woods. Strung up from a tree."

After examining the meat for a while longer, the woman nodded at the man, then got down to haggling quickly, with her husband stepping in here and there. Ranma didn't try to drive a hard bargain, after all, if Ranma wanted fresh meat, she would just hunt up something

else out there. But these folks, not a one of them apparently had the wherewithal to go hunting, and fresh meat was dear indeed this deep in winter.

Soon after, Ranma left, deliberately not noticing how relieved all of the peasants were as she did. People like these peasants, they lived in fear of those stronger or stranger than they. It was a sad way to be, but there was nothing that Ranma could do about it right now. If ever. *Alsace was so different, and Leitmeritz and Legnica. I suppose I just got kind of spoiled. Have to remember all too often that peasants in this world don't have a good life normally, and what life they do have is totally dependent on the noble they look to.*

About five minutes later, Ranma was moving at a sedate pace for the martial artist, munching on a sandwich with delight, as she followed the road down to the nearest village. The farmer's wife had baked some kind of local herb into the bread which made it quite tasty, and Ranma felt he had put enough distance between the Silver Meteor Army's borders and here to not need to hide herself entirely any longer.

This proved to be a bad decision as, Ranma soon ran into a reason why peasants like those farmers were always afraid. This came in the form of a dozen soldiers, who trooped down the road, that Ranma had been taking since leaving the house, following a very limited set of directions that the farmer had given him to the nearest town.

For a moment, it looked almost as if the soldiers hadn't seen her, which if Ranma hadn't been eating a sandwich, Ranma would have thought was fair enough. The polar-tooth's pelt she had made into a coat blended into the white of the snow around her so well that even Ranma hadn't picked the beastly out until it moved. However, as the troopers came closer it became clear that was not actually part of the reason why they hadn't yet noticed her. At least six of them were riotously drunk.

The other two were more sober, but far more combative when they noticed Ranma at last as she reached shouting distance. "What's this then? Some little hunter girl out on her own? You should know that there is a toll to be paid for using the Duke's roads little miss!"

Ranma looked at them coldly, throwing back her hood, and letting her red hair be seen, crimson against the snow all around them. *Sort of a prophecy for what's to come* she thought coldly, cracking her knuckles. *Finally, something to cure my boredom. For at least a few minutes anyway.* "You lot aren't wearing Thenardier's colors. Hells, I've never seen colors like that before, what kind of purple is that? Looked like someone puked it up. On the other hand, given what I'm smelling from even all the way over here..."

"It's crimson! The color of dried blood, which you'll learn all too soon if you give us any more lip girl," one of the soldiers drawled, moving forward as his fellows spread out to either side in preparation for encircling Ranma, a few of their horses stumbling off the road into the deeper snow beside it. "This can go one of two ways. One, you pay the toll, if you got gold on you we'll take the gold." The spokesman then leered, "Or, you pay the toll another way..."

Ranma sighed theatrically shaking her head, but then reached into her coat, and pulled out a bag. It actually contained a few diced vegetables from the farmstead she'd just left, but before the guards could scowl or reach for it, Ranma tossed the bag at her feet before bringing her hands up in a fighting stance. She didn't really need to take a fighting stance with this crew of course. But she figured they were dumb enough that they needed that incentive to actually attack her.

It worked too. The entire group spurred towards her with wordless shouts, all of them now leering openly at her. Eight man against one woman, the eight-man all on horseback, it was obvious how this was going to go.

Or it was until Ranma leaped from a standing start up and forward, her leg flashing out like an unstoppable battering ram. It crashed into the one horseman who had a chest plate rather than chainmail or a leather jerkin. The kick dented both the chest plate and the individual wearing it, hurling him out of the saddle and slightly downward into the head of the horse right behind him. The horse went skittering sideways with a whinny of anger and pain, while the man fell boneless to the ground, trampled under the hoofs of his fellows while Ranma landed on his former saddle. Hopping upwards Ranma lashing out in both directions with fist and foot, sending two more riders flying.

Tearing off the bridle or whatever it was that connected to the bit in the horse's mouth, Ranma twisted around, using it like a lasso on another man, who started to choke as it wrapped around his throat. At the same time, Ranma launched herself backward, slamming into another horse and rider, snapping the rider's leg with the impact and tossing both rider and horse into the snow along the edge of the path.

With five of their number down, sobriety gripped the last three members of the patrol. One of them turned quickly, spurring his horse back down the path the way they'd come as rapidly as possible. His horse could not travel anywhere near fast enough. His two fellows fell quickly, and Ranma raced him down, racing along beside him, then waiting up at him cheerfully. The man's terrified face amused Ranma greatly, and almost made her feel sorry for him. Almost being the operative word there, considering what they had all been hinting at wanting to do to her.

A quick jump, an even faster kick, and that man too was flung out of the saddle unconscious.

Ranma grabbed him and the bridle of his horse and then began dragging the man in one hand by the ankle back to the others, while also dragging the horse, who was unwilling to head back to his fellows. Once they were altogether, Ranma stripped them of their armor and weapons, knowing that such things were expensive in this time. That, and of course any money they'd had on them, which turned out to be a bit more than Ranma had expected. It was evident that they had been out shaking people down for a while and business had been good.

Once that was done, Ranma dumped the bodies four at a time in the nearest woods, every two of them tied back to back. If they lived or died afterward, that was on them.

Afterward he looked over the horses, and though he wasn't the best when it came to animals, he was easily able to decide which of them was the finest. He stripped the others of their saddles, then smacked each on the rear in turn, sending them back the way Ranma had come, while taking the best horse with her. Not, that she needed a horse, but Ranma figured she might eventually need a horse for part of her disguise, and better to have one than not.

As she went through their stuff, Ranma found what looked like written orders with an official looking seal of some kind on the bottom, possibly a writ of something or other. Ranma couldn't really read the local language well, but could at least make out the letters, and learned that currently he was on the lands of some kind of lord named Pucey. The name had Ranma guffawing aloud, but what she found next was much more useful: a map of the area. It was smaller in scale, but more details for it then the map he'd seen back in Territoire.

He opened the feed bag he had grabbed from the patrol's supplies and allowed the horse to gorge on what Ranma's nose had told him was oats liberally dipped in brandy before pulling back. Then she hopped into the saddle. "Well come on horsey, let's get going," she said as she pulled out the map she'd gotten from the farmers, something Ranma couldn't do while moving at her best pace.

"And hey, at least this way I'll be able to travel a bit more in style. Now where the hell am I going again?" she muttered, twisting around so as to rest her back against the neck of the horse, watching behind them as the snowy expanse slowly began to pass by, subconsciously warming the horse with her ki, to go along with the brandy infused oats.

After several minutes staring at the map, Ranma sighed, before rolling it up, twisting around in the saddle, and sitting sidesaddle pulling the polar bear cloak around her, as she sent more of her ki into the horse. "Man, this is the last time I volunteer for anything! And Regin better darn well be thankful. And invest, heh thanks for the word Nabs, some money into some of her cartographers, because if I have to travel across Brune again without a good map, I'm going to hurt someone!"

Judging from the map, and the directions that she'd gotten from the farmhand, she'd essentially passed two far east and south, coming down at an even sharper angle from her starting point to where she wanted to be than Ranma had thought, and to make that up now she had some hard lands to go through once this road gave way.

Sighing, Ranma contemplated, "I hope that that lot back in Territoire are having an easier time of it than I am." The irony of the fact that Ranma was actually having a much easier time of it than anyone else could have on this journey was completely lost on the redhead as she glared up at the wintry sky above.

OOOOOO

On the other hand, perhaps Tigre would have traded places with Ranma. No, in point of fact, anyone who knew the young Earl of Alsace would know he would have instantly traded places with Ranma, polar-tooth, would-be rapists and all. Because as Ranma had left, Eleonora, Tigre and Regin were going over all the various agreements that they had made, or rather that Regin had made with the nobles who had joined together with the silver meteor Army. At this point all the different agreements had been made, the originals witnessed by a churchman and what they were doing now was creating a single document for them all, while formalizing the language in conjunction with the law-brother.

Many of the agreements were very lopsided, at least in the immediate impact, but not entirely. Regin well knew that she had been treating not trade and from a position of power, and yet, thanks to her own inclinations, her own training, and Valentina's help, she had kept two things off the table from the get go. One was that she could not raise a noble in status, such as from going from an Earl to a Viscount. However, her reasoning for keeping that off the table was simple, and unequivocal. Only a sitting monarch, with the regalia of Brune in hand, the scepter of office and the crown, could raise the household of someone.

As Princess though, Regin could bestow knighthoods and had given those out liberally. But while a knighthood was the most minor of nobility it came with a caveat: it was also a military rank with some hard rules controlling the knight's actions and his duties to the nation. The knight had to either join a pre-existing holy order, swear fealty to an Earl or higher, or serve in the Royal Army for a period of two years before being given land commensurate with his rank.

Regin had known that many of the people coming forward were strong proponents of this or that lord within the country and had worked hard to winning those men over to her own side, convincing them to work **directly** with the Silver Meteor Army rather than through their lords for greater gains later, tying them to her service for two years. This weakened the lords in question, but they hadn't realized it at the time and now it was too late.

The second item she had managed to keep off the table was her hand in marriage, that had been much harder. As Valentina had continually reminded her, and which Regin knew all too well, there was no history of a Queen ruling in Brune. Indeed, there was no history of noblewomen wielding power in their own name at all.

Regardless, with a few hints in Tigre's direction, which alas went straight over his head but not over Elen's or Titta's, she had been able to keep that off the table, and Regin mentally thanked Valentina for her help once more on this score as she leaned back, rubbing her writing

hand in bemused pain. The Vanadis of Osterode had helped Regin ready for who would push for her hand, those noblemen who no longer had wives or who had sons of marriageable age, only half of whom Regin had anticipated herself. Valentina had even coached Regin in how to respond, something that Regin herself had never been trained in.

All of her training up until she had left Nice with the Royal Army had been built on the prerequisite that she would continue to act like a man right up until she was sitting on the throne in her own right. At that point it would have been a done deal, and Regin could have married who she wished. Something Regin was still very determined to do.

Tigre looked up as the door opened, as did Elen, the silver haired girl scowling at the servant to adjust entered. As she did, he frowned, wondering why something was off about the man. The servant bowed, laying a tray of sweetmeats on the table. "My lady requested snacks?" he said obsequiously to Regin.

Regin nodded thanking him, and reaching for the table instantly as the man backed away. "Indeed I did. For some reason paperwork makes me hungry."

Tigre picked up a piece of the sweetmeats as well, but before he could put it in his mouth, he sniffed at it. Instantly his eyes went wide and he flung it down, twisting around quickly and knocking the piece out of Regin's hand. "Don't! It's poisoned!" But he was too late. Regin had already taken a bite.

As Tigre shouted the man had instantly turned around, bolting for the door. But he didn't even get a pace away from his starting position before Elen slammed into him, bringing them to the ground twisting his arms up behind his head while Regin gagged, staring at him in shock.

But then Tigre was behind her, grabbing Regin out of her chair, placing his hands underneath her chest and heaving, his hands pressed into a single fist. Regin gasped, then choked as the piece of meat she had just eaten flew out of her mouth, nearly hitting Elen and the still writhing prisoner.

After the meat left Regin's mouth, Tigre's hold on her shifted, holding her upright, not noticing that he was basically cupping one of her breasts with his hand as he turned her head in his direction, ordering her to open her mouth, staring intently inside before nodding.

Blushing brightly now, despite knowing this wasn't the time for such feelings, Regin took the wine that they had been drinking all day when he handed it to her and took a generous sip, before spitting to one side as Tigre had ordered.

"Are you feeling all right, any shakes or shivers?"

“No, well nothing that I can’t attribute to nearly being poisoned, and the understandable fear that entails,” Regin replied, leaning back against Tigre. “An attempt that failed only thanks to you, Tigre.”

“What was that, and how did you notice it?” Elen asked, scowling as she absentmindedly dribbled the ‘servant’s’ head against the stone floor.

“It’s a kind of poison based from a mountain snake. I know it because we had an infestation of them in our lands at one point, the poison spread so quickly, that it will kill in seconds. Its smell is distinctive, but there isn’t any cure for it as far as I know,” Tigre replied.

“...That’s nice and all, but how long do you intend to hold her breast like that,” Elen grumbled, dragging the prisoner upright while now glaring at Tigre.

Tigre blinked, then noticed where his hand was, he flinched, his hand coming away like it had just been scalded as he bowed quickly. “I am **so** sorry your Majesty!”

“What have I told you about calling me Regin,” Regin pouted, before shaking her head, biting her lip to keep from sending Elen a smug smirk. “Besides, considering that you saved your Majesty’s life, your moment of lese majesty can be excused.”

“By you maybe,” Elen grumped. “Me, I think I’m going to have to sliced in half later Tigre. How dare you touch some other girl’s chest!”

“The way you say that makes it plain that you would much rather that Tigre touched only yours,” Regin shot back. “For now, however, I think you need to set aside your petty jealousy so we can discover if this man was working alone. He’s obviously guilty considering how he reacted when Tigre spotted the poison, but he could be one of several.”

“And get a taster, I think. If I someone has access to a more slow acting poison without any distinctive spell, then we wouldn’t have even noticed this,” Tigre added quickly.

Regin sighed. “I had gotten used in the past month to not needing to check my food, a lifetime of training thrown out the mirror window thanks to your warm welcome Tigre. I suppose though, that believing that would last was too good to be true. But what should we do now?”

“Now we make certain this guy was either acting alone, or we catch his accomplices before they can get away. And that means finding Lim,” Elen answered authoritatively.

OOOOOO

Elsewhere in the castle Limalisha frowned as she worked through a few of the sword techniques that Ranma had told her about from his own world. They didn't feel natural to her yet, and Ranma had warned that they may never do so, simply because the sword Lim used was a longsword, what he called a European-style sword, and most of the sword techniques he knew were for what he called a katana, the heft of which as well as the size of the blade was very different. But she was determined to keep at it, and she moved through them doggedly, her blade flicking up and down, then around, before thrusting, each revolution moving just a bit faster than the last.

Lim wished she could say that the reasons she was so determined were because she wanted to simply better herself, getting stronger for its own sake. But the truth was, even though she had given Ranma the okay to start up a courtship with Valentina and Sofy, she wasn't quite as sanguine about her position as that decision made her out to be. Not so much Ranma's feelings for her, or the fact that Ranma and she would certainly have more time, if only for a little while, to get to know one another better, thereby deepening their relationship more than either of the Vanadis could do. No, it was Lim herself that she felt was lacking.

Lim was honest enough to know she was what most men thought of as beautiful. But Lim also knew that she wasn't up to either Valentina or Sofy in the physical department. Nor was she as, well, important as either of them, as worldly. And just like the Vanadis, Lim also had duties to see to. Lim couldn't do anything about that, regardless of her relationship with Ranma, she was Elen's aide, that wasn't about to change. Nor was Lim willing to change her attitude to match the other two women in terms of clothing or style.

But there was one aspect which she knew Ranma prized above everything else, even if he had never outright stated it: physical and mental strength. Ranma liked women who could stand up to him in a spar, she had seen it in his eyes when they had sparred, when sparring had become flirting, and when he had in turn dueled with Valentina the same thing had occurred, though she doubted that Ranma knew it. Even with Elen to a certain extent, although there the two of them had fallen into a kind of teasing, family-like camaraderie rather than attraction. And in that area, Lim knew she lagged behind both women, badly. Both Vanadis could beat on her like a drum without even trying.

It was illogical, Lim knew. Ranma wasn't the type to favor one of them over the other, or care overmuch about one aspect of the women in question. But Lim had grown up next to Elen, and while being her friend's aide was fulfilling in a major way, it had also given her a bit of a complex about herself in relation to other women. Lim knew this and wanted to work to overcome it. Hence Lim pushing herself with her present exercises.

She looked up as the door opened at a knock, blinking as Tiger and then Elen entered, followed by Regin and Lord Augre, quickly bowing to her lady. "Lady Eleonora, what can I do for you?"

“Sorry to interrupt your practice Lim, but we need your organizational help,” Elen said brusquely, before going on to describe what happened. “So, do you have...”

“A list of any newcomers in the town and castle or the Silver Meteor Army units barracked within its walls? Yes, milady. There are six men who arrived from a nearby hamlet looking for work, according to a verbal interview they had to have before being given leave to enter the town. Three of them signed up the Silver Meteor Army. One of them went to work as a butler for a time when one of Lord Augre’s people slipped on a staircase. The other three are also still out in the town at the Peachtree Inn. As for the other two with the army, they are in barracks number four with the other new inductees under Sergeant Nantes, one of Valentina’s men who volunteered to see to their general conditioning due to a leg wound acting up in the winter keeping him from practicing with the rest of the pikemen.”

Everyone there, bar Elen, looked at Lim in astonishment as Lim rattled this off without even looking through her notes, while Elen just looked smug. Lim smiled, the first time Lim had allowed herself to do so since her insecurity in regards to her relation with Ranma had begun to invade her mind and she sighed, shaking her head. “I have been handling my lady’s organizational needs for a decade now, long before we actually became war maiden. Keeping track of tiny details is bread-and-butter to me.”

“You see, she’s amazing!” Elen grinned, throwing a hand over her friend’s shoulders. “She’s helped me organize my army for so long I don’t know how I’d do it without her.”

“That’s not something to be proud of you know,” Tigre teased before becoming serious as he looked at Lim. “So, do you think those two men might be involved or were they used as smokescreen.”

“There’s only one way to find out, really.” With that, Lim led the way out of her room, down a few stairs, then out to one of the barracks.

The moment they entered the longhouse that served as barrack four, two of the men inside bolted for the other door, leading out of the log house. Elen twisted around, racing back out herself, then leaping up onto the rooftop, while Tigre and Limalisha towards them from the direction they had initially come in, shouting out, “Grab those two men!”

The two men had moved quickly, however, getting away from their fellows around the fire and grabbing up swords, not their own, just the ones nearest at hand and racing outside. But they weren’t prepared to meet Elen leaping down on top of them like a hawk.

One man caught a face full of foot, and went sprawling, his nose broken, his red blood staining the snow all around them. The other dodged around her, but didn’t get far before the air behind solidified, glowing slightly as Arifar activated on a whispered command, reaching out to him with a fist of wind. The air punch, which Elen had devised for sparring with Ranma,

smashed into the back of the man, sending him sprawling. "Yes! I am so going to make Ranma eat snow with that when he gets back!

By that point, the rest of the men from the barracks Tigre and Limalisha had joined Elen outside, and she walked over coldly to the man who had almost gotten away, laying Arifar on his shoulder lightly. "We're going to have a chat, you and I."

The questioning of the three prisoners proved that they had been sent by Duke Ganelon. They had initially targeted Tigre, ordered to kill him as soon as the campaign season began. But their orders had changed three days back to trying to assassinate the princess. Five-hundred gold for each of them had been offered for her head, or proof of death. They also knew of at least two other teams sent to infiltrate the refugees that could be ordered to target her, though they didn't know what any of the would-be assassins looked like.

Hearing all this Regina shivered, and Titta laid a comforting hand on the princess's shoulder in an automatic show of sympathy. Her eyes widened when she realized what she had done, and she was about to pull her hand away, but Regina caught it tittered in one of her own, looking over at the other young girl and squeezing her hand gently in thanks.

"So, this is but the first attempt that's going to be made on your life your highness," Lord Augre predicted with a sigh. "As news of your possible identity spreads, Duke Ganelon and Duke Thenardier will be forced to try to do something about it, even if you don't currently have enough proof of your origins to stand up in the court of public opinion. As the head of the Silver Meteor Army you are already a threat to them."

Tigre nodded in agreement. "We need to place a guard on you twenty-four-seven milady, just like you would have in the palace or even when you were with the Royal Army. I think that a taste tester plus moving a lady in waiting into your room will also be a necessity."

"Switching Regin's room with mine would also be a good idea," Elen added. Elen had taken the room she had because it had a nice view over the outer wall of the keep, but it was the furthest away from the stairwell, and thus the most secure from the inside. And if you locked the window, it was too heavy to be silently moved from the outside.

"I will volunteer to become your lady-in-waiting Princess. And I can even cook your meals for you, your highness," Titta volunteered with a curtsy.

"That would be lovely Titta. Thank you," Regin replied with a smile

This talk went on for a while, but soon enough the talk turned to other things. As it did though, Titta turned to her lord, looking at him through suddenly narrowed eyes and a dangerously disapproving pout on her lips. "By the way what is this I hear about you grabbing at her Majesty?" she questioned harshly as she pinched Tigre's hand.

Tigre winced, trying to get away, but Elen grabbed at his other hand quickly. "That's right, we haven't talked about that yet, have we?"

Later that night, after settling into her new room, Elen sighed theatrically, looking outside at the setting sun. The days were so short in the winter that you really couldn't do as much as you could want. Furthermore, she had missed training time today thanks to having to question the three prisoners and going over the security of the town and castle. She blinked however as she heard a rap on her door to her new room.

When she turned to look, she was surprised to see Lim poking her head in. "Lady Eleonora, can I ask you for a favor?"

OOOOOOO

"Ough, that one was the worst yet! I actually feel sorry for that silly animal, even if my rear doesn't agree with the rest of me," Sofy complained, as she glared up at where Valentina still sat on her horse, breathing in deeply and looking somewhat ill, but not nearly as worse-for-wear as Sofy was currently feeling. Sofy's horse, a loan from Leitmeritz's stables, raced away down the road and over the snow mounds on either side of it. Once more, Sofy missed her own horse, which had long been trained to put up with her abilities. "Are you sure you're not somehow making these transports worse every time out of spite?"

"Out of spite of what, exactly? From what I recall, you and I had an equal number of kisses from Ranma, since we left him. Surely you're not implying I would be so petty as to humiliate you in turn for your own teleportation powers humiliating me at every turn?" Valentina shot back, scowling.

The two Vanadis were still not pleased with one another's company even if they had somewhat buried the hatchet on the way to Leitmeritz and had continued to snipe at one another even after they left so hastily two days ago. Sofy often implied Valentina was an arrogant little so and so, while also hinting at the fact that she found Valentina far too mysterious to truly trust. In turn, Valentina hinted that Sofy used her body just a little too well for her own tastes, a blow that never ceased to hit home and was at the same time too naïve despite her work as a special envoy.

However, jabs like this did not make up the majority of their conversation as they rode hard and used their powers as often as they could to head to the capital of Silesia. That honor went to Ranma, the information that he had shared with Valentina, and the information coming out of Muozinel.

“No, I suppose not,” Sofy conceded, having been the one to start this latest session, watching as Valentina slowly slid out of the saddle, moving over and laying out in the snow nearby. For anyone but a Vanadis, it would be too cold out to do something like that comfortably, but, like Sofy, Valentina was practically immune to the cold.

The two women were silent for a time as they recovered from the reaction each of them had to the other’s teleportation powers. Both of them knew it was stupid to use them one after another without some time between them, but it had become almost a contest between them to see which would give in and admit weakness first. Sofy knew it was stupid competition, much like Ludmila and Elen’s issues with one another, but that didn’t mean she was going to relent.

Sofy began to speak again, saying something that had been working at the back of her mind since leaving Ranma behind. “I, I am still uncertain how far to take my attraction to Ranma. Due to my duties, it is unlikely that the two of us will ever have large blocks of time together after all, and that would be necessary for any real relationship. Even with my powers of teleportation, I can’t just go and visit him whenever I wish, and he isn’t a citizen of Zhcted either. You have to admit the same thing, Valentina. Don’t you?” Whether Sofy was looking for reassurance, commiseration, or to simply point this out to an opponent for Ranma’s affections, even Sofy didn’t know.

Valentina shrugged serenely. “I am willing. Indeed, I am extremely happy to take what I can get from Ranma in terms of romance. I was upfront with him, as you were, about our duties to Zhcted being of more importance to us than anything else. A man like Ranma, with his abilities, physical skills, who sees us as women and friends first instead of Vanadis or noblewomen? One who has no ambition, no ties to anyone save those of friendship? Oh yes, I am going to pursue my interest in him whenever I get the chance. To say nothing of the information he shared, how interested I am in the world he came from.”

Of course, that was only half the reason why Valentina had gone from interested in Ranma to seeing him as a possible romantic partner. The other half was the fact that when Ranma had forced Valentina to share her ambitions, Ranma had accepted them, had even told Tina that he would support her if it came to open conflict. That was immensely important to her, though Valentina would never share that secret with Sofy or anyone else.

“Yes, his information...” Sofy had been looking through Valentina’s notes, or rather the notes Valentina had decided it was safe to share with her, and one thing had been made clear. “Why are you so interested in this, what do you call it, technology? I have to admit that I think his medical information is far more important than this steam stuff or this plow thing.”

“Perhaps on the surface. But I believe you haven’t studied industry enough if you think that. Answer me this, how many people does it take to run a farm ten acres in size?” Valentina asked seriously. “That is the basis of our economy and our tax system as well when you come down to it.”

Furrowing her brows, Sofy thought for a moment. "Ten acres? Four men and their wives, perhaps with children included, I would assume, why?"

"Try a single family of six, with fifteen or more paid aides at different intervals during the farming season, not full time. Children older than eight are put to various tasks, and of course, boys are more valued than girls given how much more work they can do supposedly due to our own gender." Even as she lectured, Valentina allowed a disparaging note to creep into her voice. She was well aware of how most women were viewed in this world and the lot in life of most women born into the peasant class. "Much of the work needed to keep a farm operating or to clear land is immensely strength intensive and that means people."

Sofy nodded understanding, then, as she stood up and moved toward Valentina's horse, indicated the woman should go on. She took a wine-skin out, shivering slightly as a gust of wind got under her skirt, then led the horse closer to where Valentina had flopped out onto the hard-packed snow by the edge of the road and sat down next to her, watching the woman as she began to speak.

"But what if you could remove the need for half that number? What could the workers freed of such onerous duties put their minds and hands to? We both know that it is the cities, the merchant class where real money and power reside. And one thing every city needs occasionally is more manpower. More power on the docks of Legnica, more manpower in the Royal Army, more men under arms in general, and more apprentices in the various crafts. One thing can lead to another."

"I understand your point, and that this plow is but the tip of the iceberg. I feel though you are reading too far into it. Especially given your own notes and the number of little annoyed marks you made within," Sofy answered, giggling at the last bit. "Those were very cute, by the way."

Valentina pouted but couldn't argue the point. She had indeed made a lot of little cutesy versions of herself with asterisks and exclamation marks in place of her face in her notes. "Yes, well, I could wish that Ranma had been a better student, perhaps, certainly more interested in science and technology. But we were able to build that plow and create a steam-powered saw. That alone would save time, effort and manpower for Territoire. Think about such things spreading. They could be but the start of a, a kind of Industrial Revolution."

Sofy looked closely at Valentina, that last label sounding as if it was a quote, making the blonde Vanadis wonder if she had learned it from Ranma. But as open as Valentina had been about the information Ranma had shared, she had been close-mouthed about Ranma's past, or about their own discussion above and beyond the notes. Sofy wondered once again what else the two of them had talked about. Sofy knew Ranma had shared more than just the information Valentina had shared with her in turn.

But she wasn't about to ask and give Valentina the opportunity to turn her down. After all, they were both Vanadis, and as this discussion had nothing to do with Sofy's duties as a special envoy, she had no real power over Valentina, whatever her position as the mediator between Vanadis might have indicated to others. Instead, she probed, "And you have no trouble with me spreading Ranma's medical knowledge? You could gain great renown if you did so instead."

"Only by taking credit for it and that I will not do. And you can spread that information far faster than I, although not as fast as the royal court will spread it, once we share it with them. Medical knowledge like that could save a lot of lives and to be spread quickly. The fact that leeches do nothing, for example, the knowledge of how the human body works that Ranma told me about, to say nothing about how Ranma had organized some of the medical aspects of the various refugee camps, his knowledge of healing bones and so forth." Valentina shook her head. "Besides, I will be too busy pushing the steam and the plow and the rest forward in my lands to really devote time to spreading the medical knowledge. I need to free up more people and get them trained as soon as possible."

"You seem overly concerned about that for someone whose lands are so far from the border with any civilized nation. Are you so worried about the Horse Lord's?" Sofy questioned, staring at the other Vanadis. "I've never had dealings with them, but I know that the Vanadis of Brest comes from one of those clans. Surely..."

"Surely, nothing!" Valentina interrupted with a laugh, a sharp crack, a sound that held absolutely no humor rather than her normal alluring giggle. "The Horse Lords pour over our borders once every three or four years, without fail. Most of the time, it's just one clan, or perhaps two united under a local warlord and they can be seen off after a bit of raiding by any competent lord of a Viscount or larger strength. But sometimes, their depredations are much worse. You have to have been taught about the last full-scale invasion about a hundred and twenty years ago, weren't you?"

Sofy winced. She could indeed remember learning about the invasion of the last true Warlord of the North, who had united eleven clans behind him and invaded Zhcted. All of the Vanadis at the time had been called together to deal with the threat and two of them had died in the doing. At the same time, it had opened up Zhcted's other borders to invasions from Brune and to Muozinel. It'd taken fifteen years of war to reclaim those lands, and Muozinel had almost depopulated them via their slave-taking before they were forced to give up their gains.

For a time, they talk about tactics and strategies against the Horse Lords, then resumed their travel, using their teleportation powers to transfer forward to an inn they both knew. A royally mandated town, this place was a crossroads of several different roads, but otherwise not important enough to become a city. Sofy was able to buy another horse there, but this alas didn't do her any good. The nag, which the horse trader had told Sofy was the most docile, easygoing animal he owned, threw her the first time Sofy used her powers, once more leaving

Sofy on her rear, as it reared up breaking Valentina's grip as the black-haired Vanadis swayed, dealing with her own reaction to Sofy's teleportation power.

"Drat!" Sofy groaned, rubbing at her rear.

Valentina looked down at her fellow Vanadis, holding her stomach and narrowing her eyes. Continued exposure to it had not acclimatized her to Sofy's power. The fact the reverse was true was scant comfort. "Drat?" she drawled. "Is that really the only word you can use to describe what just happened?"

Sofy looked up at her, then raised her nose mock-arrogantly into the air. "Well, excuse me for assuming that you are polite company."

The two women looked at one another, then shared a rueful laugh, before Valentina reached down and pulled the other woman up onto the saddle once again, while above them, snow began to fall once more. It didn't look as if it would amount to much, but even that little bit might become annoying, piling up on the road, which had been kept clear of snow up to this point. During the winter keeping the roads clear was one of the many minor tasks that the Royal Army saw to stay in shape.

Valentina twitched a little as she felt Sofy's breasts pressed into her back, and she shook her head in exasperation as she felt how far back on the saddle Sofy had to sit because of them. "How big are those things? Honestly, it's obscene."

"Pot, this is Miss Kettle, I would like to inform you, my dear, that we are both made of iron," Sofy retorted tartly, reaching one hand around Valentina's body. Not to place it around her waist, but to grab a handful of breast for a moment.

Valentina rolled her eyes and smacked the hand away before asking seriously, "So, what do you think about the missive from the king?"

"Are you asking about the language of it and his personal demands to both of us, or are you talking about the information therein?" The two of them had each received their own royal letter, but Sofy had easily discerned that the wording was probably almost the same in both cases.

"The information. I can make my own determination about the King's attitude from his words thank you so much. He's annoyed with me, but that isn't outside the realm of possibility. But I don't know the names of the individuals he mentioned, Duke Calla and Viscount Laram whom he mentioned as being the source of information on Muozinel's movements."

Sofy nodded. "I do know them both in point of fact. Calla and Laram are... good people, I suppose. Or as good as you will find in Muozinel. Both know that the slave-based economy of Muozinel is not good for the country in the long term and makes them anathema to the other

nations of this world. They won't rise in rebellion against the rest of Muozinel, but they will do what they can to hamper Muozinel's military ambitions. If they say that Muozinel is moving, then I think we can assume it is true."

"And the powers that be in Muozinel don't know that they pass on that information?" When Sofy answered that she had no idea, Valentina hummed thoughtfully, tapping one hand on the pommel of her saddle, thinking.

Sofy prompted, "What do you think about it?"

"Muozinel has people to spare," Valentina began to explain promptly. "They are always producing more people than any other country, which is rather silly when you think about how much trouble they have feeding their population along with their slaves. Indeed, I often think that the reason why slavery began was so they had a workforce they didn't need to feed as much. Regardless, Muozinel they could have a few units, indeed a small army, making noises around these counts where their lands border Zhcted, while preparing their main army for an all-out invasion of Brune."

"I don't think so," Sofy argued back. "First of all, what Muozinel needs, as you just pointed out, is farmland. If they can push past Ludmila, they will be in an excellent defensible position that includes several thousand acres of good farmland. And if they can keep it, that will be enough for them to feed their own people. Whereas the invasion for Brune isn't through farmland, but mountain and forest county. They would also be faced with a running battle against prepared defenses and the majority of Brune's Knightly orders."

"No, they won't do that. Anyone could see that route would be horrible for an invading army," Valentina shook her head. "They'll come in via the ocean and the passages to the south."

"Which would bring them right into contention with Duke Thenardier, who I had don't have to remind you was the one who smashed their last attempt at invasion seven years ago. And the land there is extremely hostile, they wouldn't be able to feed their forces."

"Thenardier will be busy with Duke Ganelon out of position, both him and the dragons you mentioned, which, frankly, I doubt they know about. They will be able to get through the worst of that territory before anyone can react, and then will be able to take much of Duke Thenardier's own territory, including the city of Southport, with which to supply their troops."

"They don't have a powerful enough of a navy to take that city," Sofy protested.

Valentina countered. "It's not large certainly, but it is well-led and organized. Red Beard has seen to that, or do you forget the battle of Baram Straits?"

Sofy grimaced, shaking her head. She did remember that battle when an outnumbered force of Muozinel ships had devastated an armada from Sachstein five times its size. "But the

Knightly Orders would still be in a position to attack their flanks if they expand from that point, as would Roland. And just because he is out of position doesn't mean that Thenardier's dragons would not be able to return and deal with them."

"True. But if Muozinel can keep control of the sea, they'll simply keep on bringing in more troops, and there's only so much that even someone like Roland can do against an army that could easily number seven or eight times the entire military strength that Brune as a united nation could put in into the field even in their own land. The dragons... they are a wild card. I don't know how Muozinel would deal with them. But that route just makes more sense, I think. Especially if Muozinel is not just grabbing land but looking to conquer Brune outright."

And Valentina thought, it would make more sense for me too, which is why I cut orders for my spies to hint about how Brune was a ripe target for conquest the moment Elen shattered their army on the plains of Dinant. Valentina had hoped that, in so doing, she would then be able to convince the King to move some of the Royal Army groups on the borders with Muozinel to help against the Horse Lords. All of her sources within the Horse Lords told her that there was going to be trouble there in the next few years. Maybe even this summer, and it was going to be invading Brest's territory.

And there wasn't much that Valentina could do about it at the moment. She'd already shaved off all of the lands of Brest that she could really. Valentina just didn't have the men needed to even protect her own borders. She could patrol and then move troops to stop any incursions in her own lands, including the lands she had taken from Brest, which was what she had done the last time the tribes had tested Osterode. But that left the rest of Brest and the area to the west of it to their own devices.

Scowling in annoyance and knowing that she had lost the argument, Sofy turned her attention to other matters, asking about Ranma once more. "So, what do you really think about sharing Ranma with Lim and me?"

Triumphant in her victory, Valentina answered that she didn't really care so much about being Ranma's one and only. "After all, it's not like any of us really have the time for that given our various duties. And speaking of which, I think it's my turn to transport us, isn't it?"

With that, Valentina used her power once more, speeding them towards the capital. This was followed by another later that day and a teleportation from Sofy, which put them on the outskirts of Silesia at well past midnight. From there, they sent word of their arrival in the city to the King, hoping that they would be able to stay the night in the inn, both of them hungry and weary from the pace they had set, traveling from Leitmeritz to Silesia in barely a day, and not spending more than a few hours resting there.

However, this hope was in vain. The King sent a royal carriage to the inn that they had been staying at, accompanied by court orders to report in person to him in his courtroom that instant.

Valentina sighed, looking down at her meal then across at Sofy, seeing a similar look of chagrin on the other Vanadis' face. They sighed in unison, thanked the proprietor for his attempt to see to their needs despite being roused from his bed, and then paid for their stay despite not getting to use the beds he had provided. The meal, though, they took with them to eat in the carriage.

To their intense surprise and chagrin, the King, Victor, and his three most trusted advisors were all awake, waiting for the two Vanadis in a fully lit courtroom. And the glare Victor gave them as they entered, bowing onto their knees in front of him, was not welcome either, although both women had already known he was annoyed with them, given the tenor of the notes that he had sent to Leitmeritz.

As they knelt, Sofy and Valentina both let their eyes flick to the three advisors. Ilda Kurtis, Victor's nephew and one of his best generals and Miron were both important figures. Miron was also the majordomo, so his being in the palace available for this late-night meeting was not a surprise. Ilda, with the news about Muozinel, was. The last man only Valentina recognized as a noble who had dabbled in mercantilism, and who was a major proponent of increasing the number of royal roads in the nation, to facilitate trade. Why he was part of this meeting, she had no idea.

Before either Vanadis could speak, Victor's voice thundered out censoriously. "You arrived together? Good, then We will be able to chastise you both at the same time!" so saying, he slammed one hand down on the side of his throne. Though elderly, Victor was still a powerful-built man, and the blow shook the throne for a second. "We are most displeased with both of you! It is bad enough that Vanadis Viltaria hairs off into Brune on her own recognizance for such flimsy reasons, but for you two to join her?! This is beyond the pale! It smacks of treason against the crown!"

"We did not join Eleonora and the Silver Meteor Army your Majesty," Sofy replied, keeping her own voice level while Valentina remained silent, looking at the King searchingly. "Instead, we were both in Brune for our own reasons. My own reasons for being there you well know as it was by your order I was sent to speak to King Faron."

"Yes, it was our orders. But such a thing should not have taken you so long, Vanadis Obertas! What possible reason could you have for taking so long on a simpler reconnaissance mission as our accredited ambassador!?" the King growled. "We had assumed you might have trouble on your mission, but to this extent? Have you become incompetent, or simply too arrogant that you believe you can ignore the need to check in with us once your mission is complete?"

Before Sofy could reply, the King turned his attention to Valentina. "And you Vanadis Estes, why in the name of the Dragon King were you in Brune!? Osterode has nothing to do with Brune, and you have long posed as being sickly, so your absence from not only Osterode but also Zhcted is inexplicable!" He paused then glared at the black-haired Vanadis, seemingly

trying to stare her into submission, his habitual wariness of the Vanadis in clear view. “Well, do you have anything to say for yourself?”

“Your Majesty, I had traveled to Legnica, intending to offer my aid to Lady Alshavin in speaking with Lady Fomina, who has been plaguing her borders. When I arrived in the port, however, I learned that Sasha’s illness had been miraculously cured. Surely you received Lady Obertas’ reports on that before she left for her mission into Brune?” Valentina answered, showing no sign of being cowed beyond a faint tightening of her mouth and the overall tenseness of her body.

The King growled but nodded, conceding the point, and Valentina continued on. “The result was so miraculous that I felt they had to look into the young man who healed her to see if he could help with for my own health issues. You know how sickly I have been in the past and my reaction to Ezendeis’ powers. Lady Alshavin told me I had just missed the young man, and where to find him, having headed back to join the Silver Meteor Army as a friend of Earl Vorn.”

Beside her, Sofy wondered idly if Valentina really ever had been as weak as she had acted since becoming a Vanadis. It was true she acted as if she did, but Sofy had to wonder. Until Sofy saw Valentina with Ranma, Sofy had been certain Valentina was hiding something, some secret ambition or goal. Now she was almost certain of it, but also had a better handle on Valentina’s personality.

I should inform the King of my suspicions, but I don’t know. I don’t have any proof of my supposition in that area, and the last thing Zhcted needs is for the King to become even warier of his Vanadis. And he did send me into a literal bee’s nest and has cut Elen off at the knees when it comes to her activities in Brune. I, I think I will keep my concerns to myself. Call it a very tiny bit of rebellion on my part, Sofy decided.

“And I was right to do so,” Valentina had continued to speak as Sofy finished thinking. “Ranma, the healer who helped Lady Alshavin at the behest of Lady Viltaria, was able to show me a series of changes of exercises, ordered a changed in my diet, as well as performed an operation of a sort on my stomach. The powers of Ezendeis still drains my body’s energy and thus are still of limited utility, but I can actually use them now, at least three times a day in fact, without nearly killing myself.”

This was a series of lies of course, all except the series of exercises. Ranma had indeed given her some of those, but only she, and possibly Ranma, knew they had nothing to do with making her able to better withstand Ezendeis’ power. Rather they were simply physical exercises.

The King glared down at her, breathing in deeply as he took all this in. And was that a look of anger or unhappiness that had just flitted across his face? Valentina didn’t know and didn’t have time to ponder as the King spoke. “While the idea of a Vanadis bettering her strength is one that can only be welcome to us, your presence on enemy soil was not as

welcome! Do you at least have this so-called medical knowledge, so that it can be shared? Or were you selfish in that as well as your initial goal?"

"I did keep notes, your highness." Valentina didn't even try to defend her initial decision seeing no point in doing so. "I even inveigled Ranma to share quite a lot of his medical knowledge with me in a series of discussions over the weeks I spent with the Silver Meteor Army. You may have a copy of it as soon as I can get it to a scribe here in the palace."

"We will keep the original," King replied coldly. "You will take the copy. Furthermore, your absence from Osterode has been noted, and your lands need your guidance, perhaps now more than ever. The court will miss you for the next year but your duties to your people come first."

Valentina grimaced at that. In other words, she was being banished from court for a year. While that worked well with the plans she had begun to make when speaking with Ranma, Valentina's own personal ambitions would not be served from being away for so long from the seat of royal power. *And any chance to possibly follow up on the idea that Sasha was poisoned has now gone out the window!*

That wasn't something she could ever let in someone else's hands. But even a chance sighting of Valentina in the city would no doubt bring further censure down on her, and suspicion with it. *Dammit! An entire year!? I knew I would be reprimanded, but that long? Still, there is nothing I can do about it now. Perhaps the King will relent in a few months. And look at it this way, I will indeed be able to devote myself entirely to pushing the use of steam and the creation of guns this way.*

"Good. We are done with you. Now for our special envoy." Tso saying the King waved one hand, and Valentina retreated slightly.

Sofy stepped forward in turn as she had been addressed, still kneeling on the floor. Before she could speak, however, the King began to lay into her as well. "Well, what to do you have to say for yourself? You are Our special envoy, but that does not mean that you can go haring off on your own adventures! Especially if they reinforce another Vanadis' mad desire to embroil this nation in the troubles of another!"

"...My King, if you recall, we had reports from Lady Viltaria that a Dragon was involved in the battle for Alsace. When I heard rumors of Duke Thenardier somehow training up more dragons, I felt it serious enough to look into. Doing so took me some time, and cost me my horse, a loss that I have been paying for ever since," she added wryly, looking over her shoulder at Valentina as she tried to inject a tiny bit of humor into the proceeding.

This failed as the King sobered at that information, leaning back in his throne and staring at her bowed head in silence. "We will get to that in order," he said at last, his voice sounding far calmer now, if still cored with anger. "First, tell us about your mission to the King of Brune."

Wincing, Sofy did so. She held nothing back, the conversations she'd had with Bedouin pressuring him into letting her at least speak once to the King. How she had withheld the message until Bedouin had been, apparently, forced into allowing her to do so. And how then instead, she had been assaulted within the palace of Brune, locked in a special room created to get rid of individuals such as herself and others with beyond average physical abilities. "Luckily, they didn't know about my teleportation ability and I was able to escape."

"Hmm... so the King of Brune is indeed on his deathbed. Bedouin wouldn't move against you, an official messenger from one king to another, unless he had to in order to cover up such. Still, in so doing he shows that the Brune's royal line is most probably defunct." the King mused. "And in the future, we can use this attack on you to demand diplomatic reparations at the very least. Perhaps even as an excuse to cut all diplomatic ties with Brune during this civil war. That is something to think about in the next few days."

"Yes, and, your Majesty, there is more that you must know on that score. Not only is the King ill, but the prince, Regnas, was not killed. Nor was he, in fact, a prince..." From there, Sofy explained about the rest of what had been going on in Brune, in particular about Regin and her survival and alliance with the Silver Meteor Army. Here she looked to Valentina, and the black-haired Vanadis reluctantly spoke about the agreements she had made with Regin for her aid in creating binding contracts with the various nobles of the Silver Meteor Army.

For a moment, Victor stared down at them, his face reddening so much Valentina idly wondered if the man would have a heart attack right in front of them. When he spoke, his voice was a vicious hiss. "How, how dare you?! Three Vanadis conspiring together to embroil Zhcted in a succession crisis!? Have you no shame!?"

Even though she had anticipated that accusation, Sofy flinched while Valentina took it stoically. It was, after all, something she had anticipated, despite how annoying she anticipated this was going to be.

"First, you, Vanadis Estes! Not only were you absent from your duchy for your own purposes, but then you personally aid this, this possible princess to bolster her position! Showing approval for her as a Vanadis, a representative of Zhcted!" Victor roared.

"Your majesty, every agreement I made with Regin was between herself and me, as the Vanadis of Osterode. At no point did I make any move that would make it seem as if I was an official envoy," Valentina murmured, her voice low and coolly controlled in the face of the Victor's wrath.

"Semantics!" he snarled in reply, shaking his head like a bull. "Regardless of your reasons, you aided and abetted her position in this civil war. You involved yourself further by agreeing to send another company of your pikemen to serve the Silver Meteor Army! Without you Vanadis Estes, Vanadis Viltaria would not have such strength."

Valentina shrugged very lightly. "Take that to the logical conclusion your majesty. Who would you rather have on our borders? A queen on a shaky throne who owes Eleonora and myself much for helping her get there, Ganelon, whose machinations are already legendary, or Thenardier, the greatest living general Brune can boast, with dragons at his command?"

To her side Sofy winced. She had thought of that herself on the way to Leitmeritz, but to hear Valentina lay it out made it sound so cold and calculating. Yet it did seem to work to cool the anger of the king.

"HAH!" Victor barked a laugh. "Ganelon? He is no war leader. A politician and traitor, yes, always spinning his webs, always preying on those around him. But we have no doubt that while he could claim the throne, he would never be able to keep it. The Knightly Orders would eventually be forced to oust him, and the civil war would continue. Thenardier too. Without an heir, and with his 'rule of iron' he would face homegrown threats like the Silver Meteor Army sans Viltaria's participation for many years, again possibly with the aid of Brune's Knightly Orders. Issues that would weaken Brune internally and abroad for years. Now? This Regin wench, if she is able to prove her lineage, could cut both Duke's support off at the knees. While at the moment she is the weakest player in the game despite your machinations, she has the possibility to become the strongest. Indeed, the only one who can end Brune's civil war cleanly and relatively quickly."

Valentina could not argue with the king's analysis, but she still felt she had been correct to aid Regin. Regin's personality was simply too weak for a reigning monarch, and she felt that the king badly underestimated the Silver Meteor Army, Ranma, Tigre in particular. They were not nearly as weak as he had supposed, even against dragons. *Then again, I met Tigre and Ranma and personally took their measure. The king has not.*

"You and Vanadis Viltaria will be punished for this. As will you Vanadis Obertas." Victor went on grimly, switching his glare to Sofya.

"Your Highness I barely..."

Sofy's protest stopped as Victor raised his hand halting her words. "Not for your part in this Regin farce. No, you failed utterly in your secondary purpose in Brune. Testing the waters to see if Brune as a nation was in danger of collapsing. Admittedly we are in no position right now to launch a war of conquest, not with Muozinel poised as they are. But even so, you should have been able to convince this Vorn fellow and his allies to reach out to us in turn for more aid the instant the majority of Elen's troops were sent home, to further muddy the waters."

It was with a start that Sofy realized that the king was right. She hadn't pushed that aspect at all and admitted as much. "Lord Tigre's patriotism is such my lord that when I hinted at the idea of this, his and his allies becoming independent states simply allied to Zhcted, it became clear he would have nothing to do with the idea."

“Hmmpf, as I suspected. Still, if you, Vanadis Estes hadn’t propped this Regin girl up so much, we would have at the very least known Brune would be embroiled in this civil war for many years. That was my real goal in limiting Elen’s forces. One that you, Vanadis Estes, have undercut immensely!” Victor growled angrily.

Valentina simply nodded her head. *Let that be a lesson. Victor has played the game of thrones for decades now and knows all the tricks. I had missed that aspect entirely. Still, I think my own plan to place Regin on the throne as a puppet is more stream-lined, and has a better chance of working.*

To her side, however, Sofy grimaced at that, realizing that her initial thoughts about Victor’s designs on Brune had been wrong. He had attempted to create a situation that, whatever happened, Brune would be weakened, and Zhcted would remain strong. It was an incredibly shrewd series of moves, but also immensely self-serving. *Drat it all, but I hate politics!*

“Still my king, this is still an opportunity we should seize!” Ilda interjected leaning down to whisper the words, in the King’s ear, but Valentina and Sofy could hear him well enough. The acoustics of this room was excellent, and thankfully there weren’t that many people within it the moment. Having more witnesses to this dressing down would’ve been humiliating. “Aiding Silver Meteor Army, we could...”

“Did you not hear Vanadis Obertas saying that Vorn has refused to become such!? No, this is not good!” Victor retorted before the man could continue, glaring him into silence, and gesturing him around to stand to one side of the two Vanadis in front of the throne, angrily gesturing Lord Kshal to stand by Ilda’s side, leaving only Miron standing on the dais with him. “All of you, you lords, you Vanadis, you knights, you think of land and honor! Or land, money and raising your status,” he said, sending a semi-good-natured sneer Lord Kshal’s way. “I must think of the nation’s well-being as a whole and of the future.”

Victor leaned back once more, visibly grabbing hold of his temper. “Let me speak plainly, so that all of you might understand. I know that when I die whoever choose to be my successor will face a crisis, will face internal strife and perhaps even open warfare given the lack of a direct heir. I had hoped that when that crisis hit, we would have secure borders. But with Muozinel amassing its armies, and with the chaos in Asvarre and Brune, there cannot be a weak person on this throne, nor a simple regent for Valery. This news from Brune and the rest of the news reaching us from elsewhere might have ruined my hopes!”

“Your Majesty, if you had thought that you could have simply ordered Lady Viltaria to...” Sofy began.

“And have of a Vanadis in open revolt?” Victor interrupted with a scoff. “All of you Vanadis are too independent for that,” he finished, darting a knife-like look towards the two present Vanadis.

"We could instead look to enforce our new borders thanks to lady Eleonora's deal with Earl Vorn," Valentina started to suggest only to be interrupted brusquely in turn.

"No." For a moment Sofy and Valentina both felt as if the King had rejected that suggestion so out of hand because Valentina, a Vanadis, was the one who had made the proposal, but the King went on, thumping his hand on the side of his throne with each word to further emphasize them. "Secure borders! That border is already far too parlous, as I told you to mention to Vanadis Viltaria, Vanadis Obertas. We will do nothing, and we will continue to have as little as possible to do with the civil war in Brune. Hopefully it will continue to rage, to keep Brune broken as a threat for a good many years to come, as I had hoped it might. So if and when they lose, this nation is not nearly as damaged as would otherwise be the case."

"And what if Elen and Lord Vorn win, your majesty?" Sofy inquired. "I do not see them losing easily, not with Regin to possibly rally heretofore neutral parties throughout Brune. That includes Lord Roland and his Knightly Order."

"Which was another mistake, letting such as him live," Victor scowled, shaking his head. "But if this ridiculous Silver Meteor Army wins through, then Zhcted will demand reparations for what we have already allowed to have occur."

That was scant little, a ten percent yearly tax rate for the next few years for the Dinant Plains and Alsace. But it would be enough to enrich the royal house somewhat while keeping Zhcted out of the civil war, and it was clear that the King didn't care overmuch about anything else.

"But what if Muozinel interferes in Brune?" Valentina suggested innocently.

The King looked at her, stroking his beard, his anger having abated for now. "You think they will attack there? That the movement along our border with them is a feint?"

Valentina nodded her head and then gave some, but not all of her reasoning about that.

Even without all of her reasonings, Victor put it together quickly, thinking hard. Then he nodded. "The force that would be first to feel the sting of an invasion from Muozinel would be Vanadis Lourie and her troops. We will send them extra wagons and mules over the winter, just in case so they can move all the faster when Summer comes. If we have word that Muozinel has instead invaded Brune, then I will give you, Vanadis Obertas, orders for you to join Vanadis Lourie and take her forces to aid these... allies... in Brune. And for Vanadis Viltaria's troops that we ordered home to take the field once more with her. But **not** before. We must conserve our military power as much as possible."

Sofy nodded her head in supplication. She felt the King was acting little too close-minded to the idea of placing a strong ally on the throne of Brune now that his plan to create a

puppet within Brune was no longer viable, but she also didn't want to see Zhcted launch a war of invasion of Brune either. So this was probably the best they were going to get.

Done with the matters about Brune, Victor looked over at Valentina. "...There is indeed a point to my sending you back to your lands Valentina and insisting that you stay there," he went on, acknowledging the fact that he had essentially exiled her from court far more openly than was really polite. But the King was obviously not in the mood to be polite, and he went on unhurriedly. "We have sources within the Horse Lords, and at least three of their clans have combined recently, and their new chieftain is looking to add two more to his horde. This man, Illigut Khasar, is looking to invade the land of either Brest next year or late in the campaign season of this year, apparently.

"Of course they are," Valentina retorted, showing a bit more spirit than Sofy thought appropriate after the drubbing they'd been taking. "They can't go towards the oceans, there is no way down the escarpment in that area beyond the Trail of Sorrow, and say what you will about her personal animosity towards the rest of us, Fomina is a strong leader. I have made my own lands strong as possible and wiped out the last clan that attempted to raid my lands. That only leaves Brest!"

She now looked up at the King directly, a pout on her face, but her eyes deadly serious. "I have been saying for months now that having that girl away, unwilling to take up her position, has severely weakened our borders! Your Majesty has so much as stated such, allowing my conquest of some of Brest's lands that bordered Osterode before this. But I do not have the manpower to defend her territory and mine, and what little forces still remain under arms there are not up to the task!"

The holdings of the various Vanadis did not have nearly as many lesser nobles within them as was normal in the rest of the country, and most of those nobles were if the knightly rank rather than earls or other such which could be expected to bring more than a handful of fighting men together. Leitmeritz had twelve knights. Olmutz fourteen and Legnica twenty, the largest holdings in terms of land and people among the Vanadis-run counties. Osterode had seven, and two of those were landless knights, holding a purely military rank in Valentina's army. This normally wasn't a problem, since the Vanadis were always capable of seeing to both the legal and military aspects of their lands and most had cities to call upon as well for more manpower of all sorts.

Osterode had a city named after the county, but that was due to Valentina's work since she had taken the county over. Brest had nothing of the sort. Worse, without a sitting Vanadis, Brest had splintered quickly, forcing the nine knights it normally had to step up. But none of them were very competent in Valentina's opinion. The power vacuum had been filled by local bully boys, people concerned with lining their own pockets instead of the good of Brest or the nation. This had led to her carving bits of Brest off, but she lacked the manpower to do more.

“This argument coming from you so soon after you left your lands and haired off on a personal quest does not persuade. Rather, it sings of self-aggrandizement!” the King shot back sharply. “Are you saying that you are unable to defend the borders of your nation Vanadis Estes?”

Valentina's lips clenched over hot words, but after only a second, she shook her head stoically. “Your Majesty. My pikemen, the units I have created since becoming Vanadis of Osterode are powerful units. They are not fast. They are primarily a defensive formation. If my enemies come to me, I can bleed of them white,” she said without any hint of humility or pride, a simple statement of fact. “But I can barely protect my own lands. Protecting the lands of Brest as well would stretch my men far, far too thinly. And I refuse to allow them to be destroyed in copper packets instead of the company-sized formations they have been drilled in.”

The King grimaced, shaking his head. “You know how young the owner of Muma is.”

“Youth is one thing, and allowing her a year or so to get a handle on her new powers would be fine. Her going into seclusion on her own lands for two years be fine, or to apprentice under another Vanadis. But to simply take off, to not even be within the environs of Zhcted, to be completely unreachable? How is that serving the purpose Muma exists for, defending Zhcted?” Valentina shot back, coolly, but also with more than a hint of dislike in her voice. “I realize there was nothing you could have done given how quickly she left, and indeed how astonishingly good she has proven in hiding her trail, but even so...”

“What do you think of this matter, Vanadis Obertas?” the King inquired, looking at the other Vanadis.

Sofy cursed Valentina liberally as she was suddenly on the spot, not having anticipated this at all. But after a moment spent gathering her thoughts, she answered gamely. “Your Majesty, I have never met the young wielder of Muma, I only met her predecessor twice, I believe, before she passed on, in the last invasion from Muozinel seven years ago. And while I know the whole nation rejoiced that Muma reacted to someone after five years of sitting idle, I have to admit to some... concerns about how well she has handled being given such power at so young an age.”

Licking her lips, she gestured to one of the banners above them, the one that showed Levias on a field of mountains, with a few hammer symbols in the air above, the banner of Olmutz. “Ludmila Lourie might have also been given her weapon when she was that young, but she also had the structure of her family, and more importantly, her mother at the time, who had trained her entire life with her aunt, the previous wielder. Whereas this young woman was not only not from our nation originally, but, beyond reporting here with Muma, did not reach out to anyone for help in getting to know her duties or abilities. At least that is what I believe occurred. Is that correct?”

“You are correct,” the King said, resting one hand lightly on the other in his lap, turning to one of his other advisers, Miron.

That worthy nodded, holding out a message with the seal of Leitmeritz on it. “I asked Lady Alshavin this very point when we first discovered that the Horse Lords might be gathering under this new Warlord. She affirms that not only did Olga Tamm not come to her for help, but she rejected Lady Alshavin’s offer of aid. And without her, as you have so cogently argued, the land of Brest is no longer being administered as it should be. The court has been aware of a problem growing there, but only recently has the severity of it come to light.”

When the spymaster finished speaking, the King looked between the two Vanadis. “And what do you think I should do about this?”

“Appoint someone else in her place,” Valentina responded promptly, knowing that was what the King wanted to hear. He had long looked for ways to limit the powers of the Vanadis, and here was a perfect way to strip one of their position as the equivalent of a Duke. “There are several good, capable war leaders among your nobility sire, even if you do not wish to use a Vanadis. One of whom is standing here among us. Besides, after so many years of having no lord or lady above them, surely her own people will see the reason for setting aside the normal precedent of a Vanadis in favor of someone strong to protect them and see to their prosperity?”

“And yet, that does not suffice answer to the actual Vanadis in question,” the King mused leadingly, and suddenly Valentina wondered what else the man wanted from this part of the meeting.

“What can we do, Your Majesty?” Sofy questioned.

“We can recall her,” the King announced, smirking dryly at Sofy’s look of confusion. “And enforce that rule.” He then sat up sharply, staring down at them both. “Very well. Do you, Vanadis Valentina Glinka Estes of Osterode, and Vanadis Sofya Obertas of Polesia, agree with Lady Vanadis Alshavin of Legnica that Vanadis Olga Tamm has not fulfilled her duties to this land?”

Valentina’s eyes widened, then slowly narrowed as she saw the King’s crown begin to glow slightly. It was a piece of the Royal raiment, the oldest piece in point of fact, hailing from the Dragon King himself, something that she had never been able to examine closely. There were stories about it, but none had seemed real to her. Or at least, they hadn’t until right now.

Sofy hadn’t caught it, and she simply frowned deeply then slowly nodded her head. “Olga Tamm has been gone for two and a half years, almost since the day she submitted herself to your rule, Your Majesty. Without communication. Without taking thought for the land of Brest. I am forced to agree that Olga Tamm has not performed her duties as a Vanadis.”

“As am I,” Valentina added sharply, seeing no need to go into all her own reasons.

“So be it. By the word of the King and a quorum of her Vanadis sisters, Olga Tamm of the Horse Lord tribes is deemed unfit to wield the Viralt, Muma! She must return within two seasons, or have it stripped from her.” The light from the crown faded on those words, and the King slowly stood up from his throne, suddenly looking older than he had a moment ago, leaning on the side of it slightly before heading to the Royal entrance to the throne room. “Now, begone. Both of you have duties to attend to tomorrow and my bed is calling me.”

Moments later, the two of them were walking through quiet castle hallways, the way lit by a few scattered torches and the moonlight beyond, thinking about what had just happened. Then Sofy broke the silence, chuckling a little. “So, I’m going to have trouble sitting down for a bit after that tanning, what about you?”

Valentina giggled and yet internally was still somewhat pleased. Exile to her own holdings was not good in the long run, but for the short term, it served the plans she wished to set in motion there. Then she looked over at Sophie quizzically. “Do you think the king can actually summon Muma back if Olga doesn’t return in time?”

“He can.” Sofy nodded firmly. “Do you recall that a new wielder has only a month to appear before the king or the Viralt in question will leave her?”

Valentina nodded, though she added that she had never seen such a thing occur.

“Of course not. What woman in their right mind would give up such power, even if it tied them to the power structure of another nation? But the King can declare a Vanadis unfit so long as he has the agreement of half the other Vanadis at the time.”

“So that story is true! I had heard rumors of something of the sort, but that is far more powerful than I expected,” Valentina’s eyes narrowed as she remembered the gleaming on the crown. *Interesting, and explains much about why Vanadis have only rarely married into the royal house.*

Sofy shrugged. “The King must have kept some secrets from you, I suppose.”

Valentina smiled at that but didn’t reply. The two of them stood there for a moment, staring at one another in the darkened corner outside the rooms that the Vanadis were given when they stayed in the palace. In another life, they would’ve been evidently enemies. In this one... They were still enemies of a sort, just not in a competition they could honestly use of violence to win.

“And you possibly heading back into Brune with Ludmila come summer. Lucky,” Valentina said, clear jealousy in her voice.

“I am, aren’t I?” Sofy chuckled lightly. “And you stuck on your lands, I wonder how you will spend your time?”

Sofy watched that hit go home, one eyebrow rising as she acknowledged the fact that she knew that Valentina would be doing a lot with this technology thing and that Sofy suspected Valentina had held back on quite a bit of what she had learned from Ranma. And then she dug the blade deeper. "All alone out there."

Valentina growled, breaking her normal habit of not allowing anger to show, and Sofy smiled at her glad to have gotten in the last dig. "Have a nice night Valentina."

"The same to you, Sofya," Valentina replied, her voice a brittle mockery of normal politeness. "Alone just like me, for many a day to come."

With that, Valentina turned away and entered her room, smirking over her shoulder at Sofy, who was scowling at her back as she closed the door.

Staring at her bed, Valentina sighed. "Darn it." That last comment had been all too accurate, even if it was more about companionship rather than actually sleeping with someone. As interested in Ranma as she was, even if he had been with them, Ranma wouldn't be spending the night with Tina. Still, it irked Valentina to acknowledge how much she had already begun to miss him. *Get a hold of yourself, Valentina. You only knew him for a less than a month! You can't be that besotted with him. Think of your ambitions, not your would-be paramour.*

With that thought and the memory of her vow, Valentina's back stiffened, and she turned away from the bed to the small desk set against the inner wall. If the King or Sofy thought she was going to bed right away, they were sadly mistaken. Valentina had messages to send, things to purchase. Plans to cancel. Plans to put in place. No matter how lonely she suddenly felt, the future waited for no one.

OOOOOOO

Fire was a routine part of warfare. It had always been used, either to destroy other people's properties, as a weapon in and of itself, and, of course, the most plebian of uses, to light the night for guards on duty.

Never before had fire been spread so widely in Lutetia as it was now being spread by the advance of Thenardier's army and its three accompanying dragons. Although only one of them actually was a fire-breather, a Prani, the soldiers accompanying the others more than made up for it.

And yet, there are even more fires around than my army would account for. Dragging his gaze from another smashed fort, Thenardier used a spyglass to take in the lay of the land, as the two-headed dragon twisted around under his direction, coming back the way that they had come, moving through the column of his army as of the cavalry raced forward to engage the retreating members of Duke Ganelon's men that had retreated before his destruction of their fort.

His eyes narrowed as he watched the action, a thing of swirling blades, charging horses and away, snow tossed up here and there and everywhere by all of the participants. As he saw that his men were winning, he nodded and pulled the dragon to a halt next to where Steid and Drekavac were standing. There he kicked the rope ladder off the back of the large saddle, climbing down the side of the beast.

On the ground, he jerked his head to indicate the ongoing battle in the distance. "They are fighting tenaciously. I would've thought Ganelon would cut and run, being a personal coward."

"That is true, Sire. But still, they cannot win. This is the third nobleman allied with Ganelon, whose land we have ravaged. There is only one more, Earl Ochredos, between our current position and Lutetia's main city. The way into his heartland is clear. Our swift assault out of the mountains and our preparation has borne fruit even if we decided to leave half the army behind in Nemetacum."

"You are thinking too much like a soldier, not a general," Duke Thenardier admonished. "There are many ways that they can hold up our army instead of offering us direct combat. The dragon's after all, need to eat."

"Sire? We had agreed to feed them on the land..." Drekavac began quizzically.

Thenardier held up a hand, gesturing to another man nearby. He was dressed for more coarsely than the Duke or his general, wearing a heavy winter cloak of homespun tweed over light leather armor, with twin daggers at his side, and a bow on his back, which was extremely well maintained and clean in comparison to the rest of his outfit. "Tell him."

"There ain't no people around," the man said bluntly. "Duke Ganelon's men, they're herding all of his people away. Burning the crops, gutting the cows an' the rest, destroying bridges too." He spat to one side, "Even poisoning wells."

Thenardier could see Steid's eyes flicking one side to the other as he thought about the ramifications of this. "...That is perhaps the only way they could fight us, my Lord," he admitted. "A full scorched earth campaign, forcing us to rely on our own resources throughout our advance. But his lands are not nearly large for us to feel the bite them are much. And with our sleighs and the way we were able to come down into his land from the side..."

“True,” Thenardier nodded, “but he doesn’t know about those sleighs. They were a last-minute addition to our plans, after all, so his spies might not have had time to report them.”

Thenardier owned the only oldest iron mine within the borders of Brune of any appreciable size. It had been the source of his family’s wealth for many generations as well as a basis for their leadership style. It had started to die out when he was young, hence why his father had made overtures of friendship and alliance towards the Vanadis of Olmutz, who was in a similar position in Silesia. Yet even with the mines dying out, his lands had a surplus of iron, and he had put it to good use, creating sleighs that could go over snow and ice easily for this winter campaign.

Thenardier narrowed his eyes, looking over at his general. “How long do you think this will slow us down?”

The general winced but took a moment to answer. “My Lord, I do not think we will be done before mid-summer if this kind of action is going to continue along with further harassment attacks.”

“Drekavac if we have to halt feeding them for a time, you do not think that the dragons will go wild?”

“It’s possible, my lord. Lack of food is the only thing I can think of that would break my control over them.”

“So be it,” Thenardier intoned grimly. “Duke Ganelon’s lands will be shattered by his own hand or mine I care not. These men and these women of these lands sided with him, let them feel the sting of defeat. We will keep control of our dragons, even if we have to do so by letting them get a taste for the flesh of our enemies.”

OOOOOO

Ranma had traveled throughout the rest of the day after she had been attacked on horseback, then, after changing gender once again, had gently knocked the horse out, and carried it in turn off the road into the forest, through the forest, cutting off a bit more of territory to enter Thenardier’s lands from the direct east. Early morning, he found another road, woke the horse up, piled it with the saddlebags of the morons who had attacked him, and moved on. Those bags, like the horse itself, might come in handy as a mask for his ability to use ki space.

They were added to around midmorning that day when another group of men accosted him. These men were wearing tabards with Thenardier's colors on them, a darkish kind of gold circular dragon mark on a crimson background. Despite that, they hadn't been very well trained even for regular soldiers, and all of them were young, new conscripts tossed out on a shit patrol.

Because of their youth, most looking almost as young as Ranma, and one or two looking even younger, he didn't beat them up as badly as the first group. Nor did he leave them tied up for the wilds. He did, however, leave them tied to their horses backwards.

"After all, they weren't any threat, so killing them outright or leaving them to the wolves wasn't really in the cards. They also didn't seem as if they were thugs-in-training like your owner and his friends were," he spoke aloud to the horse as he looped along beside it at a canter. "They attacked me because they didn't like the look of me and because I gave them lip, not because they wanted to shake me down."

The horse neighed, shaking its mane out as the two of them pounded down the road, kicking up light tufts of snow from the inch or so on the ground. The roads here in Thenardier-owned territory were mostly made of paved stone, with wide areas to either side for horses, where the horse currently was. A lot of the road looked to be a bit in disrepair, but this one at least was in good repair and had been kept clear of snow. Considering that it was piled up two-and-a-half feet and maybe more elsewhere, that wasn't a small consideration. The walls of snow piled onto the sides of the road were actually quite high, so high that Ranma would've had to be in the saddle to look over them.

Two crossroads later, Ranma came to a sign that pointed out his destination, the town of Artishem, beneath which lay the Holy Grotto of Saint-Groel. Breathing a sigh of relief at finally seeing a visible sign that he was actually in the right area, Ranma headed down that road. Soon he had to stop and step aside to let a group of soldiers passed by. These were much like the last group, only a little more disciplined, and older, trained soldiers rather than raw recruits.

One of them rained in in front of Ranma, staring down at him, as Ranma nodded his head to them respectfully. "What do you do, traveling in winter like this alone?" the man asked harshly.

"Huntin'," Ranma gestured to the number of skins on the horse. They covered the saddlebags and several swords Ranma looked to sell as part of his cover and the fact he really did need supplies. Ranma had been attacked three times more by remarkably stupid polar-tooths and an emaciated wolfpack at one point. "Business has been good this winter."

The man looked at them closely, then looked back at Ranma. "How long have you been in the woods?"

"... I like me solitude," Ranma affected a woodsman's brogue as he spoke, grateful once more for the cloak covering most of his mouth and face. It made lying so much easier when all

he had to do was keep his eyes on the other man. "Been out there two winters. Wouldn't have come in, but been running out o' aught but meat to eat. And me clothes need patching."

The man nodded, staring hard at the woodsman, then over at the pelts avariciously. "When you get to Artishem, you'll have to check-in with the town watch. Everyone who enters a village or even a hamlet must check-in and receive a token from the local guard. Normally you would have to have someone vouch for you as well, Ganelon's spies are everywhere after all. But drop off those three polar-tooth pelts at the guardhouse and tell them that Trebek ordered they give you a pass, and you'll be fine. Keep the pass on you at all times, or else you will be tossed out and all your goods confiscated."

Internally rolling his eyes at the man's obvious greed, Ranma affected being cowed, the normal peasant reaction to someone on horseback with weapons. *I'm just grateful that he isn't asking me how I hunt them, considering I don't have a bow on me or even a spear.* "Yes, my Lord."

The man nodded, then kicked his horse back into motion, catching up with his fellows quickly.

This worked out pretty well for Ranma. He dropped off the three polar-tooth pelts, got the pass, and even got directions around the town to some of the stores that were still open in winter. Of course, he also knew that he was being followed, but the tale was obvious to him, even through the normal bustle of the decent-sized town. Unlike farms or smaller villages, towns of this size and larger did not shut down during wintertime.

He first made a show of selling his other skins and buying yeast and other things so that he could make his own bread and so forth. Then he headed to the blacksmith, where he sold the weapons that Ranma had taken from the two groups of guards that he had run into.

"Where did you get all this?" the blacksmith questioned as he watched the apparent huntsman pull several swords out from under a polar-tooth pelt.

"Stupid bunch o' bandits. They tried to follow me into the woods, wit'out a woodsman among them," Ranma guffawed, still using his affected accent. "Bunch o' fools, dey blundered right into some of my traps, and never even looked up into the trees. Heck, one fool knocked himself out racing away too quick."

The blacksmith, who seemed to be the typical large burly sort that such men always seemed to be, chuckled at that, slapping Ranma on the shoulder, noting that Ranma didn't even twitch at it and for all his own wiry frame was dense with muscle. "Well, far be it for me to not profit from the actions of idiots. And you wanted to trade instead of taking coin? With coin being scarce, I quite like the idea of a trade."

Ranma nodded, pointing to arrowheads, a new dagger, more like a short stabbing sword really, a whetstone, and various other metal sundries, while also asking for lots of nails. "Need to do a lot of work around the hut," he half explained both for the blacksmith's ears and the ears of his watcher. "All that and directions to the inn. Might not like company, but I be thinking at least three days of not cooking for myself be a right treat."

The deal done, Ranma headed in that direction, wandering through the town as if he was just taking in the sights, recalling what Regin had told him of where to find the Grotto. The Grotto itself was a kind of religious site, but a private one for the royal family. However, it was kept that way by an order of monks who lived in the Moshu Temple here in town.

Ranma made a note of it, as well as the rest of the town wondering where the main entrance was. Regin had mentioned one entrance in the center of town, one entrance in a cemetery and one in the temple. But Regin hadn't been able to give good enough directions to it, which meant Ranma would probably have to travel through the temple itself.

Not good, but not bad either, Ranma thought, staring at the temple for a moment, wondering aloud, "Why people always think you need big buildings to honor the gods. They built the world, didn't they? Can't be grander'n that."

Deciding he had acted the rube enough, Ranma headed to the inn that the blacksmith had told him about, getting a good meal, although smaller than he would normally order. Again, Ranma didn't want to bring too much attention to himself. After that, it pushing evening already thanks to how quickly the sunset during winter, Ranma retired to his room and waited for the deep night.

Leaving his cloak behind, Ranma pushed open one of the slanted windows - not glass, glass was far too expensive - making certain that he could move it without too much noise, before opening it just enough for him to slip out, leaving behind the pelt and a few other things underneath the blankets to make it look as if he was still sleeping there.

Ranma climbed up to the roof, hanging there for a moment to close the blinds behind him, making a note of which room was his. After all, Ranma had no idea how long it might take him to find the Grotto, let alone the actual books he needed within it.

Getting into the temple was ridiculously easy. Even though Ranma couldn't really muffle the sound he made when he jumped from one group to another very much in snow, no one looked up, and there were only a few guards on patrol. There were a few watchers around the temple of might, a sign that maybe Thenardier might have discovered Regin's continued existence, and her possible need for evidence of her legitimacy.

Regardless, Ranma was able to sneak past them, moving to the back temple, then leaping high, grabbing onto the edge of the roof there, flipping himself up further, and entering the small belfry there. Getting down into the rest of the temple was much more difficult, as the

monks were still mostly awake. Ranma nearly ran into one of them as he exited the belfry onto the upper story of the main temple, ducking back into darkness just in time to avoid being spotted. Down below, several other monks were moving around the temple and deeper into the back where they actually lived too.

Sneaking past them was almost impossible, and more than once, Ranma had to duck under or into the shadows, or more often leap up to cling to the ceiling directly above where he had previously been standing. Indeed, Ranma made most of his progress by clinging to the ceiling, using his Way of the Gecko technique, his hands and feet sticking to the top of the ceiling.

This was a technique Ranma created after competing in a Martial Arts Tea Ceremony duel. Say what you would about training a monkey to do your fighting for you, but those people had figured out some interesting ways to move over strange terrain without seeming to. Ranma had taken that ability and honed it to the point where he could cling to the ceiling through just his fingers or even his toes. In this manner he moved through the temple to the back area of the temple.

This area, where the monks actually lived, was quite large, just as large as the main temple area, the name of which Ranma didn't know and didn't care about. And it was even larger than it first looked because it had a basement, where the kitchens and other things were, along with a long staircase leading even further down.

Entering that staircase, Ranma was lucky to not see anyone passing upwards and moved down it as silently as he could. The staircase became a tunnel its sides becoming roughhewn, looking almost but not quite like a natural tunnel rather than something man-made. Certainly this area was much older than the preceding staircase.

This theme continued until Ranma found himself exiting the tunnel out into a cavern, a Grotto in point of fact, just like he had been told he would find. It was huge frankly, the largest underground thing he'd ever seen, the edges disappearing in the distance in either direction, a small walkway up here where Ranma had come out on what Ranma estimated to be three stories up from the actual floor below. Above, he could see stalactites dripping downwards, each of them a slightly different color in the flare of the torches which lined this place from below in different areas.

Below, Ranma could see what looked like a series of bookcases just resting there on the floor of the Grotto, looking extremely out with among the more natural grandeur of the Grotto itself. But they were the only thing that seemed out of place. Because as Ranma moved, slowly circling the Grotto to make certain that there was no one here, he noticed on the far wall, something that looked like a giant painting of some kind. He couldn't make out any of the details at first, but when he came closer, he gasped aloud.

Lit by two torches to either side, the painting was obviously ancient, almost looking like it was from prehistoric time or at least the equivalent. It showed an archer and several companions fighting, a few dragons, and the archer firing something that looked quite a bit like Tigre's black bow and one of the dragons. Or it could be a single many-headed dragon with several tails, Ranma wasn't sure. *Now, isn't that interesting. I wonder if that is connected to why that thing always gives me an odd vibe whenever I'm near it.*

Setting that minor mystery aside, Ranma found the darkest corner of the Grotto, somewhat bemused by how many braziers there were here, before leaping down to the floor of the Grotto. Once on the floor, he moved into the bookcases, frowning. There were a lot more of them than he had expected., A lot more. Turns out that Lim was right, I should have started to learn the local language. Dammit.

So busy was Ranma with trying to figure out what he was going to do, that he neglected his situational awareness.

Right up until someone unseen nearby spoke up. "did you hear that?"

"Did one of the other brothers come down? I didn't see a light coming down the passage."

Both voices were young, male and currently confused. They also pinpointed where they were coming from and Ranma slipped around behind where he had thought they would be looking.

In this, he was wrong. One of them had already turned back and let loose a gasp as he saw Ranma coming around the edge of one of the bookcases. That gasp was the last noise he made for some time, as Ranma leaped forward, slamming two fingers into his chest, freezing his entire body still like a statue.

He swept around that monk, grabbing the other one from behind, hand over his mouth. Lifting him up by that simple grip and pulling him backward, Ranma then jabbed him with two more pressure points on him, one in the neck and one in the chest. The first jab knocked him unconscious, the second paralyzed him, like the first monk. He then returns to the first month, doing the same to him.

The pressure point on the chest had paralyzed both, making them go as stiff as stones, and Ranma now moved them this way and that, until it looked as if they were huddling over a section of books, with one book open and set against the shelf as if they were reading it there. With that, Ranma moved into the center of the Grotto, staring up towards the walls, noting where another tunnel intersected the one he had come down. But it looked as if it had caved in at one point, and Ranma wasn't certain it led anywhere, let alone out. Still, it was good to know where it was just in case.

With that done and no sign that any other monk was coming down the stairs, Ranma sighed and turned back to the job at hand. He estimated the sheer number of books for a moment, then thought about how much space they would take up, even if he took away the bookshelves then sighed. *This is going to suck!*

Ranma went from one bookshelf to another, emptying them into his ki-space, enlarging it gradually as he did so, which was why Ranma knew this was going to suck. Despite the show he had put on for Lim and the two guards his first night in Leitmeritz, Ranma's ki-space was actually kind of small, only about three times his own body size. This library was at least fifteen times that size.

Three bookshelves in, Ranma scowled as he began to notice a significant dip in his ki reserves. He still had quite a lot, but still, he was only a third of the way through. By the time the last book was pushed into his ki space, Ranma estimated that he had used about two-thirds of his ki reserves. That wasn't good, but unless Ranma ran into a dragon or another fighter like Roland, that would be enough.

The last book he took was the one the two monks were posed over, and he patted them both on the chest, causing their bodies stiffness to fade instantly, catching them both he laid them down the ground, patting their heads as he dropped the letter Regin had given him for the Moshu Order. Ranma had decided that using it to try and gain entry was too dangerous, the monks might have been suborned after all. But if it kept the oldsters among the monks from having heart attacks at their sacred charge going missing, it was still parchment well-spent. "Sorry, guys, nothing against you or your order. You're just in the way. You'll wake up tomorrow with a splitting headache, a but it'll fade quickly enough."

Ranma leaped up onto the passageway on the second story, moving quickly to the entrance. This he knew would be the most dangerous part of escaping the temple. There was no way to hide within the tunnel. Even if he clung to the ceiling, he would be very visible since the ceiling was only about a foot above a normal man's height.

Alas, Ranma's luck truly left him now. Ranma was not halfway up the hidden staircase when he saw two more monks coming down, carrying torches. Ranma tried to sprint forward, faster than they could react, but one of them shouted out a loud almost hysteric, "What in the-!" while the other one stepped forward and, thinking very quickly, hurled the torch down into Ranma's face.

Knocking it out of the way caused Ranma to pause in his headlong charge for just second, by which time the other one had turned and raced back up the way they'd come, shouting out, "Intruder, thief!"

Cursing, Ranma knocked the other monk out quickly, gently tapping the side of his head against the wall, or gently for him anyway, before racing up after the other one. The door at the top of the downward spiraling stairwell shattered as Ranma surged through it, tossing several

monks to the ground. He then crouched, his leg flashing out in a roundhouse kick, which caught two more, dumping to them to the ground by their fellows. Leaping upwards, he bounced off the roof down on the other side of three other gathered monks, racing away as he heard more monks rousing themselves from their beds above.

Knowing there was no way to stop the hue and cry getting out from the temple, Ranma didn't even bother fighting the monks. Instead, he simply skirted around them, smashing open the main door to the temple, after which he leaped upwards, alighting on the nearest rooftop.

From there, Ranma made his way out of the town easily, even as the shout of "thief" and "intruder in the temple!" began to make their way around. When he reached the edge of the walled town, Ranma leaped upwards, easily clearing the top of the outer wall, landing on the other side. There he had to dodge a few arrows from guards, who had been on duty on the wall. But within seconds, Ranma was racing away.

But near the town, a column of soldiers had stopped as they had seen the lighting of more torches on the wall, and heard in the distance the cry of outrage. Loud noises traveled quite a ways during winter, and this was no exception.

They instantly began to move in the direction of Ranma, their horses racing up to a charged straight towards him. Ranma leaped upwards over the piled-up snow on the side of the road and out into the fields, but the horses moved after him, climbing up the solid mound of snow on long the side of the road, then into the more powdery snow beyond. And with their long legs, they were making better time than Ranma, who had sunk to his knees in the snow before leaping upwards onto it, using an Anything Goes Aerial Style skill to distribute his weight enough so that he couldn't sink into it. But he still couldn't travel fast enough over the snow as fast as horses could.

They caught up with him within a few moments, and the man in lead shouted, "Halt thief, are I will cut you down where you stand!"

Ranma turned, grinning evilly. "I gotta wonder, does Brune have a similar story to the boy who caught a tiger by the tail?" he called out in a loud voice, loud enough for all of the cavalymen to hear them over the sounds of their horses moving through the snow and the clank of weaponry.

The man in the lead was huge, with bigger arms than anyone Ranma had ever seen before. They almost looked like someone had taken the arms of a hairless guerrilla and sort of stuck them on a human being, they were that large. While the rest of him looked to be equally large, the arms were the bit that grabbed Ranma's attention, considering in the moonlight he could see that they were also not being covered by any cloak, the better to show off those massive muscles.

Oh crud, am I really going to run into someone like Roland here? Ranma groaned aloud, then dodged backward as the man's sword slammed into the ground where they'd been standing, kicking up a plume of snow as the man reigned in his horse.

Ranma charged forward, grabbing at the horse's front legs and twisting to the side, tossing rider and horse into the snow. He then turned, leaping upwards, one leg flashing out in a kick that caught a second rider in the face, smashing his nose and hurling him out of the saddle into one of his fellows.

Both men went down, and Ranma twisted around a lance strike, using one hand to smack the lance downwards as he pushed off it, landing behind the man who had used it. A quick elbow blow to the armored back of his head dented helmet and head, and Ranma leaped forward, slamming a fist into the next man's chest, while two sword slashes went through the area he had previously occupied.

At the front of the column, the massive man pushed his horse off his leg, grimacing in pain, but thanks to having landed in soft snow, the leg hadn't been broken. A quick thrust of his sword into his horse's neck ended its life before it could do him any damage with its thrashing, and he pushed the dead weight off him just in time to see his last man go down, literally hurled from the saddle by an almost negligent grab of the man's outstretched arm, tossed several hundred feet through the air to land face first in the snow towards the town.

Bellowing a cry of pure anger, the man raced forward. "I am Duke Thenardier's lieutenant Armand de la Royce, and you will regret this day!"

"Somehow, I doubt it," Ranma taunted, jumping clear of his last victim's horse, watching Armand's overhead strike land where he had previously been standing, cutting through the horse's entire body from the side. *Okay, so he's strong. But he's nowhere near as fast as Roland, now let's see about his durability.*

While the garrison of the town began to rouse itself, Ranma launched himself forward towards the man, noticing that the man's footwork was horrible thanks to the snow. He could move in one direction well enough, pushing his way forward, but not quickly. And his ability to turn was horrible, possibly due to a mix of the snow and his own personal style.

Ranma danced around him in contrast, his ability to stay on top of the snow paying dividends here.

The man's strikes were insanely strong, smashing into the ground underneath the snow, passing through the snow itself as if it didn't exist. These strikes kicked up massive plumes of frozen dirt and debris, reminding Ranma almost of fighting Ryoga after he learned the Breaking Point Technique. He also seems to be entirely in control of the massive sword he was wielding, slicing this way and that expertly, no sign of its weight apparent in his movements.

He just wasn't fast enough to catch Ranma, and Ranma sensed that the man had little to no ability to use the ki within him. He did have large internal reserves, almost like Elen or Roland but he couldn't consciously access it.

Deciding he had played with the man long enough, Ranma ducked under one blow instead of simply racing around behind the man again, thumping a fist into Armand's chest. It had been a full force blow, but to Ranma's astonishment, Armand didn't even grimace. "Useless! I have taken blows from Roland and before him King Faron and even my Lord Duke Thenardier himself! Your puny blows will do nothing and your speed will eventually fail!"

"That just means I need to be sneaky," Ranma quipped, even as he rolled backward and away from another blow.

Luckily he was moving so quickly that the snow, which was quickly turning into mush underneath them, didn't have time to stick to him, initiating the change. If at all possible, Ranma wanted to finish this fight in his male body so that he could then use his female form to throw anyone trying to follow him off the trail if need be. Ranma didn't like killing people, especially not soldiers who were just following orders. Armand, on the other hand, could prove a real danger to his friends, and he was going to go down.

Ranma danced backward, now almost giving ground, moving this way and that, but letting his opponent track his movements as he thought about what to do. The next moment, the swordsman's next strike came down, blasting into a snowdrift deeper than most of the snow covering the field they had been fighting in. The snow blasted up, blinding Armand for just a second. When it cleared, Ranma was standing on the side of his sword.

A kick to the chin lifted Armand upwards and sent him hurling backward. For all his muscles, there was a limit to how heavy a person could be. And after his first strikes had gone so wrong, Ranma had used his ki to enhance the strength of that kick.

The man was hurled backward, but he rolled in the snow, coming up even as he spat out into, raising a hand to touch his jaw. "That was a good..."

Ranma didn't let him finish speaking. He had followed Armand and two powerful jabs to either thigh, and the man's legs no longer obeyed him.

He collapsed, face-first into the snow, where he desperately tried to roll, pushing himself up out of the snow. Even the most powerful man could still suffocate, after all. "What, what did you do!"

"That's for me to know and for you to never figure out." Ranma taunted, giving the man of a victory sign. Not that he figured the man would understand the actual gesture, but the meaning would probably get through.

He was thankful that the guy didn't seem to understand the importance of where Ranma had struck. Unlike Roland, who had figured it out almost instantly. *Then again, that guy is a freak anyway*, Ranma thought somewhat respectfully of his friend/rival. *I wonder what he's up to?*

Actually at that moment, Roland was dealing with a series of nasty winter raids from Sachstein, designed to discover whether or not rumors which had reached their ears of his demise were accurate. Alas for that country's ambitions, they were not.

Staring down at Armand, Ranma debated for a moment whether or not to kill the man. With his legs no longer working, and his sword having been abandoned in his attempt to push out of the snow, Armand was pretty much helpless.

And Ranma wasn't a killer. If he had had to kill the man in mid-battle to put them down, that was one thing. Now that he had won though?

But that doesn't mean I'm going to let him continue to be a threat. With a wide smirk on his face, Ranma crouched down, sticking out two fingers as they began to glow, almost steaming as Ranma used his ki to heat them up a bit. Just as quickly, he was holding a pair of metal spoons which began to glow. For this next technique he needed something a bit wider and more circular in shape than his fingers. Moreover it wasn't so much penetrating through to a pressure point, as transfer enough heat into a moxibustion point..

Armand snarled and thrust out a massive punch in a pretty well-coordinated strike even if he couldn't use anything from the waist down. But Ranma smacked his arm just slightly to the side and closed in quickly.

The man's breastplate was soon sliced off at the joints, falling into the snow even as Armand bellowed and tried to fight back. Then Ranma was in again, getting behind the man, his heated needles thrusting forward in a series of strikes designed to cover the one real one. Armand screamed as the heated needles went home in various places of his body, but it sounded more like rage than pain, not surprising Ranma at all given the man's durability. But Ranma still felt the strike, the Weakness Moxibustion Point hit home, and then he was bounding away, flipping upwards and backward several times to land several hundred feet away from Armand.

"Well, I think I've done enough here," Ranma announced seeing the towns watchmen and guards coming out towards him on horseback. "You should get feeling back in your legs and about a few hours. The rest of what I've done to you... that you'll discover on your own. Have fun trying to figure out what all to do with your life now."

"... Wait, what?" Armand blinked, Ranma's last few words and the strangeness of them cutting through his anger as he felt the heat of the strikes that the strange youth had done to him begin to fade. "What, what did you do to me?!"

Without replying, Ranma turned away, racing across the winter landscape once more. Behind him, he could hear the horses on the road, trying to use the roads to get ahead of him. But a straight line even in wintertime was going to take him far less time than the roads would take horses. *Still, I don't want to have to be dodging patrols all the way back to the Silver Meteor Army's lands.*

With that in mind, Ranma put more ki into his legs, grimacing at the amount of energy it took, not having realized that using the aerial style technique on snow as he had been had slowly drained his reserves by tiny increments. Normally such a small amount wouldn't have mattered, but with his reserves a third of their normal size, the strain had built up quickly.

Still, he pressed on and swiftly began to leave the area of around Artishem behind.

OOOOOOO

"What do you mean, you don't want to report a theft?!" shouted a very harried looking guard captain. "Your monks, all of them reported you had an intruder, we saw the intruder escape, you have evidence of smashed doorways and apparently unconscious monks! And, and, nothing was taken!?"

The priest smiled beatifically at the shouting man, waiting for his diatribe and before smiling faintly. "While you are correct we do have unconscious members of our brotherhood, none of them were overly injured, they were merely brushed aside. That is what happens when normal humans get in the way of God's chosen."

"... What? What are you talking about?" The man asked.

The monk merely smiled, shaking his head. "I am afraid I can't tell you. It has to do with temple secrets, I'm afraid. Secrets I am bound by oath to keep. And since there was indeed, no theft, I cannot in good conscience report such."

The guardsman spluttered at that, but no one, not even a nobleman, wanted to get on the bad side of the temples. It wasn't so much that individually priests had much in the way of power, but combined, the temples had a tremendous amount of power if they wished to exert it. It was only the most powerful nobles, like the two Dukes, who could ignore the temples and their power base among the people. And even they trod lightly around actual holy sites and temples themselves. Certainly no lowly guard captain was going to try.

The man left without a response, and the head priest pushed himself to his feet, following two of his most senior brothers down into the Grotto, where they looked over the

now empty bookshelves. "It must be a sign of the gods," said one of them. "How else could someone enter the Grotto so easily, and then, without seeming to be carrying anything, abscond with every record within?"

"Truly," agreed the head priest, shaking his head in thought as he stared from the empty bookcases to the side of the Grotto, where the mosaic stood. "Now, if only of the angel had been so kind as to tell us what his being here meant."

"Do we truly have to wonder? Most of those records were royal records, from the start of the line of House Charles to now, including lineages. And we have all heard rumors from our wandering brethren of rumors of the Prince surviving..."

"True. And if the heavens themselves are on **her** side..." The priest paused, thinking deeply as he touched the note from Princess Regin, thinking about the proof of her identity it contained and what had happened here.

Unlike his brethren, he was also a bit of a political animal. Not as much as the chief priests of the various deities who resided permanently in Nice, the capital, but he was still a veteran of temple politics and knew the lay of the land politically speaking in Brune, as well as socially. The idea of a queen was going to be a very hard pill to swallow, but perhaps, with this kind of divine intervention to possibly prove her lineage, Regin could make it stick.

"I believe that we should talk to the brothers who came face to face with the angel, and then, perhaps yes, send a message to Nice and the Highest. We will need his word to declare this a true miracle of the temple, and this pigtailed person as perhaps a messenger of the gods."

OOOOOO

Ranma had reached the nearest woodland by this point and had slowed down, realizing with a groan that in his haste to get away from all pursuit, he had not retraced his steps. Instead, he had cut even further east, and possibly even a little south. "Crap! It's going to take me forever to figure out where I am and how to get to where I want to go!"

Creating a simple torch, he looked down at the map, wondering where the hell he was, then stuffing it back in his pouch - not his ki-space, which would be temporarily out of order given all the books in it - shaking his head at how useless the map was. It showed the roads and the towns, and nothing else.

Suddenly a shiver went down Ranma's spine, and he looked around wildly, staring into the predawn darkness taking a combat stance as he looked around for trouble. Not finding any

and feeling another shiver going down his spine, Ranma groaned. "Why the Fuck do I think I just made a lot more trouble for myself somehow? That wasn't even a shiver I'm familiar with either."

It hadn't been the New Rival shiver, which would've made sense after Ranma's pasting of Armand nor the crazy love interest, which he was damn happy for. It wasn't even the dreaded new fiancée shiver! Nor was it any derivation of any of the three main categories of shiver that Ranma had felt often enough to categorize.

No, this was an entirely new kind of shiver. That did not bode well. "Crap!"

It took several minutes for Ranma to calm down, but when he did, he sighed. There was nothing he could do about it now, and so he looked at the map, looked down at the compass that he had been given for by Tigre and then, picked out the northeast direction, sighed, and began to follow it.

A moment later, a branch cracked, giving out under the weight of the snow that had piled upon it, followed by a feminine cry of anger ringing out through the woods. "Oh, come on!"

Having initially gotten himself so badly lost, it took Ranma more than two weeks to get back to Territoire. First, ten days to figure out how to discover the right direction, and then another seven days to get back. Ranma had become so lost in getting rid of any pursuers, that he had been heading deeper into Thenardier territory for much of that time.

By the time Ranma saw the town in the distance, to his surprise, Ranma also saw signs of spring, or at least the snow was melting in places. Ranma felt it wasn't going to be a real's spring, more a temporary defrosting, but regardless, he was grateful for it. Ranma felt he'd had enough of winter travel to last a lifetime. And the constant drain on his ki reserves from needing to continue to use a tiny trickle of ki to remain on top of the snow rather than sink into it had been good training, but also really annoying.

Arriving back at Lord Augre's castle, Ranma was ushered in without delay, finding Regin, Tigre, Elen, and Lim, all waiting for him along with Augre in his dining hall. Tigre smiled at him, exchanging a nod with Ranma, while Lim smirked slightly, secretly, before looking away. Despite their being together, she wasn't a very effusive sort, and certainly wasn't going to be more welcoming in front of Elen. The teasing would be truly terrible.

Ranma grinned back at her even so, then twitched his eyes to Regin, nodding his head to the younger girl. "I got it. All of it. But this is the last damn time I volunteer for things that aren't related to finding a fight somehow."

Looking at her boyfriend, Lim suddenly realized that Ranma was about to play a joke. In response, she quickly stood up from the table, moving away several steps.

Before anyone else could turn toward Lim and wonder why she had done so, Ranma began to pull out books from his ki space. Or rather to dump them out. Swiftly shrinking a ki-space sort of expelled things like water out of a cannon. Books upon books upon books began to tumble out from Ranma's sleeves, piling up onto the table, which started to creak alarmingly under their weight, before finally giving way. The books continued to pile up, and Elen, Tigre, and the others were caught so completely by surprise that it took them a few seconds before Tigre grabbed Regin and pulled her away.

By the time Ranma was done, the table was nowhere to be seen, completely buried under the pile of books and squashed scrolls. He moved around it, smiling cheerfully at the group on the other side who stared back at him agog. "There you go," he announced mock-cheerfully, "all the records from the Grotto. Every single book. So, unless one of the priests had the latest record of your family's line out somewhere, it'll be in there. Have fun trying to find it. I'm off to bed."

With that, Ranma left, the others staring after him. Then Lim began to laugh, shaking her head, joined by Elen moment later. "Well, he did say he'll just bring the entire records back with him, didn't he! And he surely did!" Elen shouted between bouts of laughter as all three of the Brunemen stared at the two laughing ladies in silence for a time, before finally understanding the humor of the moment and joining in, while the history of ages continued to settle in front of them.

End Chapter

Chapter 8: Winter Ends With a Bang

Since he had returned from his solo mission of grand larceny, Ranma had been surprised by how much Limalisha had wanted to train. The very next day, she had knocked on Ranma's door and asked to begin training with him. Despite the earliness of the hour, Ranma had been happy to oblige and was still happy now a few weeks later. During that time they'd continued the previous training, only more of it and of course more sparring.

While Tigre joined the physical training, Elen joined them for the sparring and Ranma always got a kick out of fighting her. With her use of Arifar, and her ability to use multiple sword styles, like Ranma could multiple martial arts styles, Elen was still a danger to Ranma, despite his much greater level of speed and endurance. She had even been able to think of ways to make their fights more fun, coming up with new and interesting ways to use the wind power granted to her by Arifar. This included an invisible Air Punch that caught Ranma by surprise the first time she used it, which directly led to a revelation with Lim that Ranma became to be very much of two minds about.

Ranma dodged around a first strike from Elen, his hands rising up in a blow towards Elen's chin. Simultaneously Ranma's other hand smacked down on the side of the blade, thrusting it further downwards and lifting himself in the same motion, twisting around into a

kick to follow up on the first blow which Ranma knew that Elen would dodge. Elen didn't disappoint, dodging his punch by a minuscule amount, but then she surprised him.

Instead of ducking underneath his kick or taking a kick on her forearm and redirecting it like Ranma anticipated, Elen moved forward, using the elbow of her sword arm to block the kick, her free fist coming up into a hard against his inner thigh. Ranma moved with the blow and was able to dodge her next attack with her sword, landing a quick kick which Elen had to block. With the impetus of that kick Ranma took to the air once more, but a blow from nowhere struck him right in the chest, hurling him out of the air and sending him crashing into the snow,

Grumbling, Ranma leaped to his feet, the snow falling away from him. "What was that!?"

Elen smirked, eddies of wind moving around Arifar in her hand, his chuckle rising to match Elen's humor in the moment. "That's for me to know and you to discover."

She charged forward grinning, Ranma did the same. "Fine by me!"

Ranma tried to watch the currents of snow particles in the air to try and follow where Elen was sending Arifar's wind, but the thing about air was that, for the most part, it is kind of invisible. Even with the snow particles, Ranma couldn't figure out where the next blow was coming from. He could anticipate some, but not all. The wind currents would move from the sword, whose red gem was glowing all the while accompanied by its laughter, to Elen's feet or her fists.

But that didn't mean Elen wasn't also prone to mistakes. Such was when Elen propelled herself into the air after smashing Ranma upward with another Air Punch.

In midair Ranma began to beat her like a drum, while they were in the air, hurl his fists and feet flashing, her own sword ability to fly completely curtailed by Ranma's skill and aerial combat. Every time she tried to cut at him, Ranma would use that attack to add to his own momentum, and after two hard blows, Elen just swooped away, using the wind to hold Ranma in place and move herself away at the same time.

"Oh no you don't!" Ranma roared. From his feet in turn came a blast of ki, hurling himself forward, breaking the wind's hold on him as he closed.

Elen's eyes widened in shock, but she got her sword up in time to block the punch grunting as the blow flung her backwards. Still in midair she adjusted her course, coming up at Ranma, her sword flashing. Ranma met it with a kick, and again used the momentum to flip over her, fists flashing down towards Elen's head. "Gaah, what is with you and being so at home in the air!?" she shouted, using a shield of wind to deflect the blows a bare inch away from her face. The next second the ruby on Arifar's guard gleamed brighter and that air flowed out, attempting to grab Ranma in place again.

A blast of ki was the only response she got, the blast pushing the gripping wind away before Ranma lashed out with a kick that got through Elen's defenses. "What is with you and all those wind attacks?" Ranma retorted.

That blow landed almost cleanly, Elen twisting her body slightly to catch it on the side. But despite that, Elen was punted back down to the ground enough that she actually had to slow her descent via Arifar once more. Upon landing she thrust up with her sword.

The blast of condensed air caught Ranma, but he twisted around and through it, landing nearby easily, his battle aura subsiding for now. Running forward, Ranma was met with a fist of air that caught him in the chest, as Elen thrust her hand forward, then ducked under another blast of air coming from her sword as she whirled around, moving into the attack even as Ranma launched a Moko Takabisha.

From the sidelines Lim and Tigre were watching this, each of them waiting for their own turn. Ranma had thought up some ways to utilize a bow and arrow in close combat and wanted to see if they were viable. If any of what could make them work, it was Tigre with that black bow of his. An item that still gave Ranma the creeps every time he looked at it. Something about that thing screamed to Ranma's danger senses.

Yet for all his extra-senses, Ranma didn't notice Lim frowning as she watched Ranma and Elen spar. A scowl that continued to grow as the battle continued, with both of them using special attacks now.

Eventually Elen scored an upset victory, a looping blast of air having upended Ranma from behind just in time for Elen to catch him with her blade on the side. And as they had agreed all the way back when they sparred in Leitmeritz, a strike directly against Ranma's side or chest with her sword was counted as a kill.

Instantly the two combatants separated, and Elen thrust her Viralt in the air, the gem glowing all the brighter as she whooped. "Heck yes! Finally! I win, Ranma!"

"You do," Ranma said ruefully, shaking his head. "I've never had to detect invisible air moving around before, and your ability to send it out through your entire body from different directions threw me at the end. I should've finished you off when you were silly enough to take to the air."

"Yeah, Heeheh..." Elen sheepishly scratched at her silver hair. "I realized that was a mistake as soon as I did it. And you don't exactly have tendency to let people survive making mistakes like that."

Ranma shrugged his shoulders. "If you're dumb enough to try to take me on in midair, I'll be more than happy to beat you down."

“But this time you didn't~,” Elen sang with a whoop. “I win!”

“Yeah fine, now just win what, forty more times and we'll be even?” Ranma snarked, before looking away from Elen and over to Lim, then Tigre. “Who's next?”

After sparring with Elen, Ranma taught Tigre some moves, specifically a few grapples and chokehold that utilized his bow as well as a few points on human body to target with the points of the bow or an arrow clenched like a dagger. When he was positive Tigre had at least two of the moves down, the group switched once more, with Elen and Tigre dueling in a very unusual manner, after Lim had spent time with Elen practicing a series of what Ranma thought of as katas.

“The name of this exercise is speed, Tigre,” Elen ordered, as she stood 100 paces away from him. “If you can fire six times and hit me with five before I reach the range to use one of my own attacks on you, you win. If you don't, you lose.”

Tigre reluctantly drew an arrow back on his bow. “I don't want to hurt, you know.”

“You're sweet, Tigre,” Elen laughed as a blast of air encompassed her suddenly hurling snow in every direction, her voice changing into a growl as she went on, causing Tigre to blanch. “Let's see if you can retain that kindness. I still have to pay you back for yesterday, when you accidentally walked in on Titta changing.”

“That, that isn't my fault!” Tigre defended himself, even as he reached for one of the arrows set in the snow to one side. “Why was she changing in the princesses sitting room anyway!?”

“No excuses!” Elen shouted, racing forwards, not propelling herself forward with her wind power but retaining the shield of it around herself. *Although, come to think of it why was... ooh, that little, grr! So 'innocent' my left tit! We will be having words Titta!*

As she closed though Elen became serious as she saw Tigre's eyes change from confused and embarrassed to arrow-straight certainty, his bow coming up with a speed that rivaled Elen's own. The black bow seemed to glimmer in the chill light of winter, almost sucking in the light, and an arrow flashed towards Elen before she could blink.

She raised Arifar smacking it out of the air, then swiftly had to redirect her sword to slice the other one next. *Tigre is so fast! Is, is he getting faster thanks to Ranma's training this winter?*

Elen jinxed to the side, but Tigre followed her and an arrow flashed underneath her feet. At first Elen thought Tigre had missed, but the next second her back foot caught on the shaft of the arrow, causing her to stumble. The next arrow came towards Elen instantly and this time, it

crashed into the air shield around her, splintering directly in front of Elen's face. *I haven't even taken forty paces!*

"You've been practicing I see," Elen quipped, shaking her head. As she stood up straight, sheathing her weapon, which in turn allowed Tigre to lower his bow. "Next time I won't be holding back then."

"So I fear," Tigre agreed wryly, gesturing over to where Ranma was dancing around Lim, his hand flashing up towards her face, then his foot tapping down towards her knee, which was just a bit out of position, even as his other hand smacked aside her blade. "Ranma was on me for training in speed for months before you and I met Elen and this winter I restarted much of that training in my spare time. Accuracy is all well and good, but speed is important too. I'm honestly surprised that I've been able to make as much progress as I have."

Although luck plays a part too, Tigre thought, sweatdropping as he deliberately stopped Elen from locking eyes with him. The truth was that one shot that had caused Elen to stumble had been a clean miss. He had just taken advantage of it quickly. *But if Elen thinks I planned it out like that, then who am I to argue?*

Elen looked in that direction as well, frowning as she noticed the frustrated, annoyed, expression on her friend's face. Moving over to Tigre, she grabbed his arm in both of hers, dragging him away, not noticing the guilty look on his face before it disappeared. "Come on, let's go inside. You look like you're getting cold and we can practice grappling inside just as easily out as out here."

His expression changing instantly into a blush at the touch of Elen's chest against his arm, Tigre couldn't stop the images, which popped into his head, at the idea of practicing 'grappling' with the beautiful, buxom, girl next to him. Still, he wasn't exactly certain where the heck that would go and so said, "I, I think I would rather that is, Ranma is..."

"You're right, I don't know nearly as much about grappling as Ranma does, but I can certainly at least spar with you in that manner, train your strength if nothing else. And I don't think we want to be here for a moment," Elen interrupted, both aware of the fun she could have grappling with Tigre and the fact that Lim looked as if she was about to have a major temper tantrum for some reason.

Tigre frowned in response to that, and asked her what she meant, but Elen didn't respond, still pulling him along.

As Ranma's feet swept her legs from under her, Lim collapsed into the snow, but did not immediately get up. Instead, she stayed there, grinding her teeth as she stared up at the sky. A second later Ranma's face occluded her vision, as he reached a hand down. "Sorry, did I dump you too hard? I thought that pile of snow was deep enough to..."

“No,” Lim growled sharply. “You did not. I am not some effete, weak noblewoman, Ranma!”

Ranma's hand paused in reaching down to help her up but a moment later resumed, his brow furrowed. “Okay, I ain't exactly a genius when it comes to figuring out what girls are thinking, but there seems to be a lot more behind that statement than just annoyance that I had beaten you again.”

“That's just it, Ranma ‘again’,” Lim emphasized, before sighing, taking his arm in both of hers, allowing Ranma to pull her up like Lim was a child, so light was she to Ranma. Dusting the snow off of the polar-tooth cloak Ranma had given her as a present, Lim shook her head, looking at him sadly, frustration now visible on her normally controlled face. “That's just it. Elen is making progress, real honest progress towards closing the gap between you in terms of your physical abilities. I don't think I'll ever be able to do that and had hoped that style would allow me to cross that. Instead. But it doesn't seem as if I am going to. I've never even been able to touch you and in return it's like I've run into a wall in my training!”

Ranma frowned, then noticing that now that they weren't moving around so frenetically, Lim had started to shiver a little. In response Ranma put an arm around the blonde girl's shoulders, his life force coming out in a wave of heat that could almost be seen in the air like the haze over a fire. Lim sighed, tension leaving her body as she leaned into his embrace but still retaining a pout on her face even so.

“Are you asking me for some advice rather than training now?” Ranma hadn't actually given her much in the way of style-based training, other than saying that she needed to increase both her strength and speed equally. Not being a swordsman, he figured that Elen would be a better person to come to if you were looking for techniques, even if he could talk the talk as it were.

“Yes,” Lim answered instantly. “I've run into this wall with both you and Elen's training, and I, I'm, I'm just frustrated. Elen and you both are seemingly growing with every passing day, and the gap just seems to be growing, not just between you and I, but also in comparison to Elen and I.”

“You've never mentioned any of this before comparing yourself to Elen. You followed her around most of your life, so this can't be the first time you've done that right?” Ranma asked, more for something to say than he thought it would tell him anything new.

“No,” Lim shook her head. “I have always known that Elen was better than me, but...” she looked away, embarrassed. Ranma let her stay silent, not prompting her to speak, waiting until Lim did so on her own. “I wish to progress, I wish to move forward as you both are, and I do not think I am,” she repeated instead of telling Ranma why she wanted to move forward.

Lim didn't want to admit to Ranma her real fears. That his desire for strong women, like Sofy and Valentina, would eventually lead Ranma to leave her behind. This, coupled with an old fear of being useless to Elen, had grown within her over the past few weeks after Ranma had returned. Her growing feelings towards Ranma were slowly becoming a driving force in her life.

Ranma frowned, looking around the winter landscape all around. It was noticeably warmer than it had been when he was on his mission of larceny. *Grand Theft Ranma*, he thought to himself, chuckling internally but noticing even as he did that the snow was starting to fall, he estimated they had another month maybe before the snow would start to really melt enough to start saying that spring was her and troops would begin to move.

"If you say you've hit a wall with your sword techniques, well, I have a few ideas which we can follow up on if you want to hear them," he said at last. Whatever was driving Lim to get stronger, Ranma wanted to help her, even though he felt Lim was already strong enough in a lot of other ways beyond the martial arts. Her ability with numbers and organization were frankly scary, like Nabiki squared, and her mental fortitude to live the life she and Elen had lived, and still come out as kind and well-put together as she was spoke volumes of Lim and Elen both.

Lim nodded into his shoulder, pulling back slightly to look at his face, the two of them being of the same height. "I would like to hear them Ranma, please."

"Well first, why are you so invested in the sword?" Ranma began slowly. "There are a lot of other weapons we can try you on you know, see how well you do on them. You're comparing yourself to Elen but you really shouldn't. Elen is a swordswoman born, she has the kind of instinctual grasp of swordsmanship that only comes around once in a generation. You're not going to match up with the sword, not in pure swordsmanship so don't even try."

Before Lim could become more depressed at that, Ranma went on. "You should instead try to separate yourself from Elen, not just to stand out, but because you need to find your **own** style, your own weapon. I can help with that," he added hurriedly, grinning at her. "I've got so many different kinds of martial arts styles, I bet one or two of them will suit you. Weapons on the other hand, that you will have to experiment with."

Looking up at the setting sun, Lim slowly nodded slowly, then more firmly. "I remember being shown numerous weapons when Elen and I were around eight or so... but, but the person I am now, was is not the same person I was then. Perhaps you're right Ranma, perhaps another weapon would suit me better. But we will have to wait until tomorrow to test that theory." She shivered as the wind picked up once more. "Let us get inside."

Ranma nodded, and with his arm still over her shoulders, the two of them entered the keep, heading up towards the dining hall where they would eat with Regin, their friends and Lord Territoire.

The princess looked up as they entered, smiling politely at them, before turning a gimlet-gaze on Ranma, a scowl on her face as there had been at every evening meal since he had returned with the entirety of the Royal Archives of Saint-Groel. This had forced her and every scribe within Territoire to work for weeks on end trying to figure out which books and which items were important, which pertained to her own genealogy, and everything else, trying to make certain his cavalier attitude hadn't destroyed anything. It had been a desecration of important historical knowledge but Ranma didn't seem to care.

Actually Ranma did a little, he understood her point about some of it being important information for Regin's cause, he just didn't think it was as important for its own sake as Regin and the other Brune natives thought. Genealogy was all well and good for horses and dogs. For people, Ranma thought it was an idiotic idea to care about that kind of thing at all. Nobility was a state of mind, not just a thing of breeding.

"If you keep on glaring at me like that every day, your face is gonna stick like that Regin," he teased, smirking at her, while the nobles, a group allied to the Silver Meteor Army there with their armsmen around the table stiffened or chuckled, looking away. They, and indeed Regin herself, had yet to get used to Ranma's ideas of how to treat nobility, and more than one of them thought that Ranma, foreigner or no, should've been punished for it by this point. Others who knew him better realized that any attempt to punish Ranma was doomed to failure at best. At worst it would lead to the public humiliation of the person attempting to do so.

Regin rolled her eyes, but allowed her face to shift back into a more pleasant expression as she smiled at one of the other Lords, engaging the man, a newcomer to the Silver Meteor Army in a conversation. It had taken weeks to go through all of the books, but she had finally found the genealogy information with which Regin could prove that she was indeed the daughter of the King. Armed with that information, Regin had begun to be more open about her presence with the Silver Meteor army. Regin wanted to hammer the idea home that Silver Meteor Army was not an army of Zhcted invaders, but an army of Brune citizens and Zhcted mercenaries retained, in an effort to make certain that the royal line stayed on the throne. With the number of Zhcted troops it was a little difficult, but she had managed to change the tone of the Army itself entirely. No longer was the Silver Meteor Army about defending their own borders. It was an army raised to put the true heir to the crown of Brune on the throne, despite Regin being a woman.

That last point was still a sticking point alas but there was only so much Regin could do about it. One could not expect to change a society within a winter's breadth after all.

Among the many letters she sent out with copies of the proof of her parentage, Regin had sent word to the Knightly Orders who held lands along the eastern and northeastern borders, requesting them to send representatives to meet with her at the very least. Two of the seven Orders had already done so and had agreed to follow her orders as rightful heir to the throne. Others were sitting on the sidelines still, unwilling to take the part of a princess, even one that could prove her ancestry.

Yet Regin knew that their neutrality would not last long. More people were coming to realize that she was the true heir to the throne, many Lords around Nice, in point of fact, had already sent representatives through the winter to Regin in response to her missives. And several had even pledged their loyalty to her cause. They didn't have much in terms of manpower, but they could provide food and transportation at the very least when the Silver Meteor army marched south.

Even better, in a way, word had reached Regin that day of another group of messengers arriving. These came from Lords from near Ganelon's territory had sent word over the frozen Resia that they were willing to look to her for leadership. According to these earls and lesser nobles, Ganelon had not been seen in a while, not since Duke Thenardier had launched his surprise winter campaign.

That invasion had arrived like a roundhouse punch, coming up from the south and west, pushing up hard into Ganelon's territory. Thenardier had crushed every defensive position or enemy holding that was set in his way, although Ganelon had taken to fighting almost guerrilla-style, attacking in penny packets, using a scorched earth style defense. But everyone knew that it was only a matter of time before Duke Thenardier reached Lutetia.

And after that, what few allies that Ganelon's still had further to the north and east, would lie supine before the Dragon Duke.

They needed help, help that could stand against dragons, and with Roland not taking part in the civil war yet, Regin was hopeful once the Silver Meteor Army marched that would change) that left only one place they could find such aid. The Vanadis currently acting as a mercenary for Regin. That was the story anyway, and everyone was willing to stick to it, even if Regin hated the idea of losing Alsace to the silver-haired woman.

Ironically, several of those nobles still retained the majority of their forces, or rather, had gathered in their forces once more. These lords had been among the first to join with Ganelon and provided the majority of the forces Ranma had faced at the bridge over the Resia. They had looked forward to eagerly plundering the lands of the Silver Meteor Army and the north east of Brune.

But instead Ranma had destroyed the bridge, and then earned his name as the 'Living Trebuchet' for the second time, dispersing their peasant army.

When Regin shared this bit of information with the others at the end of the meal, Ranma shook his head. "I'm not happy about the idea of us working with that group. Do you know what that ass Greast was offering their troops? First rights of any valuables or women of any town or city they captured. In Brune itself! They weren't even using that as an excuse to ravage an enemy country, which, even if I would hate it, I could see the point of. No, they were willing to do that to their own people. That's just not nasty, that's evil. And these lords you want to treat with were part of that army."

Regin sighed. "I know, and I know all of those Lords well enough to realize that they are cut of the same cloth as Ganelon. He has tainted every one of them in a way. But I still need to work with them for now, since they represent the only semblance of order in a decent swath of Ganelon's territory. After my throne is secure, and Ganelon and Thenardier have both been executed for treason, time will come to hopefully deal with the other lower-ranked nobles who shared Ganelon's proclivities. If I can," Regin added, looking at Tigre with a gleam in her eyes that made Titta and Elen stiffen in anger. "It will depend on how strong my position on the throne is, after all."

"And your position has been strengthened tremendously over the last month, Your Grace," Lim smiled thinly as she tapped a document in front of her. A document that Regin had a copy of, but which had been Lim's work as chief logistics officer for the Silver Meteor Army. "Six thousand men have been added to our numbers from the central plains in the last month. That is nothing to sneeze at."

"Raw recruits, that we have been forced to put through harsh training to make real soldiers of them," Elen cautioned, before going on in a more conciliatory tone of voice. "But still, Lim's right. With Ranma's added training on top of combat training, six thousand extra soldiers are nothing to sneeze at, whatever their experience."

These men came from the area around Nice, the area where the lords had originally answered the call to arms most eagerly when Regin, then disguised as Prince Regnas had led the Royal army, which Elen, the woman now sitting at the table with her, had routed so easily.

"Fine, whatever, we have to put off dealing with the pond scum until we get rid of the swamp monsters, whatever. But what will the Army do once the campaign season begins?" Ranma interjected, changing the subject.

"The capital," Regin suggested softly, as the others clambered with their own ideas.

Elen wanted to press hard for Thenardier's territory. "Most of his army is in the field, and his dragons, which meant we might, if we can move fast enough, take Duke Thenardier's city from behind him!"

However, Tigre had an entirely different idea. "Interdict the supply line of Thenardier's Army, cut across it, cut them off from home. That army's already dealing with a scorched earth style defense around them. A lack of food may make the dragons go crazy. We could certainly force Duke Thenardier to leave off his ravages into Ganelon's territory, to face us on a field of our own choosing. Thenardier and the dragons are the problem, not Nemetacum, or his family or even the rest of his lands. We have to bring them to battle, or else they'll just move elsewhere, ravaging where they wish."

Before Lim or the other lords could weigh in, the meal was interrupted by a messenger coming to the door. He moved to speak into his Lord's ear, and Lord Hughes blinked, then

looked over and Regin, his face troubled. "Lady Regin, a representative of the united Temple union has arrived to speak with you."

Regin blinked in return, then frowned looking down at her meal. She'd already eaten about half of it, and Regin supposed that that would be enough for now. "Please, send him to the foyer, we will join them there."

She looked around at the others, then requested, "Lord Tigre, if you could come with me please?" *The more I act as if Tigre as my chief advisor, the easier it will be to make the switch from chief advisor to consort in the future* Regin thought, as Tigre nodded.

Elen looked at her, her eyes narrowed and suspicion, but there was nothing she or the nearby Titta could say. Until they knew what the temple was here for after all, having the representative of a foreign power, no matter how much Elen was acting officially as a mercenary at the moment, would not be a good idea.

Entering the room, Regin smiled blandly at the priest, before moving around and sitting at the head of the table, folding her hands in front of her. "Good evening sir, I understand you represent the temples? Might I know your rank within your specific parent temple?"

"You may Your Grace," the middle-aged man answered, and Regin smiled turned into a quirk of the lips at the inherent admission of her heritage in that term but not her rank as heiress-presumptive. "I am a prelate of the god Perkunas and I serve as second in command of the temple in Nice. I was asked to come here in the dead of winter, despite the danger of doing so, in order to speak to you." He gestured, to four men armed in full plate armor, and wearing heavy swords and baldrics, showing the image representing Perkunas a half-sun with rays scattering across a white background.

Tigre stared at the men, but did not raise an objection to their presence, instead standing beside Regin's chair, his bow strapped to his back. *I could fell at least two before they reached sword range and could possibly hold off the other two until help arrives.*

"Before we begin to speak about my reasons for making such an arduous journey, might I ask after the whereabouts of the secret archives from Saint-Groel? Those represent a priceless artifact of the temple after all, not just the information your family has always asked us to keep over the years."

"If you would like to be shown it instantly, we have it here, stored within several rooms on the fifth floor of this keep. We tried to retain the organization, but I'm afraid some of that was lost during the transportation. Only one or two of the most fragile scrolls within were damaged, however. I must commend the temple for its record keeping, many of those scrolls looked almost new, such was the skill with which they had been copied over the centuries," Regin answered politely.

“It is the task of the monks of the Saint-Groel monastery to see to such Your Grace. I will pass on your regards to them. And it does my heart good to know that all of the books and everything else have been looked after. Many nobles would simply have searched out the information they desired to find and not cared about the rest discarding it is useless. But your method of taking that information from the grotto is why I am here.”

“I was hardly in a position to officially request the information I needed prelate,” Regin retorted, smiling thinly. “Even if I had been able to, no doubt it would have taken months to get to us, by which time the war would have heated up once more. I'm sorry if the theft of the books offended you and your brethren, and I will willing to pay remuneration in some fashion for any damages caused during the theft once I have secured my crown and my father. But I will not apologize for needing those records in the first place.”

“Nor would we expect you to,” the Prelate answered easily. “We do not quibble about whether or not you need them, or indeed the act of taking them. It is the how which is of such interest. The fact that you are blessed by a messenger of the gods is something that every temple within Brune is eager to confirm.”

“...I'm sorry,” Regin said, nearly collapsing out of her chair in shock while Tiger seemed to be having a coughing fit to one side. “Could you repeat that? You think I sent an, a messenger of the gods to take the records?”

“A young man able to pass through walls unseen, there one moment gone the next, someone able to take all of those books make them disappear and then leave just as easily? Only the gods can bestow such power,” the man answered sternly. “They do oftentimes move in mysterious ways but we wish to know what is behind this visitation. Are the gods backing your assumption of the crown or is there a deeper meaning? Regardless, I wish to meet with the gods-touched in question.”

A bubble of amusement threatening to burst out, Regin looked over at a servant by the doorway. “C, could you please send to Ranma?” her voice faltered as she tried to keep a straight face. “We require his presence for this discussion.”

Soon Ranma came in, followed by Elen and Lim. For a moment Regin thought about restricting their access but decided that the two would find this too humorous to see them out. The sight of the Vanadis did cause the Prelate to stiffen a little, and his four guards fingered their swords, but the prelate, who had yet to tell Regin his name, kept his attention on Ranma for the most part.

Ranma looked at Regin and Tigre, one eyebrow rising. “You wanted to speak to me? If this is about something I broke when I was in the temple down in Artishem, I'll volunteer to help fix it but not until after everything else we want to accomplish is done okay? Priorities, y'know.”

“Nothing of the sort,” the prelate smiled. “We just wish to know which particular God has deigned to bless you, my son.”

Ranma's eyes flew wide, as Elen and Lim also stared in shock before the Vanadis started to grin like a pumpkin. “Er, whut, just, whut?”

At that, Tigre burst out in laughter, nearly collapsing to his knees as he lost control of his carefully hidden humor. Loud guffaws burst out of him as he shook his head. Regin too was laughing but Tigre still managed to explain. “The, the temple thinks,” he gasped, “they think that you are blessed by one of the ten gods.”

“What the heck!? I'm no, that is, I've never been blessed by anyone or anything! Cursed, sure, but blessed, no!” Ranma nearly shouted, shaking his head and basking away. *What the hell is this!?*

“Few people who are blessed by God believe in point of fact that they are. And yet, your abilities speak for themselves,” the priest replied, before listing the abilities that Ranma had been seen to use in his mission of thievery.

“N, now hold on a minute everything I...” Ranma began, only to be interrupted as Elen smacked a hand over Ranma's mouth, while Lim smacked him in the rear at the same time.

Shocked at that Ranma looked over his shoulder at him, while Tigre instantly took up the tale. No one wanted the full gamut of Ranma's abilities to become common knowledge, or the fact that some could apparently be taught. “I am afraid Prelate, that the temple is off base with this idea. Ranma has come to us from a distant land, an island between the Beast Lands and our own. And beyond endurance and strength, he is unable to teach anyone or explain any of his other abilities to us in ways we can understand.”

“So he is not teaching the Brune army to fight as holy warriors then?” the prelate inquired. “We have heard rumors of that as well.”

“I'm helping to train the Silver Meteor army, out of friendships sake. I've got nothing to do with Brune as a whole,” Ranma said shaking his head, while Regin winced horribly at the bluntness of his tone and at the fact she suddenly realized they had just missed a golden opportunity to bring the temples onto her side.

The prelate's eyes narrowed slightly at that. “Friendship is a thin reed in comparison to the power of faith, or even loyalty to the crown or nation one is born in. Surely there is more to why you are here aiding the princess than that.”

“Why would I be loyal to Brune?” Ranma asked shrugging his shoulders and ignoring the glare from Regin or the wince from Tigre, while in the background Lim and Elen exchanged

smirks, enjoying this immensely. "I wasn't even loyal much to my own country to be frank. My loyalty is to my friends, which I have said dozens of times before."

The priest looked horrified, but Ranma went on, pointing a thumb towards Regin. "She's one of my friends too, and since she wants to beat Thenardier and Ganelon and find out what's going on with her father, I'll be fighting alongside her to succeed at all that. Beyond that, I'm not going to be tied down to anything." Ranma shook his head ruefully. "Believe me, if you had lived my life, you would understand why friendship matters to me way more than anything else."

The priest frowned at all this. Part of him was annoyed, having hoped that Ranma had some kind of central theme or goal that the god who had blessed him wanted Ranma for. He didn't put much stock in Ranma or Lord Vorn's protestations of not being gods-touched, of course. The proof was in the pudding after all, and there was no possible way Ranma's abilities could be explained away. If Vorn believed what he was saying he was foolish, or simply believing Ranma's words over his own eyes.

Still if the Princess was happy enough with Ranma's divided loyalties and trusted him well enough to allow him to train the Silver Meteor army that she would lead to reclaiming her crown, the prelate couldn't say anything against it. And as for his friendship with Vorn, that was another connection both to Brune as a whole and this new royal crown, if the prelate was reading the atmosphere between Regin and Tigre right. He was certain on Regin's part, not so certain on Vorn's the young nobleman having a very decent poker face. *However, the fact that Ranma does not have some kind of overarching goal or mission means there is leeway to force Regin to pay us for our backing her push to the throne.*

"This casts an entirely new light on matters. If we are to take Ranma's words at face value, this shifts the concept of your rise to Queenship from blessed by the gods to a major societal change. Surely you must understand that," the prelate began, looking at Regin. "While we are not compared to back either Duke Thenardier or Duke Ganelon, neither are we willing to back a woman who is not strong enough to hold onto her throne on her own without aid from the unnatural Vanadis."

Ranma shook his head, turning around and exiting the room. "I'm done. You don't need me here for this conversation and anything I could add would be unprintable anyway. To my mind priest boy, you and your lot are stuck in a very hard place right now between two avalanches and Regin is the best option you've got. Everything else, that's just semantics and stupidity. That whole women can't be ruler's thing is freaking stupid point blank."

The prelate scowled, before his face clamped down as a very nasty thought occurred to him. *Is, is that the message Perkunas and the other members of the Ten wish us to learn? That we have been wrong all this time about women's place being subservient to that of men? No, no! That cannot be! Thousands of years of tradition going back to before there was even a Brune cannot be wrong!*

With some relief the prelate banished those thoughts from his mind and turned back to Regin, but she had been given time to prepare her counter-argument thanks to Ranma's interruption, and even as Lim and Elen followed Ranma out of the room, she began her own attack. "True, I am a woman, and yes, I know that in the teachings of Perkunas, Triglav, Vors, and Dirge, women are unfit to be leaders. And yet, surely the actions of Duke Ganelon and Duke Thenardier have poisoned them too in the eyes of the Gods above."

She lifted her hands, as if weighing two sides of a scale. "Duke Ganelon has publicly stated that he would tear down the temples, crush your edifice of power root and branch. Duke Thenardier's not gone that far, but you well know that he believes the Temple should be a mouthpiece of the crown, not a secondary power of its own. Certainly, you would no longer retain the benefit of the crown's approval for your separate taxation system, or the social convention of a nobleman without any heirs turning over his lands to the temple upon his death."

The prelate flinched, looking away. But he was still off-balance by his thoughts on Ranma's earlier words and Regin drove in hard. "Indeed, I would think the fact that Ganelon has practices what he preaches in terms of the destruction of the temples in his domain would put you squarely alongside myself. The idea that I would then have to promise aught but to let your temples and your current power structure alone is the height of blind arrogance!"

The talks with the prelate were not easy by any stretch, even armed with the knowledge of what Ganelon and Thenardier planned to do with the temples in the future. The prelate wanted specific demands met, and was adamant that Ranma not knowing why he had been sent by the gods was a mark against Regin's position. Regin's association with Elen was also an issue as was her own femininity, one which Ranma just could not understand when he was explained to him later.

"I mean I don't think you'd be my choice of Queen, Regin, but then again, I don't think anyone would be," Ranma said with a shrug later the next night as they once more all gathered for some drinks before bed. "And I know for a fact your head and shoulders above the two assholes."

"Thank you for that faint praise." Regin rolled her eyes, reaching out to smack Ranma on the shoulder. Regin and Ranma didn't really get along very well. Ranma treated her, like well just another person, didn't seem to care at all about the fact that she was a woman, her past or her being a princess. It threw Regin off tremendously and she just couldn't get used to Ranma's level of lese majesty.

Ranma, in turn, thought of Regin as kind of wishy-washy. And if there was one thing that Ranma didn't like, it was weakness. Regin was smart, intelligent, and a survivor, but instead of fighting for her throne, her first instinct these days was to talk, and when she had first revealed herself, Regin had been almost hoping to hide behind Tigre. Ranma was fine with talking to a certain point but he felt that Regin took it to an extreme.

A late-night snowfall forced the group to stay inside the day after the prelate arrived, which caused Ranma to go kind of stir crazy. However, he put the day to good use, working with a few of the local artisans, joking and laughing about their latest attempts to make a steam-powered sawing machine. It hadn't gone well, sending the saw through the wall of the workshop and deep into a stone wall. "But it's proof of concept at least! Just imagine having that power and keeping it going on what you want it to be doing!" shouted a halfway-drunk sawyer.

Still, Ranma was ecstatic when the snow faded into nothing, adding only another six inches or so to what was already on the ground, which began to slowly subside as the day wore on.

In contrast, Tigre had spent most of that day out and about, pushing his scout troops through their paces. With winter finally ending, it would soon be time for them to prove their worth again and he was determined that they would do so."

He was yawning as he walked through the doors of the keep, as Ranma was leaving, walking beside Lim, and paused, looking at the two of them. They were both carrying numerous weapons, and that sight made him wonder what they were up to. Ranma shrugged as Tigre voiced that question, gesturing with a finger towards Lim. "We're going to be trying Lim here out on various weapons. Seeing which one feels natural, which ones she's got an aptitude for and so forth."

Tigre's lips quirked, and Lim glared at him from over a pile of weapons. Ranma had volunteered to carry them all in his ki space, but Lim had demurred, saying that she wanted to look over the weapons before deciding which to try and she could do that while carrying them. In reality, she just didn't want to get used to relying on Ranma for every little thing, and carrying weapons wasn't exactly difficult even with this many different types.

Now however, as she saw Tigre's smirk, she glared angrily. "Do you have something to say, Lord Vorn?"

"Oh, nothing at all," Tigre said with a chuckle, backing away rapidly. "Nothing at all, I just well, it just reminds me of the time when you and Elen were trying me on various weapons. I hope it goes better for you than it did for me."

Flushing as she remembered how during one specific spar Tigre had accidentally disarmed both himself and Elen, and then landed headfirst in her lady's cleavage, Lim snarled but with her arms full of weapons, did not answer further. Instead she turned back, following Ranma out the door.

Or at least that was the plan anyway. Instead, Tigre yawned, his eyes closing for a moment as he paused in his way between the two of them. Lim didn't notice this until one of the polearms she was carrying caught in Tigre's bowstring. Tigre didn't notice this either, and

when he made to step forward, the pile of weapons in Lim's hands started to overbalance just as Tigre was pulled backward. The two of them crashed into one another, weapons flying all over as Lim found herself on the floor.

"Ow, what in the world..." Lim paused, a flush suffusing her features as she saw that Tigre had somehow managed to fall with his face pressed deeply into the cleft of her thigh meeting her waist, his hands flailing to either side. The blush on his face did not register for a moment and Lim saw red.

Above them Ranma cocked his head to one side thoughtfully. "Huh, so that's what it looks like from the outside. Pity rises from deep within me Tigre, yet at the same time, I am also restraining myself from hurting you right now. Instead, I think I'll just let the punisher fit the crime."

Shaking his head, Tigre pulled back, a flush on his face and the word, "Soft," on his lips, before he realized where he had been. Then his face turned white and he leaped to his feet. "Lim, I, I,"

"No excuses!" Lim shouted, leaping after him and grabbing the first thing that came to her hand. A long-hafted warhammer for a mounted knight. "Get that perverted memory out of your mind, you, you lewd beast! I knew it! No one has luck that bad, you must plan these moments in some fashion!"

Ranma shivered as Lim rushed after Tigre with the warhammer, slamming it down as he dodged out of the way, desperately parrying her attacks with the black bow, which worked much better than one would expect, the properties of the mysterious black bow serving Tigre better than ever before as he raced back outside, Lim on his heels. Ranma followed, once more uncertain how to feel about the events happening in front of him.

A few minutes later, Elen came up watching with some amusement as Tigre dodged this way and that, cocking her head thoughtfully to one side. "So, is this dodging training for Tigre, or weapons training for Lim?"

"Honestly, I don't know anymore," Ranma sighed, looking over at Elen. The two of them shared a laugh, then moved forward, separating the two with some difficulty. "So, let's start again shall we?" Ranma said, restraining Lim with some difficulty, the famous feminine fury giving her ten times her normal strength. Meanwhile Tigre found one arm and his head caught in a choke hold, holding him in place, Elen blushing slightly but still smirking in triumph as she pressed his head deeper into her bosom.

After Tigre apologized for the accident and Lim, with Elen poking her in the side, apologized for overreacting, Elen dragged Tigre off to have breakfast with her, while Ranma and Lim finally got down to business.

The pike was right out, Ranma could see that instantly. Lim, like Elen, liked to get in close, and any kind of long staff polearm or pike just felt wrong Lim hands and Ranma shifted them out quickly one after another watching as she tried to take a stance with each in turn. "Nope."

"That was remarkably easy," Lim said with a nod glaring down at the one particular guan-do that had caused the earlier moment with Tigre. "And I can already tell you that a bow and arrow or crossbow are not my weapons either. I'd actually a recent enough shot with a crossbow but it would not be my weapon of choice."

"Good, because then I'd have to turn you over to Tigre for training and I don't think either of you would want that," Ranma snarked causing Lim to both pout and blush hotly at the earlier moment before thumping Ranma's shoulder with her tiny fist. Ranma snorted at her, catching Lim's hand and gesturing to another group of weapons sitting in their sheathes. "Longsword we've already tried, so let's try two-handed sword maybe?"

Lim's grimace of distaste was a prelude to how that went. "A two-handed weapon was okay, Lim was able to wield it well enough, but it was obvious that she was fighting all of her previous training to which told her to use it in one hand, and after a few passes at Ranma, Ranma ducked under one blow, carried the claymore to the side, and quickly slapped his other hand down onto her the inside of her wrist, deadening it. The weapon dropped, Ranma grabbed it and tossed onto the pile of various polearms they had tried. "Next."

The short sword was better. Lim proved to be almost ambidextrous, switching from one hand to another as she came at Ranma. But again, it relied too heavily on her previous training as a swordswoman, and Lim just couldn't quite make the shift from one longsword to two short swords. The style was interesting, and Ranma made a note of it, but again it just wasn't Lim.

Then came the axe.

"Hmm, I like this," Lim announced instantly upon hefting it. "It's got more heft than my broadsword longsword, but nowhere near as much as the claymore."

The axe in question was long hafted weapon, almost a throwing axe in size, but not quite, with a smaller head to the length of the shaft than an infantryman's weapon. The length of the shaft of the weapon was about the same length as a longsword. It was the kind of weapon a mounted cavalryman would use in close range after losing his lance.

Ranma watched carefully as Lim attacked, seeing Lim quickly shifting stance and footwork to match the new weapon, using added inertia of the steel head to add speed to her blows. She even used the staff portion to block a few of his blows.

“That’s interesting you did that automatically,” Ranma said as pulled back from one blow, which had crashed into the center of the staff instead of Lim’s chest. “I think we’re getting closer.”

“Definitely a possibility,” Lim agreed also stepping back and looking down at the weapon with interest. “And...I think you were right the other day. I had fallen into a mold, assuming that the weapon I was given when I was younger was my best choice, just because Elen took to it like a duck to water. This is the kind of weapon I could have been training with for years, a mounted weapon and I never thought of it.”

She smiled, and it completely transformed her face from that of a determined warrior woman to a teenage girl as she leaned forward and kissed Ranma on the cheek. “Thank you, Ranma.” *Thank you for helping me grow stronger so I can keep standing beside my lady and beside you.*

“N, no problem.” Ranma blushed, affected by that kiss despite the number of times they had made out over the winter months for some reason. “Er, N, next.”

Next, however, was a weapon that Ranma had secretly dreaded, the bloody thing having already given him flashbacks once today to a certain tomboy from his previous life. The warhammer.

Eventually Lim selected a warhammer that was designed to perform the same job as the axe. But whereas the axe had been a wooden shaft with a steel head, the warhammer was entirely metal. Both sides of the head were a little larger than the axe, and heftier, but not so weighted that Lim was having trouble wielding it.

The smile on Lim’s face as she picked it up made Ranma want to back away rapidly and this feeling did not go away as Lim advanced towards him. “Let us see how this one works,” she said with a whisper, then attacked quickly, throwing out two short swings with the weapon, that barely went wider than her body, before twisting around and kicking out before shifting her hold on the weapon’s haft, flinging it around in a wider blow.

Ranma yelped as that blow nearly took his head off, Lim having surprised him for the first time since they had met. Part of that was the fact that despite Akane having used a mallet on him, Ranma hadn’t really **fought** anyone wielding a warhammer before, and the mallet and the warhammer were only superficially similar. And part of it was the fact that Ranma was a little freaked out at the sheer delight on Lim’s face.

“Right,” Ranma said, dodging backwards, “Time to step it up a notch.”

He dove in, his hands flashing, fist smacking into the head of the Warhammer, and then Ranma’s other fist flew towards Lim’s face. She dodged backwards, the end of the Warhammer

coming up in a jab towards Ranma's throat, even as Lim used the momentum of the block to move hit her weapon into position for that jab.

Ranma twitched his body to one side, moving around the blow, his hand flashing up to catch the shaft of the metal warhammer between her two hands, and then twirling, hurling Lim to the side to land in a nearby snowdrift. However, Lim didn't let go of the weapon, instead getting her feet underneath her. With a grunt of effort Lim kicked off hard and flung herself back up and over, using Ranma's grip on the shaft of the Warhammer like it was a pole her feet flashing towards Ranma in a mule kick.

Ranma found himself staring and unabashed wonder at her thighs and panties so revealed, and completely ignored the fact that her feet had just bumped into his chest with enough force to hurl a normal man off his feet. Even Ranma stumbled, then he let go of the shaft and grabbed her legs before Lim could recover, twirling her around to toss her into a nearby snowdrift.

She landed with "Oof!" but bounded up, shaking the snow off herself, and looking down at the weapon with some amusement. "I think, Ranma," Lim whispered, "That we are even closer now. This feels almost right to me."

"That's what I was worried about," Ranma said with a sigh, shaking his head to clear it of the blush that the view Lim had given him.

Lim noticed, one eyebrow rising as she was about to ask questions before she winced as the pain of her shoulders and arms began. "Ow." A moment later as the pain in her arms began to really register, she repeated herself, louder. "OWW."

Ranma looked at her, then moved to stand behind her, his hands on her shoulders. "Hold still." He ran his hands down Lim's arms, his fingers glowing blue for a moment, and Ranma shook his head. You do know you just pulled your arm muscles something fierce with that little maneuver, right? The flip thing was cool but has way more to do with arm strength than leg and you don't have the upper body strength for that kind of thing without any preparation just yet."

"Just yet," Lim repeated, as Ranma's touched soothed her pulled muscles healing them from the inside. "Does that mean you're already thinking of a new training regimen for me?"

"Quite," Ranma sighed. "I'm not exactly happy about it, frankly I hate mallets so much I don't want anyone near me wielding a hammer. But it's either that or the axe and I think a mix of the two would work pretty darn well for you."

This led them to another weapon that knights used, one side of the weapon was a hammer, the other a short-bladed axe, the edge of the blade curved in such a way to come to a thin point. It was an ugly looking weapon, made to either smash a man's armor to pieces, or to

open it up like a crab, but Lim liked it. She still said it felt slightly wrong in her hands, but it would work for now. After the war was over, she might commission a weapon from the smiths in Leitmeritz. But until then, this would work very well.

Training began later that day not on the weapon, but on strength training. This put Ranma in a very difficult position frankly. Most of the training techniques he knew about, especially in terms of strength training or endurance came from his old man and Cologne. In other words, they were not something Ranma wanted to do to a girl who he was, in local parlance, courting. He confessed that to Lim, and then added "I mean some of these are like really bad, especially the endurance ones."

"Give me an example," Lim replied not becoming angry or concerned, and not immediately deciding that Ranma was looking down on her, which Ranma had been quite frightened she would. His experience with attempting to train Akane back home was now foremost in his mind for an obvious reason.

"Well, for instance of the endurance training, well the first bit of endurance training I did was to simply be smacked between two tree limbs, while also fighting off my old man. The second, was to be tied to a rope, and then swung repeatedly into a boulder or vice versa." That actually hadn't been Genma's idea, that had been Cologne's when she trained Ryoga to be a rival for Ranma, but Ranma had followed up on it afterward, although never to the extent pig-boy had.

Lim winced, looking over at Elen. The four of them were having lunch together, something that they had been doing all winter long since Ranma had returned. It was a time where Regin was too busy to join them and the other nobles were equally occupied with their own things, a time just for the four warriors. Elen too looked a little appalled. "That is indeed a bit much. Do you know any other ways to build up Lim's endurance?"

"Not past a certain point," Ranma admitted. I mean we'd worked up to that point, of course, but at this point, Elen, you're at the point where I'd be, generally speaking, starting to get into the extreme end of my repertoire of training methods anyway. I can keep giving you strength and speed training, more strength training than speed without getting too painful, but there is no way to build endurance past human norm that isn't extreme by its very nature."

"I understand why you don't want to put me through this training Ranma, and why you think I'm not up to it but I think I am," Lim said after a moment, her tone soft, yet very firm. "And I want you to try. I won't hold it against I promise."

Ranma sighed, then nodded his head. "Fine. We'll try it. But I reserve the right to tell you I told you so!"

"That, might be at step too far," Lim chuckled, with Elen nodding firmly beside her. "Being proven right is one thing, rubbing it into my face afterward is just not on."

“Word to the wise it’s never a good thing when you’re courting to do that kind of thing,” Elen added, smirking at both boys.

Elen and Tigre soon left the lunch table, leaving the blonde woman and Ranma alone. Lim moved around the table to sit beside Ranma, reaching under the table and taking one hand in hers. “Why are you so scared about me using a hammer? You mentioned a mallet several times today.” When Ranma opened his mouth, Lim put her hand over it, shaking her head. “And don’t try to deny it Ranma, I heard you mention it too often and I saw your face when I came at you with the warhammer. What’s wrong?”

Ranma looked away for a moment, but didn’t pull his hand out of Lim’s, turning back after taking several deep breaths. “I, I ain’t scared of the weapon or nothin’ like that,” Ranma began his previous hick accent back home coming through now before he got a hold of himself. “But I have a whole mess of bad memories associated with a mallet. And a cast iron skillet too, admittedly. Akane wasn’t picky.”

“Akane?”

“You remember me mentioning the girls back home and how screwed up everything was thanks to my Old Man and honor pulling me this way and that? Akane was the so-called heir of the land-style of Anything Goes. The one I barely knew for two hours before dining myself engaged to her.”

Hissing, Lim nodded, remembering that conversation with Ranma and Valentina in the hot springs Ranma had made back near the refugee camp. “Yes, I remember you mentioning them, but not by name. This Akane was she being trained in a hammer? Did she often beat you in spars or something?”

Ranma cracked a laugh so loud it caused Lim to wince, but there was no humor in the sound. “Hah! She wishes! No, she wasn’t trained in it. She just smacked me with her mallet any damn time I did something she could label as being perverted or showing interest in the other girls over her. I told you, they were all more about the competition than actually trying to court me.”

Scowling Lim gave Ranma a hug. “Ranma, I promise. I will not just attack you like that. Not even if you are doing something that could be construed as perverted. You have proven trustworthy on that score several times this winter, indeed,” she smiled wryly, “precisely once a month you prove it multiple times.”

Flushing Ranma understood that Lim was talking about how he used pressure points to relieve Lim, Elen and Titta (and before them Valentina) of the monthly monster. Those pressure points were very close to the area most impacted by that time and Ranma had to renew them every six hours. Yet not once had Ranma, in his female form to make it less embarrassing, ever tried to let her hands wander.

Lim turned Ranma so their eyes locked. "Ranma, again, I promise. I will not pass judgment on you for anything like that, not without listening to your side of things first. Okay?"

"Ehe, what about how you are with Tigre?" Ranma asked, a faint frown on his face.

"Now that's different. He's courting Lady Eleonora, and no man is worthy of her hand!" Lim huffed, and Ranma laughed, shaking his head while Lim went on. "Besides, Vorn already has Titta and Regin interested in him, and there's no honor obligation or anything of that nature there." She scowled, looking away. "I understand he isn't a pervert, nor is Vorn leading them on or anything. But he does find himself in perverted moments a little too often."

"Just promise me to extend him the same courtesy ya do me, okay?" Ranma asked, going to bat for his friend. Lim had nearly killed him a few times during their chase earlier that day after all.

"...fine. I promise not to overreact, not without extreme provocation towards me, anyway," Lim promised.

Chuckling, Ranma figured that was the best he was going to get, and honestly a part of him figured if Tigre did find himself in any situation with Lim, Ranma kind of wanted Lim to smack him one. Either that or Ranma would himself. "Okay, I'll help train you in the hammer-axe thing. But I will hold ya to your word about not getting angry with me about the strength and endurance training okay?"

After her second day of endurance training, Lim understood why Ranma had wanted her to promise on that score because she felt like someone had, ironically, taken a small bung hammer to every portion of her body and bluntly beaten her black and blue. The fact that her skin wasn't black and blue was small comfort.

As Lim felt herself being untied from a stone, Lim looked up at her tormentors/boyfriend, her eyes narrowed. "Are you telling me this is really how you built your endurance?"

"No," Ranma said shaking his head and looking around at the straw-covered rock he'd set down a moment ago from where it had been hanging by a long rope. "I told you how I learned, all at once with one giant stone piece slamming into me. Be grateful that I'm using straw-covered rocks instead of just rocks."

"Ugh, I believed you before, but I don't think it really sank in how crazy this is," Lim sighed. "As it is, I," she pausing, trying to move her legs from where she had dropped onto her chest on the ground upon being released from the stone. "I don't honestly think I'll be able to move. My body's too damn sore. No wonder you had me doing the strength training first, you masochist."

“Yeah, it kind of does build up a bit, and I ain’t the one who wanted me to train ‘em like this Lim,” Ranma retorted before softening his tone. “So you’ve got a choice, I can take you in and have Titta feed you, or I can get you a meal and we can eat out at the hot spring. The hot spring will do your muscles way more good in the long term than relying on my ki healing you.”

“...I honestly don’t think I’ll be able to change myself Ranma,” Lim admitted after a moment shaking her head. “And while the idea of you touching me all over is both arousing and painful at the same time at the moment, I don’t think that that would be a good idea.” Lim felt actually they were closer to that moment than she felt appropriate after not even a single season of courting but Lim wasn’t about to act on that feeling. Not yet.

Ranma nodded, hefting her to up in his arms in a princess carry. Lim blushed, but could do nothing more than flop in his arms, her body just literally was not following her commands right now.

“Titta feeding you, and then a massage before you sleep it is.” Ranma smiled sympathetically and even as he spoke, he was already shunting some of his ki into her, his arms glowing blue. The touch of the blue glow soothed Lim, causing her to sigh in relief. “Thank you,” she whispered, causing Ranma to chuckle a little.

Moments later, after helping Lim change into her winter night things, Titta found it somewhat hilarious to feed the older blonde girl like she was a baby, making “Now say Ahh” noises,” and “Here comes the dragon, chomp it all down.”

Very aware of her dignity at all times, Lim spent much of the meal glaring at the girl. Still, Lim opened her mouth when needed and ate her food without complaint beyond the glare. “Shouldn’t you be saving all of this nonsense for when you’re doing this to lady Elen?”

“I’m practicing,” Titta retorted, then paused. “Do you really think that Elen will want to go through the same training you are? I know Lord Tigre decided not to.”

“The strength training no, the endurance training, perhaps?” Lim shrugged astonished to find that she could move her shoulders now. Whatever Ranma had done to her while carrying her had helped, even if he had refused to just use his ki to take away her pain entirely.

“Heh, that’s something to look forward to then,” Titta giggled maliciously, and Lim shuddered, thankful beyond measure that the two other women interested in Ranma were elsewhere at that moment,

Later on, Ranma came back into Lim’s room, to find her having been changed by Titta. Ranma too had changed, though not his clothing, his body, now being in his female form. “How are you feeling Lim?”

“Better than I expected,” Lim admitted. “Not good by any means but I don’t feel as if I will fall apart like glass if I try to move.”

Chuckling, Ranma nodded. “Yeah, that’s how Ryoga felt the first few times, and trust me, he was already more durable than you are. Not any faster and I think you have the edge on him when it comes to training too.”

Not by much though, and his strength is a lot higher than anyone here, she added mentally. And when it came to pure hand-to-hand, Ranma would stack pig-boy against any of the girls he’d met here except for Sasha who could probably have beaten Ryoga into submission even without her Viralt. With them, Sasha was just this side of terrifying even to Ranma. *A good target for me though,* Ranma thought, grinning at the thought of challenging that woman again.

Luckily Lim didn’t see that grin, or she might’ve misconstrued it and after a second’s hesitation, Ranma asked, “So, do you want me to massage you now?”

Lim frowned a little, then nodded. “Please. Just don’t let your hands wander?” Lim tried to make it a joke, knowing she could trust Ranma, although there was real annoyance in her voice and a little concern too. The lack of control Lim currently had of her body was putting Lim on edge. One thing that Lim had learned over the years was that helplessness was never a good thing, and being this weak brought back memories that she would rather do without of her time as a young child, and some of the most dangerous moments Lim, a child born into a wandering mercenary band, had found herself in.

Ranma just nodded and without further preamble began to massage her feet. Lim blinked, the feet not having been the target of the training/torture she’d gone through that morning, but Ranma didn’t answer her nonverbal question, simply channeling some ki through his hands. A second later, Lim wasn’t questioning Ranma’s choice, she was barely keeping in a moan of delight.

As Ranma began moving up her legs, her touch soothed Lim’s sore and battered muscles, being very careful to steer clear of the pressure points that normally would’ve been already touched by her massage, so that the pain from Lim’s monthly visitor would subside. Now, Ranma had attempted to stay away from any points that would make Lim uncomfortable, and succeeded magnificently. Yet, the areas Ranma did touch were no longer in pain. That was enough, and frankly, Ranma pressing her ki into Lim like this was causing Lim all sorts of issues. That wasn’t something Ranma did normally when giving her a massage to get rid of the monthly monster, but the redhead was doing so now and to a far greater degree than he had ever done before.

“Mmm, what are you doing to me,” Lim moaned, *other than driving me insane,* she mentally added.

“Trying to help your muscles along,” Ranma said. “They’re not broken or anything, just bruised and pulled. So I’m fixing it slightly, not enough to take the progress you made, rather, to help strengthen them as we go. It’s a lot tougher than just taking away the pain, but it will help you make progress way quicker than I did,” Ranma replied, even as she began to knead at Lim’s stomach. Soon though Ranma gently flipped Lim onto her front, and Lim, winced, anticipating pain that didn’t come.

A second later though, as Ranma worked her back something went crack, and Lim yelped, causing Ranma to chuckle. “You are really tense back here.”

“When you have a chest like mine, your back being tense is the least of your troubles,” Lim retorted with some of her normal fire, shaking her head.

Ranma rolled his eyes at that, but continued to press her hands deeply into Lim’s back and shoulders, working out the shoulders in particular then down her arms. Lim’s arms and felt like noodles before. Now, they still felt like noodles, only extremely happy ones, as pleasure began to wash through her. Lim moaned again when Ranma worked something in her wrist and palm, and then back up to her shoulder and neck. A sharp twist, caused Lim’s eyes to fly open, and then there was a click, but her neck suddenly felt better than it had for weeks. “W, what was that?”

“A lot of tenseness leaving the body all at once,” Ranma snorted, “you’d be amazed how much muscle pain sometimes builds up in your system. Now, can you do me a favor?” the redhead requested, moving down to Lim’s lower back kneading and working the muscles.

Lim moaned, and Ranma took that as a reply. “Could you breath in for me when I tell you to and then exhale slowly as I begin?”

With her new range of movement, Lim nodded her head and what followed was about 20 more minutes of pure unadulterated bliss. By the end of it, Lim felt like she’d been put through a charge once more, but all of the pain from her day had gone. She didn’t feel revitalized or anything like that, but there was no more pain and Lim fell asleep right there on her bed at as Ranma continued to work her muscles for a few moments until she he noticed that she was now starting to snore lightly under her breath.

With a faint fond smile on her face, Ranma left her there, shaking her head. *Well, this winter is getting more interesting now, isn’t it?*

OOOOOO

After rubbing at her nose with a handkerchief from a sneeze which had gripped her for no reason she could discover, Valentina set the cloth down and went back to tapping her lips with a finger, staring at her secret ledger in annoyance. This was the ledger no one else saw, the one where she kept the monetary side of her clandestine activities in order, the things that she did not want anyone, and in particular, the tax collectors to know about. Yes, even Vanadis were taxed, just as the equivalent of the noble Lords of their station. Of course, given the size of Osterode, the tax collectors had never really been able to, in the words of one taxman 'get as much milk without the moo' out of this particular cow as they could have wished.

That would have changed, had they seen this book.

Normally, Valentina was good enough at keeping her activities off the record and in particular her various contacts with other countries, that looking at this book made her smile. Now, however, there was no smile on her face, merely a slight downturn of her lips as she tapped them, working out the numbers in her head. That was because of the amount of liquid assets Valentina had been forced to turn over to a few of her local factors in the capital city, along with their specific orders as to what to pursue after she left. That, on top of the purchases that she had made herself.

First were the things she hadn't had to hide. With the news that the Horse Lords were possibly uniting under new warlord, Valentina could get away with quite a bit in terms of planning for that eventuality. So long as the taxman did not actually ask how she was paying for them anyway.

These kinds of purchases included a full work team of men who could build crossbows, and would be willing to both move and train others in their craft. A farseeing device, the kind that Ranma had called a primitive spyglass, which were in use by mariners for the most part, and whose utility had not yet quite been grasped by nobles in terms of its impact on warfare, at least not in Brune or Zhcted. On top of that, she had retained the services of a master map maker, as well as his apprentices.

Other purchases, however, had to be clandestine due to the impact she hoped to see them have in the future.

In the two days that she had spent in the capital before being pointedly reminded that she should be 'voluntarily' exiling herself back to Osterode, Valentina had hunted down a few very odd folk. Natural scientists they were called. People who looked at the world and questioned why. Why was lightning attracted to high points? What kind of soil was best for what plant? How did you go about collecting this or that natural element?

Valentina also poached a few discontented blacksmith apprentices, offering them money to leave their masters. Considering what she wanted them for, apprentices were more than enough. Valentina also had two master blacksmiths in her lands already, who could be

coerced into taking more apprentices at need. To have a few more people around to train couldn't be any worse than working with the alchemist's guild after all

The worst expense however had been the items Valentina had to purchase. Her lands could produce a lot of what she needed to needed, but harvesting the items in her lands however was going to be very difficult, hence the natural scientists. And to start off with, to get the alchemists working, she'd had to bring in a lot of charcoal, bat guano, saltpeter and metal. The metal would be an ongoing expense, since Valentina had overestimated how much iron Osterode's tiny mine could produce.

If it all worked, and over the past month Valentina had seen some progress perhaps it might, it would be well worth the investment. If not, well...

Sighing, Valentina reached for a cup of tea that she had been drinking as she continued to work the numbers in her head. Right now Valentina was operating in the red, both on this book and the official one. *There isn't enough leeway for me to pay for actually fielding my troops.* An army on the march always cost more to maintain than an army at rest. Even if you could, somehow, live off the land there were many other expenses, and far more wear and tear on equipment.

If the Horse Lords do come across the border in force, I might be forced to use ransoms and pillaging in order to pay my troops! Or worse, Valentina actually shuddered, hugging her cup of tea to her bosom in horror, *go to a money lender! That would be disgusting on many levels.*

Of course, if I had made that deal with Ganelon to provide him and his crony sanctuary, money would not be an object. Even as she thought that in a rather rueful tone, Valentina knew that she wouldn't have after meeting Ranma. Somehow, she just knew doing so would've bitten her in the rear eventually, specifically the exact moment that her prospective swain discovered Valentina had done so. Although he had evinced a willingness to back her ambitions, Valentina instinctively knew that there was a limit to what Ranma would condone.

No. I must find the means to raise the money somehow. Or cut down further on ongoing expenses. *Hmm... while Master Trivedi is already working wonders, and he has willingly agreed to both use the new method of mapmaking, I think I will need to see if he is willing to take a pay cut to pay for learning it. That, and his use of my spyglass. Other than that, perhaps a direct tax on the purchase of a plow, paid upon receipt of the plow? Make it a silver crown, and most farmers would leap at it, even on top of actually buying the plow at two. Given the demonstrations I've had the smiths put on that could work. That will raise more money, although I doubt it...*

Valentina's reverie on the money issue was disturbed by a pounding on her door. *Who would dare?* Valentina thought, getting to her feet, and grasping Ezendeis as she moved

towards the doorway to her inner sanctum. All her servants knew not to disturb her unless called for, and indeed, only Valentina had the keys to this room.

Outside she found one of her servants grappling with one of the alchemists. "I'm sorry my lady," the servant said bowing his head to her as he kept a hold on the other man's shoulders. "The man just wouldn't take no for an answer, he barreled past the guards, and..."

"It's all right, thank you Arthur," Valentina interjected, nodding her head politely to the older man. "You can let him go."

The older man did so, scowling as Valentina looked at the alchemist in question.

If someone from Ranma's world was going to paint a picture of a mad scientist, albeit one dressed in medieval clothing, this person would be it. His eyes were somewhat wild, his eyes also never quite tracked person he was talking to, his face and hands stained with soot. His hair was a frizzy mass of cloud around his head, and he moved with the same jittery, swift movement of a squirrel, his hands constantly moving this way or that, as if he had a thousand thoughts in his head and couldn't really concentrate on what was going on in front of him.

Before Valentina could address him, the man began to prattle. "We've done it! We've done it, and controlled to, the new blasto-sphere my own name you know, thoroughly excellent, the compound is almost perfect, and the explosive properties, yes and and..."

Valentina's eyebrows rose, and she smiled in delight. "Show me."

From her keep, Valentina followed the man through a side door leading out into a former training area for the pikemen but which had been turned into a kind of laboratory in school, by local artisans. It was a series of buildings with heavy stones sides, but very flimsy roofs. Another design she had gotten from Ranma to, as he put it, "Make the explosions happen upward."

Here, a mix of alchemists, natural scientists and local men moved around, with two of the blacksmiths apprentices she had retained a few months back currently arguing about some kind of mix or other of metal with a few of them. The phrase 'Mix' was certainly on the mind of the alchemist who had brought her here, who continued to prattle on about this or that compound as he led her to an area near the back.

"Stand well back my lady," the alchemists said, gleefully picking up a large clay container, his voice misting in the chill of winter. "I'm going to add the fire now, and this compound, my blasto-sphere, it doesn't like fire."

A long string had been steeped in wine, and stuck on the top of a clay bottle. The alchemists now moved over to a brazier, lighting the string's tip, before tossing the clay jar.

It clunked down onto a strong mattress set nearby, and Valentina looked at the man quizzically. He shrugged, the length of the burning match is something we haven't quite gotten right. So, if the compound hits the claw will break and then the compound will spread, it won't explode because the fire won't reach every part."

A second later, the explosion went off with a dull *Whump!* the straw mattress was gone, blasted into pieces.

Valentina smiled. It wasn't a large explosion, but it was most decidedly an explosion, and a controlled, created on purpose, rather than accidentally like so many others had been since work on this project had begun.

This most decidedly gave her hope for the future, and staring down at the explosion, she even knew how to go about utilizing them. Looking around, she beckoned to one of the locals, a former servant of hers who she had decided to set to work with the alchemists due to his ability to smooth ruffled feathers. When he came close, Valentina smiled gently at him, causing the young man to blush. Young Dimitri had a bit of a crush on her, but he also had a very good grasp of math, and both a willingness to work with the alchemists, who were crazy to a man and a loyalty to her which could not be denied to go with his ability to work well with others.

"Dimitri, you were once a shepherd, weren't you? I imagine you still have your sling. Could you show these gentlemen how large a clay container you could hold in a sling? And then, show me how far a sling staff could hurl something."

Looking between his Lady and the smoldering fire to one side, Dimitri's eyes widened, then he nodded hurriedly, twisted and ran off like a hare.

Valentina chuckled at that before turning back to the mad scientist. "Now, tell me more about this compound, what it is made of, and how volatile it is. Can you transport it?" It wasn't quite the gunpowder that Ranma had talked about, but it was certainly a step in the right direction and made Valentina's concerns about wasting money decrease ever so slightly.

Later that day, Valentina had her twice monthly meeting with her pike company captains. While they had more than a month and a half to go before winter ended out here, winter being slow to loosen its grip near the steppes, the Horse Lords would already be on the move. With one captain already in action in Brune, and the other leading his pike company on the road to arrive almost on the heels of the campaign season, Valentina had six captains left, leading six pike companies.

Before this winter, that had meant that each of them led a hundred and twenty to two-hundred men. Now, however, with the changes she'd made since returning to Osterode, that had changed.

"Gentlemen," Valentina began as she sat down at the head of the table, "how goes the training on the new crossbowmen?"

The group of crossbow makers Valentina had brought along when she had left the capital city had begun to make progress on building up a large reserve of men trained with the weapon almost immediately. Indeed, creating the crossbows in the first place was the most time-consuming aspect, training people on their use was remarkably simple in comparison to bows. They didn't have the range of a long bow, but they did have as much stopping power if not more so, and since the Horse Lords usually didn't use much in the way of armor, they could be devastating on horse and man alike.

"Quite well, my lady. The new crossbowmen have taken well to our discipline and we've been working through a few tactics. We've some battle formations for you to review if you like," the most senior of the captains answered. He was a short, very wiry old man, who almost had the look of someone's grandfather until you looked into his eyes. Then you wondered whether or not he had missed his calling as a pirate. The fact that he was indeed a grandfather always amused Valentina. Indeed, two of his sons served in the pike companies as well.

"Excellent. How many crossbowmen have the training center turned out so far?"

One of her other advisors stepped forward, bowing to the table where the captains sat with Valentina. "Three-hundred and seventy-seven so far, my lady. Another group of forty, minus one or two more dropouts, will be done training on the crossbows within the week. We don't have enough weapons for all of them just yet, but we should by the start of spring." He went on more hesitantly, "As you know of course, our local crossbowmen haven't been able to create enough of the weapons for us to use and we've been forced to purchase..."

"Yes, I know that," Valentina cut in more tartly than she would normally allow herself, the comment sparking a little too close to home considering her own worries about money.

"My lady, you have this surplus of manpower to play around with during wintertime. But once the growing season begins, most of our new recruits are going to want to go home. Contract or no contract we will have trouble keeping them under arms if they know that their farms and families need them. Are you so sure...?"

Valentina held up a hand, and the captain who had spoken, a younger man around her own age, and the son of a knight of some repute paused, bowing his head towards her. "Apologies, Lady Estes."

"Unneeded. I realize that the swing plows and the other concepts that I have been pushing for this winter are new and in your eyes untested. But they will be a major help, decreasing the number of men needed on the farms. Indeed, I expect for most farms to grow in the news few years because of them. You've already seen how much manpower the water-powered cutting mill can help with. Believe me, that is just scratching the surface."

The captains all looked at one another. To a man, they were not certain that they agreed with their lady's belief on that score. However, if they could retain their new recruits, all their companies would soon go up to over two hundred and fifty men each. That wasn't quite the two crossbowmen to one pike that Valentina had wanted to field this next year, but it would certainly come as a surprise for the Horse Lords.

There were just so many innovations coming this winter, one after another, that the six captains were having trouble keeping up. That wasn't to say they disapproved of most, though. The idea of having a baggage train composed of mules for example rather than carts just made sense to them. Out here there were few roads that could really take a cart, let alone in spring. And each company retaining their own mules, and workers for them, was again perfectly understandable. It added an internal ability to deal with the wear and tear on equipment.

The idea of adding crossbowmen, that was a bit more difficult. The weapon wasn't unknown, but it was a thing for hunters or, at best, marines in the navy. Using them in a land engagement, in particular, in the numbers Valentina wanted to, was bizarre and simply new.

Valentina was about to make it worse. "On that note, let me tell you about what I just saw at the alchemist's workshop gentlemen. I am certain when I do, you'll understand why I am so enthusiastic about these new innovations."

The crossbows to start with, along with the grenades. Then muskets to replace the crossbows. Everyone will be used to working with long ranged weaponry by that point and we will have tactics and formations built around it. It should only be a matter of time until we can make that switch too.

A few moments later, the captains were once more exchanging looks, but they were now looks of speculation. The amount of destructive power that Valentina had just explained would make any kind of cavalry charge in the world stop in its tracks. It would wreck any infantry charge in the world come to that. But horses would simply panic at the first blast, the sound alone would see to that. And without their horses the Horse Lords lacked the organization necessary to stand against their forces.

"What are you imagining to do with this new creation my lady?" requested one of the captains, a man name Geppetto. Middle-aged with a bit of a paunch, he was a former merchant and not very innovative, but excellent with logistics and keeping his men fed in the field.

"Slingers," Valentina answered instantly, "sling staff users in point of fact. To show the proof of concept, Dimitri will have a bit of a show to put on for us later. And after that, I believe that I would like a team of seven trained slingers, to be attached to each company."

"You wouldn't want to retain them as a single force?" Geppetto asked.

Valentina shook her head. “No. A smaller group of men can move much faster over any kind of terrain than a larger one, and as we all know gentlemen, it is the Horse Lords mobility which has always been a major stumbling block when dealing with them. It is why I kept your pike companies to a size of two-hundred men or less before. But with the number of mules we now have, I believe that we can retain that kind of speed, and create a combined arms company,” Valentina finished, stumbling over the word for a moment.

Those mules had been another ‘above board’ purchase, even if the monies used to do so had not been. Indeed, in total they had been the largest such. But the payoff was so obvious that Valentina had not regretted it at all.

“Combined arms company,” more than one of the captains murmured, and then one of them slapped the table. “I like it. It makes sense. And these men, these slingers, they’ll need to have a special name, slingers just doesn’t cover it. A name to show their special status in the army. And maybe each company should also have its own personal name.”

“Grenadiers,” Valentina declared firmly. “And as for names for your companies, yes, you may create your own names, but I reserve the right to veto them.”

Again the word was repeated down the table and met with general approval, while Valentina smiled. However, at that point, the question of logistics came, with a few of the captains still sorting out the idea of the pike companies reach that kind of size, let alone being composed of more than simple pikemen.

But Valentina was adamant, reminding herself of the conversations that she had had with Ranma about Napoleon Bonaparte, a man who Valentina had come to respect for what he had accomplished if not his priorities. Ranma had actually known quite a bit about Napoleon, and moreover, about the military innovations that Napoleon had put into place, specifically the Corps system, Miniature armies, each of them had retained infantry, cavalry, guns and artillery while on the march, while in battle the units could become interchanged or remain under the Corps command structure.

Valentina didn’t have nearly enough men to really create a Corps like those of the Napoleonic era. Indeed, even if the Vanadis of Osterode put every man on her lands under arms, Valentina probably wouldn’t have reached the number sufficient for a Napoleonic Corps. But the idea of smaller companies built along similar lines? With mixed arms, their own baggage trains, and everything else? Valentina was certain it could work.

The captains however were not so sanguine and the oldest, whose name was Rosco, spoke up for them. “My lady, I’m just concerned. In the past when we fought the Horse Lords you retained command of the pike companies in the field, utilizing us as a single force. I understand why moving through the field separately is a good idea but believing that we could go into battle in that fashion invites destruction in detail.”

“It does,” Valentina allowed. “But I do not believe that any such destruction will come at you out of nowhere, hence the scouts I will be attaching to all of you as well. Scouts, moreover, who can act as messengers at need.”

Valentina had retained a dedicated scout force ever since she became the Vanadis of Osterode and it had served her people very well in the past. Most of the time before though they would report to her, now once more Valentina was putting a lot on the shoulders of her pike captains.

The conversations continued, but Valentina was able to respond to every objection with good concise points, both on logistics’ matters, why mules instead of horses for example, and why there was no talk of adding further cavalry to her forces. They just didn't have the horses frankly, nor the people to mount them. Questions about the alchemist’s workshop questions about why she was pushing all of these innovations, everything Valentina answered and did so well, if not convincing her captains what she was saying, then at the very least, convincing them not to argue further.

As the meeting broke up, one of them dared to ask, “My Lady, could I ask, that is, how did you come up with all of these ideas?”

Valentina smiled, putting a finger to her lips as she thought of another book, the set of notes she had made during her long discussion with Ranma, wondering what he might be up to at that moment. “Now that is a secret.”

OOOOOO

Over the next few days, and then weeks, Lim took to the strength training like a duck to water. Every week, Ranma would load her up with more training, more weight and she would take to it, grimly determined to better herself. That kind of drive made Lim all the more attractive to Ranma, and every night, the two of them would meet for a massage session,

For the first two nights, Lim fell asleep under Ranma’s hands, but a few weeks into the training regimen, Lim started to have enough energy to thank him for his services. The first time the redhead found herself being pulled down into a kiss, Lim was amused to watch the pigtail stand upright, like other parts of Ranma’s female body, but Lim was too tired to follow up on that, and Ranma seemed to sense that, backing off quickly. The second time, Ranma responded with no hesitation and a lot of ardor and the two girls began an intense make-out session, with Ranma on top of the taller girl.

But Lim had by that point decided that she wanted to reward her friend, her lover and it was Ranma's turn to moan in shock as Lim worked her hands in between their bodies, touching Ranma's breasts. Ranma squeaked a little, putting pulling back and shaking her head. "Ooh, I don't know if I'm..."

That was as far as she got before Lim's fingers found her nipple and began to play with it. "Oh, that feels weird!" Ranma exclaimed, shaking her head.

"Weird in a new but good way, or weird in a new and bad way?" Lim questioned, pausing her ministrations.

"Er, weird both," Ranma admitted with some hesitation. "Like I know it feels good, but I don't think it should? There's still an aspect of my mind that, you know, wants to reject my female form at moments like this."

"That part of your psyche is stupid," Lim declared bluntly, rolling Ranma's nipples again between her fingers causing her to squeak and blush in a most fetching manner in Lim's opinion. She pulled the redhead down towards her, and the two of them again made out for several moments, until Lim once more started to nod off.

These moments escalated every few days, first an intense make out session, with Lim practically purring under Ranma's hands, becoming more and more daring in her requests. In response, Ranma became more and more comfortable with receiving affection in his female form, until they were literally humping against one another in the bed.

About two months after Lim's new training regimen began, Ranma decided that Lim deserved a reward for reaching a milestone in her training. That day Lim didn't even need a massage, although by the look in her face, she wasn't certain if that was a good thing or not. Instead of offering her a massage anyway, Ranma said hesitantly, "You know, you've done so well with all of this training, why don't we head to the hot springs?"

Over the course of the winter, Ranma had, with the help of some of the local stone masons, constructed five points along the nearby river. These were little pools where the water of the river lapped over the edge of small stone walls. If you heated up stones and tossed them in, you could get a small hot spring, for a set amount of time. Four of them were open for public use, with set times for the townsfolk, women, men and the troopers.

But one of them was only for the nobles uses like Regin, Tigre, and the others. This of course included Ranma, who could much more easily heat the thing than any of the others with his ki attacks.

Lim frowned in thought for a moment, making Ranma blanch, but then she smiled. "I think I'd like that."

Soon enough, the two of them were in the hot spring together, each of them having taken the time to change in the nearby changing rooms, a much more elaborate thing than the small shack Ranma had thrown up back at the first hot spring he'd made. Both were dressed in the same kind of towel combination that they had used the first time, hiding everything yet also titillating once wet. And as Lim looked at the male-Ranma across from her, she again paused, thinking deeply for a second, then very deliberately swam towards him.

Ranma looked at her, calmly, not retreating, just wondering where Lim was going to take this. He had said at the start that he wouldn't push, but making out in the hot spring like this was a few steps further than they'd gone. After all, when Ranma had been massaging Lim, she'd been female, and both of them had been fully clothed, despite how wet certain parts of that clothing had gotten during the massages.

Lim plopped herself in Ranma's lap and instantly began to kiss him. Ranma returned the gesture, opening his mouth and tapping his tongue against her lips, causing Lim to smile slightly, her lips moving against his before she too opened her mouth. Despite deeply appreciating the fact that Ranma wouldn't push her, Lim still liked it when Ranma took the initiative like that once Lim set the limits. And right now, those limits were a good way's away.

For several moments they simply kissed and then Lim pulled back, reaching behind her to take one of Ranma's hands. Holding it by the wrist, Lim then very deliberately placed it on her breast underneath the towel she was wearing over her chest. Ranma replied instantly, the hand moving in just the right manner to win a moan from Lim as Ranma hefted the breast, his fingers working her breasts almost as if it was just another part of Lim that needed a massage until his thumb found her nipple, flicking across it.

As Lim began to hump slowly against him, Ranma lifted his hand slightly, pulling the towel off of Lim, looking at her face all the while. She blushed, but didn't reach down and correct this, so Ranma stared at her chest unabashed interest.

Lim wasn't as big as Elen, but she still was quite big, perhaps half a size again larger than Ranma in his female form, filling Ranma's hands and then some. Her nipples were a distinct light pink color, gleaming with the water in the light of the nearby braziers. The color reminded Ranma of a Sakura blossom and about the same size. Her nipple dominated her tiny areolae and Ranma worked his fingers along both nipples at once, watching in interest as they hardened into the consistency of tiny erasers. Then Ranma put his arm around Lim, pulling her slightly forward and upward, allowing his mouth to wrap around Lim's nipple.

Once more all the while he was watching her face, but she made no motion that she was uncomfortable with this. Instead she smiled at Ranma then let her head fall back as she moaned at his touch. "Hmm, that's it Ranma, yesss..." Once more Lim began to move her hips slightly, finding Ranma's rising erection and beginning to grind a little against it working her still toweled lower regions against his.

There was no move to remove her lower towel, but this was a way's different than it had felt in girl form and Ranma found himself slowly losing control. The pleasure he was dealing with was very different in his male body, far more intense and directed. Before, Ranma had felt it in her chest and lower regions, now it was just down there, and Ranma could feel his crescendo coming quickly.

Lim seemed to sense this, and pulled away slightly, her nipple leaving Ranma's mouth with a loud pop, causing her to giggle a little, shaking her head. "We can't leave a mess in the water," she whispered, reaching past Ranma and lifting herself up over the edge behind him. In so doing Lim very deliberately grinded both her breasts and then her stomach and then even lower down into Ranma's face.

This might've backfired, her feet catching him in his crotch if Ranma hadn't her reacted quickly, boosting her up and over him with a single hand, catching both of her feet one after the other. Yet with that, it had been an extremely erotic thing to do, and Ranma shuddered a little as Lim's covered hips passed by his head even as it gently moved across his face.

Then Lim was out on the cleared area around the pool, gesturing Ranma to join her.

They didn't go any further that night, but Ranma thoroughly enjoyed himself exploring Lim's breasts and chest. The look of utter fascination on her face as Ranma joined her, did more for Ranma's ego than any amount of sparring or words from his father had ever done in his entire life. Then to his delight, he found out that she was ticklish directly around the belly button.

Neither of them noticed that they had an audience. Elen and Tigre had been out with the troops that day, pushing the regular infantrymen into an all-day march, marching along with them. While the rest of the troops had to take turns to head to the baths and cool houses, however, the two leaders, or rather Elen, had elected to head to the noble hot spring, only to arrive as Ranma and Lim began their intense make out session.

Tigre, who had been dragged there by Elen, turned instantly to leave, but Elen grabbed his shoulder whispering harshly "Don't move, they'll see us! And I am not going to embarrass my best friend like that." Instead, she dragged him into the bush, where they watched for a while, until Elen turned to Tigre, and with an intense blush on her face and a wry twist of her lips, said, "Gives you ideas, doesn't it?"

Before Tigre could answer, he felt Elen kissing him, the woman having been extremely turned on by the scene they were seeing.

The next morning as they all sat down to breakfast, Ranma looked at Tigre's blushing face, while Regin and Titta were looking between him, and the suspiciously smug-looking Elen. "You okay, Tigre? You're not coming down with a fever, are you?"

“N, no, nothing like that! It’s just um, it’s just a momentary bug. Yesterday’s endurance run was a challenge, that’s all. I think I’ll take it easy this morning yes, that’s what I’ll do,” Tigre stuttered, looking away from his friend.

Ranma shrugged, and proceeded to ignore the moment, while Regin and Titta continued to glare daggers at the now quite insufferably smug Elen.

Two nights later, however, things began to change. The winter had finally begun to thaw, and that meant it was time to start moving troops.

“We need to start moving now,” Tigre concluded a long oration on that score, looking at Regin in earnest, who had argued for waiting longer, thinking that Thenardier’s forces would slowly come apart the longer they waited and word of her being alive spread. “The faster we do, the more troops we can have in the field, the better we’ll be.”

“Are you sure about that? I don’t think the roads are going to be at all passable for a good while yet. Most of them anyway, remember, all of the roads are made of dirt, and what you get when you get a lot of melting snow? Water. Water plus dirt equals mud,” Ranma interjected, not in favor of waiting, just commenting.

“True, but we can take precautions against that. Remember, that’s actually to our benefit.” Lord Hughes several of the other commanders looked confused, but Ranma just nodded, realizing the point that Tigre was making, as did Elen and Lim.

“Many of our best forces aren’t built for traditional warfare. Our archers and scouts can move over rough terrain easily,” Lim explained, shrugging her shoulders. “And, those that are can operate better on their own.”

Like Valentina, Lim and Elen had decided to import mules, making a few of Zhcted’s nobles very rich in doing so to work for the Army. The scouts of course could operate entirely on their own carrying whatever they needed.

“We also have an advantage in leadership,” Elen intoned, gesturing around the table. “We all know and trust one another to do what we are supposed to. Thenardier only has a few such commanders, and they are all apparently in the army or currently contemplating suicide,” she added with a snort, looking over at Ranma. Word of one nobleman who was trying to kill himself after having been robbed of all strength after his run-in with Ranma had reached them through the priesthood. Ranma winced, not exactly happy with that, but he still felt that giving Armand the Moxibustion treatment had been a great example of the punishment fitting the crime.

Between them, Elen and Tigre browbeat Regin and the others down and soon the army was gearing up for war. The troops would move out from their scattered camps, but in small lots for now and in different directions. Regin and Tigre, at the princess’s insistence and over

Elen's objection, would take a company of horse archers, along with the latest Knightly Order representative, heading straight east to talk to the rest of the Knightly Orders who had yet to commit to the Silver Meteor Army in person.

Meanwhile, Elen would lead a force of engineers and archers, along with a company of Valentina's pikemen to take over command of the Eagle's Tower, the Silver Meteor Army's forward position. They would start to prepare bridges there. Bridges would help the army cross all the faster into what had previously been a no-man's-land between the Silver Meteor Army's territory and the territory that had gone over to Thenardier. That territory was now in severe doubt however, considering how many of its nobles had basically told Regin that they would support her as heiress presumptive.

"Of course," Regin mused as they talked about that point, "The one person we haven't heard from yet is the most important: my father's Chamberlain Bedouin."

"You mean the asshole that had a hand in trying to kill Sofy," Ranma growled, his face turning dark, as his hands clenched dangerously. "I don't think I want to hear anything he has to say."

"I've tried to explain, that was simply..."

"I don't fucking care what it was," Ranma said coldly, cutting off Regin more rudely than he normally would when talking to anyone, let alone a girl.

In response Regin's mouth clamped down, as she saw the genuine anger in Ranma's expression. "I've told you, but maybe it's not sunk in. I don't fight for Kings, I don't fight for country, I fight for friends. Sofy is my friend and he tried to kill her. You do not want me anywhere near that man, unless you want him dead or at least broken. Am I clear?"

"So, what will you do instead?" Regin said, shaking her head.

Ranma looked over at Elen. "You taking Lim?"

Lim shook her head. "No, I'll be staying here, preparing the Army to march in small lots after Lady Eleonora."

"In that case, I'll stay here too." Elen began to grin at him, and Ranma blushed looking away. "It's not about that! But I figure any training I can give the troops right up until they start marching is a good idea, especially with the raw recruits that we've been dealing with for the past few months."

And so just like that the somewhat idyllic winter time ended, and the Silver Meteor Army went to war. But fate had two tricks up its sleeve...

The first came in the reports from the nobles around Nice that arrived a bare day after Ranma and Lim led the last group of four hundred infantrymen to the fords. Muozinel had crossed the border, and had taken South Port. Suddenly, the Civil War took second place in everyone's priority list.

And at the same time, an object fell from the sky, straight towards Lim.

Ranma saw it first, hearing something in the distance he looked around and saw something falling towards them like a star. "Look out!"

Everyone looked where he was pointing, and everyone obeyed instantly, wondering where this attack had come from. But a moment later, Elen heard Arifar speaking, and she shouted, "Wait, everyone, It's not an attack, it's..."

A second later, the object halted in midair as if it had a special understanding with the laws of physics, something that Ranma felt he should be somewhat jealous of. The object in question was a weapon, a massive, double-bladed axe in point of fact. The weapon was embedded with a fist sized topaz and engraved with delicate patterns. But beyond the fact it was hovering in the air, there were two facts about it that grabbed Ranma's attention.

First, it was pink. It was perhaps the girliest of girly weapons, so girly it made Ranma wonder if it might belong to a certain kleptomaniac skater of his acquaintance.

And second, the observation that drove the first out of his mind, was that it was hovering in the air right in front of Limalisha.

"That's a Viralt," Elen whispered. "It's one I've never seen before, so either that is Muma, or Valitsaif. But if it's here, then..."

Ranma's girlfriend was staring at the weapon as if hearing a voice in her head, and after a moment, she whispered, "The King, he, he declared Muma's previous wielder disloyal to Zhcted, and recalled it, breaking their bond. But a Viralt must instantly find another user, so instead of returning to the king, Muma, he found me..." Gulping, Lim reached forward, placing her hand on the weapon. The thing glowed for a moment, then shrank in her grip, to the point where she could place it on her back like a throwing axe.

After a moment spent staring, Ranma spoke up, trying to make light of the situation just a bit. "Huh, well, it looks like we were wrong Lim, it's the axe you..." the pigtailed martial artist paused then, his eyes narrowing as laughter began to assail his mind.

The laughter of a small child who just looked around the corner and saw something hilarious.

“Oh come on!” he shouted, causing Elen and Lim to break out into hysterical laughter of their own.

End Chapter

Chapter 9: Marching and Trolling

After about ten minutes of futilely glaring at the axe as Limalisha moved Muma this way and that, Ranma finally decided to stop letting the fact that it was still laughing at him bother him. Meanwhile, Eleonora’s thoughts had moved on from her initial shock at this sudden shift. While she had never thought Lim would become another Vanadis, she understood that each of the magical weapons looked for something different in their users. *How else could you explain someone like Eleonora, a foreigner, becoming a Vanadis for Zhcted or Elizavetta with greedy grasping nature or Ludmila, with her inherited stick up her ass?*

“I’m wondering what you’re supposed to do with such a tiny little thing. It certainly can’t have the heft or range of the warhammers and battleaxes we were playing with to see which would suit you best. Unless o’course there’s magic involved,” Ranma finished in a drawl, adding an eye-roll for good measure.

As if it understood Ranma’s words, Muma’s chuckling in Ranma’s mind shifted, changing from that of a young boy who had just seen something amusing to a sort of sinister chuckle. Ranma reflected it sounded exactly like the kind that a young boy would use when he was trying to play with ants and magnifying glasses.

Hefting her Viralt, Lim smirked at Ranma. “Let’s find out, shall we?”

Ranma shrugged, then leaped backward doing a triple flip in the air – just to show off, honestly - before landing nearby, one hand in front of him, beckoning, the other cocked back. “Who am I to say no to an invitation like that?”

Letting out a totally inappropriate chortle at that, Lim charged forward, smiling widely, wider than most of the smiles Ranma had seen on her face up to this point except for when they were alone. He just thought that even if that was the only thing that Muma did for her, it would be a good thing when the battleaxe in her hands transformed. While it looked the same for the most part, its size changed between one eyeblink and the next, becoming massive, at least twice the size it was previously.

“What the heck...!” Ranma exclaimed, leaping up and away.

The axe slammed down, where he had previously been standing, and Ranma kicked out at the weapon’s side. But at a nonverbal command, a weapon shifted again, becoming much the same size as the war axes they had been practicing with for the last month. With that,

Ranma's kick that would've sent him flying to the side while overbalancing Lim missed, leaving him in midair with his leg out.

Below, Lim twisted in place, bringing her axe up again, shifting once more into a giant form as she sliced at him.

Ranma was still able to dodge upwards, proving once again that the laws of gravity and momentum were his toys in the air, while Elen watched and laughed. A moment later, Ranma had crossed the distance faster than Lim could retract her weapon and a kick to the chest was barely blocked by the axe's shaft, hurling Lim off her feet. As she rolled and came up to a crouch, Ranma relaxed, cocking his head to one side. "Okay, I'll bite. I have to assume that its weight doesn't change at all?"

"Not only does its weight not change, but Muma's impetus doesn't change. I don't even feel any drag through the air when I'm using it, which I certainly should when it's that size," Lim stared down at the Viralt, shaking her head in shock and some bemused wonder. "Either that, or it's already given me an immense boost to my strength."

"Eh, it won't give you an immediate leg up like that. Sasha and I talked about that once, and while it will let you gain strength and speed far faster than most and access to your inner life force, that is more subtle than quick. Ooh, although you won't feel the cold anymore," Elen replied, snorting. "No more winter coats for you."

Lim looked at her childhood friend thoughtfully at that, then clicked her fingers as an idea occurred to her. "Do you know anything about the Vanadis that previously owned this weapon, Eleonora-sama?"

"You can't call me -sama anymore." Elen then laughed wildly, thrusting her fist into the air as the implication of that hit her. "Yes! Finally, I'm going to get you to stop calling me that and running after me to make certain I'm not 'acting beneath my station'."

Lim blinked, and Elen spelled it out for her. "You're a Vanadis too now, you know. And we're all equal."

At that, Lim blushed, not having realized that point and uncertain how she felt about it. Despite the fact they were best friends, being equal to her lady was something Lim had never thought of herself as.

"As for your question," Elen went on, frowning pensively. "I don't remember much about Olga. I certainly never met Muma's previous wielder, but I think that Sasha and Sofy both mentioned her. Something about Olga being from the Horse Lord lands and young to boot. I think Sofy also said something about her basically not taking over her lands? I mean, she showed up, took the oath and then disappeared."

Frowning further, she tried to remember what Sasha had said on that score and then click her fingers. "Olga wanted to go on some kind of journey or something, to get used to the idea of the weapon, and her duties as a Vanadis, looking at how various lords ruled their lands or something."

Frowning at that, Lim shook her head. "That is not how I would've done things. Especially if, and I think I am right on this, that Muma had gone unclaimed for many years before it found Olga?"

"You know, that actually is not a bad idea," Ranma said almost at the same time, causing Elen and Lim to look at Ranma in surprise, and Ranma went on, gesturing to the southwest across the river. "You probably should get used to Muma as fast as possible. Maybe by, let's say, heading across the river, see if you can find any of the bandit bands that our scouts have been reporting?"

Many of the scouts had already crossed the river, moving ahead of the rest of the army to scout out the land and check on the various nobles who had said they would be willing to support Regin's move across the river via goods and supplies. A few had filtered back, reporting that the territory was somewhat lawless, with few nobles in the area retaining enough manpower to patrol their lands, and several bandit groups had formed taking advantage of that.

"We do need to wipe away those bandit groups," Elen agreed, smirking at her friend. "And trust me, that little show you just pulled put on does show that you need some time to get used to that weapon. Probably more time than it took me to get used to this boy," she's patted the hilt of her sword fondly.

Lim slowly nodded her head. The size-changing thing had thrown her off, and if Ranma had been serious, he'd have beaten her instead of just kicking her away as he had. "Agreed." She frowned, thinking about it for a moment and slowly, Lim's frown turned upside down. "A thought occurs. Given Ranma's own experiences, acting as a poor peasant woman moving from one place to another, perhaps even pushing a cart or something similar would be more than enough of a disguise to allow the bandits to come to me."

"Heck yeah," Ranma snorted, then looked over the river and back to Lim. "In fact, I think I'll join you. Unless you need me here, Elen?" Ranma deliberately did not look at Elen as he asked this question, knowing what he would see there.

Elen was indeed grinning like the world's snarkest pumpkin, so much so that Lim blushed, muttering "Eleonora-sama!" under her breath.

"Ah, ah, ah, there's no sama there any longer," the other Vanadis caroled before nodding her head to Ranma. "But sure, I don't need you here for this Ranma," she gestured over to the number of trees that Ranma had already downed and brought to the river, stacking

them in neat piles on the Silver Meteor Army's side of the river. "You've done your bit. Now let our carpenters do theirs."

Grinning, Ranma excused himself and returned a moment later, dressed as one of the locals. His silk pants and shirt were gone in favor of heavy leggings and primitive cotton shift. Moreover, Ranma had changed into his female body, causing the cotton shift to bulge out in a way that had several nearby workmen gawping and Muma's laughter starting up once more.

Ranma was philosophical about that, actually. First, she figured that, like Arifar, exposure to his curse would let Muma slowly get over the humor of it. And second, Muma's giggles weren't anywhere near as annoying as the twin cackles of Sasha's weapons. There was something more innocent about Muma, maybe? Ranma wasn't certain how to describe it. *I got the distinct impression that Sasha's weapons consider themselves bad boys, outside of their loyalty to Sasha. This one sounds almost guilty about laughing now.* Ranma was certain, however, that it was a boy's voice, unlike Sofy or Ludmila or even Valentina's weapons.

The redhead blinked as Lim smacked her fingers in front of her face. "What were you thinking of just now?" she asked, dumping a small bag of things in front of him.

Ranma looked at the back, then smirked, looked back at Lim and asked innocently, "Did you want me to do something with that or..."

Lim rolled her eyes and made a 'get on with it' gesture, causing Ranma to smirk snort at her. "Bah, I see it now. You only keep me around as a pack mule."

"Strange, I don't think that a pack mule is the kind of animal she thinks about when she looks at you. I was thinking more stud-horse, despite it being a mislabel right now," Elen quipped.

"Eleonora-sama!" Elen shouted, now blushing hotly.

"But your stud-horse didn't answer your question, Lim. More time in the saddle might be needed to break him in," Elen smirked at her now furiously blushing friend before looking over at Ranma. "What were you thinking of?"

"The different personalities of the Viralts I've interacted with."

"Ooh, and what do they sound like?" Elen wondered. *I know my Arifar is a teen boy, but what about the others?*

"Yours is a teenage boy, Sasha's two preteen troublemakers. Mila's weapon sounds like an elderly grump, unused to laughing at all. Sofy's is a young woman with an off-center sense of humor." Ranma counted off on his fingers. "And Valentina's Ezendeis sounds like a female emo who will only let loose a chuckle occasionally."

He paused, then frowning. "I want to say Ezendeis is a bit of an Edge Lord, one of those people who'd say stuff like 'revelry in the dark' and paint everything black. Can't say entirely why I think that just from a laugh, though."

"And what about Muma," Lim asked, patting her weapon, while Elen collapsed to her knees, laughing uncontrollably at the idea of Ludmila Lourie's weapon being a crotchety old woman.

Ranma answered Lim's question while Elen's shouts of 'that fits, that so fits' resounded around them. "A younger boy, maybe nine or ten, not a preteen yet, and much more innocent-sounding than the two knives. Mind you, that's all I'm getting because of the types of laughs they have at my expense, so take it with a grain of salt." Ranma snorted, then winked over at Elen. "Although I do agree with you, the crotchety old woman thing definitely fits Mila."

Rolling her eyes, Lim turned away, grabbing up a change of clothing and heading for the keep to change.

OOOOOOO

Elsewhere, as her men finished preparing to march into Brune to help against Muozinel, Mila frowned, looking around, her eyes narrowed and a snarl on her lips.

"My lady?" one of her officers stammered, somewhat put off by the sudden change from formally serious to this vengeful, angry look.

"Why do I have the impression that someone just made a joke at my expense, and one I would find most vexing?" the Vanadis asked, before shaking her head out of the strange mood, and returning to the pain of all good generals: logistics.

OOOOOOO

Soon Lim returned, her appearance greatly changed. Gone was her normal green armor and in its place the kind of clothing that any wondering peddler would wear, matching what Ranma was already wearing. Which, of course, was what Ranma had intended. It was just another part of the disguise, like the elderly packhorse they were using, which Ranma had scrounged up while Lim was changing.

It dawned on Lim then that this little operation of theirs would probably take a few days, and they would spend that time together alone, with no other duties to get in the way. At that thought, Lim found her pulse quickening. At the same time, her smile changed ever so slightly in such a manner that Ranma began to blush looking at her, but an answering warmth entered her own expression.

The two had not much time together since the Silver Meteor Army had begun to mobilize. Ranma had pushed the newest band of scouts and saboteurs hard, trying to complete their training, to let them join the others who had already begun to move off in various directions. Not only would the scouts be moving ahead of the Army gathering intelligence, and when they started to clash with the enemy forces, doing what they could to sabotage them, but groups of them, normally four-man teams, were being left behind in the territory on this side of the river.

They would help keep order, helping the Lords who were not going into battle to maintain control of the refugee camps as those camps slowly began to come apart. That process had already begun. Many people had already begun to find new jobs, settling new farms and so forth. Only about a third of the refugees would be remaining as refugees until the war was over and they could head back home. The rest either didn't really have enough back home to care about leaving behind, had skills in demand now, or had too many dark memories to want to go home.

This is going to be a treat, Lim reflected, then felt Muma's eagerness, the weapon having sensed the bloodthirsty nature of her thoughts on the bandits they might be, *In more ways than one, apparently.*

Elen pulled Lim into a hug, then did the same to Ranma, grinning at both of them. "Take care of one another and have fun." Then her face sobered and she shook her head. "We won't be having much fun when we meet the Muozinel army in battle, believe me. As much as their entire society is based on something I find abhorrent, no one's ever accused their soldiers of cowardice."

Ranma nodded, then gestured Lim onto the cart and leading it down towards the ford the moment Lim was sitting on the cart. The cart was actually empty, except for some food, but there were a few bundles here and there of torn rags that made it look as if it had something else within, and along with the single aging packhorse, completed the image of two peddler women very much down on their luck. Now that the winter had broken, that disguise would be more than enough to convince anyone that they were peasant travelers, ripe for the plucking.

Elen watched them go, hearing Ranma's comment of, "I'm going to have to teach you how to move like a servant, aren't I? You got too much ego in your walk."

"You are the last person to speak to anyone of ego!" There was a pause, then Lim's voice went on, "What do you mean anyway?"

“Well, peasants all move like...”

Then they were out of Elen’s hearing range, and Elen chuckled before sighing and turning straight west, staring towards where Tigre, Regin and the Knightly Orders were. It still ticked her off to remember how Regin had convinced Tigre to come with her but that was neither here nor there now. Watching Ranma and Lim, even in his female form, just made her miss Tigre more. *You better not do anything with her, Tigre, just remember you belong to me!*

OOOOOOO

At that moment, Tigre and Regin had just arrived at the headquarters of the second Knightly Order that they trying to visit. They had been traveling slowly with much fanfare and panoply through the lands policed by the Knightly Orders to try and convince the Knightly Orders that Regin was truly the heir apparent to the throne instead of the only female among three pretenders. This had worked the first time and they saw no reason to change a winning formula.

News of Muozinel’s invasion from the desolate mountains to the far southwest had yet to reach this territory, and the Silver Meteor Army’s messengers had yet to catch up to them. They hadn’t even run into any trouble from bandits here, the Orders having kept their lands clear of brigandage as the rest of Brune collapsed into war and chaos. Even the roads were in good repair, which even most of the Army’s territory couldn’t claim.

Indeed, the most dangerous thing for Tigre at the moment was Regin slowly stepping up her flirtations with him. Touches on shoulder and hand had changed to touching his face and hair on this journey. Smiles had become warmer, and her modesty was slowly disappearing, despite all Titta could do to get between them.

These things were slowly having an effect. Even though Regin had been forced to dress and act like a boy for much of her life, Regin was still a beauty, if not to the same level as Elen. And even though Tigre was as dense as the mountains, through which he had hunted most of his life, he could tell that Regin was genuinely interested in him.

Coming to grips with that thought was something else, and what to do about it, something else again. Nor was this the time to about such things in Tigre’s opinion. Especially since he and Elen had come to a kind of understanding over the winter. That moment near the makeshift hot springs had not been the only such private moment they had shared.

This would all change once news of the invasion reached them, but that had yet to happen just yet as, indeed, Tigre had all of a day before that news would arrive.

But as staid and normal as it was around Tigre and Regin at that moment, elsewhere, on a small island that looked to Albion as one of its least important ports, a young girl was staring up at the ceiling of the room she had rented for the night. Or rather, where the roof should have been. Currently, there was a giant gaping hole in it, while shouts and howls of anger reverberated through the in from down below. Muma had left his master, and in so doing, had not been gentle.

Olga's hands still twinged from where she had been trying to hold on to the Viralt, confused and somewhat frightened about what had just happened. But a final image and fought from Muma, the image of Zhcted's king, accompanied by a snappish and almost derogatory feeling, had caused Olga to release it, at which point it had smashed through the roof above her like a stone hurled from a catapult.

I am no longer a Vanadis, Olga thought, still somewhat shocked. I didn't even, I didn't even know that was possible! And yet, the last image that her weapon had sent her was too powerful one for her to ignore. The King had recalled Muma because she had proven to not be loyal to Zhcted.

Olga shook her head at that, wondering how anyone could think she would be. Olga came from the Horse Lords and had never wanted any kind of power over other people and certainly hadn't wanted to fight for Zhcted, the nation that was the historical enemy of her own people. The weapons power had been great but the responsibility? No, Olga had wanted no part of that.

Instead, she had used being a Vanadis as an excuse to leave the heavily patriarchal society of the Horse Lords and travel the world. She had seen quite a lot of Zhcted in that time and then left it behind, heading into Brune, then to Albion, where this had happened.

Now, Olga scowled in annoyance, then glanced at the window and then down at her small, spare frame before nodding. She opened the window, a tiny thing and wriggling out quickly. *Best not to stick around and answer uncomfortable questions. And then, perhaps, I will join the Farseeker, its captain did offer me a place on his crew, and the ship's mission is a fascinating one.* Having been trained as a medicine woman before Muma came into her life, Olga knew many healing ointments and other things that made her invaluable on any ship. And the idea of trying once more to get into the Unknown Lands to the far West intrigued her immensely.

OOOOOO

Ranma and Lim were barely half a day's journey away from the river before they had their first customers. Not that those customers enjoyed the experience, of course.

"Well, now, what do we have here, boys?" The man who addressed them looked like the most prototypical bully-boy that Ranma had ever seen. In fact, it put Ranma in mind of an old anime she had watched. *A lot of the bandits in Slayers were kind of generic and this guy would fit right in. His men, too, seem almost prototypical bandits*, she thought while the group of peasants turned bandits around them made loud guffaws at the lady's expense leering at them. "What you got in the cart, girlies?"

"Our wares and tools," Lim said simply, looking around.

As she did, Ranma winced. There was no fear in her voice. *Whatever else we see over the next few days, I can already tell one thing, acting is never going to be something Lim can do well. At least not if it forces her to act meek. Still, it doesn't seem like acting is very necessary at the moment. Crud, these fools are incompetent.* Ranma had been looking past the bandits that had rushed out of the woods to surround them, and she didn't see any archers staying behind or any horsemen.

"Hand over all you got, and maybe we won't hurt you much. Hell, you might enjoy it," the bandit's spokesman said, laughing wildly.

Lim looked at him, then over at Ranma, and Ranma shrugged her shoulders, indicating that there weren't any watchers staying back from the rest of the group. "We're clear."

Before Ranma had even finished the sentence, Lim was off the cart, Muma in her hand and enlarging quickly. The axe grew to about half the size it had been when Lim had first used it during her short match with Ranma, crashing into the ground by the expedient course of cutting through one of the larger and more obviously leering bandits.

The man was bisected, Muma cutting him in twain, sending blood and viscera in every direction. Then his body disappeared as the battleaxe crashed into the ground where his feet had been. "Explosive Quake!" Lim roared. The ground underneath the blow exploded in every direction, creating a giant ditch in the ground in the middle of the bandit band, hurling several off their feet, burying others, simply tearing the closest two in two by the explosive force of the attack.

She twisted the battleaxe sideways, amazed anew at how light it was. It was almost as if the entire thing was made of aluminum or something similar, some insanely light metal. It didn't even weigh as much as a wooden battleaxe of the same dimensions would.

Putting that observation to one side, Lim cut sideways through another bandit, scattering his remains over several more as they charged forward's. Horror and shock were visible on their faces, but these were desperate men who knew only a noose awaited them.

And they were no strangers to violence, although Lim reckoned they weren't so used to seeing entire people cut into ribbons like this.

On the other side of the cart, Ranma had been far less murderous in her attack. Ranma didn't hold that against Lim. Indeed, from the lewd glances and ribald comments the bandits had been making to one another, Ranma wouldn't have any issue with wiping these fuckers off the face of the earth. But no. *Advertising, that's the thing* she thought, as she very purposefully knocked out six of the attackers, their bodies to the ground like puppets with their string cut, while Lim basically hacked her way through the others.

"Still, while I don't mind putting down rabid dogs in human form like this, that was kind of overkill," Ranma observed after the last bandit had fallen to a pinprick touch on his neck, gesturing to the area around them which had been liberally coated in blood and viscera. The last of the bandits had been the only one to realize that, yes, running was the best thing to do. Far too late to do any good.

Lim shrugged her shoulders, looking down at her weapon. "I rather think that a battleaxe would normally not have a means with which to knock an opponent unconscious, and whatever your initial impressions was, Muma is quite bloodthirsty. More so than I think Eleonora-sama's weapon is."

"Ehh, I think that the Fire Twins are just as vicious, but whatever," Ranma shrugged her shoulders, which did interesting things to her chest. Unlike Lim, Ranma had disdained binding her chest up, which Lim could not help but notice at the moment.

"Perhaps so, I would imagine the wounds fire can cause would call for that type of mindset. But why did you leave so many alive?" Lim asked quizzically, then she smiled somewhat vindictively. "Wait, are you going to..."

"Yep," Ranma snickered. "Call it advertising. "A battlefield like this is going to get noticed quickly, especially with summer here and people starting to move around again. So, I want a message to go out to other bandits. Groups like this always know where one another's areas, to avoid conflict so..."

With that, Ranma held up a finger which began to glow. "First, I'm going to do to them what I did to that group of pirates that attacked us on the road to Sasha's city. And then they are going to wake up here among their bodies and do the obvious thing: panic, run to their fellows with word of what happened and then realize precisely how weak they are now. What you did, and that weakness is going to spread and cause fear, pushing the bandits either into banding together, making them easier to find or to just run."

Lim nodded, reflecting on that Ranma was smarter than most people would think upon first meeting him outside of the healer's tent. He was no strategist but he did sometimes come up with some interesting tactics on the fly.

“Have you discovered how to use Muma as you wanted to? Or do you think we should keep going?”

“I think we should keep going. It’s not as if we’ve actually gone that far.” Lim looked at the mule, snorting irritably. “Do you think we can leave the horse and the cart behind now?”

Ranma nodded quickly. “Sure, put some packs on your back, and we’ll still look like merchants, only even worse down on our luck. And when it comes nighttime, we can push on.”

“I’d rather not, but yes, I think we need to put more distance between us and Eagle’s tower before we run into any truly dangerous bandits.” Lim nodded.

The two of them moved on quickly, running into no trouble for the rest of that first day out. The next day passed wetly, rain beginning early and going through much of the day, leaving them wet and annoyed. But as evening came upon them, Lim and Ranma met up with a group of the scouts who had already crossed the river ahead of the Army.

Normally, they had would’ve broken up into smaller teams, but this one was a full four-man squad, with one of them injured. Ranma recognized the injured man as one of the recruits from the refugee camp as he was treating him, while two of the others had originally been archers that Tigre had taken under his wing. The last was a farrier that Ranma remembered only vaguely, but who the others looked to as a leader.

At first, the four men thought Ranma and Lim were travelers until Ranma pulled back her hood. “Hey, you four, what’re you up to?”

Ranma’s red hair was quite distinctive, and the group went from wary and concerned to respectful and relieved in an instant. “There are at least two large bandit bands out here, Milord, Milady,” the farrier said, going up in Ranma’s estimation as he used the masculine form when addressing Ranma. Regardless of her current body, Ranma preferred that form very much, thank you. Alas, few would use it without Ranma scaring them into doing so.

“We’d been attacked ourselves a few days ago, a half-day’s travel from here,” one of the archers said, gesturing to himself and his companion, who was working out his shoulder and collarbone now that Ranma was finished with him. “We slipped away from the woods, and few among them that attacked us ‘ad much woodcraft, and we ganked several with our arrows before fading back. Then I tended to Alric’s wounds.”

“The other band is a little more serious. It’s made up of bandits and former men-at-arms,” the former farrier explained. “They are better-armed and better led. What’s worse, rumor among the peasants I spoke to is that one of the local lords might be backing them. And as for the other lords around here...”

The scouts all exchanged glances, then the farrier turned his head back to Ranma and Lim. "We memorized dozens o' coats of arms before we were allowed to cross the Resia. Several noble's who promised ta support the Silver Meteor Army wit' supplies and'd bend the knee to Regin are hedgin' their bets."

Lim waved that away. "Of course they are. They're nobles. Especially in a civil war like this, you don't survive if you are willing to jump ship from one to the other so quickly. And especially considering that these nobles will have been among those who gave of their manpower to the Royal Army that my lady smashed."

"I wouldn't use the term smashed," Ranma murmured, smirking a little wickedly. "That makes me think there was some kind of strength in the thing being hit. Smooshed would be better, since that army was rotten to the core."

All of the men there laughed at that. Brunemen to a man, they well understood by this point what had really gone on that night when Elen had launched her sneak attack and how the Army had been so decisively weakened from within.

"Do you have any idea where this second more dangerous bandit group is operating from?" Ranma asked, concentrating on something that they could do something about. The nobles who were trying to play both sides were something that the princess and Tigre would have to sort out.

Two of the scouts pulled out maps, extremely detailed ones, more so than most maps the local nobles would have access to.

Part of their training with Ranma had been on topography. Few of the scouts had really mastered it to Ranma's level, but those that had would, when this war was over, probably be able to name their price as surveyors. Ranma knew that more than a few of them were thinking of creating a kind of guild for themselves, selling their services as a group to whoever could purchase it.

Now she looked at the map with interest as the former farrier, and the others conversed for a few seconds, before slowly marking out a portion of the map. Ranma looked at it and then up at the scouts, one eyebrow rising and one of the archers obligingly moved a tiny pebble onto the map denoting their current position.

Lim also examined the map closely, taking a certain delight in how informative it was. It wasn't nearly as detailed as the maps that had been created to cover the Silver Meteor Army's territory over the Resia, those maps were things of delight, whereas these were somewhat cruder. But they still retained information about how dense the forests were, marked out minor rivers and the areas of farmland the scouts had moved through up to this point.

This included a narrow road that ran through the area where this better-led bandit group operated. Ranma pointed out, then looked at the scouts. "It's one of der favorite stomping grounds, yah. Most people goin' through that area disappear, leastwise according to the peasants."

"Good. I figure that we can get away with the poor little waifs who have lost their way thing one more time. And that looks like a great place to do it."

The scouts left that night, pushing on to get back to the rest of the army with their reports. Other scouts were still in place and moving further away from Eagle's Tower, but the farrier had made the call that Lady Viltaria at the very least needed to know that some of the nobles who had agreed to supply them might not, in fact, have those supplies to give, let alone be on their side.

Lim informed Ranma that it wouldn't matter, though. She had personally created the logistics corps of the Silver Meteor Army over the winter, and though their supplies lacked in variety, they made up for it in amount for now. They would be able to march deeply into Duke Thenardier's territory before needing to live off the land. If even a few of the nobles along the way could give them supplies, they would be able to extend that quite a bit.

Later on their third day out, Ranma was proven correct: they could pull off the innocent peasant women on their travels one more time.

The attackers didn't bother with blustering this time. They came straight out of the bushes in a pretty well-planned ambush. Several of them grabbed at the two women as others pulled back bowstrings, shouting out, "Surrender or die where you stand."

Neither woman, of course, stood still. Ranma's fist met one bandit's face, and even though the face was concealed behind a makeshift helmet of some kind, it was dark out, so Ranma didn't get much detail, both face and helmet were shattered by that punch, the man flopping backward dead before he hit the ground.

Muma flew out from its sheath at Lim's back hidden underneath her pack, slicing into one bandit as he closed, then enlarging to block a sword thrust, before the return blow cut through sword and swordsman's chest, before she leaped upwards, using that as a pivot point to head into the air, bring the axe down as Ranma took down another attacker, letting Lim concentrate on the archers. Muma's sides blocking a few arrows as they flew towards her.

Twisting Muma around, she crashed it down into the ground, and another attack lashed out, the ground in the way of the attack becoming spikes, stabbing upwards. "Rock Spike Strike!" This time it was a more focused assault instead of a wide-angle one that exploded on impact with the ground. Instead, it sliced through the ground towards the archers. Those archers and a portion of the forest around them exploded, hurling the archers every which way to fall lifeless to the ground.

Ranma had dealt with the attackers around her by that point, leaving only one of them alive to answer questions. That one screamed as a kick utterly ruined his kneecap, a light kick from Ranma admittedly, he didn't want the bone to explode and the man to bleed out. But still, the bones shattered, and the man fell to the ground screaming.

One of his fellows turned, about to run the wounded man him through before Ranma's next blow caused the man's head to fly off his shoulders. This was followed by Ranma dealing with the last two attackers in likely manner.

As the din of combat settled down, to the low whimpering one man alive, Ranma stared down at her hands, shaking her head sadly. *I know it's normal in this world, but I think if I ever get used to how easy it is to kill here, I don't think I'll be able to look at myself in the mirror.*

Seeing that look, Lim sighed, moving over to Ranma and putting an arm around her shoulders, shaking her head. It still bemused her that Ranma, one of the most dangerous combatants she had ever met or even heard of, came from a place that was so safe that taking lives seemed so oddly foreign to her at times. Despite that, Lim would give what comfort she could.

The redhead looked at her, laying her head against the side of Lim's lightly in thanks, then gestured down to the prisoner wordlessly, asking what they would do with him. Lim's lips twitched into a faint scowl at that before she whispered into the redhead's ear. "Follow my lead. You can heal his knee, correct?"

Ranma snorted, and Lim's smile turned into that of a smirk. "In that case, we have a carrot to go along with my stick."

With that, she moved to stand over the man, glaring down at him like an angry goddess. "This is how this is going to go," Lim began, nodding to Ranma.

It took a second, but with Lim's earlier question, Ranma realized what Lim wanted and held out a hand over the man's wounded knee, the hand beginning to glow with ki.

Both the movement and glow cost the man to flinch, but Lim's voice grabbed his attention. "You tell me where your bandit camp is, and my companion will heal your leg so you can lead us to it. Lead us false, and I will cut off both legs. Try to lie or bluff and we will leave you here as a cripple."

Ranma winced a little at Lim's words but continued to go along with things, keeping her glowing hand above the bandit's knee. When the man stammered that he agreed, her other hand moved quickly, one finger heating up via her ki and touching into the Moxibustion Weakness Point before another finger hit another pressure point slightly higher up the back. "That will deaden your pain," she said, even as the man opened his mouth to scream at the heat of the first touch.

Since the second pressure point had indeed deadened all feeling from the waist down, the man's eyes widened in shock and surprised relief. He stared at Ranma in awe as she began to heal his wounded knee. "The Maiden of Mercy! I have heard rumors that there was someone who could heal with a touch moving among the peasants, but..."

At that, Ranma grumbled a little, but that was all. She really didn't have as much of a problem with that rumor as she did about the Servant of The Gods thing the priests had passed on. But Lim frowned, taking in the man once more, then looking around at a few of the other dead on the ground, her eyes narrowing.

"So, you truly are not peasants turned brigands. You are armsmen. Did your Lord die, and no one else agreed to take you on? Or, are you still in the employ of someone?" *Let us see if the rumor the scouts passed on is correct.*

The man blanched, but Ranma moved her hand away from her knee, leaving the wound only partially healed, raising one eyebrow. "Answer her questions, please," the redhead demanded, then, deciding to add a bit more to her good cop routine, leaned forward just slightly to give the man a look down her cleavage. While she really didn't like doing it, even in this world, Ranma wasn't above using her feminine wiles if circumstances warranted it.

It worked, the man's eyes widening, then looking between the two of them, licking his lips lightly before stammering. "Your word of honor that you will not kill me?"

Lim scowled but nodded, before hefting Muma in one hand, the battle-axe having shrunk down to a more manageable level again. "If you answer our questions. And only if you answer our questions."

Gulping, the man answered. He worked for a local Lord, a minor Earl who had decided to use the backdrop of the Civil War to enlarge his lands, a goal that made Ranma idly muse, "Is the man that greedy or that stupid? I mean, the minute Thenardier or someone else more powerful learns about it, he'll be crushed."

"It is not so much stupidity as believing that the war itself is none of his concern. I would wager there are other lords elsewhere doing the same thing under Thenardier and Ganelon's auspices. Many nobles only see things in relation to what they personally can gain," Lim advised before asking the brigand to go on.

The lord, whose name Ranma had never heard before and promptly forgot, sent this band out to ravage the lands of his neighbors and specifically the strongest of them. At the same time, he was offering safety and protection to his own people. This dual strategy had been working well up to this point, even in winter.

Ranma wondered why she hadn't run into this group or this noble on her earlier run to Saint-Groel but decided she must have cut through the woods too fast for entering the area

they were operating in. For her part, Lim gestured over the man's shoulder, pointing out into the woods. "Is there any proof of this among your band?"

The man shook his head, replying, "Feh, no. None of us can read, who'dja think we are, nobles? Our orders were verbal and we received more by messenger."

"So, there is a messenger that presumably meets with the lord in person? Good. I presume then that there is also a specific place that you meet up with this agent?"

The man nodded, giving the description of a place a few days distant for a normal man. It was a tree among the forest that had been struck by lightning and then overgrown with golden ivy. With that and the vague direction the man gave and the knowledge that there was a small path leading to it, the two women would be easily up to find it and ambush the agent. The man even offered to lead them there, which Ranma agreed to, pulling her hand away from his knee and ordering the man to try and stand up.

He did so, then flopped back, and Ranma smiled sheepishly. "Sorry, forgot to cancel out the pressure point."

She did so quickly, and the man slowly stood up, staring down at his knee in shock. That kind of wound would have left a normal person crippled for life, in constant torment from the pain. Indeed, even a nobleman would never have been able to find a healer who could heal it to the point where they could actually use their leg again. It did not escape the man's mind though that the same hands which had healed his knee had also done the damage to it in the first place and he looked at both women warily. "Didja want to start off now or wait for dawn?"

"Now," both Lim and Ranma answered.

With his leg healed, the man led them quickly through the woods and with only about an hour of night left, the two women found themselves looking down at the bandit camp from where they had climbed up into the branches of a tree. It was hidden among the trees of a small dip in the land. Even their fires were well covered, showing how professional the armymen to meet up most of their numbers were, although their patrol was moving through the camp rather than hidden outside it.

Those hints of professionalism availed them and not at all. After tying their prisoner to a tree – he might have been both afraid and given his word, but there was no need to tempt fate – Lim started the party by launching one of her new long-range attacks directly into the center of the camp. This attack caused a massive fissure to open up along the ground, several feet deep and wide, causing much of the camp to fall into it, as well as hurling men and beasts off their feet.

Meanwhile, Ranma raced around the camp quickly, then into it from the other side, trapping the remaining bandits between the now charging Lim and herself. Before the bandits

could realize they were under attack, it was pretty much all over. While Lim didn't have the speed of a more experienced Vanadis, she had already developed the strength of one, thanks to Ranma's training and her rapidly rising familiarity with Muma's abilities. As well fighting Ranma in hand-to-hand was a paddling waiting to happen unless you had the skill of a Vanadis.

Within minutes the last of the bandits had fallen, with Lim and Ranma had both decided that they would not be leaving any further survivors. There was no further need for advertising. This group's disappearance and what would happen later once Elen moved on their lord would be more than enough. Ranma then retrieved their prisoner, asking him to identify their band's leader, and the man did so with alacrity shaking in fear at once again seeing these two in action, this time from a safe distance.

Soon, Ranma had gone through the man's items, finding that their prisoner had told the truth: there was nothing incriminating on them. Their weapons and armor were better than most bandit stuff and far better quality than the pitchforks, Spears and hatchets of the first band they dealt with, but that wasn't so unusual. "If you want evidence of this Lord's plans, we will have to capture that agent."

Doing so was extremely simple once they reached the place the agent would meet the brigands. The two of them waited barely a day near the golden ivy-covered tree before the man appeared, which was good timing, admittedly. Ranma took him by complete surprise, leaping down from the trees where she had been moving through the branches silently, knocking the man out instantly. He, too, didn't have anything incriminating on him, but what he was wearing, a well-made doublet with leggings along with the pouch of money, and how well-groomed the man was just screamed nobleman to Ranma.

At that point, Lim decided that they should start heading back with their two prisoners. But thankfully, early the next day, after passing a somewhat unpleasant night with both of their prisoners tied to a nearby tree, they ran into another pair of scouts heading back the way they had come. They handed the prisoners off, with a report in hand for Elen. The agent even obligingly shouted threats and deprecations on them the instant Ranma removed his gag, wanting to retrieve his rope from the man, calling the Princess a betraying whore who, "Sold out her country to Zhcted for the cost of some turncoat Earl's cock!"

"Well, if that doesn't show him an enemy of the Princess and Tigre, then nothing well," Ranma drawled, pushing the man hard in the back, nodding to the two scouts while thinking violent thoughts. "Elen will want to talk to them both, I think."

"Will you not travel with us back, my Lord, my Lady?" The agent and the prisoner, whose name Ranma and Lim had pointedly not attempted to learn, looked quizzical at the way the two scouts had addressed Ranma and Lim, but Ranma ignored them, shaking her head. "No, we'll go back on our own." She smirked, pushing at the shoulder of one of the scouts playfully. "Or are you saying you could keep up with me?"

"God's no! I'd rupture myself tryin'," the scout retorted, shaking his head.

Lim chortled, nodded to Ranma, and the two of them left the scouts behind. Within seconds, both of them were running, sprinting faster than most men could in a ground devouring lope that left the scouts smirking and the two prisoners stunned. "She is Vanadis too then," the agent grumbled, shaking his head. "That explains how easily she overpowered me."

The scout who Ranma had been joking with sugar his head, making no comment on the man's noodle arms or lack of build. "Nope, Ranma is something else entirely. And I think that's enough talking from you. Let's get those gags on you two, and then we must be off. We might not be able to handle their speed, but that doesn't mean we should tarry."

However, Ranma and Lim did not head back directly. Instead, due to the weather turning against them, the two women decided to spend another night away from the ford at Eagle's Tower, barely ten leagues away from the river, as rain pelted down around them. Ranma found a tree whose trunk split upwards into four large boughs at the top with branches going every which way between them, almost creating a kind of upward grasping hand image.

There she quickly strung together to the tent that they had been using up above them, creating a canopy and giving them a bit more room as well as protection from anything on the ground. Then, as Lim watched, Ranma pulled his largest cooking pan pulled out from her ki space. A few branches that he had picked up as the clouds moved in on them went into the pan, and after a moment, Ranma had created a fire there.

The two women warmed themselves up above the fire, leaning closely against one another. While as a Vanadis, Lim didn't feel the cold as she once had, it was still highly uncomfortable to be so wet and bedraggled. Nor was Ranma immune to that feeling either. However, as they cuddled, Lim broached the subject that she knew would cause Ranma some angst. *It certainly is already doing so for me but it must be done.* "You realize that when we return to camp, I will have to move on quickly, right?"

Ranma looked at her quizzically. "No, what the heck are you talking about?"

Lim winced. *Oh, dear, this is not going to go easily, is it?* "I am now a Vanadis, Ranma. That means I am of the same rank as Eleonora-sama. I no longer serve my lady. I instead must serve the king and country of Zhcted directly as a Vanadis, and as such, there are duties and responsibilities I must see too, even discounting the need to present myself to the King directly in Silesia."

Ranma frowned, then slowly nodded. "I remember Valentina saying something. Something about Brest having been neglected badly or something like that?"

"Probably, I know it was a long while since the last Vanadis' death before Muma chose Olga. And even that was probably too quick if I am honest. Muma has shared some images of

Olga with me.” Lim shook her head. “Frankly I think she was far too young for the responsibility. The fact she literally ran away from the responsibility is not a surprise. But I cannot do the same.”

Lim hesitated and then went on firmly, *I will not step back from this, no matter how potentially painful.* “That means I must travel to Silesia and give my vows to the land and country to him. Indeed, I will have to rush to get to the king before he recalls Muma once more. After that, I must take command of Brest. I cannot simply return to this war after I take my oaths. I must rule those lands, and doing so will be my calling for the rest of my life.”

Ranma winced. “Which means you'll have to leave right away. Maybe this whole trip was a waste of time, then?”

“No,” Lim replied firmly. “For one thing, I needed to have some time to get used to Muma’s abilities and personality, which is rather more bloodthirsty than I expected and my new abilities. Further,” Lim smiled, then kissed Ranma on the cheek, then down her jaw to her collarbone, where she began to lick and suckle at. “Spending time with you is not going to ever be a waste of time. Especially since my duties will, as I said, take me away from this war. And it will be who knows how long before we see one another again.”

Ranma smiled, holding Lim there for a moment, then moving backward just enough to lean down to capture Lim's lips with her own. The two women made out for several moments, the only sound the rustle of the rain through the leaves around them, and slight whimpers coming from one or the other as their tongues began to move around one another like mating snakes, first in one woman's mouth than the other.

Finally, Ranma pulled back, allowing Lim to breathe. As she did so, her chest heaving slightly from the make-out session and growing arousal. Ranma smirked at her. “Remember, I'm not loyal to Brune. I'm loyal to Tigre, and I personally want to punch Ganelon in the balls and squish Thenardier’s head like a grape. Once I’ve done those two things, I don't have anything holding me here. After that, all come to see you in your new lands. I promise.”

Lim nodded, blushing brightly under Ranma's gaze, as she whispered, “I’ll hold you to that.” Then, she leaned forward, kissing Ranma again. This time, she slowly began to dominate the kiss, pushing Ranma backward against the bow of the tree branch behind them, her hands beginning to roam, causing a squeak to come out of Ranma's mouth that would probably have mortified the martial artist if she wasn't so busy becoming more and more aroused at Lim's touches.

Lime start:

Ranma continued to whimper as Lim's hands moved under her jerkin, pulling it upward and then off entirely, as Ranma feebly raised her arms at Lim's instruction. This allowed Ranma's breasts to bounce free, which they did so energetically. They weren’t as large as Elen's

or even Lim's, but they were firm, more than a handful, and with intensely red nipples, visible in the firelight behind the two lovers. And Lim had no hesitation to lean down to take one in her mouth, licking and nibbling at the hardening nipple.

The sensations going through Ranma now were entirely new. Lim had attempted this at one point in his male body, but nipples just weren't all that sensitive in his male form. In his female form, that changed greatly, and Ranma idly wondered how the hell he had not been feeling anything from the shirt before this without anything between shirt and nipple.

Then Lim began to suck at her nipple, and Ranma let out a moan at that point that was so loud. Lim giggled, pulling back slightly and smirking up at her lover. "Like that, did you?"

Ranma looked at her through half-slitted eyes, shaking her head as her breath came in gasps. "Jeez, is, is that what it's like for you girls all the time!? How the heck do you get anything done?"

"I rather think you're just extra sensitive," Lim replied diplomatically. "That and perhaps you can become used to such sensations."

Then she bent down to her task once more. That task being to make Ranma squeal.

Instantly Ranma started to do so, loud "MMMMs," and a "Yeee," resounding through the woods. But her mind slowly got used to the sensations, and Ranma was not one to just let Lim do all the work. She firmly began to push Lim away slightly, then leaned down and kissed Lim again.

While Lim started to dominate the kiss, this did allow Ranma to start to work on Lim's own jerkin, and Lim let her, allowing Ranma's hands, familiar hands now, to roam her upper body. She cooed into Ranma's mouth, then pulled away as Ranma began to play with her own breasts, her thumbs moving over her nipples in precisely the way that Lim liked. "Mmm, yes Ranma, that feels, mmm..."

Ranma left one hand on her breast, playing with her nipple, while the others slowly moved around Lim's body, gripping her rear and pulling her into Ranma. Lim moved with the movement, one leg going in between Ranma's, her knees moving up against Ranma's cleft, slowly moving up and down it adding a new sensation to Ranma.

This one wasn't so unfamiliar to him, as Ranma was used to being sensitive down there although this time there was no twinge of concern as Lim's knee went up and down his private area, wetness and heat making themselves known. Lim knew that Ranma still had issues despite all she had done previously with his female form, so decided not to include any fingerplay, but playing with his pussy lightly, then dinging her clit seemed to be fine. The newest Vanadis watched as Ranma's eyes started to roll back and head before the redhead shook herself.

The hand that had previously been on Lim's rear started to move her, shifting Lim forward still more so that Lim's other leg them together. Now, their legs were in a scissor position, their pussies pressing against one another through their clothing. Yet despite that clothing, the sensation was enough to bring a moan from both women.

Then they were kissing, grinding, first slowly, then faster, harder. Ranma's hips rose, meeting Lim's downward strokes, as their legs dragged against one another, bringing a louder moan from Ranma than Lim had heard from her before this. "Oh, OOOH, I ca, I can't..."

"I'm nearly there too, RanmAAaAA!" Lim's moan rose in pitch, and soon both women were shuddering and gasping against one another as electricity went through their bodies, their breasts pressing hard against one another their mouths almost fused, as first Ranma, then Lim, went over the edge.

The two women stayed like that throughout the night, kissing, cuddling, and once or twice rousing themselves to once more scissor one another into oblivion. Not once did Ranma ask if she should change back to her male form. Somehow, the martial artist turned dimensional wanderer sensed that Lim wanted this moment to be about Ranma's female form, which she was willing to go along with. Ranma still wasn't as comfortable in her female body as she was in her male form, but Ranma now knew that there was a lot of pleasure that could be had in the female form.

Lime End

However, the next day, the two had to return to the reality beyond their makeshift love nest. The two of them wordlessly cleaned up the area and, with barely a word spoken between them, raced towards the ford. And they still arrived earlier than the two prisoners and the scouts with them.

Elen greeted them cheerfully from the top of her horse as she finished giving orders to one of her officers while the army began to move across the Resia. In the days that the two had been gone, the bridges had been finished, and now the infantry was crossing, the two pike companies Valentina had sent them moving in the center. Groups of cavalries had already begun to move along and to either side of their route to the various nobles who had agreed to back Regin with resources if not men, telling them of the Army's movements and intentions and what was required of them by the Princess. Viscount Augre had also arrived with the last infantry column, and his son, Gerard, had taken over the logistics corps of the army.

"He's been singing your praises, Lim, quite a lot frankly." Elen giggled after summarizing for Ranma and Elen what they had missed, hopping out of her saddle to stand before the two lovers. "If not for the fact that he knows you and Ranma are courting, I would be on the lookout for his attempts to approach you in the future."

"I am most decidedly taken, and I hope he respects that, Eleonora," Lim said.

Elen noticed the lack of honorific and laughed, pulling her friend into a hug, then pulled back, her face turning serious. "You know what you have to do now, right?"

The other woman nodded, then gestured to Ranma, who had taken the time to heat up some water and turn back into his male body now that they were back. "We have already said our farewells, although we did discover some things you might wish to know."

"Wish there was time for more farewelling then," Ranma muttered, remembering last night, a blush suffused in his features, at the same time one came to Lim's face. She punched him hard on the shoulder. Ranma did the same to her, and they stood smirking at one another for a moment before Elen deliberately coughed before gesturing to one of her men.

Rurick nodded and was quickly back with two horses, saddled and supplied for a long journey. "You'll have to get going quickly. Heck, I doubt you'll be able to even stop in at Leitmeritz before you head on to the capital, but I prepared everything you need," Elen intoned, then formally clasped her friend's forearm. "Good luck, and I hope that we see against one another soon. And, as a piece of advice, just let the king talk. He's a bit windy sometimes, but he is the king, so just letting him get on with things is the best way to do it."

"So long as King Victor treats me as my own person rather than an extension of you, Eleonora, I should be able to stay on his good side. Considering how badly managed Brest has been up to this point, I imagine he will be more than pleased to finally have someone he can foist that problem off on," Lim answered tartly. Then to Elen's surprise, Lim stepped forward and gave Elen a hug, which Lim would rarely do. "I do hope you take the time to come visit."

She turned towards Ranma, smiling at him even as she continued to hug Elen. "Both of you."

Ranma smirked at her, the look in his eyes making the drawling 'sure,' a promise, while Elen supplied that if she could, she would. "Although after this bit of errantry, I fully suspect the king to basically order me under house arrest in Leitmeritz for a time," she finished ruefully.

For a moment, the three friends fell silent. Leave-takings were simple, and Lim and Elen had very rarely been apart for long periods since they had been toddlers. Indeed, the longest they'd been apart before this in their whole lives had been a single summer when Lim had been injured early in a campaign, forcing Elen to leave her behind until she could heal. But this leave-taking would be measured at a minimum in years.

Then Lim shook her head, smiled at Elen and pulled out of their hug. "Until we meet again, my friend."

Then she turned to Ranma. Before Ranma realized what she was doing, she grabbed him by the pigtail, pulling Ranma into a kiss, kissing him in front of the passing infantry. Needless to say, this drew quite a few catcalls and exclamations from the troops passing by, and Elen

whooped. Then Lim pulled back, smiling at him again. "And I will hold you to your words, my Lord," Lim stated archly.

"You can bet on it, my Lady," Ranma said with a snort, then watched as she pulled away, leaping into the saddle. He remained there, staring after Lim as she crossed the bridges and headed northwest towards the Dinant Plains. Then he slapped himself in the face a few times, so hard it left a mark and turned to a smirking Elen. "Well, let's get this show on the road. We've got a pair of an invading slaving army to beat the shit out of and two assholes who need to be put into the ground."

"Eloquent as always," Elen laughed and turned back to her army as well, pulling herself back into her white stallion's saddle. "But you're right. Let's be about it."

Ranma and Elen led the Silver Meteor Army south until they reached the Royal Road, at which point they started to veer towards Nemetacum before they came upon another road. There, they started to move once more directly southeast. The army had barely begun to move down this new road, though, when a rider trotted up from the rear to the front of the march where Ranma and Elen were.

He whispered something to Elen, and she grinned, turning her horse out of the formation and trotting back down along the side of the columns of marching horse and men. Quizzically, Ranma moved after her, and soon the two of them were at the back of the column, watching as a group of riders approached.

One of them was redhaired, and Ranma shook his head in shock as he moved forward to take Tigre's bridle. "How did you do that!? You're what, nearly a month's travel away, and you covered that in less than a week?"

"Through grit, determination, and nearly killing seven horses," Tigre smiled wanly at him, then nearly collapsed out of the saddle, letting Ranma catch him with his free hand. "A, and knowing the direction you all were going to go, I cut across cross country through both unclaimed land and several farmer's fields. I even got an arrow shot at me once, not that that slowed me down much," the redheaded Earl added critically. "The farmer in question was a very poor shot."

Elen smiled, dropping down next to them, pulling Tigre into a sideways hug, as she gestured towards their baggage train. "Sad to say we don't have any carts, but we can set you up on one of our mules instead." Such was the need for speed, the army didn't even have any medical carts. "I think we've got enough pillows to provide you with some padding."

"Please," Tigre whimpered as he tried manfully to ignore the fact that he had long lost any feeling below the waist. "My lower half feels like it's about to come apart at the seams."

“Well, we can’t have that. Elen needs some of those bits,” Ranma snorted, then as Elen blushed and smacked him on the arm, reclaimed Tigre, hefting him off of the ground over one shoulder in a fireman’s carry.

Tigre didn’t even protest, that was how hard he had ridden the horses. Indeed, he merely quipped, “Well, at least my bruises will be more evenly distributed over my body this way.”

That caused everyone nearby to laugh, even as many of the riders nearby looked at Tigre respectfully for his achievement. What he had done was truly a ride out of legend. Even a royal courier could not have done better.

About a week later, however, smiles were in stark abeyance as Tigre, Elen, and Ranma scowled, staring down at the map of Benjamin laid out on a camp table in front of them in Tigre and Elen’s command tent. It wasn’t just the fact that that map wasn’t a very good one in his estimation, causing Ranma to scowl. No, that had to do with the messenger across the table from them.

The man was a middle-aged, somewhat effete man wearing the royal colors of Brune. And he had brought a message from the Chief Chamberlain which changed everything.

The geography of Benjamin sometimes through Ranma even now. He had tried a few times to liken Brune to France, thanks to some of the names they used. But that wasn’t quite correct, and the border situation, and the terrain, always threw him.

Ranma had been told several times that the best route of invasion possible from Muozinel was through the territory that had been ceded to the Knightly Orders and the area of Zhcted that looked to Ludmila Lurie for leadership, represented by a kind of jagged segment of Zhcted ‘stabbing’ south and just a bit west of the Voyes Mountains. But the Knightly Orders operated out of several dozen castles, each of them highly defensible, from which they could interdict any invasion or raid from Muozinel or their northern neighbor. Even the peasants in that area were better prepared to flee their homes. And the rolling plains that interspersed the forests were perfect areas for the heavy cavalry tactics that made the Knightly Orders so dangerous.

It was even worse on the Zhcted side of things, where the Lurie line had long practiced what they called the ‘Strength of Steel’ defense. There weren’t as many people because that territory wasn’t very good for farming, but there were even more natural defenses, forts, and Ludmila’s own castle, which was big enough to hold an army and so strong it could sneer at sieges.

Eastward of the ‘dagger’ shape was the area of the border normally defended by Thenardier, leading to the tip of what Ranma couldn’t stop himself from thinking of as the equivalent of the Gulf of Thailand or the Adriatic Sea. This area was heavily mountainous, and

according to what Regin had told Ranma and the others at one point, the only way to invade through the mountains was slow going and defended by a large walled bastion. It had not been challenged in living memory simply because no army could make the march through those mountains.

From there, the mountains, whose name Ranma couldn't recall right now, moved further south and east until they met the gulf, becoming almost as impassable as the mountains between Alsace and Zhcted. The gulf itself was also dangerous near its tip, with numerous hidden shoals, nasty and ever-changing currents. That was why South Port was so, well, south, further down the gulf's edge towards the border with Sachstein.

But something had apparently changed. Because the message from Bedouin told them that the bastion had been taken by a massive invading army.

"Are we sure he's telling the truth?" Ranma complained, looking over at Elen and Tigre. "What I think about this Bedouin ass can also be said about his messengers that sneak."

"You really took his attack on Sofya personally, didn't you," Elen quipped, shaking her head. "You do know she doesn't need you to watch her back, right? And would be genteelly furious with you that you thought she needs you to fight her battles." *Actually, Sofy would probably find it sweet, right up until she rapped him on the head with Zaht.*

"Doesn't matter," Ranma looked away, unwilling to admit that Elen had a point. Heck, he could already feel the smack Sofy would give him. "Sofy's still a friend, and if you think I'll forget the ambush that asshole set up for her, you can think again. What's to stop Bedouin from setting us up in turn?"

Tigre coughed delicately, amused at his friend's reaction. "You must understand, Ranma, that Bedouin was acting in what he thought of as the best interests of Brune. He was wrong but he was acting as his station demanded. Personally, I cannot see any way he could gain anything from lying to us on this."

Crossing her arms, Elen turned from the map to stare up at the tent above them, thinking. "It makes sense. Since we passed south of Nemetacum, we haven't heard anything about the naval invasion that took South Port pushing out from the port. If it isn't doing that, then the naval force that took it isn't can't be very large."

The messenger coughed delicately. "Um, indeed. Lord Bedouin is receiving information from a few of Duke Thenardier's nobles which imply that the Muozinel forces which took the city are instead bent on reinforcing the city's paltry land-based defenses."

"Why keep them separate?" Ranma questioned, setting aside his animosity for the messenger and his master to look at him and Elen both. "I mean, if they have the force to invade, why split like this?"

“Because they could probably transport either the supplies for the Army or the Army itself, not both,” Elen murmured, thinking hard as she stared at the map. “Wood is hard to come by for Muozinel, and even though they won the last naval campaign against Sachstein, their mercantile fleets were mauled beforehand. They probably don’t have the ships to transport an army from their own ports further east.”

Tigre nodded grimly. “And this map isn’t to scale, I don’t think. There’s way more space between where the Charles Gap comes out and the Knightly Orders than is shown here. Attacking both places, forces Brune to split their forces in turn. And Muozinel can field far larger armies than a shattered Brune at war with itself.”

“That is what my Lord Bedouin believes. Further...” the messenger scowled, shaking his head. “Further, Duke Thenardier is woefully out of position to face either threat. By the time he makes it back, this army coming out of the mountains could be sieging Nemetacum, pushed on to Nice while receiving supplies from South Port, or have reinforced their fellows at South Port itself. If that happens, even the Duke’s doughty army could not reclaim it.”

“Or, if they know about how we are already reacting to that, they take South Port, a strategic objective, forcing us to try to retake it. While this army comes in from behind and starts to rip out the country’s guts, slaving, despoiling, destroying. I would lay odds that commander of that army will retreat if South Port is retaken, retreating with everything that isn’t nailed down,” Elen grumbled, staring back down at the map.

Tigre scowled as he, too, looked down at the map. “Do we have any reports on how fast that army is moving?”

“No, the last report we received from Earl Martinet stated he would hold out as long as he could. Beyond that, Do I look like a rural rube like you?” The messenger sneered. Tigre had recognized him as one of the noble brats who had followed Zion Thenardier around during the campaign against Zhcted that Regin had been forced to lead.

While Tigre didn’t care about the opinions of such men, Ranma reached around across the table, grabbing the man’s nostrils with two fingers and hoisting him up into the air, holding him like that, his arm fully outstretched over the table but not even twitching at his weight. “What you look like is a corpse in the making. Just answer the question.”

He removed his fingers from the man’s nose and made a point of wiping them off on the tablecloth under the map while Elen laughed and Tigre simply shook his head with a small smile. But he too looked at the man firmly. “Answer the question or I will ask Ranma to do that again.”

The threat of Ranma and the pain he had already caused the effete noble brat worked, and the messenger shook his head rapidly, backing away from them and almost looking like he would bolt if not for two Zhcted guards on the tent flap. “I, I honestly don’t know,” he whined, one hand moving to his nose as he looked around for a way to escape from these madmen.

“How am I supposed to know that kind of thing? I was chosen for this mission because I was the best horseman in the court, that’s all!”

“The Prime Minister didn’t send anyone to investigate what was going on personally? A group of cavalries to try and get to the fort and back to give us some idea of their numbers?” Elen asked incredulously.

“Of course we did! That’s why I’m here dealing with you er, people,” the man hastily changed whatever he was going say, and Ranma reflected that that was probably wise. Ranma wasn’t loyal to Brune, of course, but being called a traitor to his face would probably annoy him anyway.

“So we actually don’t have any real information about this army. It could just be a small reading force,” the martial artist suggested. “A ghost, something that will make us chase them back into the mountains, while the enemy moves their main forces into the port, and then starts ravaging outward from there.”

“They’ll have a harder time with that than you might think,” the man continued to stammer, pointing at a few points on the map. “While Duke Thenardier went with the majority of his army, he did leave small units of garrison troops behind, and those castles are in very good repair, paid for by Duke Thenardier’s coffers, as befit a noble of Brune.” Even as scared as he was, it was obvious the man was one of Thenardier’s proponents even now.

“Okay, I didn’t know that,” Ranma answered, with Elen and Tigre adding their words to his. Ranma wanted to get angry at the guy. His attitude was just screaming for it right now. Here he came with a message from Bedouin basically begging them to do what Bedouin wanted them to, take on this new enemy army, and the brat still couldn’t leave behind his own prejudices. Ranma really wanted to smack him around on general principle just for that, let alone his connection to the Prime Minister. Still, there, alas, were more important things to think about it.

“I, I can give you maps! I have a few more detailed maps, paid for by the king himself in recent times,” he said proudly as if having such things was an honor rather than something that should be a matter of course. “And Lord Bedouin has prepared a letter of introduction to several of the minor nobles you might meet along the route. They won’t have much in the way of military forces led to they could have information at the very least and supplies.”

Ranma’s scowl deepened, but he sighed, looking over at Tigre. “I still think we should push on and reclaim South Port. I don’t think that this army really exists, but I will bow to your greater standing of strategy and the whole geography thing,” he waved his hand vaguely at the map, disgust plain on his face.

Tigre and Elen looked at one another, communicating with facial expressions and eyes in such a way that it made Ranma blink in surprise. *I knew they were close and had some of their own romantic moments over the winter but that close?*

In any other moment, Ranma would have been teasing them both without mercy right now, but this wasn't the time for it and he remained silent until Tigre said, "I don't think we can ignore this. If that army really exists, Brune cannot sustain the damages it could do to the country. Not with the areas which have already been damaged by war."

He looked up at the messenger, waving him towards the tent flaps. "My men will see to your horse and that you have enough food to get you back to Nice. Gerard will be waiting for you outside."

The messenger sneered and left, and Ranma instantly turned back to Tigre. "Fine, we're going, but how long will it take us to get there?" Ranma asked, scowling as he tried to picture the terrain and failing miserably. "Do we have to retrace our steps, or would it be better to march overland? Whatever we decide, we're well out of our way for a speedy move to the gap, so could we even get there in time? If Muozinel is fielding as large an army as you all fear, the moment they get out of the Gap, they could just swamp us, right?"

"I know. But I think we can do it if we use every resource available to us." Tigre looked at Ranma, and after a moment, "So did Elen."

Ranma's eyes narrowed. "Why the hell're you two looking at me like that?"

"Tell me, Ranma, how many tons of material do you think you could stuff into your ki space?" Tigre inquired.

The answer, as they found out several hours later, was quite a lot, although Ranma wasn't happy about this particular piece of knowledge. He felt bloated, heavy in a way that he had never felt before, even when Happy had used the Weakness Moxibustion Point on him.

Ranma had long since known the ki space equation, as it were. Pump enough ki into a specific small area, and it distorted space, widening the area affected. To organize it, you then added more structure in the form of an interior latticework of further ki.

What Ranma hadn't known was that, if you then filled that area, the weight of the items within had a slight, normally negligible impact on the weight of the container – sleeves, pockets, backpacks, whatever. Normally Ranma could carry all his gear and quite a lot of odds and ends besides and not even notice. Now, he was carrying what amounted to nearly two-thirds of the entire army's supplies, many tons of goods, blacksmith tools, weapons, everything.

"Oooh, this doesn't feel good. I'm like a freaking sumo wrestler," Ranma growled as he experimentally moved around, the massive pack on his bag wobbling as he did so. He could still

move, but very slowly like he was moving through water in comparison to even a normal man, which in turn was so below Ranma's normal abilities that it wasn't even funny. "I will get you for thinking this up, Tigre, I promise!"

"Mah, mah. Look at it this way, Ranma. Without the bags to hold them, our mules can now be used to shift the Infantry along even faster. And we cross straight through forests without the need of roads," Tigre soothed, his lips twitching at how cumbersome and weighed down Ranma seemed, while Elen was guffawing next to him.

"That's supposed to make me feel better, is it?" Ranma snarked before scowling. "Fine, whatever, let's just get this show on the road before I put down roots."

OOOOOOO

Staring past the rear of the ship, Duke Ganelon smiled, the fires spreading throughout Lutetia, his former demesne glinting from his black eyes. "I imagine that right now, Duke Thenardier believes that he has won it all. I wonder when he will get the reports that he has lost South Port. Oh, to be a fly on that wall..."

Beside him, his general Greast nodded slowly, also staring out at the fires of Lutetia receding behind the ship, an almost beatific expression on his face. They were too far from Lutetia, alas, for the sounds of the screaming and dying to reach them. But even so, watching the city burn had been most fascinating.

The expression of vile joy on their faces made the nearby sailors shiver. Even the Imperial Agent could not bear to look at those faces. The idea of someone taking delight in the destruction of their enemies, he could understand. Someone taking an equal amount of delight in the destruction of their own property, the deaths of their own people? That was wrong. *Even if they had been slaves, that would have been wrong.*

Eventually, the last of the fires disappeared into the ocean behind them, and Duke Ganelon sighed, turning away from the horizon to stare at Muozinel agent. "So, how exactly are we going to get through Albioni waters? You never explained that."

"Muozinel has an alliance with one of the Princes currently fighting for Albion's throne; you do not need to know which one. It is a momentary marriage of convenience, but they will not harass our shipping, and they will protect us from the unaffiliated pirate bands. Beyond that, it is in the hands of Rish-torr," the agent replied, calling upon the name of Muozinel's Sea God. As they were not a naval power, seek God from the Muozinel pantheon was a minor god, but Duke Ganelon knew that it was also said the sea god had a soft spot for travelers.

"I suppose that will have to do." Duke Ganelon frowned, shaking his head slightly as he looked over his shoulder again back towards Brune. "I dislike the fact that we will be so out of touch with events, however. We will not know how the invasion of Brune has gone until we land in Muozinel after all, by which time it might all be over."

To that, the man had no answer, so he simply said, "The invasion will succeed. You play your part magnificently, and you will be rewarded for it."

"For your sake, I hope that proves to be the case," Duke Ganelon stated, giving the man an almost reptilian look, causing him to shiver again.

In any other circumstance, the threat might've made him laugh. The Muozinel agent was an experienced spy, provocateur and in charge of this ship. In comparison, Duke Ganelon was now an exile from his homeland, and for all the wealth that they had brought with them aboard the ship, the sailors were Muozinel men, under the agent's command, not Ganelon's.

But when the Duke looked at him like that, it made the man question the balance of power between them. Shuddering once more, the agent made his excuses and left, hoping that Rish-torr would be kind and this voyage over quick. The sooner he could hand this man off to the Emperor and his court, the better.

OOOOOOO

With the news of the invasion force coming out of Muozinel to the east, Tigre and Elen pushed the army even more quickly. To do so, Tigre, despite still needing a cushion himself, had come up with a concept called hot-saddling to go with the use of Ranma's ki space to lighten the load on the mules. Men, both infantry and cavalry, rested in the saddle for half the day while marching the rest of the day. The only groups not part of this rotation were the outriders, light cavalry and horse archers that Elen occasionally commanded, moving around the army as it marched.

With Ranma and this new technique, they were moving far faster than an infantry force, no matter how well trained, could move along, although not as fast as a good purely cavalry force on its own. Even their baggage train, composed entirely of mules now, moved fast. The Silver Meteor Army marched the equivalent of a third of the way across the entire nation of Brune, and in the years to come, knowledge of this march, and the campaign after, would utterly overshadow Tigre's own ride to rejoin the army, becoming the stuff of legend, as would the entire campaign...

About two weeks after rejoining the army, Tigre had recovered enough to take command of the horse archers moving out ahead of the rest of the army. They were about an hour's ride ahead of the rest of the army, which put them several hours behind their outriders, or at least, they should have been. Tigre was just about to rein in and order his troops to start back when one of his outriders came over the horizon towards them.

He was coming down a smaller road to one side which, though small, looked well travel, pushing his horse hard, when he pulled up next to Tigre, his voice came out in long gasps. "Sir, w, we've spotted fires in the distance and fleeing peasants coming this way from one of the hamlets ahead of us. I, I rode back to report while my partner moved ahead to see what was going on."

Nodding, Tigre ordered the column to form up. He only had a single company of horse archers, but depending on the enemy, that might be enough. Soon, he and the rest of his men saw the fleeing peasants for themselves. They all to a man or woman stopped to stare at the riders but then sped past as none of the riders moved to halt or otherwise molest them.

A few minutes after that, the other outrider returned, bowing from the saddle. "Muozinel troops sire, on foot, armed wit' long clubs and short swords. No cavalry. They look to be raiders o' some kind."

"Numbers?"

"I didn't get close 'nough to see, milord," the man, a Brune native risen to the horse archers from the refugees, replied. "Given the fires an' the size o' the hamlet, mayhap a hunnert?"

Nodding firmly, Tigre turned to his two assigned messengers and the company bugler. "We will intercept them," he commanded. Send a runner to the main Army. Eleonora will want to know."

Moments later, Tigre started to see the hamlet, and in the fields surrounding it, he could spot the first of the enemy raiders. No horsemen were in sight, and he wondered if Muozinel used only infantry as their forward scouts for some reason. *Perhaps horses are too expensive to be used as such?*

Regardless, he held up a hand, then gestured in a series of movements. This sent the horse archers behind him out to either side in teams of three, spreading out to attack the raiders from a much wider angle.

So busy were they with sacking the hamlet that even the infantry in the fields around it didn't realize the danger until the first arrows began to fly, the attack taking them completely by surprise. Men fell screaming as arrows punched through light armor or into throats or heads, and at least ten men died before someone thin in the slowly burning hamlet started to shout

orders, a single warbling bugle call carrying over the wind. More foot soldiers came out of the hamlet into the fields around it, trying to form up, several fleeing back the way from the Brunish forces.

Tigre, however, didn't allow them to do so. He and a group of his men rode right into the hamlet, seeing the dead and the chained peasants among the burning buildings. His arms moved in a blur, his arrows unerringly finding throat or eye, as he killed anyone who looked to be trying to give orders or move to the chained peasants while his horse raced on.

Behind him, still more horse archers came, killing those Tigre didn't. Most of the time, this would've been an idiotic move, but against the disorganized skirmisher, one who had just been worked over by Tigre, it worked.

Many of the raiders were still able to force their way out of the town, though, only to find more of Tigre's horse archers waiting there. The teams of three worked together, coming in from every angle to tear into them. While within the hamlet, Tigre and the force with him continued to empty quivers and send bodies to the dirt.

Tigre fired an arrow from one quiver, noticing it was the last, and reached to his other side, clicking open the top of the next that hung from his saddle, the arrow he had just fired taking a raider in his open mouth. He was just about to pull out the first arrow from that quiver when a voice shouted for his attention. "My Lord!"

He turned and saw that there had been a response from that one warbling horn that the enemy had gotten off for their attacks started to truly decimate the Raiders. Coming towards them was a much larger infantry group, with their own archers in toe, while behind them, Tigre could make out a faint dust cloud of incoming cavalry.

Grimacing, he dropped the arrow back into the quiver and grabbed up his own horn, playing a recall order on it, as he rode away from the hamlet. He then turned to the nearest chained peasant. "Get your people out and on the road leading deeper into Brune! We can't help you just yet, but we will, on my honor as an Earl!"

With that, he twisted his horse around, leaving the peasant folk to try and put out the fires on their own.

Within a minute, his company was reformed, far faster than the enemy had thought they could. The light cavalry, which Tigre had seen first as a dust cloud in the distance, had rushed through the infantry, eager to get to grips with the horse archers and now found this out to their cost.

Tigre used his horn again, and the horse archers whirled, firing into the incoming light cavalry then twisting away, keeping their distance as they raced off over the hamlet's fields.

They soon moved around the hamlet and away to the side, drawing the enemy saber-wielding riders after them, dumping more from the saddle as they went.

Light cavalry would perhaps have eventually been able to run them to the ground, if not for the fact that Tigre had already reported this incident to the rest of the Army. And Elen now came up with her household troops.

Heavy Cavalry to a man, with the Vanadis at their front, formed into a sharp wedge. So engrossed with trying to close with the horse archers were the enemy cavalry that they didn't even see their doom approach until Elen's shout of, "For the Silver Meteor army! Death to the slavers!" reached their ears right before the blast of, "Ley Adimos!"

The blast of magically created air crashed into the enemy horsemen, lifting them off their feet, twisting and twirling horse and man through the air to crash with bone-shattering force into the ground or fellow rider. Then her own forces were within lance range, and the enemy began to die.

There was a booming sound on the breeze, not a horn precisely, something deeper, and with the same staccato rhythm like a drum.

As it rang out, the incoming enemy infantry raced forwards, presenting heavy spears as they moved into a formation that looked almost blocky in shape deeper than Tigre had anticipated. Their spears facing forward as they moved towards the heavy cavalry under Eleonora.

Tigre hastily ordered his own horse archers in on the infantry, trying to ruin their formation, while Elen and her heavy infantry continued to slaughter the light cavalry. But the enemy had archers too, and Tigre lost men and horses to their arrows as they closed.

Then, behind the enemy infantry, another cloud appeared signified more enemy cavalry, and Tigre ordered his men to break away, moving to intercept the new formation. This proved to be Muozinel's heavy cavalry, the first among the enemy who wore the facemask and triangular helmet that Muozinel troopers were known for. They didn't look as if they had the same armor quality as Eleonora's troops, but the enemy cavalry carried the same heavy weapons. They formed into their own wedge to take Elen's formation from the side, their hooves churning up the dried dirt and loam of the fields beneath them.

Quickly, Tigre shouted orders to one of his nearest horse archers, his voice barely discernible over the clamor of battle. "Reynold, take two men, circle around this lot, find out if there any more forces incoming. We need to know."

As Reynold broke off with his two companions, Elen shouted orders of her own, relaying them through the bugle system they had developed for the Army, both Zhcted and Brune using similar instruments to convey orders. The heavy cavalry slowly peeled away from the light

cavalry that they had badly mauled, although there were still a few of them in sword range, hacking and slashing at their enemies. The infantry was thus able to close before their formation was shattered by Elen using Arifar.

With their formation broken, Elen's heavy cavalry turned, building up a bit of momentum and reaching into the spear-wielding infantry in turn. Meanwhile, Tigre led his own horse archers to interpose himself between the oncoming heavy cavalry and the battlefield.

They didn't stay in one place, of course, wheeling shooting, moving all around, trying to break up the heavy cavalry's charge, and doing so in a few places, but Muozinel's soldiers seemed to be too disciplined to falter in the face of a few losses or to shift targets to the horse archers. Instead, they were locked on their counterparts as they tried to disengage.

Once more, Elen's Arifar roared out, "Ley Adimos!" once more. An instant later, the blast of hurricane-force air crashed into the front line of the enemy horses.

Crashing into the melee and attempting to turn the tide, while Tigre's forces continued to circle around them, creating a carousel of death. Each horse archer was an expert with his weapon, firing into the dusty chaos with deadly effect.

The battle might have turned against the Brunish forces at that point. The enemy had them outnumbered badly, although thanks to Tigre's horse archers and Elen's Vanadis skills, neither the spear-wielding infantry nor the heavy cavalry had the momentum to break Elen's men. Instead, they were all trapped in a melee, the speed of Elen's troops gone now, letting the enemy's numbers start to tell.

But as Tigre emptied his third quiver, the vanguard of the Silver Meteor army and Ranma arrived. Ranma had been out on the other side of the army with another group of outriders, making his slow way out to meet with a local lord. The man in question had requested to meet with 'the Maiden of Mercy' to heal his son from a riding accident in return for supplying more than two hundred pounds of grain and other supplies. Ranma had been doing that kind of thing and seeing to those wounded on the march ever since they had left the Resia behind. Ranma had barely started back toward the army when news of the attack reached the then-female martial artist.

When asked earlier in the march by a giggling Elen why he didn't try to fight the Maiden of Mercy rumor, Ranma had shrugged. "Because I don't care if people, I won't ever meet again, know I'm really a guy and frankly trying to explain my curse or where I'm really from is too much of a hassle. Far less of a hassle than this damn backpack is at the moment."

A still-wet Ranma raced in on foot, having left the rest of the army well behind. One man wasn't much of a threat, and even those few soldiers who spotted Ranma discounted him as some stupid berserk peasant. Until he was in among them, his fists and feet lashing out, hurling men in every direction. Then they were too busy dying to realize their error.

As he tossed men around like so many ninepins, Ranma examined the men he was so mistreating, grabbing one of them and holding him above his head for a second to look at him even as he doubted the man's friends. "Huh, I had thought the Muozinel might be some kind of Arabic equivalent, but that really isn't the case, is it? Those masks remind me of this really bad historical fantasy movie I once watched, some band called the Immortals or something. The rest... hmm..."

The man in the air looked at him in something approaching quizzical horror. Horror at the fact he was being held in the air so easily and quizzical thanks to the dry analytical tune Ranma had been speaking with, which had grabbed his attention even through the shouts and shrieks all around them of the battle.

The man's horror was magnified as Ranma tossed him negligently to the side. Yet for all the seeming lack of effort behind that throw, the man was going so fast that when he smashed into a heavy cavalryman nearby, both horse and rider went over on to their sides, bones breaking among all three of his victims.

While he continued to cause chaos and injury among the enemy, Ranma continued to look at them thoughtfully. The cavalry, the few remaining light cavalry and the heavy cavalry around Ranma reminded him of the concept of barbarian horsemen, although they didn't seem to have the horse archers that were so connected to the Mongols in modern minds. Their outfits were a mix of scale and brigandine armor, among the heavy infantry looking more like something he'd seen in the picture from a Hunnish soldier at one point.

The heavy cavalry wore scale mail, the scales made out of small rectangular pieces of metal, on an underlayer of armor. They also wore helmets, but not the simple half-face masks of the spear-wielding infantry. These were full masks, the lower face crafted to look like an evil mouth, protecting jaw and nose, leaving the eyes clear. The mask connected directly to the helmet, which in turn was shrouded by a kind of gray covering that went down to just below their shoulders.

Their weapons, both infantry and cavalry, were curved, sabers in the cavalry's hands, just slightly curved swords among the infantry along with their long spears. No shields were in evidence among the infantry bar a few on the dead raiders, who had small bucklers. They didn't look quite like any weapon Ranma had seen in the past, almost like someone had taken the concept of a cavalry saber and made it into an infantry weapon while enlarging the width of the blade and shringing the guard.

However, as barbarically villainous as the enemy looked, they didn't seem to still retain some kind of organization, unlike how barbarians were portrayed in most movies Ranma had seen. Even now, when their force was heavily engaged, someone was still able to give orders, which Ranma noticed as a weird, almost tinny drum noise rolled out, and the heavy cavalry started to retreat, pulling out of the melee as best they could. This wasn't very good,

considering that Tigre and his horse archers were still there, arrows hammering not just into men but also horses. And they had been joined by still more coming up from the main army.

Tigre too heard the noise, and he and Elen met up for a brief moment at the outskirts of the hamlet, the Vanadis having pulled out of the melee to gain a better perspective of the overall battle, and they saw an approaching force of what looks to be heavy infantry, with archers and light cavalry and support coming towards them.

However, from the other side, pushing up towards them along the road, came more of their own forces. Their own heavy infantry, composed of Brune levies and trainees. More horse archers appeared behind them, raced to join the fight, forming into columns moving around the battlefield.

Evidently, the enemy saw them too, and drums rolled from this new force before they could come even close to arrow range and they started to pull back.

Elen was not going to have that. She started to issue orders via the horns, and the new horse archers raced towards this enemy instead of joining Tigre. Soon this new force was also under fire. Then the horse archers peeled away when the enemy archers started to fire back, pulling the heavy cavalry into trying to chase them down, a natural reaction that only the strictest of training could stop a cavalryman from performing.

And on came more of the Silver Meteor army, the infantry finally arriving at the field and charging in, commanders dressing their lines even as they charged. Only the two pike companies stayed back, too slow to join the rest of the army for this battle.

Meanwhile, Tigre had taken charge of one of the new companies of horse archers, ordering them not to engage directly. "Keep your column separate! Separate, I tell you!" Tigre shouted while his bugler passed on the orders so that even the furthest trooper understood. "Get behind them. This looks like an entirely independent command, which means they might keep their slaves with. If we can free them now, we must!"

In the center of the battle, Elen reformed her heavy cavalry with some difficulty, pulling it out of the melee to racing towards the retreating enemy. The enemy's heavy infantry set to meet the charge, spears, not as long as the pikes, but still deadly, set. But once more, Arifar spoke as she launched a mass of rapidly twirling air towards the enemy formation, shattering it.

Elen charged on her attack heels and the heavy cavalry with her, further disorganizing the enemy. And on her heels, Ranma also hammered into the heavy infantry, tossing them this way and that. This seemed to signal something within the enemy, and they finally started to retreat, faster and faster, the heavy cavalry abandoning the rest of them, following the few surviving light cavalry away.

As they were abandoned, the infantry finally started to break in earnest, and after that, it was all over. Like with most medieval engagements, the battle was decided by who broke first. Once an enemy was broken, the casualties really started to mount, and Tigre and Elen continued their pursuit until they were certain that the enemy force wasn't going to be able to reform, with Tigre deliberately killing anyone with the strange, shoulder-mounted drums of the enemy or wearing better armor than the rest.

Still, Ranma was, against his will, somewhat impressed with how the slavers had fought. "They didn't break nearly as fast as they should have in the face of your and Arifar's magic," Ranma said, shaking his head as he surveyed the battlefield with Elen even as his hands continued to work. Tigre was nearby, helping to organize the hamlet's survivors as they left their burnt-out homes behind and elsewhere. Duncan and a few of the other blacksmiths had begun to work on the collars in chains peasants who had been captured by the slavers.

Tigre had been correct: this force seemed to have been split off and sent ahead of the main enemy army to ravage the land as well as scout it out, and they had taken some thousand or so prisoners in the doing. This area only somewhat well-populated, being one of the major areas for sheep herding, which was not a man-intensive undertaking. Still, the Silver Meteor Army had arrived just as they were pushing into the far more populated farmlands deeper within Brune.

Ranma, too was doing his part, tearing off chains and collars with their hands even as he conversed with Elen.

She shrugged as she lashed out with Arifar, cutting through a slave's chains as he held it up with a slight 'tink' of chopped metal. "Remember, Muozinel has fought Zhcted numerous times in the past and indeed conquered some of our lands at one point in the not-too-distant past. They know how to fight Vanadis, and they know what we are capable of. Numbers are always their advantage and that use them well."

Elen gestured with one hand towards the battlefield, smiling politely at the peasant's thanks, before gesturing the next man towards her. "Don't let the last few moments of this battle fool you. Up until the rest of the army arrived, we did not have a numbers advantage here. They did. Muozinel covers about twice as much territory as Brune and Zhcted combined and always field more men than either of our nations."

Turning away from the second slave she had just freed, Elen caught Ranma's eyes with her own as she shook her head seriously. "The only thing we have ever had going for us in a larger battle or war is morale, organization and leadership." She shrugged somewhat self-consciously. "And magic too. But this, this battle alone tells me that Muozinel might have learned from their past mistakes. That just leaves morale and magic."

Then a thought occurred to her, and she started to sweatdrop. "By the way, I notice you don't have your backpack with you."

"Ah, I left it back with the rest of the army when I heard what was going on up here..." Ranma paused, turning to look in that direction, a sweatdrop forming on his own face as he thought about it.

"...Any chance your ki space survived without being on your actual body?" Elen asked after a moment.

"Not even a little," Ranma answered, sighing as he thought about what that meant before his face firmed. "And if you think I am going to let you and Tigre talk me into loading my pack back up like that again now that we're this close to the enemy, you'll have to fight me to make me do it!"

The army camped near the burned-out hamlet for the rest of that day and the morning of the next. This served four purposes: it let Ranma heal all of their wounded, large and small. They helped the freed peasants move on their way. The army redistributed its supplies from the pile Ranma's pack had left behind. And they sent out larger groups of outriders with an entirely new mission. Now that the main force of enemies in the area seemed to have been smashed, these riders would clear up any other raiding bands.

Why this group had been sent out ahead of the rest of the invading army was a mystery to Ranma until Elen reminded him of the nature of the enemy that they were facing that evening.

"That unit was primarily a slaving force, Ranma," she said bluntly as Tigre turned away from where he had been cooking over the fire for her and Ranma, smiling appreciatively at the bowl of stew that Ranma held out to her, chomping down on a spoonful, not even caring that it seared her mouth. Somehow, Ranma and Tigre between them kept coming up with ways of making normal camp food taste great and she loved it. *Can't beat a man who can cook*, she thought, with the right twist of her lips before becoming serious again as she set her spoon back into the bowl, breathing a bit on her lips as the pain registered.

"Remember, the enemy isn't just here to conquer. They are also here to **enslave**. That force was sent ahead, probably with many other smaller raiding forces, light cavalry and skirmishes, scouting the land and taking slaves. The main army will come up and smash anything that that group couldn't get through and will then claim the land later, building forts and so forth, but the main slaving will be done before the enemy's main force arriving in the area."

"Even peasants carrying everything they own can move faster than a large army, especially with the motivation knowing that you are fleeing for your freedom and the freedom your family can give," Tigre agreed, shaking his head. He took a clipboard from Gerard, looking over it for a moment, then nodding to the man. "Prioritize getting full quiver to the horse archers. We have the perfect weapon to deal with these raiding forces and I mean to do so," he intoned firmly, Eleonora and Ranma growling in agreement.

For the next four days, the Silver Meteor Army changed their marching formation. The horse archers to a man were sent out in twenty-man troops in every direction with orders to halt the slave-taking and raiding. With so many horses gone from the main march, the infantry now set the pace, hot-saddling being cut down to barely an hour a day. The scouts took up their positions as outriders around the army and ahead of it so that the main force didn't run into any ambushes, not that the enemy seemed to have enough forces in the area just yet to do so. Their forced march seemed to have allowed them to steal some initiative away from the invaders.

With Ranma joining the scouts, the Silver Meteor army pushed deeper into the desert-like mountains separating Muozinel from Brune proper, using the King's Road once more to gain still more speed. But as they entered the mountains, the road ended at the main gap through the mountains, and the army broke away, heading deeper into the mountains, shifting further away from the gap in such a way so that they could no longer be observed by enemy scouts using it going the other way.

Meanwhile, Tigre, Lord Augre, and several other nobles and the horse archers did what they could. Soon, more than four thousand people who had been captured were freed and moving further deeper into Brune while the horse archers mauled every raiding force they came upon.

Even so, the enemy had made a mistake. With Duke Thenardier busy with Duke Ganelon, they hadn't pushed the main army as hard as they should have after sacking the fort guarding the Charles Gap, and the distance between the raiding force and the rest of the Army was so large it allowed the Silver Meteor army to push them into the mountains for several days before the scouts started to run into enemy outriders. While the rest of the army slowly made its way through the mountains, Ranma and the scouts fought a series of small sharp engagements against enemy skirmishes before Tigre and the horse archers rejoined the rest of the Army. They had lost only about four people but had gone through their arrows at an exorbitant rate. Even picking up the arrows afterward, they were still going through them faster than Gerard would've liked.

The night after Tigre returned, he joined the scouts and Ranma, the two men clasping hands as they set out from the tent Tigre shared with Gerard and Ranma, with Ranma telling his friend the nature of the enemy they were dealing with. "They're not very good at mountain-type combat," he confided, shrugging his shoulders. "They don't seem to have a lot of men out here in the mountains. Those they do move through the mountains pretty well, but not as stealthily as ours can. But there is a lot of the enemy. A whole lot."

"Yes, I'm getting that impression myself," Tigre replied dryly, and the two men chuckled before falling silent as they passed the guards around the camp, joining up with a band of the skirmishers. With Ranma taking the lead, they moved off, heading out into the mountains for the rest of the night, slowly looping back until they were near the main pass through the mountains, observing the enemy from on high.

In so doing, they had bypassed several of the enemy's own scouts, moving through the mountains in such a way that few people could have believed possible, let alone matched. But to Tigre, moving through any kind of mountain terrain was like coming home, and Ranma could move as stealthily as any ninja if he wished. And both of them had to pass on these abilities to their scouts. Still, there were a few close calls, and a few of the enemy's scouts wouldn't be reporting in ever again.

But now, they were above the enemy armies forward most troops, watching as it marched through the main pass through the mountains while the scouts waited nearby.

There, Tigre used his spyglass to stare down at the enemy army, shielding the end of the spyglass with one hand so that there was no telltale glint of glass in the sunlight. After several minutes Tigre concluded that he was not happy with what he saw and told Ranma that in no uncertain terms. "Elen was right last week when she mentioned that the enemy seems to have learned organization," he practically growled, handing over the spyglass to Ranma, cautioning him to remember to hide the glint of the end of it.

Ranma looked through the spyglass of the enemy army, scowling too. He couldn't understand all that he was seeing, but it looked like a very well-organized force to him despite that. "Okay, I get they're organized, but what exactly am I looking at?"

"Multiple columns, each of them moving almost like separate smaller armies. Every unit has its own supply train. Lots of archers, more than there would be in a Brune army, although less I think than you would see in a Zhcted force, mixed in with the infantry. Look at those flags too. Signal banners, I think. Them and the drums we've already seen will allow for a lot more control than I had hoped to see,"

Ranma frowned, thinking about it. "They'll be able to move a bit faster, but judging by the skill of their scouts, they are still vulnerable." He handed over the spyglass, gesturing to the other scouts around them. "We could still mess them up, I think."

"Agreed, but for now, we need to start slowing them up any way we can. And I am still not exactly enthused by the numbers coming at us." The vanguard of the enemy force below was at least the same size as the entire Silver Meteor army. Behind them, there came still more troops, another series of marching columns, coming into view, keeping good order and discipline just like the forces that composed the vanguard.

There's just enough space between them that the first groups could hammer into an enemy, holding them in place for the second while it goes around or comes up, completely untouched, Tigre thought, as he turned his attention to them for a moment, then back to the vanguard, seeing that each unit seemed to have their own marker and their own signal flags, with the larger units having more colorful banners signifying where their commander was.

Then he turned his attention to the new force coming into sight through the pass, seeing that among them was a larger kind of banner than in the first group. It was red with gold highlights, completely unlike any of the other banners that Tigre could see through the spyglass. *I wonder if that means that the Army commander is in that group*, the Earl thought, frowning a little before he put that idea into words.

"Why, do you think you could shoot him from here?" Ranma joked. *Although I wouldn't put it past Tigre to be able to do that kind of thing. Or I could sneak in and maybe assassinate them. That's a thought too...*

Chuckling, Tigre shook his head. "Even I can't shoot that far. Although that could be a tactic to use in the future. For now," Tigre stood up, collapsing the spyglass, which had been an invention made over the winter, in the very expensive gift from Elen, placing it in his pouch almost lovingly. "Let's get going. It's time for you to let out your creative side again."

"Ooh, goody!" Ranma laughed, clapping him on the shoulder, then moved back. "What exactly are we talking about, though?"

"Slowing them down is best done by putting up a few walls..."

The next day, the Muozinel Army slowly ground to a halt, their way blocked by a large number of boulders, many of them larger than a man that now were stuck in the ground of the gap. Between them were large mounds of dirt and rock. While Tigre watched from one side of the gap, Ranma had led a smaller group of the scouts down, where they began to construct a series of barricades and stops. These were not meant as true defensive positions, simply areas where the enemy army had to slow down their march more than they would otherwise.

"Tigre was right," Ranma muttered, amused. "They have to assume each line of bulwarks as a possible defensive position."

Below, the front of that army ground to a halt. Men began to move forward to first reconnoiter then remove the debris. That would be an extremely slow process, but eventually, the army would realize that it would be faster to just go over them, despite their supplies being carried by wagons. Moving those wagons over the jagged, rocky walls Ranma and his troops had created would be hard but doable. And to the enemy's surprise, those points were not currently being defended.

Indeed, instead of being defended, some of the mounds had little messages etched into the rock. Ranma had spent a large portion of the time spent marching into the mountains learning how to write out and curse in Muozinel, and while his ability to speak the language wasn't up to his habitual taunting just yet, his written form was, according to Elen and Gerard, decent enough for what he wanted.

This meant that at that moment, down below, men were reading out little messages that went ‘fooled you’ and ‘oops, try again,’ with the odd, ‘look out behind you’ mixed in. It probably wouldn’t matter in the long run, but it certainly made Ranma feel better, and those messages on top of everything else that was going to happen today would hopefully damage the enemy’s morale something fierce.

As those messages were being written, Ranma grabbed at a nearby boulder, tearing it out of the ground as he reflected that, *Those barriers might not be defended now, but in the future, when they start to think of those walls as mere distractions and start looking up at the cliffs for the real threat, that can change. For now, though...*

With that thought, Ranma heaved the boulder over his head and, with barely a grunt of effort, hurled it down onto the army below. As it fell, Ranma grabbed up smaller stones about the size of his torso from the sides of the small, barely-there overlook where he currently was hiding. Each of those he flung down even harder at specific knots of soldiers, those he could make out as standing below banners. “Feel the power of the Living Trebuchet, you slaving fucks!”

A shout went out from the Army down below before the first rock even impacted, not that the shout saved the group of soldiers unlucky enough to find themselves underneath it. That boulder had been as large as Ranma and many times heavier. It crushed several soldiers under it and then rolled, killing and wounding more. And then Ranma’s next group of boulders smashed down, killing men in two or three if he was lucky.

The effect on the army below was immediate. Troops of light cavalry started to make their way up the sides of the past towards him, only to run into traps, other scouts having created them all over the sides of the gorge throughout the night. And thanks to Tigre’s training, nearly every scout was also a competent archer. Bows twanged, and men fell from their saddles, across the charging group of cavalry, slowing the fellows behind them, while Ranma launched another stone and then another.

The army below continued to respond, drums rolling out in set cadences. A larger cavalry group, followed by a full regiment of skirmishers, tried to head up the hill. The infantry forces moved around the enemy’s position, trying to get behind them. However, they found that they had to retrace their route quite a bit before finding a way up on that side of the gorge. Coming straight up the nearly fifty-degree angle slope right below the ambush point was really the best way to get at Ranma, and it wasn’t going to be fun doing it.

However, the Muozinel troops had determination and courage to spare. Their cavalry falling back, the infantry made their way up the slope now, moving faster despite occasionally having to go to all fours. They kept on running into traps, too: tripwires, a few scattered caltrops, hidden ditches that ate their legs, and dozens of transplanted nettle bushes, tearing at their clothing and skin. Meanwhile, the scouts continued to fire down into them too, targeting anyone who looked to be giving orders.

When they reached a specific stone that had been painted yellow on the side face up into the mountains, a scout well behind the others fired a special arrow into the air that Tigre had made. The same kind of arrow that Tigre had occasionally used to interrupt arguments between the various forces that composed the Silver Meteor Army, the arrow made a sound like a particularly loud whistle as it flew up into the air.

Despite that, it was only the fact that Tigre had been straining his ears for that noise that allowed him to hear it over the tumult of battle occurring on the other side of the gap. He did hear it, though and quickly pulled himself up into his saddle, looking around at his assembled troops. "Sound the charge!"

As the enemy army continued to shift forces up towards Ranma and his group and to try and remove the obstructions, from the other side of the gap the newly assembled might of the Silver Meteor Army's horse archers, all three-thousands of them, crested the rise from a gap in the mountain which few would have recognized as anything more than a crack in the sides of the gap. With Tigre in the lead, they launched themselves down into bow range of the enemy army's other side, peppering infantry and the scattered cavalry units on that side of the army, none of whom had been prepared to receive such an attack.

Hundreds of men fell to their arrows, including many of the enemy's archers, who had been assembled from their parent units on that side of the army, away from what they thought was Ranma's range. But to Tigre's chagrin, the enemy commander began to bark out further orders. The Earl watched as flags moved this way and that in different segments of the army, signaling something, while drums once more rolled out through the tumult of battle.

A cavalry regiment from further back along the gap instantly veered off, moving in at an angle to try and cut off the horse archers from retreating back deeper into the mountain passes. The enemy horse, even their heavier cavalry, were lighter than the knights of Brune or Zhcted, and their horses could commensurately move faster up the slope than those troops.

Tigre had been waiting for that, and at another sound from his bugler, the entire column of horse archers retreated quickly, seemingly in some disarray.

Meanwhile, the group attacking Ranma continued on towards them, and Ranma put Tigre's part of this battle out of his mind, continuing to hurl boulders down onto the main army. Behind him, the man with the bow, the same former farrier Ranma and Lim had met on their brief time together before she left, pulled another signal arrow out, firing it up into the air.

At that signal, the scouts slowly retreated from their small hideaways, not allowing the enemy cavalry to close with them, let alone the infantry moving up past them. Like their own horse archers, the enemy light cavalry could move through this area with relative quickness, pushing up faster than Ranma had anticipated, really, once the traps had been cleared by the infantry. But the scouts were ready and retreated in proper order, leaving Ranma alone to face

the charging horses as they came closer and closer to Ranma's position, which was atop a rocky outcropping.

When the last of the scouts moved past him into the passage leading away from the gorge, Ranma crouched down as if he was trying to hide behind the edge of the outcropping. But before the light cavalry of the enemy could try to split up to go around the outcropping, he shouted out, "Bakusai Tenketsu!"

The outcropping's entire stone edifice came apart with a thunderous boom like someone had stuffed it full of TNT. Shrapnel raced into and through the incoming enemy forces, downing horses and men, killing many instantly, wounding others horribly and leaving the entire group in disarray.

With a final toss of a stone the size of his fists towards the largest banner he could see, Ranma turned, racing away up and higher into the mountains, following his scouts. "Later, losers!"

Meanwhile, Tigre led the enemy cavalry and an infantry force that had joined them through a series of ever-narrowing defiles on the other side of the pass. His troops stayed just at the edge of bow range, keeping them insight. Occasionally, he ordered a few of his men to act as if their horses were coming up lame, shifting to other horses, making it seem as if they were now really on the run and in disarray.

It wouldn't have worked against a more cautious enemy. But the commander in charge of this unit had blood in his eye. His army had been assaulted and he wanted some payback.

After about forty minutes of riding through the mountains, Tigre spotted what he was waiting for: a sword held up above a cliff face nearby. Instantly he grabbed at his own horn, blowing into it three times, an order for his horse archers to turn.

Seemingly at bay now, they launched two rounds into the incoming enemy, then twisted around once more, heading up the steep passage in front of them. The defile there was extremely rocky and steep, letting the enemy infantry and cavalry close quickly. Horses couldn't move as fast up that hill as men could and the infantry and cavalry soon became muddled.

Then from both sides came a roar and the infantry of the Silver Meteor army crashed down from three sides. Ahead of Tigre, the two pike companies moved as one, their training showing as Captain Odell shouted out an order. An avenue appeared in their formation to allow the horse archers through before the pikes formed up into a single line. Then they thundered down into the infantry and cavalry of the enemy.

Faced with bristling pikes, the cavalry tried to pull away, tried to allow the infantry to move up to halt that inexorable advance. Yet they were too badly jumbled together. Then from on high, arrows began to pelt them, the Silver Meteor army's regular archers taking them under

fire from above. And then from behind along an avenue the enemy hadn't even noticed in their pell-mell charge after Tigre came Elen and her own troops, crashing into the back of the enemy regiment.

Not a single enemy from that group returned to tell the tale of their destruction, while Ranma and the remaining scouts kept the main army jumping, ambushing the groups of men they had sent into the mountains from the gap on the other side with smaller skirmishes here and there. Occasionally as the army stayed in place, seemingly uncertain of what to do, rocks crashed down from on high.

However, the next day, Ranma's stone and debris piled in the main pass had been cleared, and the army moved on, pushing deeper into the gap. Further, their march had changed. The Muozinel forces pushed out more scouts along their route. More light infantry moved up into the mountains, too, trying to make certain an ambush like this couldn't happen again. Their advance had only been slowed, not stopped.

Observing this from a distance, Elen and Tigre exchanged a glance, then shook their heads and began to make plans prepare for their next ambush, while Ranma and the scouts moved ever deeper into the mountains.

OOOOOO

In his camp outside Lutetia, Duke Thenardier scowled as he stared at the message he had just been handed by a gasping, nearly dead courier. Then he began to bark out orders. "Prepare the army to march! We must be on the move within the day."

Steid had already anticipated that, and a brief glare to one side sent the army's own couriers scurrying as he moved to his Lord's side, wordlessly asking what their destination would be.

"East Port," Duke Thenardier answered that unasked question before going into detail of what the Bedouin had told him in the message, finishing with his own analysis. "The army coming from the mountains is a danger to the peasants in its path. But without the enemy army retaining control of the port, they are not a danger to Brune as a whole. Brune can survive that army's ravages. It cannot survive if Muozinel retains control of East Port. Moreover, my house's honor will not stand an enemy to control any of our lands!"

"You're not even tempted to attack the Silver Meteor army from behind?" Asked Dreka, looking at the Duke quizzically.

The Duke scowled at him shaking his head. "No. The Silver Meteor Army, feh, presumptuous name aside, is serving Brune's interests at the moment thanks to Bedouin's moves. But we must do our part. There are greater things at stake now than simply the civil war. I will not allow Brune to fall!"

The Princess had been correct months back when she had spoken of Thenardier and his general character. Whatever else Duke Thenardier was, and the list was **very** long, including attempted regicide, among other things, Thenardier was also a patriot. The confrontation between him and the Princess would come but they had an interloper in their game to deal with first.

OOOOOO

That night, Ranma led his troops through the mountains, climbing through cliffs and taking routes, the enemy no doubt thought no one could pass. But with Ranma's strength, and the admittedly the number amount of climbing ropes and other equipment he could carry, the scouts were able to avoid the enemy patrols and once more gain access to the gap the enemy army was currently traversing. And this time, they actually came down to the floor of the gap between several enemy camps.

Ranma paused, staring towards the somewhat distant fires as the scouts organized themselves into squads. Duncan, his brother Klaus, the farrier Asher and other scout officers would be leading two squads forward into the nearest camps, while Ranma would deeper into the chasm, trying to get as far as he could between the various camps and patrols.

Despite all the training the scouts had been given, this made Ranma worried. Ranma knew he was a decent enough trainer, but Ranma didn't think of himself as a leader and didn't know how well he could trust the scouts to do their job without being found out and subsequently slaughtered.

Putting his misgivings to one side, Ranma looked at Duncan and the other squad leaders. Every face was marked with charcoal, making it easier to blend in with the night. Even their weapons had been covered with a kind of gunk that blackened the blades. "Remember," he hissed, "if you're seen, that means you've already lost. Do this quick, do this fast and get out."

"Do we have any specific targets?" Duncan questioned laconically.

Ranma frowned for a moment, then said slowly, "...We've seen how strong their organization is. Let's see if we can mess it up a bit on top of hitting their supplies. Destroy any banners you find, destroy any drums you find."

“And if we are seen?” asked one of the other scout commanders.

“Get out as fast as possible. If you think you can break contact, while within the camp, targets of opportunity,” Ranma shrugged. “But your survival takes priority.”

The men all nodded, and Ranma whispered out a final ‘good luck,’ before he turned and raced off, disappearing into the darkness around them even to the senses of the men and women he had trained. The fact he was also so silent unnerved more than a few, but after a moment, Duncan gestured around him, gathering his own team, pointing to one of them in particular. “Thomson, you’re on point.”

That man nodded. A small, wiry man, Thomson had the air of a poacher about him with a furtive air of someone always looking for the hangman. Still, he was loyal to Tigre and to Brune and that was all Duncan cared about.

He broke off from the team for a few moments, then came back, signaling silently for them all to follow. Moments later, they passed between two enemy patrol routes, moving into the camp, unseen by any while Duncan indicated one area that didn’t have as many people awake or fires around it as a fallback point.

Once inside the camp, Duncan decided that the supplies would probably be near the center of the camp, and moved in that direction, still silent with Thompson leading them around the various areas with torches and campfires lighting the night around them. At least a hundred troopers were still awake, working on this or that bit of equipment around the fireplaces as they passed, the numbers rising as they moved deeper into the camp.

As they moved, they saw several tents which had guards outside the flaps along with campfires nearby. But Duncan was reminded of a point that Ranma had often mentioned. “A tent ain’t a house. If the flaps are guarded, woopie. You’ve got knives for a reason.”

He moved towards the back of one such tent, the largest in the camp's central area, and entered quickly, cutting through the tent with his dagger, slowly to make no noise.

Inside, Duncan found what looked like large barrels of food and other supplies, including quivers of arrows. Remembering the last tirade he had heard from Lord Gerard Augre, Duncan was tempted to steal those. But instead, he moved deeper in, finding several bundles of spare banners along with a few shoulder-mounted drums. And as they found them, Duncan and the men with him started to tear them into pieces.

I wonder, should we start thinking about poisoning their food and such? The blacksmith’s son thought, then shuddered. No, he decided. *Or at least, I won’t be the one to make a suggestion.* It made sense, but it was also well beyond the pale, dishonorable to the degree that even a peasant like him found it appalling. However, that didn’t stop him from pouring the water supplies out onto the ground, as well as any wine he found.

All this destruction had to be done silently and took more than a few hours. Meanwhile, Duncan's men had moved through the other supplied tents, doing much the same.

One of them, however, ran into some trouble. Unlike the rest of the team, Tabane had neglected to cut a tiny hole to see through first. Moving around a stack of barrels, Tabane found himself in a supply tent with a man who had a torch and looked to be going over some kind of parchment list. The two men looked at one another in frank astonishment, then the Muozinel man, who unlike most of the infantry and cavalry they had seen didn't have a mask, opened his mouth to scream.

Instantly, the scout launched himself forward. One hand clamped around the man's mouth as they landed, muffling the noise, as his other hand pulled out his dagger, stabbing quickly up into the man's vitals from right below the ribs. The man shuddered and soon went limp, slumping against the got Tabane.

With a faint shiver of disgust, Tabane dumped the body in the corner of the tent, then very, very quickly went about his business before exiting the tent. As he did, Tabane made the cuckoo sound that meant that he had been spotted.

Exiting out of the supply tent he had been ravaging, Duncan heard that and cursed before deciding that he too should fall back for now.

The rest of his men followed in ones and twos, meeting up in a dark corner of the camp they had passed through that Duncan had indicated earlier. When he arrived, Tabane explained what had happened. Duncan frowned, looking around thoughtfully, listening for any hue and cry but hearing nothing.

"All right, we haven't been made yet, but we need to be aware that eventually, someone is going to miss that fellow. Teams of two, from now on, and let's just scout around a bit. I want to make certain that we know the layout of these camps before we leave. We didn't do nearly as good a job it finding banners and drums as I had hoped, but that doesn't mean we can't come back later and do a better job."

His men all nodded and moved off through the night.

Later that night, Duncan was able to extricate his men from the camp without any further incident, and most of the other bands moving through the gap hitting other camps would have similar success, with only two squads turning back without being able to enter the camps unseen. This kind of warfare wasn't usual, and very rarely were night guards chosen among the best and brightest of any army.

OOOOOO

Meanwhile, Ranma had left the others behind, racing deeper into the gap, examining each campsite as he passed them. And after watching a few of the other camps, Ranma eventually decided to target a camp that housed a cavalry unit. Nobles seemed the same regardless of what nation they were a part of and all nobles in this world outside of Tigre seemed to be enamored of horsemen.

Idly, Ranma wondered what it was in the human mind that made people think they were automatically superior once they got up on a horse. But Ranma didn't dwell on it. Instead, he concentrated on finding a way into the camp without being spotted. Eventually, he found one, moving through the horse paddocks, where there were only a few guards. Better, those that Ranma could see were lounging around campfires, ruining their night vision, not patrolling. *Since this camp's smack dab between a dozen others, I'd guess they could be justified in not being as on their toes as normal but I'm still going to take advantage of it.*

As he landed within the paddocks, the nearest horses whickered a bit, but Ranma tossed a dozen carrots into the air, having pulled them from his ki space. With that, the horses quickly quieted down, pushing and nudging into one another to try and get at the treats. *Not exactly well-trained*, Ranma reflected sardonically as he pushed deeper in. *All the better for me, I guess.*

Out the other side of the paddock, he came upon a group of four more alert guards patrolling the area where the paddock met the rest of the camp. But despite the fact this group was actually doing their job, they were using torches as they patrolled around, and Ranma simply leaped over them so high that they didn't even feel his passing and unable to see him thanks to ruining their night vision.

A second later, Ranma landed in the darkness beyond without a sound.

From there, Ranma moved through the entire camp, doing first what Duncan had assigned as a secondary priority. But Ranma was far more certain of his ability to not only not get caught but also get out if need be than Duncan had been and much faster too.

Doing so, Ranma found the various officer's tents were marked out by small banners, the size of the banner and the colors of them indicating rank. And each commander beyond the level of company captain had their tents next to a special purple tent.

The color purple seemed to have some kind of significance to the Muozinel people, and Ranma wondered why that was. *Most of their troops wore maroon uniforms, and I saw them using green, blue, and yellow banners in the battle earlier.* In contrast, the banners marking out officer quarters were purple with silver tassels. The number of tassels seemed to demark the officer's rank in question. This meant that the purple-marked tents had to be important too.

At the direct center of the camp, though, silver tassels gave way to a gold outline, gleaming in the light of the campfire outside it. Around it was a group of fully awake men, staring out into the dark alertly, blades at the ready in their hands. *That has got to be the camp legate or whatever, the equivalent of a regimental commander or perhaps even a general?* Since he didn't know how many people were assigned a normal trooper's tent, Ranma only had a vague idea of the size of the force within. *Hmm... even I can't get through without being seen, darn it.*

Later, once he was done surveying, Ranma made his way back through the, targeting not the supplies but those purple tents. *They have to be important, right? Not officer's tents, but still really important.*

The first one he cut into showed a group of men, all asleep on their own cots. But there were large shoulder-drums set on the ground by each cot, as well as banners tucked into large canvas cases.

Regimental signal-callers then, Ranma thought, grinning evilly in the dark of the tent as he cut his way into it. *Excellent!*

Once fully inside the tent, Ranma stared at the man thoughtfully, then shook his head. *No, I'm not going to kill a man in cold blood like this. That would be... well, vile. At least in battle, they have a chance to run away, if not fight me. Like this, no. Still...taking them out of the equation is too good an idea not to follow up on.*

With that in mind, Ranma went to each man in turn and hit a series of pressure points on their necks and the back of their heads, having to turn two of them over to do so. The first one knocked them out. The second one paralyzed them. The four men would seem to still be alive and even sleeping, but they wouldn't be waking up anytime soon. *Hmm... should I leave a little message or something?*

Thinking about it, Ranma shook his head. The time to make fun of his enemy's weakness and inability to stop him would come later. *If I can get out of here without being seen, then they won't be any the wiser as to what happened at all. That will be even scarier than them knowing someone snuck in and felt confident enough to taunt them.*

Decision made, Ranma searched around, taking the signal flags sticking all he could find along with the drums into his ki space, ruefully reflecting that *I would have to stuff about a thousand times more banners and shit in there before I felt as heavy as I did on our march to the mountains.*

With that done, Ranma made his way from there onto the next group of purple tents. Each tent from then on was smaller than the first, without the gold chevron marked banner outside an equally gold-marked tent nearby. And in each purple tent, Ranma performed the same operation. Although in reverse. First, he paralyzed the men, then he stole the banners

and the drums, then he went through and searched for any spares among the supply tents while ruining the camp's water and wine supplies. Without them, this entire regiment couldn't use signals to move their troops in tandem or report to a higher authority mid-combat.

Even Ranma couldn't do all this quickly. By the time he was done, the sun was starting to rise and men had begun to move around the camp. So Ranma decided to call it a day.

After meeting up with the other scouts at the rendezvous point and confirming that all of them had succeeded to a lesser or greater extent, Ranma helped the rest of the men back out of the gap to a high crevice well above ground level, hiding there from the groups of infantries who were trying, and failing to find them. From there, Ranma watched that particular regiment with the spyglass he had been given by Tigre.

As he watched the consternation and fury, and then a lot of fear going through the faces of those down below, Ranma murmured, "Now, how long do you think it'll take that get over this kind of thing?"

"They'll probably be able to replace the signal flags and the drums much more easily than the people paralyzed," Duncan answered, looking a little queasy at what Ranma had described. He couldn't imagine being, well, stuck in his own body, unable to move, and only hoped that Ranma was right. That to the men so struck, it would simply seem as if they had been asleep. Some things were too bizarre and disturbing to wish even on your enemies.

Ranma and the scouts were able to do much the same thing to several other camps the next night, remaining in place. They hid throughout that day as the groups they had attacked moved further down the gap, retaining their position in the attacking army's order of march. That was odd to Ranma. He would have pulled those units out of the march for a bit to let them recover. *But I suppose their commanders could have tried to keep what happened a secret. Stupid nobles and their weird concepts of honor.*

Snickering, Ranma wondered what Tigre and the rest would do to those units later today. He knew that the plan for the rest of the army was to see if they could take advantage of the losses of coordination and supplies.

But that was Tigre's part of the affair, and Ranma could let it to him. Now he looked over at Duncan, Claus and the others. "Well, you lot, what do you think? More of the same, or should we change our targets?"

The second night was almost as successful as the first, but the third night showed that, alas, this enemy had a brain. And that the nobles who led the units Ranma and the others had attacked had finally swallowed their pride and reported what was going on.

Regardless of why the guards on the third night's attacks were far more alert, and there were far more of them. Furthermore, many of the camps had begun to push fires out deeper

beyond the camp's outer edges while keeping their guards further into the camp in their original positions. Those guards, though, were still not very good at their jobs and Ranma, as he passed a few of them, heard them cursing in their own language. And they still had their night vision, which made sneaking past them harder.

However, the camp Ranma had decided to sneak into was pretty much set up the same way as the others, and Ranma had again chosen a cavalry regiment or whatever to attack. After confirming that the camp was set up like the first, Ranma pushed deeper quickly. He quickly found the purple tent next to the gold-marled tent and banner and cut a hole in the side of it quickly, looking inside.

One of the signalers was awake, scowling angrily from what Ranma could see, the remains of some kind of game of chance on the ground before him. Ranma thought it was a game anyway. *I'm guessing they played for who would have to stay up, and this fellow lost.*

Thankfully, he was looking away from the direction that Ranma's dagger had cut his viewing hole in the side of the tent, and Ranma frowned, pulling his dagger back and thinking. *Okay, let's hit the supplies first, give this guy some time to get tired.*

Here too, he found trouble. Two men were inside the first supply tent he found, sitting in the center of the tent, cleaning their gear as they stared around them, talking quietly in their own language. Of course, Ranma once more could only understand a word or two, but the fact that they were there at all was a bad sign.

Ranma frowned, thinking for a moment, then went back to the first tent he had investigated, looking around him thoughtfully. It was then that he noticed that two of the guards on the gold-marked tent had moved off on patrol, leaving only four men left, one to each corner of the tent. Moreover, the tent was so large that you could barely make out the corners away from your post, even with the nearby campfire. *A trap or a mistake in timing?*

The dimensional traveler hesitated a moment and then acted, grabbing up a stone and hurling it to one side. One of the guards looked in the direction the sound had made, and Ranma quickly leaped upwards and out, landing in a position by another guard, an arm wrapping around his throat, holding him still before striking two pressure points. One knocked the man out, the other left him upright, locking his body in place as if he had been struck by rigor mortis. With that done, Ranma cut a hole in the side quickly, ducking inside before the guard who had been looking away could turn back.

Inside he found a single man sleeping on a bed of cushions and quickly did the same thing to him that he had done to the men in the purple tents before this, paralyzing him. *Well, that was anticlimactic. Really hoping this guy is the real commander now, but whatever. But hey, now that they know we're out here...*

With that, Ranma took out one of his most treasured possessions: a permanent magic marker. *And images, as they say, are universal. Especially dick joke images...*

Once he was finished with his masterpiece, Ranma left the tent, slowly, admittedly, but still without being discovered, although he exited the entire camp quickly afterward, knowing it was only a matter of time before the paralyzed guard was found. *Still, with the regimental leader, whatever his title, down, it'll be an interesting experiment to see how this group reacts. Regardless...* Ranma glanced up at the moon, deciding he had time to see if he could find another, less well-guarded camp.

The next camp Ranma found was even larger, and it was with a start, but Ranma realized this was an infantry regiment, not a cavalry one, and seemed to have more people awake as well. That didn't stop Ranma from getting in, but it made it much harder. He found one supply tent, although there thankfully, the guards had already fallen asleep. Ranma was in, knocking them out and dumping water and wine supplies onto the ground before an alarm could be raised. By the time he was finished with the supply tents, the camp was slowly rousing itself, and Ranma barely escaped.

Other scouts were not so lucky, and more than one of them had fight their way out. The scout squads lost four men that night, but none had been taken captive. The next day, though, Ranma decided to change tactics. "Okay, guys. It's obvious they know we're out here now and have developed ways to try and stop us. We need to change tactics too. Frankly, I think we're getting to the end of what we can do here without fighting our way in and out of these camps. We're not built for that."

"We're not, you are," a scout leader named Vande stated bluntly.

"Maybe," Ranma shrugged. "But that doesn't change what we're going to be doing tonight. We're going to make some of those guards disappear and then we're going to wreck as many other supplies as we can. Banners, communications, anything. We can't be perfect, but we can still do damage. I'll choose the target camp, find a way in and then call you all in."

The others rumbled in agreement, then one of them dared to ask, "So boss, what're you going to cook for us tonight? And would ya mind changing into your female body to do it? Only all this time spent around only guys is..."

As the others roar in laughter, Ranma proceeded to bounce the speaker like he was a hacky sack but did heal him up afterward. His joke had shown that the scouts still had high morale anyway.

That night Ranma spent an hour scouting between camps before finding one camp whose size and makeup caught his eye. Ranma would've thought that maybe this was the Army commander's personal camp, if not for the fact that it didn't have the solid gold and crimson banner that he and Tigre had seen that first day they had scouted the enemy army. That meant

that the army commander was much further forward than this group. Regardless, Ranma decided it was a good target for the night.

After calling the other scouts forward, Ranma took out a guard patrol personally, while Duncan and Asher led the others on an ambush of another patrol, taking their clothing and dressing up like them, before heading into the camp as if returning from their patrol. This left a quarter of the camp without any guards beyond its outer edge. Ranma trailed them and then moved ahead, entering the camp from another angle before working back to a tent that had been thrown up right at the entrance, heading inside and taking out the guards there before gesturing the group onward.

“Hurry it up,” he hissed. “The more people I silence, the more likely it is we’re going to be discovered!”

Once inside the camp, the scouts broke up into fireteams of four, the smallest group Ranma was willing to trust at this point given the patrols within the camp they could see moving around. Despite that, though, Ranma was certain that he had chosen his target well. Not only was this the biggest camp they had seen yet, but it was also the only regiment or whatever that Ranma had seen that had a mixture of archers, infantry, and cavalry. Not light cavalry either, but heavy infantry and heavy cavalry. *I’d wager anything that this is either a separate force of some kind, an elite unit or... or maybe a siege unit?* Ranma could see several hundred more carts among this camp than the others had, and that number didn’t match with the larger size of the encampment.

While the others scattered throughout the camp to destroy supplies wherever they could, Ranma worked his way up the ranks this time rather than down, taking out company and troop areas first, leaving men paralyzed unconscious or simply out of it behind him, destroying drums, stealing banners and so forth.

However, at the regimental commander’s tent, Ranma ran into a problem that even he couldn’t surmount. There was an entire **company** of infantry awake and moving around in teams of five. And every few moments, one of them would shout out something, waiting for the others to reply.

Dammit! Ranma sighed. *Still, all this means that whoever is here is really important too, despite the lack of gold and crimson banner. And if I can’t sneak in, then...*

Before the guards could even think that anyone was there beyond the firelight, Ranma raced out of the darkness, leaping over their heads, his feet lashing out to either side, crushing skulls and hurling men backward. He grabbed their torches and tossed them forward past the guards, impacting the side of the tent, before hurling a bottle of cooking oil after them from his ki space. The cooking oil smashed into the side of the hurled torch, shattering and pouring the oil out directly onto the fire, causing the fire to spread across the tent’s canvas quickly.

There was a shout of rage and fear from inside, and Ranma turned away, ducking under a blow from a sword, then jerking to the side as a spear went through where his chest had been previously, grabbing the spear and pulling it easily out of the man's grip. The butt end of his purloined spear took another spearman straight in the face, hurling him backward with a cry of agony from his shattered nose and jaw before Ranma ducked a sword thrust and stabbed directly behind him at the swordsman with the spear.

The swordsman gurgled in shock as the spear thrust took him right through his brigandine armor, then Ranma pulled the spear out and twirled it, smashing aside several more blows, howling like a madman as he charged towards the command tent. "Come get some! Come on, you bastards!" since he was shouting in Japanese, it made his words seem scarier.

Quickly the soldiers in front of Ranma formed up, creating a wall of spears. Then Ranma ducked aside, hurling the spear in front of him into the formation so hard that when it struck, it picked up the man it hit and carried him into several others. As that happened and the spear wall recoiled, Ranma ducked into the tent of the signalers. The men inside, six of them in this camp, had been rousing themselves but had yet to race outside of the tent.

Now he smashed two of them aside at the entrance before pummeling the other four into the ground.

He grabbed up their drums, shattering them in his grip to loud cries of dismay, before he picked up the bundle of signal flags and made them disappear, causing even more shouts. "Yeah, it's a bad night for you lot," he said almost conversationally. Then his knife was in his hand, and Ranma cut through the back of the tent, barreling through it, the tent collapsing behind him.

The guards that had formed the outer ring had remained in place, while the inner shell had condensed to stop Ranma. So they were still there, trying to attack him as he came out of the tent. Ranma hammered them aside and kept on going, shouting at the top of his lungs as if he was roaring a war cry, when in reality, what was saying was, "Cuckooo, cuckoo, fucking cuckoo!"

Elsewhere, Duncan and the rest of the scouts had already begun to exfiltrate, having done what they could to the supplies within the camp, which had proven to be a lot, perhaps the Muozinel army's reserves. This had not been easy, the supplies having been far more heavily guarded than ever before, forcing the scouts to use every trick in their book to deal with the guards anyway they could. However, now, as the camp roused itself to the danger within, they raced away in every direction they could, keeping away from the torch-bearing patrolmen.

"It is time we left," Duncan said to the fireteam with him as they left behind the last supply tent. Thankfully, and Duncan knew that Ranma had planned this somehow, all of the hullabaloo was centered on him, at the center of the camp. It would take a while for someone

to figure out maybe that there had been other targets other than the commander, by which time they would all be gone.

Ranma met up with the rest of the scouts later. All of them were exhausted from the sprint out of the enemy camp and then the climb up the rope to their hideaway above the gap, but they were all there despite that. Ranma sighed, looking at the scout commanders for a moment. "What do you think? Do we keep going?"

The man all winced, then shook their heads one after another. "Not unless we want to start really losing people, Ranma. I think we pushed this as far as we can," Duncan said regretfully, with his brother, Asher and the others echoing his words.

Ranma sighed, nodded and frowned in turn before shaking his head. "I could've wished we had done more damage, but this enemy reacted too damn quickly once news of what we were up to spread. We'll stay here and observe for the day and then into the night before we get the hell out of here."

As they observed one of the enemy camps that night, Ranma was proven correct. This was yet another formation that they hadn't targeted yet, and the regiment below was taking their security even more seriously than the others had been the night before. They were throwing up an entire palisade around the camp, having stopped earlier in the day than they would normally have to do so. Moreover, it was large enough that another regiment coming up behind them could move into the area, joining the two commands together in one camp.

"That tears it," Ranma announced with a sigh. "I'm the only one among us who could get over palisades like that, dirt mounds though they are, without being seen, and even I don't think I could move through that rat's nest without being spotted before I could find something vital."

He looked around, frowning pensively, then grabbed up a chunk of the nearby rock, heaving it out and hefted above his head. He tossed it down towards the enemy camp, hurling it as hard as he could towards the center of it, then looked at his scouts. "Let's go," he said, as screams and horn calls began down below. "I think we're done here. For the next bit, it'll be up to Tigre and the rest of the army."

End Chapter

Chapter 10: A Big Enough Hammer

While the campaign against Muozinel was dragging on in the Agnes Mountains, Lim arrived in the capital of Zhcted, looking around in interest. She had been there before, although not often, since Eleonora had always entrusted Lim to look after her lands when Elen had to

make an appearance here. And when she had been here, Lim had never really had the time to take in the sights.

Silesia was built mostly of white and blue marble, with gold painted wood decorating the larger buildings. It was built near a stream, and a dike had been created to divert some of the river so that it wound around the central castle, part stream and part defensive work, although since it didn't hug the castle walls, it wasn't as good at that last aspect as it could have been.

To one side of the city, which was by far the largest in Zhcted with over a million people, the side towards the stream, the walls had long since been taken down. It had been replaced by long bridges going over the water there to a new set of suburbs on the far side. But a wall still existed, separating the rich district from a few of the other quarters of the city.

The center section was composed of the palace, a towering edifice that could be seen even from the city's edge, built on top of a manmade hill whose sides were stone walls almost equal to the tallest manor house elsewhere in the city. Around it, the various churches and noble houses sprawled, scattered among the various noble's houses.

There weren't many of those. The vast majority of nobles had their own lands and preferred to stay there. Their representatives in court had decently large estates, but nothing in comparison to the few nobles who resided full-time in Silesia. Instead, much of the area round the bottom of the castle's walls were taken up by wealthy merchant houses and a few artisans. Surrounding that area and pressing up against the portion of wall remaining was the suburbs, where the poorer folk lived.

The suburbs at least are not nearly as organized as even the meanest segment of Leitmeritz, Lim thought with some pride. No squalor here, as I know there is in the capitals of other nations.

But after a second, Lim consoled herself that there were outlying forts, set several miles away from the city in a star pattern, to protect the city. All of whom were under the control of the King's Army, and Lim had seen that very morning that those men took their training seriously. Lim had seen them at training, when she had stopped at one of those forts for breakfast.

Entering the city, Lim rode her horse through its cobbled streets towards the palace, winding this way and that to avoid traffic as much as she could. *But, seeing as I have no idea how I will be received at the palace, or how much time that will take, or indeed if the King will immediately turn me around and send me to Brest, I will take the time now to stop over at one of the temples.*

At her side, Muma seemed to mutter in her mind, pulling her toward the palace. But Lim let one hand fall to Muma's head, rubbing it as if it were the head of a young boy. "I know, but

if I am going to be in front of my King, I need to fortify myself mentally, Muma," she murmured, and Muma's mutter subsided, although the urging was still there, as it had been for several weeks now. It never got distracting, but it was always at the back of Lim's mind.

The temple in question could've fooled an observer into believing that it wasn't a temple at all, rather a small park set in the center of the city. But this illusion would not last after the individual noticed pillars here and there, covered with ivory and what looked like roses. There was also a small, almost humble, long building made of bricks and stone set to one side of the park, where men and women in robes stood talking to various people.

Lim did not join that crowd. Leaving her horse at the edge of the park with its reins tied to an iron post set there, Lim instead walked deeper into the garden. At the center of the garden, Lim bowed her head in prayer to the statue set there.

It was an incredibly intricate statue of a woman, standing with a pair of animals, a young calf and two sheep at her feet. In one hand, she held a pitchfork. Every aspect of her face and clothing was the work of a master craftsman, but there were no jewels set into her eyes or gold inlaid into the statue as there would've been in other temples. Instead, like the temple nearby, there was a certain understated humility to the statue.

This was Moshia, Mother Goddess of the Earth. Goddess of farming, mining, and beloved of the peasantry. She was not in any way a war goddess, only called upon by farmers and other people who worked with the earth, although perhaps a few shepherds had on occasion called to her when defending their flocks against wolves. But considering the powers Muma bestows upon its user, Lim felt it was appropriate to take a moment to compose herself before heading on to the castle.

She was trying desperately not to let her lady's thoughts on the King's recent actions bother her. But Lim had realized rather belatedly that Elen had acted as a buffer between her and politics even as Elen used Lim as a sounding board and second-in-command. Now bereft of that and having seen how cagily the King played the game of politics and influence, Lim felt quite a bit of trepidation for this meeting. So, she needed a moment of tranquility.

Lim stood there, her head bowed as she thought about the goddess in front of her, the weapon at her side, what she had already learned from past conversations with Valentina about Brest. While they had never talked directly about Brest, sifting through half-remembered comments and offhand remarks was enough for Lim to have an inkling as to what she was about to walk into. In doing this, Lim set aside the issue of the King entirely for a moment. This worked to calm her down, and Lim straightened her shoulders and turned back to her horse with a clear head. *Whatever occurs, this meeting is just something I must get through before going on to duties I am actually good at. So let others play politics and make foreign policy. I will do what I do best, organize and lead.*

Unfortunately for Lim, her trepidation was well-founded. When she approached the castle, the guardsmen all stiffened, staring at the weapon hanging from her saddle, all of them recognizing it as one of the Viralts. And whereas Lim would have been allowed into the castle after only a brief questioning by the guards as Elen's representative, now the guards at the gate barred her entrance, one of them saying formally, "Who comes before the palace?"

Having remembered this part from when she accompanied Eleonora when her friend became a Vanadis, Lim answered in the same way Eleonora had been coached to. *Although she had a few days under Lord Shevarin before announcing herself*, Lim grumbled internally. *But, with how Muma was complaining, I didn't have that luxury.* "I, the Holder of Muma, come to give obeisance to the Dragon Blood to give of my duty and receive my worth."

The two guards glanced at one another, and then the one who had spoken raised his halberd and the large doors behind him opened on unheard command. "Then enter, Holder of Muma."

With that, Lim found herself facing one of the castle stewards. Wordlessly, he gestured for Lim to follow him, although his eyes did widen in recognition before he did so. It was evident that the man recognized her from having seen Lim here with her lady. But there was also relief on his expression, and that caused Lim's inner paranoiac to sit up and take notice. *Now, I wonder what that could be about?* Lim thought sarcastically.

Soon, Lim was standing in front of another set of doors leading into the King's throne room, where at this time of day, he would no doubt be holding court. But, of course, this was an extremely broad description of what could be going on in there. It covered anything from a small meeting of advisors about a specific law to a full-court meeting deciding grave matters of the nation. Or even a small soirée, where dozens of discussions would be occurring all over the place, the noises drowning one another out along with the tinkle of glassware as the King sat in the center like the ringmaster of a circus.

Unfortunately for Lim's nerves, that last description was a little closer than she would've liked to reality as the doors opened and her presence was declared by the court's herald. "A Vanadis has fallen. The new Holder of Muma has arrived and wishes to pledge to the Dragon Blood. Will the King see her?"

There were at least two dozen men and women in the court, with several separate conversations going on around the hall's main floor and along the balcony overlooking it. Although at least no food was in sight. The King was in deep discussion with six men around his throne room, each of them having scrolls in her hands as they took notes. But as the herald announced Lim, all this stopped and almost every eye in the place turned towards her.

Oh my. Just, just remember Lim, this is just another battlefield. Just compose yourself as you would before a battle, Lim reminded herself as she moved forward. This helped, and Lim's stoic expression kept any hint of fear from her expression

The crowd between the throne and the entrance parted almost instantly, and Lim moved forward several steps so that the King could see her before pausing at a hissed instruction from behind, the herald having followed her forward. There, Lim placed Muma before her, the end of the shaft set on the ground, her hands on the top of the short axe's head.

As she bowed her head, Lim once more recited from memory the words Eleonora had been coached in when she became a Vanadis. "Compelled by the spirit of Muma, I have come before thee, O' King. Will you take me into your service and exalt me into the station of a Vanadis as my possession of Muma warrants?"

In ancient times, there was quite a bit more to that exaltation, Lim knew. Indeed, at first, the Vanadis had not just been war maidens but concubines to the Black Dragon King and his direct descendent. That aspect had stopped within two generations, thankfully, as the physical and magical power of the Black Dragon - and Lim had no idea if the Black Dragon originally was someone like Ranma, or indeed if an individual dragon had somehow been able to transform himself into a human - faded. But there was still a bit of magic within the blood of the ruling family of Zhcted, all of it tied into control of the Vanadis, as shown recently with Muma's recall by the King.

King Viktor stared at the blonde kneeling in the center of the hall, recognizing her and, in so doing, becoming somewhat angry. Not only did he recognize her as someone who followed Eleonora around, a woman Viktor was not exactly most pleased with at the moment, for various reasons. But seeing Lim there holding Muma meant that Viktor couldn't control the selection of the next Vanadis of Brest. He had hoped to do so for various reasons, and seeing someone like Lim there upset those plans, replacing them with concerns instead.

But may the gods strike her and her bitch of a friend down, I have no choice!! Never, not once in the history of Zhcted, had a person who had been found by a Viralt been successfully rejected by the King. One of Viktor's most stubborn ancestors had attempted to reject a Viralt's selection several times, but the weapons themselves would never bond to anyone else. That had nearly spelled disaster for Zhcted when their enemies took advantage of three of the seven Viralts not being in use to attack them. And whatever his annoyance with Eleonora, and his other issues with the war maidens, Viktor would not allow the weapon of his nation to go unused.

And perhaps removing her will weaken Viltaria's position? It's well known that this woman is her best logistician and organizer.

Shaking those thoughts off, Viktor replied as the moment demanded. "I, King Viktor Arthur Volk Estes Tur Zhcted, demand that you come forward, Holder of Muma and give your oath to my Dragon Blood."

Lim did so, frowning a little as those words had not matched what she had heard King Viktor say to Eleonora at this moment in the ceremony. Instead, they sounded more abrupt,

more annoyed. *But then again, Eleonora had been taken under Lord Shevarin and he had soothed the way forward for a foreigner to be raised to the position of Vanadis of Leitmeritz. And again, thanks to Muma's insistence and given how far I had to get here, I couldn't allow him much time to get used to the idea. Although it is odd that the King didn't learn of my arrival in the city first.*

Setting aside those thoughts, Lim strode forward, and at another discrete gesture from a second steward who had somehow materialized out of the crowd of the court, stopped a few feet away from the base of the dais that the throne sat on. There she knelt, placing Muma lengthwise on the floor in front of her, one hand resting on the shaft of the weapon as she stared up at the King.

"Recite the oath of the war maiden, Holder of Muma," Viktor demanded, his voice still cold and aloof.

"I, Limalisha do vow to serve the blood of the Black Dragon King. To defend the territories of Zhcted and those conquered by her hands to the utmost about my abilities. To slay all enemies of the nation of Zhcted and be ready to answer the call of the King. To be firm of purpose and strength, and to let no secondary loyalty sway me away from my duty to the blood of the dragon and the country the Dragon Blood controls," Lim said, hesitantly at first, but then more firmly as the same steward who had gestured her to stop whispered the words from behind her.

As she spoke that last sentence, though, Lim winced internally. *That line is meant to imply I will set my duty to the King above any personal feelings for family or love. Considering my relationship with Ranma, that statement is a bit too pointed.* Still, the two of them had talked about that previously, and Ranma knew that Lim's duty to her nation would always come first. And he had seemed fine with that at the time too. *And Ranma isn't the kind of person to become the enemy of an entire nation... well, except for Muozinel. Those slaving bastards have no idea what is in store for them.*

That brought a smile to Lim's face, one she hid by looking at Muma as if the weapon had caused her smile somehow.

For a moment, King Viktor stared down at her, then nodded sharply. "I, King Viktor Arthur Volk Estes Tur Zhcted, take your oath upon me, and upon the weapon of Muma as truly spoken. I will hold you to those lest your weapon be confiscated and your life forfeit within reach of the Dragon Blood. Rise as Vanadis of Brest, Limalisha Du Brest."

There was no vow of reciprocity there. There was no sign that the King had any duty to the war maidens. Perhaps, when the Black Dragon King himself sat on this throne, that had not been the case. But no one could remember a time when any thought of loyalty going two ways rather than one way that ever been a consideration. The King ruled, the Vandis followed. That was all.

As Lim stood up, taking Muma and placing it on her waist, Viktor looked around at his courtiers. "The court is adjourned for now. I will spend several hours getting to know my new war maiden before she must depart to see to the lands of Brest in the parlous times that have befallen it."

The King went on to name several people, whose names Lim had not heard of before bar two, the King's chief advisor and the man who ran the daily comings and goings of the castle and Lord Kurtis. The men Viktor named moved to the dais, ranging themselves around Lim and the King in a half-circle.

As soon as the last of the court had left the room and the doors closed behind them, the King leaned forward in his throne, growling, "And is there a reason why you decided to spring yourself upon us like this, Vanadis Limalisha?"

"There is, your Majesty. I regret to say that I was at Eagle's Tower in Brune when Muma came to me. From there, traveling as best I could to the capital took nearly three weeks, and every day since I hit Zhcted's border, I have felt Muma's insistence that I go faster, that I appear before you as soon as possible. Even when I reached Leitmeritz, I decided that I could make the journey just as fast as any messenger could, and so simply pushed myself on," Lim replied instantly before she voiced the question that had occurred to her earlier. "Although I would've thought that someone would have reported my presence in the city before I got to the castle."

"Indeed, someone should have," Viktor grumbled, leaning back in his chair now, some of his hostility fading. "Very well, it isn't all that unusual, and it has long been custom for a Holder to present herself at the earliest opportunity. It has only been that in the past that we have had time to make it a more formal affair."

Internally Lim blanched at that, as well as hearing the king use the Royal 'We.' All of this had seemed more than formal enough to her. But she said nothing as the King went on. "Very well, before we get to more important matters specifically regarding your new duties, tell me about what is going on in Brune. First-hand information is always best."

"My first-hand information will be three weeks out of date, your Majesty," Lim protested.

"That is fine. What I really wanted was your impression of this Regin, the girl who would be Queen as well as the military capabilities of the Silver Meteor Army that Eleonora and this Tigre fellow have developed."

Lim did so, first speaking about Regin and Lim's opinion of the younger woman. That impression wasn't entirely positive, Lim didn't think Regin really had the stomach to lead, at least not militarily, but she tried to show Regin in at least a competent light.

From there, Lim moved on to the organization of the Silver Meteor army. She left nothing out, emphasizing the use of Tigre's scouts, of indirect warfare, and of the horse archers. The first idea caused many a sneer among King Viktor's advisors, seeing that kind of warfare as dishonorable and beneath any real army's dignity. But the idea of horse archers had Lord Kurtis nodding at the utility and muttering, "Thank the gods the Horse Lords have never gone into archery, only javelin throwing and sabers."

"So, sending Lourie to back up Eleonora against the Muozinel invaders was the right thing to do," Zhcted mused.

Lim winced. *Oh dear, I hope that Elen and Lady Lourie can work together... and that Ranma doesn't make things harder for the sheer joy of chaos.*

Not noticing her reaction, Lord Kurtis nodded firmly. "It's always better to fight an enemy on another nation's lands, Your Majesty. And those mountains, from what little I remember of my geography lessons on that area of Brune, can be deadly. This two-pronged assault from Muozinel, however..." The older man shook his head. "That is a mad gamble on their part, but one that could have won them the game in Brune. I can only hope that Ludmila's additions to their fighting force will be able to stymie the Muozinel Army until they are forced to retreat."

"Indeed. And if this Silver Meteor Army succeeds and then goes on to defeat Thenardier, this Regin chit will know that she owes her kingdom and crown to our largess in sending our war maidens to aid them. And not just against the forces of Muozinel, either. After all, who could she send against dragons?" Viktor posed rhetorically, smiling thinly behind his beard. "And killing someone able to tame dragons is not a minor consideration either."

Lim felt a little chilled inside at hearing King Viktor speak so coldly about his reasoning behind the recent turnaround of his policy towards Brune. *And yet, this is international politics. Isn't it better to look at them with a cold, analytical gaze rather than a hot and covetous one? Still, a little bit of empathy wouldn't go amiss either,* she reflected.

Shaking his head, the King turned his attention to other matters. Brune was too distant for him to do more than he already had in sending Lourie there. That left other issues for his attention. "Still, that is enough on Brune. You are now the Vanadis of Brest. Brest is not one of the original lands of Zhcted. Rather, it is a portion of the Horse Lords' land he conquered a few generations ago. The war maiden of Muma was assigned to Brest to help defend against the Horse Lords."

"Before that, your predecessors were much like the Vanadis of Zaht. The land assigned to Muma's wielder was small and internal, and your duties were dependent more on specific orders from the King," Miron added. Whereas the wielders of Zaht have almost always been our diplomatic troubleshooters, in the past, the wielders of Muma were more internal security.

That aspect has not changed. You may be called upon to remove nobles or other powerful individuals at the King's command.

"Specifically, since Ganelon's defeat, many connections to the fallen Duke have become known among certain members of our merchant class. Perversions and other things..." The King shook his head. "That will be brought to a halt. While monetary connections to foreign nobles are not illegal, evidence is slowly being compiled by my spies that point to... Sinister undertakings. Vile things, things that, while perhaps not explicitly against the laws of the land, certainly fly in the face of the laws of the various temples."

"Your Majesty, I am not an assassin, nor do I think that Muma is a weapon for subtlety like that," Lim protested.

"Bah, do I look like a fool? Yes, for those among the merchant class, assassination is definitely a card that could be played. But for the nobles thus implicated? They have men-at-arms willing to follow them into depravity. If I send you after them, you will wipe them out as a warlord, as an example to others," the King said, his tone even icier now, causing Lim to shiver a bit.

"However, there are more important things for you to concern yourself with." With that, the King gestured to Lord Kurtis and one of his other advisors, a small, almost mousy man who hadn't spoken yet.

The two of them took over, talking about Brest and how the Horse Lords had recently crossed the border again and were ravaging across the county. Valentina and her small army had already moved to defend them. Normally this wouldn't be needed. A war maiden's lands were normally a position of military might. But Brest had suffered due to a lack of management.

First, Muma hadn't discovered anyone worthy of it for more than 10 years. And then, the young girl who had been found worthy had, after taking her oaths, simply walked off.

In turn, Brest had shrunk. Many of the knights, the lowest level of nobility, on the borders with Osterode had shifted allegiance to Osterode and Valentina. Others, particularly the mayor of the main town, Cindwar, had gone their own way, paying what taxes they had to the crown but otherwise not really caring about the nation or anything beyond their borders. The rest of Brest had gone to ruin in various ways even before the Horse Lords arrived.

"Several of the other Lords are now no better than robber barons. A few will no doubt resent the idea of a Vanadis finally appearing and lording it over them. They probably won't make trouble for you now, with the Horse Lords across the border, but you will need to be aware that they will probably move against you in some fashion afterward."

"I have served as lady Eleonora's second in command for years in Leitmeritz," Lim answered, smiling as she looked over the book the mousy man had just handed her. "Once Lady

Estes and I secure the borders, I believe I will be able to turn around Brest, given enough time and so long as you are not expecting miracles, Your Majesty. I cannot get water from a stone.”

King Viktor scowled a little at that bit of straight talk but nodded anyway. “A miracle, no. Certainty, yes. Brest’s dysfunction leaves a weakness that the Horse Lords are utilizing for the second time in my memory. I want that weakness repaired. Therefore, you will have a stay on taxes for a full year for the entire district. But after that, barring wartime damages, I expect you to turn it around. Is that understood?”

Lim looked over the book, staring at the map that constituted the first pages and then stared up at the ceiling in calculation. What she was really contemplating, though, was the war to come and what she knew of what Valentina had wanted to do when she returned to Osterode those months ago. *If she has been able to replicate even a tiny portion of the weapons and other things that Ranma mentioned to us, then beating back the Horse Lords will be much easier than otherwise. As to the rest, I wonder...* Opening her eyes, Lim looked at the clerk who had handed her the book, then asked if she could ask the man some questions before promising anything to the King.

Impressed and pleased that she hadn’t leaped on the opportunity to give him an empty promise, the King nodded, listening as she asked the clerk questions about the various rivers, the soil, and other information like that. Much of that information the clerk didn’t know. There was a reason, after all, why Ranma’s mapmaking ability had so thoroughly taken Eleonora and the others who had seen his maps by surprise.

But the clerk did know about the various minerals found in Brest and whether or not this or that area was good for farming in a general sense. They didn’t have any idea if the rivers in Brest were usable, unfortunately. And those rivers were few and far between. It turned out that even Cindwar was not built on the river, although it did have an aquafer-fed pond in the center of it.

“Your Majesty, could I request that the year of tax opinions start only after the invasion of the Horse Lords is beaten off?” Lim requested. “I might also need the use of a few of the royal messengers to bring in various resources and people from Leitmeritz.”

“Those are simple enough boons to grant. So yes, we can do so,” Viktor stated. “Although remember that the crown will require its normal 20% of all booty gained from the defeat of the Horse Lords.”

Lim hid a grimace at that. That was typical in times of war, but given that the Horse Lords would have taken their booty from the civilians of Brest, it left a bad taste in her mouth. *That isn’t going to make it any easier to rebuild. Blast it.*

Yet Lim knew she had no choice but to agree and simply nodded her head. “In that case, your Majesty, I believe I can turn Brest around. Of course, we won’t be paying much in terms of

taxes for a while, but I think it is possible to make Brest once more at least a marginally profitable territory. But I will only turn my attention to that after the Horse Lords are defeated.”

The King nodded at that, understanding her point. However, he then broached another subject. “In that case, you will set out within the hour. Shatter the power of the Horse Lords, return sovereign authority to Brest. And... report anything unusual that you discover. Both when fighting the Horse Lords, in traveling Brest and working with Estes.”

Viktor frowned then. “Do you have any problem working with her? We understand that Vanadis routinely have issues with one another, but since you were just elevated within the last few hours, we doubt you have had any time to build up rivalries that are truly your own.”

Those rivalries were actually something Viktor and his predecessor had encouraged, a part of the system of checks and balances to keep the power of the Vanadis in check, similar to what he did with the various nobles. But with the Horse Lords invading and threatening to push through Brest and into more important territories, Viktor didn’t want to deal with that. Rather, having someone like Lim reporting to him about Valentina was much more important.

“Your Majesty?” Lim frowned, cocking her head to one side. “I am willing to work with lady Estes well enough. We talked a few times when she was investigating the doctor who healed lady Sasha, and I respect her military acumen. Lady Estes also knows the Horse Lords far better than I do, so I have no issue with working with her.”

Or even following her lead, Lim very carefully did not say, somehow sensing that doing so would be a mistake. Moreover, she had something else she needed clarification on. “But what do you mean I should be looking for anything unusual? Is there something mysterious or inexplicable about this invasion? Are the Horse Lords not acting in their normal manner?”

“Their warlord seems to be far more intelligent than others of the breed. But no, that is not what we are talking about. There have been rumors of odd alchemical experiments, new weapons and other strangeness coming out of Osterode. Unfortunately, we don’t know enough about it to tell you any more than that, which is why we are telling you to do this,” Viktor answered, still using the Royal ‘We.’ “You will decipher the truth, and whether or not lady Estes is building up her power base in a way that we as King should object to.”

Viktor was deliberately obfuscating here. For one thing, he really didn’t have any concrete information on what Valentina was doing. There were a few rumors here and there of explosions and strange purchases and of entirely new units being added to her pike companies. But Valentina frustrated Viktor to no end because none of his spies had been able to last more than a day or two in her territory before being discovered, killed or forced to flee. She rooted them out just as ruthlessly as she did any foreign agents.

May Perkunas sear her soul to ash, Estes is too good at that kind of thing. Too good at moving the shadows. She is not the blunt weapon that the other war maidens are. Even

Elizaveta, for all that the wielder of Valitsaif is a subtle creature whose various business dealings and web of contacts have helped her land grow far stronger than ever before. Valentina Glinka Estes concerned Viktor more than any of the other war maidens, even Sasha and her massive personal powerbase in Legnica.

Viktor was determined to make certain that Estes' power base did not grow too large. *One powerful nigh-on untouchable Vanadis is more than enough, thank you.*

Opening her mouth, Lim made to protest before thinking better of it and closing her mouth simply nodding instead. After all, she had been part of the discussions with Valentina and knew about some of the things she was trying to recreate. While, yes, such things would serve to bolster Valentina's position, they were no direct threat to the King. *The status quo, perhaps, but not the King himself. After all, I rather doubt there are specific laws against the alchemical experiments Valentina's running. "I will try, Your Majesty. But given the vagueness of what you're asking, I am uncertain how good an observer I can be, and getting any observations to you during wartime might also prove difficult."*

"So long as you are on the lookout and remember to report to us regularly, of that will be good enough. Miron will supply you with a set of ciphers and the means with which to send us your reports. Beyond that, we are finished here. My clerk will give you some money to use in the campaign or afterward as a startup fund. But I expect results," the King ordered, waving Lim off.

"I will join you in a moment. Go with Samuel first," Miron added.

Lim bowed and then departed the throne room, waiting outside for the now-named clerk to join her before following him. Less than an hour later, she was leaving the castle with three more horses to help speed her journey along, each of them carrying small bags of gold. As she started to travel towards the northernmost borders of Zhcted, a road Lim had never traveled before, she paused, looking back not towards the capital but past it to distant Brune, her thoughts on the equally distant Ranma. *I wonder how long it will be before we can see one another again?*

After a moment, Lim shook off that maudlin thought and turned her head forward, staring down the road before her, feeling Muma vibrating with eagerness for battle at her side. A second later, Lim urged her horse into a slow canter, still wondering about her secondary mission.

But by the time Lim was a few leagues away from the capital, all thought about her secondary mission of reporting what Valentina was doing to the King had left her mind, and she was instead looking forward to the challenges to come, eager to put her martial and logistical skills to the test in reclaiming Brest for Zhcted. "Although, I do wonder what Valentina will think when she sees me as her new neighbor and fellow Vanadis?" she said aloud to the road around her, a sudden smirk appearing on her face. "That could be interesting."

OOOOOO

While Ranma had been having fun with the enemy army, Tigre and his forces fought a slightly more conventional war. With the difference in numbers being so vast, they couldn't fight the enemy in a standing engagement. Even at the narrowest points of the Charles Gap, the enemy could simply have overwhelmed them. And in the mountains, not every unit of the Silver Meteor Army could move freely.

To combat that problem, Tigre and Eleonora split off the two pike companies and a large portion of their baggage train when they first entered the mountains. Under Captain Marsh's and Gerard's joint command, those men would build small fortresses several leagues into the gap. These would be simple affairs by necessity, but any defensive point where the pikes could stand and defend would let them take a bloody toll on the enemy.

Meanwhile, Tigre and Elen led the rest of the army into the mountains. Leading even a single heavy cavalry unit into such terrain would have been crazy for any other army. But the Silver Meteor Army could do it, with the horse archers moving around the mountains with ease. The light infantry forces, Brunemen to a man trained over the winter, could also easily make their way through the mountains, adding their fellows along and providing more troops at need.

Tigre and Elen attacked targets of opportunity, usually assaulting units that seemed disorganized already or were just a bit too far away from their fellows. That wasn't always that far, unfortunately, but thanks to their speed and knowing the trails through the mountains, they were able to get away before the enemy could bring up enough troops to pin the Silver Meteor Army in place within the Charles Gap.

However, these attacks were not safe affairs even at the best of times. And unfortunately, the enemy also continued to learn, adapting their own defense against these attacks as they did against Ranma's activities. To combat Elen and Tigre, this meant shifting more cavalry to the sides of their marching order and sending more infantry and archer units into the mountains in company-sized groups.

Elen and Tigre quickly learned about this but knew that the enemy's main army was their real target, so simply avoided these units when they could or swept them away if the enemy could be caught unawares. But about three days before Ranma called it quits, despite their best efforts, this game of cat and mouse came to a head...

As his last victim fell, Tigre pulled his horse around with one hand, grabbing at his bugle with the other, bringing it to his lips. A long blast followed by a short one signaled the

withdrawal. He then dropped it back to his chest, pulling up the Black Bow almost offhand. An arrow flashed out, taking another cavalryman in the chest.

That unit moved faster than I expected. Still, that's all right, we can deal with this.

All around Tigre, his fellow horse archers disengaged quickly, shooting what on earth would have been called a Parthian shot: turning in the saddle to fire over the backs of their horses as they raced away. Their lighter accouterments and speed allowed them to break off the attack on the enemy infantry column, which had been their original target, retreating in the face of the heavy cavalry coming up at them. A moment later, a second horn call caused them to whirl at the top of the crest, shooting back down into the heavy cavalry.

At that range, many of the arrows couldn't penetrate the armor of the heavy cavalry below them, but the horse archers were so well-trained that they didn't even bother to try, they were shooting at the horses instead. Unlike the heavy cavalry of Zhcted or Brune, the barding on Muozinel's horse wasn't as heavy as that worn by the men who rode them.

Horses tumbled, men fell, crushed under the hooves of their fellows or just rolling down the steep slope. Meanwhile, Tigre's own shots took men who were riding alongside men holding banners off their horses, then the man with the banner, each of them having died from an arrow straight to the throat or eye.

With that and a third blow of his horn, the horse archers broke off entirely, disappearing into the hills. Or rather, that was the plan.

A warning shout of, "Beware, cavalry coming in from our east!" told Tigre that the plan was perhaps not going to go as well as he could have hoped today. From that direction came not cavalry but mounted infantry, two men to each horse. From where Tigre was perched at the top of a pass moving higher into the mountains, he could see that the horses looked as if they were badly flagging. But now the men leaped off the horses, and while half of the enemy raced forward, the others showed themselves to be archers, taking the horse archers themselves under fire from range.

Tigre and his men shot back, but Tigre could see men falling from their saddles, men he could ill afford to lose. Pulling the horn from where he'd hung it on his saddle, Tigre tossed it to his signalman, a specially trained trooper who always followed him close. "Sound the retreat! And then sound from up on the south. We'll pull back that way!" That pass was narrower but less steep and would let them gain some distance from the enemy.

With that, Tigre targeted the infantry racing forward to try and get in between his archers. If they did that, they could have taken a horrible toll on his men. Arrows leaped from the Black Bow, faster and more accurate than any other archer alive, with his men following suit, not dueling with the enemy archers but keeping the enemy from closing as they wheeled to the south, retreating through the pass there in groups of four.

Six more men were lost before the horse archers speed allowed them to pull away from the mounted infantry, who were slow to get back into the saddle to pursue them, having seen more than half their sword-wielding brethren going down to arrow fire. But they didn't have to. From the same direction as the mounted infantry came another few companies of light cavalry, who raced past their archers.

At the back of his column now, Tigre shot down one horse after another. The horses collapsed, getting in the way of their fellows behind, blocking the pass for enough time to let his men keep their lead. Even so, the light cavalry continued to chase them, losing people as they came to Tigre and a few of his fellows but keeping in contact.

And, unbeknownst to Tigre, they also sent back reports to their commanding officers, who sent more infantry up into the mountains. They would move slower but along paths that even the light horse archers could not follow.

The running battle against the enemy light cavalry continued for several hours, a thing of retreat, rest, and then being found, before retreating again as the horse archers moved through the mountains, taking any path they could to try and make some distance between them. Twice Tigre turned the tables on the enemy, ambushing their pursuers only to be forced to retreat when more light cavalry joined the battle.

They are sending at least three regiments after us by this point, Tigre thought in a frame of mind somewhere between pride and fear. There were just so many of the enemy! Of course, only a portion of them are discovering us at any point, but each time there are other units within hearing range that move to attack us.

However, the deeper they went into the mountain, the more hesitant the enemy seemed to become, the more time it took for aid to arrive. Sensing that, Tigre smiled and sent a runner ahead of them through the mountain passes, hoping Elen and her troops were nearby so they could ambush this large force of enemy cavalry. *After all, every group we destroy means our enemies don't have them to call on.*

Moments later, it seemed as if, once again, the enemy had followed Tigre too far.

More than two dozen miles of heavy, mountainous passes away from their fellows in the hard going, Elen struck. "Ley Adimos!" came her shout from on high, and a tornado-shaped ball of air crashed into the enemy column tossing horsemen and men in every direction, cutting a few of them in half at the center of the strike.

All around her, Elen's cavalry charge down, lances couched to crash into their lighter fellows. Her infantry also appeared from the other side of the small path Tigre's troops had been slogging along, coming out from under an overpass that had blocked them from sight from the path above. They raced forward, getting in among the light infantry, dumping men out

of the saddle, spooking the horses enough for them to start getting in one another's way in the narrow path.

The other side of the pass was so steep that the horses could barely stumble upward on it, let alone make any headway. Upwards, anyway. Going down was a different story.

"Remember to spare the horses! We can collect them afterward!" Elen shouted as she darted forward, following her cavalry down the slope.

Her horse nearly skidded out from under her, so steep was slope here, but it kept its footing, as did the other horses with her trained to move in the Voyes Mountains near Alsace. They crashed into the enemy horses, and Elen's stallion personally smashed two enemy horses onto their sides as Elen laid out around her with her sword, cutting through armor and men with equal ease.

However, to her surprise, the enemy light cavalry didn't break as they should have when stuck between infantry and heavy cavalry. Even Tigre's arrows falling among them didn't seem to do the job, and Elen began to wonder if there was something else going on here.

A moment later, this question was answered. Another force of mounted infantry had come close enough to hear the battle going on once more. This force had actually been following after the cavalry units, waiting for an opportunity to attack when the Silver Meteor army could not disengage and so they could attack from as many angles as they could.

As Elen attacked, nearly a battalion's worth of infantry moved forward through the mountains along a route that took them to the side of the ongoing battle above where Elen's infantry had hidden. Now they came around the mountainside over the overpass, crashing down and into the back of her infantry force before they could turn and prepare to receive.

Caught off balance and being attacked from behind, Elen's infantry began to falter almost instantly, recoiling from the point of impact, more than a dozen men dying in the first moments of contact. Their teamwork and organization, already frayed thanks to the fighting in and among the enemy cavalry and began to break down further. Tigre saw this and ordered his horse archers back into the fight, although few of them had any arrows remaining by this point.

However, it wasn't going to be enough, and Elen snarled, leaping up off of her horse, who wheeled, moving and away from the battle as Elen used her mastery of air to cross the intervening distance between where she had previously been to where she could attack this new enemy column, hammering down into the enemy infantry who had yet to reach the battle from above another Ley Adimos leading the way.

"For the Silver Meteor Army!" Landing lightly in the center of the area her attack had cleared, Elen charged forward, sword slicing out to end one man's life, then cut through a

banner being held in the hand of another man, the banner falling, the man's hand falling with it, cut off at the wrist.

The rest of the man followed as Elen stabbed him in the chest, then flicked Arifar back out and around to block an incoming blow, ducking under another, before dancing around a third. "Not fast enough, boys!" she growled, Arifar flashing out, to end the life of the second man who had attacked her, before parrying another attack as the Muozinel troops attempted to encircle her. A slash of air magic cutting nine men in half with a single swipe of Arifar, the whole blade covered with rapidly moving air.

Elsewhere, Elen's attack on the enemy infantry allowed her own to rally, the rest of the ambushers concentrating entirely on the Vanadis in their midst now. Muozinel knew precisely how dangerous the Vanadis were and knew to overwhelm them with numbers quickly.

At barked commands from their junior officers, the allied infantry pulled back and away from the light cavalry. That force was now in complete disarray and did nothing to impede the infantry moving back and forming into a rectangle, one long line facing back against the Muozinel infantry who had attacked over the overpass.

But another force of mounted infantry came up along the same route, who quickly dismounted and raced forward to engage Elen's heavy cavalry, the melee growing dangerously now. Without room to charge or otherwise maneuver, heavy cavalry only had a reach advantage on the infantry, and there were far too many Muozinel troops for that matter. The only saving grace was that they hadn't stopped to reorganize themselves before charging forward.

Tigre stared around, trying to figure out a way to disengage, break off this attack, regroup, or win outright. Not that the last option stayed in his mind for long. There were just too many of the enemy, and in the distance, down past the incoming infantry, he could see still more cavalry arriving.

Then his eyes widened in shock as one of the banners being carried by this new unit whipped out in the wind, allowing him to see the symbol on it. It was not the face of the Muozinel war god. Rather it was the symbol of Zhcted coupled with the upthrust spear of House Lourie.

Even as Tigre watched, this new group crashed into the back of the battle, forcing the newest units to turn and engage them as well. Spikes of ice began erupting throughout the enemy forces there, shattering their limited unit cohesion and killing several dozens of them at a time, instantly turning the battle in their favor again. Behind that initial cavalry rush came a smaller unit of infantry, who knelt and began to fire into the melee with arrows.

Thinking quickly, Elen fell back to her infantry, shouting out orders and sending them up against the infantry she had previously been fighting, attacking uphill and using Arifar to break

their lines. "Up and at them, men of Brune, men of Leitmeritz!" The enemy, their fronts shattered by her magic, found themselves hard-pressed, the men on their flanks now being bumped off the steep overpass to fall to their deaths below.

Yet even now, the enemy didn't break quickly. Stuck between a rock and a hard place, their ambush turned on them, the Muozinel troops continued to fight hard, forcing the defenders to kill them until the last banner carrier died, he and the group around him dying to another blast of air from Elen. That finally seemed to break their will, and the enemy began to try to retreat, filtering out past Ludmila's blocking forces. Few of them succeeded in doing so, Ludmila urging her men to kill every enemy they could.

As the battle ended, Elen and Tigre began to both order the recall, getting their men into position to fall back. "Make sure you search the dead for arrows we can use!" Tigre ordered Rurick, before looking around at a few of his men specifically. "And don't bother trying to loot the bodies. By this point, you all should know they don't have anything of worth on them."

From where she was helping one of her men to his feet, Ludmila frowned, wondering why they were preparing to retreat so quickly instead of simply burning the bodies, until Tigre raced over to her, shouting out, "Get your people moving, grab up every horse you can and let's move! The enemy always leaves a few observers behind the battle to call up reinforcements."

Understanding, Ludmila also nodded to her bugler, who quickly went to work organizing her people. As that was going on, she hopped into the saddle and then trotted over to where Lord Vorn was.

Now that her men too were preparing to move on, Tigre smiled at her happily, grinning almost boyishly. Far too boyishly in Ludmila's opinion for a noble, even an earl. "Thank you for your help, although how you got here from your own territory in Zhcted is something I have no idea about. Still, I'm not going to look a gift horse in the mouth."

Ludmila's eyes narrowed, and she shook her head. "Minus five points."

Tigre blinked, and she rolled her eyes again, holding up one hand, flashing her fingers twice. "You started out with ten points. This was a decent enough ambush, and from what your people back at the entrance to the gap said, you all have been fighting this war for quite a few weeks now. But you lost five points just now for several reasons. For one thing, never compare a woman to a horse. That's minus three points. Second, you should always wonder why a noble, especially a foreign one, is helping you. I understand you've gotten used to Elen being extremely open with her interest in you, but I certainly do not share that interest, and you should not assume I do."

Tigre's mouth dropped open, and he looked at her, gaping like a fish, as a blush suffusing his features. "I didn't, that is, I, I'm..."

“Minus one more point for your look of utter confusion. A noble should never allow anyone to see him or her in such a manner. Although I am pleased to note that you are not assuming such.” Ludmila’s expression shifted, smiling in good humor with that last sentence. Her people hadn’t lost anyone coming in from behind as they had and that made her extremely pleased.

At that point, Elen joined her, and the first words out of the other Vanadis’ mouth caused Ludmila’s smile to disappear as if it had never been. “Ugh, it’s the Potato. What the hell are you doing here?”

“You mean beyond pulling you and your army out of the fire?” Ludmila shot back tartly before growling, “And who are you calling a Potato anyway!”

“Because I can see that you haven’t exactly ‘budded’ since the last time I saw you,” Elen said, thrusting out her chest. “How sad for you. To be eternally stuck in the body of a young girl no matter how old you get.”

“I didn’t see those things helping you in battle here or at any time when we’ve sparred in the past. How amusing that a Vanadis can take such vanity in something that doesn’t matter at all!” Ludmila’s words would have been extremely cutting if not for the faint flush of anger on her face and the twitch of her eyes down to glare at Elen’s chest. She seemed to compose herself quickly, however, shaking her head with a dry laugh. “Of course, what can one expect from someone as uncouth as yourself. Why it would be the same as assuming a wolf could be taught manners.”

“Now, Elen, you know we were in dire straits before Ludmila showed up. Even though Ludmila still hasn’t told me why she’s here, we need the help.” Tigre moved between the two women like the smallest peace-keeping force imaginable, his hands outstretched to either side.

The two women continued to glare at one another before Elen huffed and nodded once. “I suppose you were able to take advantage of the enemy’s fixation on us well enough.”

“Indeed, it is a smart opponent who takes advantage of one’s weaknesses,” Ludmila said, smiling tightly.

“And besides,” Tigre went on, desperately ignoring the undercurrents of their words, gesturing around them. “We really do need to get moving. Deeper and further away from the Gap.”

Ludmila frowned, but Elen nodded agreement, smiling as her horse walked up to her, rubbing its nose affectionately against her before she leaped into the saddle. There she pulled out a sliced portion of an apple, leaned forward, and fed her beast before leaning back to the other direction and giving Tigre a peck on the cheek. “You’re right,” she said in a conciliatory tone. “We can deal with the interloper when we’re away from here.”

At this, Ludmila flushed crimson, backing away as she pointed a shaky finger at Elen. "What, what was that?! You just, you just kissed him, in public, no less! You, you harlot!"

Tigre blinked at that, the blush suffusing his features fading as he looked at Ludmila. "It was just a kiss on the cheek," he mumbled.

For her part, Elen laughed wildly, throwing her head back and actually making a 'hohoho' sound as she looked down her nose at the younger girl. "I am debating whether or not to think that was a cute sign of your innocence or your naïveté. Tigre is mine, so of course, I'm going to show him affection! If I was a harlot, as you say, I would've jumped on his horse and had Tigre rut with me right here."

Her own horse whinnied in protest at the very idea, although how much of that he understood, Elen didn't know. Even so, as she continued her verbal assault, Elen promised she would give him several apples and even some sugar after this campaign was over. "As it is, that was simply a mark of my affection For Tigre. Is a little affection so foreign to your being, Lourie?"

Ludmila growled, reaching for Lavias, but an outrider shouted at them from further away back down the main trail that Tigre had been following before Elen springing ambush. Although calling it a trail was generous since the men could only move down it in single file. "We have incoming! Light infantry and archers, and behind them, another infantry force, unknown type."

"Good work," Tigre replied instantly, before beginning to take command once more, blowing a tune on his bugle and then pointing further away down the trail. "Time we left," he said aloud, drop everything else, and let's get moving."

Soon, a few twists of the trail between them and the ambush sight gave them enough distance to feel safe. Although the fact that to one side was a drop that would kill anyone if they put a foot wrong definitely argued against that.

At that point, Ludmila made to speak, but Tigre held up a hand, gesturing to Rurick, who was following behind Tigre in the line. "What were our casualties?"

Hearing the sober, sad but collected tone, Ludmila's estimation of Tigre went up, causing her to mentally add three more points back into his tally as Rurick replied. "We lost forty-one men among the horse archers. We also have three crippled and more than a hundred wounded too much to shoot but able to keep up for now."

In front of Elen, her remaining sub-commander, a man named Bandor, spoke up next. "We lost seventy-five dead or wounded among the infantry, sirs," he reported woodenly. "Six of the heavy Calvary were also lost in the engagement as well, and five more horses than men. Injured across our forces, milady, are more than a hundred."

Both Elen and Tigre winced at that. That had been an extremely costly win. One they couldn't afford even if they had wiped out more than their own surviving number of enemies. Ludmila too frowned, shaking her head, and when she spoke, there was no sense of taunting in her tone. "It seems as if I arrived just in time."

The now-reinforced Silver Meteor Army kept moving, putting still more distance in them and any chance of pursuit. Near evening, the army found a supply cache that the army had set up earlier that day. Faster than Ludmila would have thought possible, Elen and Tigre's troop had set up camp, settling down easily despite the haphazard nature of the terrain and the fact few could put up actual tents, so rocky was the mountains around them.

Her own people took a bit longer to get settled, and by the time they were done, a messenger was waiting to show Ludmila through the sprawling camp to where Elen and Tigre were sharing a tent set on a shelf where a lone tree grew out of a bit of scraggly graze no larger than a bed. That comparison and the sight of the small tent brought a blush to Ludmila's face, but she'd had time to get over her shock and analyze what she had seen of their interactions throughout the day.

Doing so, Ludmila determined that, while they were close, Elen and Tigre weren't betrothed yet. If they were, Tigre would not have responded with a blush to the kiss that Elen had given him, and there would probably have been more, possibly even more provocative displays of affection. *They might even have held hands at some point! But no, it seems as if Tigre wants to respond to Elen, but either he has no idea how, or something is holding him back.*

Although I still question why Elen is so interested in a foreign nobleman. Although, is technically foreign at this point, given that his county now belongs to Eleonora? Shaking her head, Ludmila went back to her previous thought. Why does Elen think Vorn is worth so much? Especially, considering I know King Viktor has not approved of this entire Brunish adventure. Ugh, please don't tell me all of this is because of soft, romantic notions.

Entering the tent, she found Tigre and Elen sitting on both sides of a map spread out on a tiny camp table. A map, furthermore, whose level of detail caused her to gasp, the sound alerting the two to her presence. The map was incomplete, but still, the areas that were colored in were amazingly comprehensive.

Hearing Ludmila enter, Elen looked up at the other Vanadis, her eyes narrowing and her arms moving to remove the map. But then she stopped, sighed and gestured Ludmila to join them. Take a seat, and tell me why the King has ordered you to help us. I wager I already know but I want it out in the open."

Ludmila nodded, crouching on the ground beside the two of them. "It is rather obvious." She looked over at Tigre, who looked confused, which made her wince slightly internally. *This is rather like kicking a young puppy, isn't it?*

Still, Ludmila had her orders written out to her and marked by King Viktor Tur Zhcted's own symbol. "Personal feelings of animosity to Muozinel aside, I'm not here just to help a fellow Vanadis or help Brune against our mutual enemy. I am here to fight Muozinel because doing so in an enemy's land is simply good strategy. I have been ordered to fight them here and to bleed their army as much as possible. But the moment that the war is turning against us, in my opinion, I am to cut my losses."

To her surprise, Tigre just nodded his head, his eyes flickering down to the map and then back up to her. "That makes sense. I can't say I like it, but it makes sense. And if we're losing, why would I want more men to die if they didn't have to?"

"So long as we are clear where my loyalties lie," Ludmila sighed, looking away, somewhat embarrassed, thrown off by his easy understanding and the smile on his face, which she could tell was genuine. *Good grief is he pure!*

Shaking her head to rid her mind of the impact of that smile, Ludmila then gestured down the map. "With that out of the way, why don't you fill me in on how you have been fighting this campaign so far. Your man, Gerard, was able to give me a few guides to link up with you, but other than bemoaning how many arrows you were going through, Gerard didn't know much about the campaign."

Ludmila frowned then, looking around. "And where is that Ranma fellow and Limalisha? Are they leading another force somewhere else?"

"Heh, well, that is a tale all of its own. First of all, Lim's not in my retinue anymore," Elen answered, a sad but also proud expression on her face. "Lord Gerard is a good enough substitute on the logistical side, but I still miss Lim's presence out in the field. But she was called to be a Vanadis, and there was no way we could have kept her around after that."

Ludmila blinked in shock, and Elen described how the Viralt, Muma, had come spinning out of the sky and how it had reacted to Lim. Elen didn't mention how Lim had taken a few days to get used to it, going bandit hunting with Ranma, thinking that would probably not be a good idea with how uptight Ludmila and her entire family were occasionally about the duties of a Vanadis.

"Hmm... I can't say I ever thought Limalisha would prove worthy of a Vanadis, but each Viralt has different things they look for in their wielders. And from what I was hearing when I left Olmutz, Brest needs a Vanadis to lead it more than ever now."

Ludmila then frowned, looking at the two of them sharply. "But I also haven't seen that Ranma fellow." A horrible thought occurred to her then, and Ludmila's eyes widened. "Oh please, please, by all the gods, don't tell me that Ranma went with Limalisha to Silesia! That is a disaster just waiting to happen!"

Eleonora laughed, although there was a sharper tone to it than Ludmila had anticipated from her little joke. "You don't know the half of it. But no, Ranma's not with Lim, much as he might like to be."

"Ranma has stated he's going to stay here with us in Brune until we defeat Muozinel and Thenardier," Tigre answered, coughing delicately to hide his own laugh at that idea. "Although he put it in a more colorful manner, of course. At the moment, he is out with the scouts."

"Scouting ahead of your army?" Ludmila questioned, confused at the odd emphasis Tigre gave the word. "Or is he the reason behind this wondrous map?" She still couldn't get over that detail it showed, the use of different symbols for different heights, steepness and so forth.

"He's the one that began the process, but no, we have dedicated cartographers now who see to that. Our scouts are a bit different," Tigre answered with one-hundred percent understatement. "They are both scouts, infiltrators, saboteurs and so forth."

Ludmila frowned at that, but her frown slowly disappeared as Tigre explained how much of an impact it had on the course of this campaign, and even before during the campaign against Ganelon, Thenardier and their puppets, the Knights of Asvarre. "This actually sounds like a fascinating idea. An extremely difficult type of warfare to prepare for, and I imagine their training is also incredibly difficult. But even so..." she trailed off thoughtfully, humming as she tapped her chin thoughtfully.

"Hey! They are our idea, darn it! And I am the one that's begun training some of my troops in similar tactics. Don't you dare steal it," Elen grumbled.

"Oh no, I wouldn't steal it," Ludmila began, pausing and letting Eleonora seemingly breathe a sigh of relief before going on. "Using them offensively would be incredibly difficult to train people for, as I said. But, a kind of fifth column, saboteurs and scouts hiding among the peasant populace? Yes, that could work quite well."

At that, Elen's annoyance faded, and she too began to hum thoughtfully, bouncing in place on her seat as she thought, set her boobs to wagging a bit.

Tigre resolutely looked away from Eleonora, looking over at Ludmila, whose brows had begun to twitch at Elen's movement. "Well, in any event, welcome to our little army. We're happy to have you."

At that, Elen came back to the here and now and poked Tigre in the cheek. "What is up with that lukewarm welcome, huh? Come on, welcome her to the army properly."

Tigre rolled his eyes but did as she commanded, dutifully holding out his hand to Ludmila once more, as he intoned, "Welcome to the Silver Meteor Army," his voice a dull drone of someone who was being put upon.

Ludmila paused, looking between them, then specifically stared at Elen's hair before rolling her eyes. "Really? Silver? Could you be any more obvious? Although I will grant the meteor analogy is quite nice."

"Oh, what would you name it, then?" Eleonora challenged.

"Azure or Cobalt Meteor Army. Or perhaps I would get rid of that analogy and use something like armor or steel," Ludmila answered promptly.

The two of them began to argue over naming sense and what kind of analogy worked best as Tigre leaned back from the table, shaking his head. *I wonder, do they dislike each other because deep down, they might actually be alike? Ludmila didn't even blink an eye at the name, and I still cringe every time I hear it!*

"Hey!" Tigre suddenly found his ear being pulled by Eleonora, which seemed to be her preferred method of controlling him at times. "You were just thinking something rude, weren't you?"

"Yes, that smile on your face was that of someone who just thought of something funny at someone else's expense, and you were looking directly at the two of us," Ludmila drawled, scowling at Tigre. "Would you like to share with the room?"

Desperately scrambling, Tigre quickly came up with an excuse. Telling the truth that he had just thought about how alike the two of them were didn't enter Tigre's thinking at all. He didn't want to die, thank you very much. "I was just wondering how Ranma is doing, and the thought of how he is hurting the enemy so much made me smile, that's all."

Elen stared at him for a moment, but unlike his friend, Tigre actually had a decent poker face. Or rather, he had a very good blank, guileless expression normally, so looking innocent on purpose wasn't all that hard.

Evidently believing him, Elen turned her attention back to the map, frowning as she looked at it, then over at Ludmila. "They are getting closer to the end of the gap every day. Even with the damages Ranma and our engineers did to the gap in places, they're still pushing ahead. All the while enlarging the forces they send after us every time we cause trouble. So we'll need to set up another ambush for tomorrow. In fact, we should probably step up the number of ambushes we do per day."

With that, the conversation turned to actual military matters, the two commanders of the Silver Meteor Army describing the campaign from the time when they had attacked the

skirmishers sent way ahead of the invading army to now. Ludmila quickly became impressed and annoyed in equal measure at how well the redheaded earl was leading the campaign. His ideas on using her troops - fifty archers, four hundred mounted infantry and a hundred and twenty heavy cavalry - were insightful, and Ludmila found herself interested in working with him in the days to come. *Darn it, Elen does seem to have found a diamond in the rough with Lord Vorn. Some girls have all the luck!*

The Silver Meteor Army waited a day as the horse archers moved out to meet with the supply teams, who had dropped off arrows and other supplies. This occurred at a specific place in the mountain, with both forces being led by some of the locals who knew these mountains, hunters and trappers for the most part, who knew the little patches of the mountains better than anyone. Tigre went with them and moved with a company of his horse archers to meet up with Ludmila while Elen, grumbling all the while, rested her troops and took up a position that would allow her to come to their help if need be.

When she saw him, Ludmila looked a little askance at Tigre. "Why so many quivers?"

"One can never have too many," Tigre replied with a laugh. His horse was practically buried under the number of quivers. All told, he had eight quivers, three to a side and two behind his saddle. "I'll probably go through at least two of these per battle."

"I don't know if you're joking, bragging, or just being arrogant, but I suspect finding out will be interesting," Ludmila murmured, then climbed into the saddle and moved to the head of the column.

By mid-day, their trailblazers had reached a position where they could once more see down into the gap. The enemy army was still moving forward, the frontmost regiment doing what it could to remove the obstacles in their path to make it easier for the battalions coming up behind them. That was slow going, given the number of ditches and downed tree trunks and other things in their way at different points. Since they weren't relying on Ranma for that kind of thing, it was much slower going. And judging by the map, this was the second to last group of obstacles that Tigre knew about. But he prayed there were more beyond that point. *We, we can't have been forced that far back, can we?*

But because the enemy had been learning and had begun to mix in their cavalry regiments with their infantry, this ambush was a little different.

Ludmila led her heavy cavalry down out of the mountains on a steep slope towards the lead enemy regiment, couching lances as they went. The enemy reacted with speed, their own heavy cavalry moving up and charging forward to defend the infantry working to clear the obstacles.

But right before Ludmila's troops would've hammered into their opposite number, they instead broke off. However, they were not going back to where they began but to the left of the gorge. There they raced up a small cleft that was actually not nearly as steep as it first appeared.

While they had anticipated the defenders to break off before battle was joined, the change in direction threw off the Muozinel troops, who were nearly startled out of their stirrups.

Now, heavy cavalry units were often derided as being useless for anything beyond the charge. Of course, this was simply wrong for any well-trained heavy cavalry, or, as Eleonora once put it, "There is a lot of subtlety and a lot of different types of charging that you think about it."

But when they saw an enemy fleeing, heavy cavalry was trained to do one thing: ride them down. Especially when that fleeing made sense. After all, there was only five hundred heavy cavalry charging what amounted to a full regiment of Muozinel troops. Even with a woman who could only be a war maiden in the lead, that was impossible odds.

Yet, for all their speed, they had to slow down when they started to head up the steeper incline into the mountains and spaced themselves out so that falling rocks or any other such trick couldn't kill more than a handful at once. And having to go double-file slowed them down even further. Something that made the Muozinel troops very leery when they reached that point in the trail.

But that was all right. That unit of heavy cavalry wasn't the real target.

Tigre led the horse archers forward from the same slope that Ludmila had used originally, not across the gap to attack the heavy cavalry but once more at the infantry working to clear the obstacles from the gap. Unfortunately for the Muozinel troops, they had set aside weapons and even armor in some cases. As a result, hundreds of them died within a minute of the assault, and more died as horse archers simply stood their horses there, attacking from a range that the infantry didn't have any weapons to match.

The enemy's own archers came up quickly, but Tigre took them under fire personally. His Black Bow gave him a range they couldn't match, slowing their progress.

The enemy infantry slowly started to reform despite the hail of arrows, and a recall order to the heavy cavalry went out. However, turning around in that narrow defile was an incredibly difficult proposition. Letting Tigre and the horse archers continue to massacre the enemy's infantry until an enemy light cavalry force came up to chase them away. They retreated in the same direction it come from, and that light cavalry taste them, but only half way, turning back much quicker than Tigre at hoped for.

Ludmila had a devil of a time regrouping with the others, and was only able to do so because they gave her one of their chief cartographers, let her back across the gorge further down then back eastward to link up with them once more. “Well, that was ridiculously easy. I almost feel as if we should have made better use of that defile,” Ludmila confessed as she entered the command tent after having made sure there for people were setting up camp appropriately.

“We thought about it, but the sides of that Defile are too dangerous to set up any surprises in the cliffs above it, and even too dangerous for us to post people up there. The rock there just isn’t very strong, and wherever we set up there, we’d probably have to sacrifice, which is not something I’m willing to do,” Tigre said firmly.

“True. And the going was also treacherous for my horses. I lost three of them to leg injuries, one of my men was even tossed out of it saddle and broke his neck,” Ludmila said with a sigh. “It was just the sight of all those heavy cavalry troopers having trouble trying to head up the pass after my that made me want to do something more to them.”

“We did a lot today already,” Eleonora said frowning thoughtfully. “But what I don’t like, is how quickly their light cavalry broke off the chase. That isn’t like them at all. Worse, they didn’t retreat directly back down the way they’d come. Instead, they started to spread back down one of the other ravines, further to our east.”

“Do you think they’re getting tricky then?”

“I have to think that they’re up to something, yes,” Eleonora announced.

Looking at the map, all three of them fell silent, and Tigre said slowly, “Well, that is on this side of the Charles Gap. Perhaps we should switch to the other side? Retreat a bit, crossover as Ludmila did, at attacking that side now?”

“I think we need to do that every day. In fact, I think we should take a meal, and get a move on, the days wasting, and no one wants to move through these mountains at night save crazy people like Ranma,” Eleonora announced.

Tigre chuckled, agreed, and left the tent to give the orders. Ludmila scowled a bit, knowing that her own people had just started to set up camp, but didn’t disagree. The next day, another ambush went off, although this one, was much more difficult. A group of light cavalry were able to respond faster, and Ludmila’s troops was forced to fight it out with them almost in the gorge itself, with the enemy infantry racing forward. It was only because her people’s armor was simply better than most enemies, and because of Ludmila’s own Vanadis powers that allowed them to break off before the enemy infantry could develop them.

They took losses though, and are treated quickly, neither Ludmila nor Tigre thinking of leaving behind scouts to watch the enemy. Because, a group of light infantry followed them up into the mountains, before breaking back eastward.

The next day, Tigre decided that they could range further down the enemy column. They attacked almost at dawn, with the column, first sitting with his horse archers, and then, as the enemy replied with light cavalry backed up by heavy led them into an ambush, high up in the mountains directly above the main gorge. They only held back the enemy for a short amount of time, dealing out damage, and expending still more arrows, pushing down folders on top of them, and so forth before retreating again as more of the enemy came up to join their fellows.

These new units attempted to circle original ambush point by going through another series of passages through the mountains, those units came under fire as well from Elen's infantry and what fuel archers Ludmila had brought along.

Thanks to their greater knowledge of the territory, Tigre and his forces were able to break off momentarily, regroup, and then attack the enemy reinforcements to one side of the original ambush point, getting above them and charging down on them once more with heavy cavalry.

This kind of retreat turn and attack tactic continued throughout the day, thanks to the fact that this area of the mountains was one that they had found a neat guide for, and Tigre wanted to use his native knowledge to the best of fact. Several thousand of the enemy soldiers died in these sharp, quick engagements, pulled this way and that until finally their numbers were just too much, and the Silver Meteor Army was in danger of running out of space to maneuver. When that happened, they pulled back one more time, not back towards Brune or to the south, but deeper towards Muozinel. This allowed them to break contact quickly, and then circle around and back through the mountains, although at that point, even the Silver Meteor Army began to have trouble with the trails, being both steeper and thinner than most horses could manage. Everyone had to dismount for a time and walk on foot, until it was well packed in the evening, and they were able to find a flatter portion of trail.

Ludmila was shaking her head, staring all around them at the mountains, then over at their native guide, an elderly man who could perhaps be the very definition of wiry. He was bald as an egg, wrinkles, but moved like a goat through this area of the mountain range. "I honestly believe you when you said that that little that little..."

"Devils' Elbow we call it!" the man cackled. "Or we would. But we'd run out of Devils we've got so many damn elbows! But yeah, it becomes nice and even from here for another few miles. After that, it gets back again."

Frowning, Tigre looked up at the sun, then shook his head. "We'll rest here. And I think I am declaring the Army is not going to be attacking anyone tomorrow either. Today's been a

hard day, we're entirely out of arrows, we lost eighty men, and more than a hundred and forty horses. We need to rest a bit before we attack again."

"Do you think we have the time?" Eleonora asked not disagreeing, just frowning, while Ludmila looked as if she would argue, but looking around at the Brunemen around her, she could tell that all of them were exhausted.

"I think we do. Their main army just isn't moving fast enough, thanks to each regiment pulling their own wagon train. Their rotating their forward most regiments is allowing them to absorb more damage and keep going, but it's slowing them down."

Tigre frowned, staring off in the distance as he tried to think of the map of the whole mountain range, most particularly, the width of it, and where they were in comparison. "I think we got another four more days before the first of the enemy army really comes into contact with the forts Captain Marsh and the others are supposed to be building while we're all out here."

The next day, the Army continued to march through the small, almost impassable passages, their movements slowed tremendously, but with no battle that day, none of the commanders pushed hard. As the least exhausted, Ludmila's troops both supplied the scouts moving forward from the column, and moved up and down the column, lending aid where they needed to, their horses taking on more loads in order to lighten the burden of the other animals.

That night, they were within striking distance once more of the gorge, when they made camp, setting up that night in a series of caves and scattered passages through the mountains. Since they had been on extra duty all day, Ludmila's troops got a bit of a break from being on watch, with several of the locals taking that job along with some of Elen's troopers as night fell.

Sharing a small cave, Elen and Tigre spent some time talking about what to do the next day, then another turn of the candle simply cuddling. As much as he didn't like being public about it, Tigre knew that his heart had been captured by the silver-haired Vanadis just as much as his body had once been.

But Tigre lay awake that night, thinking about that very thing, because although after his time with Regin speaking to the Knightly Orders, Tigre could no longer say that she was the only one who had done so. the princess gentle, demure flirtations, the way she looked at him, touched his hand and Regin's simple kindness appealed to him, if in a very different way than Elen's fiery, forthright, and above all funny personality. They hadn't done anything during that trip, but Tigre couldn't lie to himself and say that he hadn't been tempted.

Tigre stayed up that night, trying to figure out what to do about that when all hell broke loose outside.

OOOOOO

Having pulled his people back, Ranma had decided that instead of meeting up with the pikes and the slower moving portions of the Army, he wanted to figure out where in this mountain as hell the rest of the Army was operating. Since they preferred to move at night, and could move for longer than the regular troops. Ranma had no qualms about pushing them, fading back into the mountains further than he normally would and then going searching for signs of their fellows. They found several battlefields, and lots of dead Muozinel soldiers occasionally, something that filled them all with a grim pride.

But because they were moving at night, Scott and one of the others heard the jangle of other troopers moving around in the same area. Pausing quickly both men quickly ducked back and around the small credits they had been about to come out of onto a slowly rising slope, which then leveled off into a ledge, and moved away into the distance.

The troopers who had been making noise cursed roundly in some foreign language that neither man could speak, which they had heard numerous times over the course of this campaign. With barely a whisper between them, Scott and pulled back and away, retracing his steps to where Ranma and the others waiting for him.

Ranma tugged at his pigtail thoughtfully, then shrugged. "Could you give me an estimate of how many?"

"No idea. But they were heading back to the gorge quickly, almost as if they'd found something and reporting it in."

"You think we could intercept them?"

"Chancy, it would depend on if there heading straight back to the gorge, or somewhere else."

They all got their answer when Chong that came back their way, gesturing them to follow him. "It wasn't just a band of scouts! There are at least several companies worth of people moving around out here, all of them heading in the same direction. Infantry, all of them, you have to be in this area of the mountains but they all seem to be heading for something specific.

"Well, let's see what they are up to then," Ranma quipped, shrugging his shoulders.

The scouts moved silently through the mountains, using ropes hooks and grapples to completely ignore the need for normal trails or passageways through the mountains that most troops would need.

So it was that they came upon the enemy troopers as they started to move through the night, having killed several of the men on guard of the Army's camp. "Now that is just not on," Ranma growled, as he leaped down from on high, crashing into one of the attackers, grabbing one of the others by the back of the head, and hurling him against a nearby rock, causing a clamor that could have woken the dead.

Unfortunately, Ranma and his scouts were just a bit too late to stop the attackers from taking the camp completely by surprise. Arrows shot out of the darkness, impacting the few guards moving around the scattered camp, and then there was a roar as the Muozinel infantry charged forward, the need for silence gone now. Only the fact that they were coming from a single direction gave the sleeping Silver Meteor Army a chance, and even that wasn't much.

The moment the attacks truly started, the commanders were on their feet, out of their tents, and shouting out, "Rally, rally to me!" But there were hundreds of the enemy, all of them armed and armored, in and among the tents, slashing and killing.

Tigre slept with the Black Bow close to hand and was first out of the cage he and Elen, to his increasingly feeble protests, had shared the night before. He had an arrow to his string and was shooting before Tigre could even consciously realize what he was doing. Out in the darkness, a gleam had revealed the presence of an enemy, who fell back without even a cry, the arrow sticking in his chest, having penetrated his brigandine armor.

The second arrow was on Tigre's string before Ellen leaped up above him and raced forward into the darkness, the gleam of Arifar's gem alighting her way. For just a moment, Tigre stared, unable to shift his attention back to the battle as he saw her racing into the dark of the camp wearing a long silk shift over a pair of panties that left very little to the imagination. *Guh, w, well, that is at least going to give the Muozinel troopers pause*, he thought ruefully as he shifted his attention to another enemy trooper, this one carrying a torch towards a pile of supplies.

For her part, Elen didn't even realize what she was dressed like at the moment, too furious at being taken unawares. Four men who had just hacked down several of their troopers found themselves within range of her rage and flew away, nearly hacked apart with quick, economical strokes, Arifar's edge covered once more with wind-assisted cutting force.

At the same time, Ludmila also roused herself, but she had taken the time to at least wrap her bedroll around herself. Despite her somewhat calm attitude months ago when Elen played her little practical joke on Ludmila and Ranma, the owner of Laviyas did get embarrassed at being seen naked by unknown men, and to Ludmila's mind, the bra and silk shorts she wore to bed constituted much the same level of nakedness.

Seeing shadows moving at the back of her tent holding weapons, Ludmila charged out that way. Laviyas shot out one of her attacks, splitting and pinning the man, tearing open her tent, as she leaped out, bouncing off of the bloodstained ice and then up into the air, where she

brought her spear down into the center of another group of enemies. "Rally to me!" she shouted, and nearby, her troops obeyed, moving towards her with alacrity as the enemy boiled out of the initial portion of the sprawling camp they had attacked. Within seconds, Ludmila was fighting for her life in the light of the nearby fires.

For the first few moments, it was a nearly one-sided slaughter. Most of the Silver Meteor Army had taken off their armor, although they all at least had their weapons close to hand thanks to Elen's orders. Yet against armored opponents, even light infantry, simply having a weapon wasn't enough under these circumstances to give most of them a fighting chance.

Disaster loomed, and then from beyond the attackers, arrows began to fall in among them, and Ranma's shout of "Nighttime attacks are our thing, show them how it's done!" With that, Ranma crashed into the saddle from on high, having leaped up into the air where he saw the largest group of enemy soldiers moving through a portion of the camp where most of the defenders had found small caves to spend the night in.

Those men, who had just slaughtered more than a dozen Brunemen, barely had time to realize there was something in the air above them before Ranma was in and among them. Punches crashed out, hurling people off of their feet, a spear was caught, and its owner used as a flail against two of his fellows before the spear was upended and stabbed straight through the man who had wielded it before his corpse was kicked into two other men, putting them all on the ground where one of the few survivors in this area of the camp hastily finished them off.

Many of the attackers had seen this and Ludmila's earlier use of Lavia's powers through the fire-lit darkness. Elen's silver hair was also distinctive, and like the other two, served as targets for the attackers, giving some rest fight to their closest opponents. This served all three of them just fine, while arrows from Tigre continue to streak through the night, killing with impunity and unerring accuracy as he moved forward into the camp.

Yet even as she stabbed one man through the neck, Ludmila forgot to take into account she wasn't wearing one of her normal outfits. This cost her. An enterprising attacker stabbed his spear into the trailing edge of her makeshift cover, pinning it to the ground. The tug this caused pulled Ludmila off balance, and another man's crashing overhead blow sent the short Vanadis backward onto her rear. The butt of a third man's spear caught her in the side of the head, casing Ludmila to see stars, and she stared up at another man raising his own sword high, screaming at her body to move.

But before that sword strike could fall, there was a series of thumping noises, then the end of Tigre's Black Bow slammed into the side of the Muozinel trooper's neck, blood bursting out from the point of impact. Staring, Ludmila could only gape as Tigre practically straddled her downed form, another arrow on his quiver, her attackers all dead around them. *Good grief, if you changed the weapon, this would be exactly like that one scene in the Vanadis and the Lord Commander...* Ludmila's admittedly muzzy mind observed.

As he readied his last arrow on his now blood-streaked bow, for just a moment, Tigre heard a female voice saying, *“My, but you do know how to show a girl a good time, don’t you?”* The thoughts gave him pause but faded as he shot his last arrow. “Damn it. I really need to learn Ranma’s ki space trick.”

Ludmila recovered her wits and dignity at that point, pushing herself to her feet and using her Cielo Zam Kafa attack again. “If you’re out of arrows, I suggest you switch to guarding my back this time, Tigre. Besides, this will let me pay off my debt to you all the faster.”

Nodding, Tigre shifted his position to Ludmila’s back as they moved forward towards the ongoing battle, unaware that had been the first time Ludmila had used his first name.

While Ranma acted like a one-man juggernaut, the rest of the scouts didn’t bother closing for the most part. Most of them were also trained archers, and they hadn’t used most of their arrows yet on their nighttime activities. Instead, they stood at the edge of the battle, taking potshots at whatever attacker they could see in the light of the scattered fires, making certain to take out anyone in Muozinel colors – distinctive thanks to their use of masks and hoods – carrying a torch.

Klaus led the few exceptions into the chaos throughout the camp. They moved forward grimly, silently, moving through the chaos, attacking enemies from behind, double-teaming anyone they could find.

There weren’t many scouts but being attacked from behind and by yet another person with the powers of a war maiden, had an impact, even as the Muozinel troopers automatically concentrated on him, Elen and Ludmila, as their training dictated. Normally that training helped the Muozinel army against Vanadis, slowly wearing them down, but now control of the battlefield began to shift as more and more of the Silver Meteor Army began to organize and join the battle.

Battering one man to the ground and grabbing another sword with his bare hand, Ranma twisted, coming around a tent and hurling the man up onto an ice spike, only to blink in surprise, not having noticed them before. Then he saw a familiar, blue-colored hair in the light of the moon above and smirked at the shorter girl. “Hey, Mila, nice to see you.”

Although the wording was genuine, and the two of them had actually parted on a somewhat positive note, Ludmila still stumbled, her face flushing rosily as she turned to them, almost absentmindedly back-handing an attacker away from her with her offhand. “D, don’t just shorten someone’s name like that, barbarian!”

“Is that supposed to be an insult?” Ranma asked, hopping up onto an enemy’s sword as he thrust for Ranma’s heart, amused at the way the man’s eyes widened in shock seeing Ranma balanced on the edge of his sword like it was nothing, before a roundhouse kick took the man’s

head off of his shoulders, sending the head into the back of another enemy who was about to finish off a Bruneman. "Because, I mean, that just makes me feel good."

Ludmila sputtered, even as she twisted her spear in a circle to block incoming sword thrusts, smashing those swords out of their owners' hands, then returning with punishing blows from the butt of Laviyas before once more using her ice power clearing the area around her. Tigre was not there to be caught in the attack, having left Ludmila in search of arrows, moving through the chaos like the best of Ranma's scouts. He had then linked up with Elen, the two of them leading the final countercharge that crashed into the last large group of attackers.

"I don't think I am ever going to understand you, and I'm not certain I even want to try!" Ludmila took the time to push her hair, disheveled from activity and sleep, out of her eyes, smiling wryly at Ranma. "Still, I suppose you **did** manage to heal Sasha, so I can make some allowances for your abhorrent behavior."

"Aww, aren't you cute, with your tsundere act," Ranma quipped as the battle around them started to die down. Before Ludmila could ask what he meant, Ranma was in her personal space, ruffling her hair and then bouncing away. "Still, it's nice to know that you care about Sasha."

Behind him, Ludmila stood for a moment in affronted shock, then chased after him, swinging Laviyas at Ranma's retreating back as she shouted, "Come back here you, you ruffian! How dare you touch a young maiden's head!"

Even as the battle ended and the Silver Meteor Army began to move through the wreckage of their camp, many a man snorted or chuckled in bemused amusement, hearing Ranma begin to taunt Ludmila. "Aw, why so cold, Ludmila? I'm certain that Sasha would, at the very least, accept your happiness for her. Or are your feelings a little more than respectful towards yer fellow war maiden? If that's the case, I'm not so certain on that score."

"You, you perverted heathen! I'm going to spear you through your stomach and leave your carcass for the crows!"

"Is that really your idea of a good time? Eesh, you need to get out more," Ranma joked back. He was almost tempted to taunt Lim about the fact she had fought in her night dress, but really, that was low hanging fruit to him. And he remembered how blasé she had been about his seeing her body back at the hot springs they had gone to back in Elen's territory.

Regardless, his taunting of her would have continued for a while. Ranma had missed the ability to taunt his opponents and have them actually understand his words, and Ludmila was just so easy a target it would have physically hurt him not to tease her. Moreover, Lim wasn't there to try and rein him in.

But Tigre was, and he interrupted the proceedings, a wry smile twisting his lips. "Ranma, you can have fun with Ludmila later. Then, as both Eleanor and Ranma dissolved into laughter at how that could be interpreted and Ludmila slowly turned into a blue-haired tomato, Tigre continued obliviously, pointing to Rurick. The man had taken a cut to his face that had partially blinded him for much of the fight and was heavily bandaged but had still stepped up to help them get organized. "We're gathering the wounded up now. If you could do your thing, please?"

Ranma instantly became serious, stepping backward and around a spear thrust from Ludmila, grabbing Lavi's shaft in one hand and pushing at her forehead the palm of his other hand. Ludmila found herself on her rear for the second time that night, overbalanced by that almost gentle tap. "Play times over, I guess."

Ranma was quickly at work once more, as the wounded were brought to him, and he started to shout out orders for boiled water, needle and thread. The worst wounded he used his own ki healing on, the least wounded were stitched back together the normal way. From one side, Ludmila, now fully dressed, watched this as Tigre and Eleonora, also fully dressed, waited nearby to question Ranma on what he had his scouts had been up to and continued to take a tally of the men they had lost in this debacle.

While he worked, Ranma joked and cajoled the wounded along, which served as his version of a bedside manner. Most of the troopers with the Army knew Ranma and were either veterans of his training or veterans in truth from the various other campaigns that the Silver Meteor Army had fought with Ranma. So they took his good-natured joking in stride, even shooting back sometimes. But, of course, when they did, they targeted the greatest weakness they knew of, that of Ranma's curse. And despite himself, Ranma found himself replying.

"Oh Holy Maiden, thank you for your healing," said one man whose stomach Ranma was evil to knit together through healing and extremely tiny stitching, his voice weak but good-natured. "I will leave a large donation at the nearest temple when I get a chance."

"Hush up, you! Or next time, I'll forget to deaden your nerve centers before I go to work on you," Ranma said, holding up a needle in front of the man's eyes warningly.

"No, he's got a point," another wounded man said. He had nearly lost his entire arm to a cut to the shoulder, but his bleeding had been brought under control by a tourniquet, and with his own pain now no longer an issue, he even had the energy to smile. "If I have to wait for being healed, can I at least get a bit more eye candy?"

Suddenly, the man's face paled even more than his blood loss would allow for as he looked over at Ludmila. But thankfully, the comment had gone straight over her head, and Eleonora wasn't within hearing range, speaking with a few of her sub-officers as they reported on their dead and wounded, causing the man to breathe a sigh of relief. Neither of the war maidens would probably have reacted well to that comment.

Knowing this just as well as the trooper, Ranma chortled evilly. "For your sake, I will forget you ever said that."

Despite that one man's near-disastrous foot-in-mouth moment, the teasing continued as the work on the wounded went on, and later, one of the men put his complaint most eloquently. "I mean, you continued that farce about the Holy Maiden and you being two separate people for the nobles who requested your help on our way here. And now we're not getting the same treatment? I didn't think you were an elitist, Ranma."

Ranma chuckled, moving over to the last of the worst injured, a man who had been following everything that was said with a smirk on his face. The first thing that Ranma had done obviously had been to go through all of the wounded and use pressure points to deaden their pain. Unfortunately, two men had died during that time, both having taken hits to the brain and throat. Even Ranma couldn't have healed that, but it had made their passing comfortable, at least. "How about this, you assholes. If we win this war, I'll put on a freaking concert for you all, but only if you never mentioned the idea of the Holy Maiden or that ship again, all right. The last thing I want to do is to get involved with your religion. That's just asking for trouble in a way even I think is too much."

This elicited a resounding cheer from those men who had heard Ranma occasionally singing over the winter. It wasn't something Ranma often did, but it was one of the few things Ranma actually liked about his female body. In his male body, Ranma could hold a tune, but his voice really wasn't anything special. In his female form, however, it was a different story.

Ludmila had watched all this with interest, and any comment she might have made being silenced after watching Ranma deal with his first horribly wounded patient. The man had been slashed across the chest, a deep wound and one that had been bleeding freely and had nearly lost his leg from another wound. But Ranma had first eased his pain and that of the other wounded and then healed the horrible wound to the leg in such a way that it almost looked good as new. Of course, the man was still unconscious, something she had questioned at the time, discovering that much of the energy of the healing came from the wounded themselves.

But even so, the magic that Ranma was using was well above anything she'd ever seen before.

On top of that were the other things that Ranma had been doing at the same time. Boiling water was a known trick, but not tools. Using alcohol as he needed to clean the wounds, using various concoctions to accelerate the creation of blood and pressure points, whatever they were? All of that and Ranma's knowledge of the human body were just incredible.

"Now that it's over, I feel as if I should've been taking notes," she quipped, moving to walk beside Ranma, although she kept Lavias between them, the better to ward off any sudden bout of hair ruffling.

“Don’t worry about it. I already put together a whole book of medical knowledge. Valentina took it to your king, I think, so when you get back, you can ask him for a copy.”

Ludmila blinked at that, her eyes showing surprise. “You that, wait, Lady Glinka Estes was here in Brune?” That startled Ludmila on several levels. For one thing, Valentina was, like Sofy and Sasha, not only a war maiden but a noblewoman. For another, it was well known among the war maidens that she had a weak constitution. So, while the idea of her out and about in wintertime wasn’t so surprising, because all war maidens could ignore the weather to a tremendous degree, Valentina traveling at all save to Silesia was.

“Yeah. Valentina had been going to meet Sasha when she learned about my healing Sasha, so she searched for me to see if I could help with her weaknesses. Turns out I could a bit,” Ranma said, only hesitating for a moment before he used that line. Valentina had asked him not to tell anyone else about her interest in his world, and Ranma had agreed to use that line with strangers, although not his friends Tigre, Lim and Elen. All of them knew about her interest in his world and all of the questions Valentina had asked over the winter.

“I see that makes sense. I know that Lady Glinka Estes is interested in making Osterode a haven for artisans and alchemists,” Ludmila mumbled, shaking her head as the two of them joined Tigre and Ellen, who had been going through the damages done to the camp. They’d already made the decision to not just move camp but pull back entirely, having run out of arrows during these last few battles, to say nothing of their other resources, which made it even more imperative that they link up with their supply chain once more.

The mood was somber as the four of them discussed events. Even with Ranma saving the lives of nearly every soldier who had lived through the battle regardless of injury, the Silver Meteor Army had taken a beating. They had lost more than four hundred troopers of all kinds in this assault, with another hundred and seven crippled.

While Ranma could probably grow back his own limbs, he couldn’t do the same for other people, and if someone lost a hand or an arm, the best he could do would be to make sure that they didn’t die of blood loss and the healing was accelerated as much as possible. And even those eighty men Ranma had healed would not be worth it in a battle for several days as he recuperated from the cost to their bodies’ accumulated reserves.

Even so, none of the troopers or leaders were willing to remain in the same place with the dead, both their own and that of their enemies, nor was there any way to bury them on such rocky terrain. But while the rest of the camp started to get moving, the four commanders met up with one another, discussing what had happened now the immediate aftermath had been dealt with and what Ranma had done since breaking off his nightly attacks.

“After I decided to pull my troops back, I gave Duncan command over about half the scouts. I wanted them to push on toward Muozinel, work around the enemy’s rear searching

for any supply convoys coming out. That's a long shot though, given how much supplies the enemy is carrying with them and how nasty the terrain is even in the gap in places."

Tigre shook his head, punching his friend lightly on the shoulder. "Heh, you of all people admitting you couldn't do something, I am going to have to mark down the date. Dozens of years from now, we will call it humility day."

"Oh shut up. And I never said I couldn't break in. I said we couldn't break in without being discovered. If my scouts were all as good I was, or I went in alone we could still do damage. But even I have limits," Ranma grumbled.

"Still breaking off when you did was probably a good idea," Ellen nodded, frowning angrily. "I gotta say, I am not happy with how well-organized and how quick to react and adapt the Muozinel army is this time. Usually, they have decent lower-level commanders and good strategic goals, but their overall organization, outside of logistics, is somewhat poor. And in all of the campaigns I've studied against them, their generals more often have to act like someone attempting to herd cats rather than someone who instills a sense of order."

"Why did you flinch just now?" Tigre asked his friend, cocking his head to one side quizzically as he caught Ranma's twitch at the reminder of the vile word.

"Never you mind," Ranma replied instantly.

"He flinched when you said the word cats," Ludmila answered, watching Ranma closely and seeing the same flinch again. "And there it is again." She suddenly smirked vindictively. "Is there something you want to tell us, barbarian?"

"Heh, is that supposed to be your nickname for me now, Mila?" Ranma deflected, which worked quite well.

After Ludmila had stopped trying to skewer Ranma, the martial artist went on, explaining his own experiences. His story showed how the enemy adapted against the scouts and saboteurs. Ranma then left the group, coming back with one of the attackers held by the back of his belt. "And look at this one. Blackened weapons, with no chain mail, only a well-made brigandine, his boots lined with leather, a small pack for water, no food. Someone meant to move fast through rough terrain, silently. Whoever over there is adapting to our kind of warfare."

Ludmila nodded, frowning in anger and worry. "I was afraid of this. In Zhcted, I received word from the king that his spies had discovered that Lord Kureys, the winner of the last naval campaign against Sachstein had been transferred to their army. At first, we feared that he might lead an army across the borders into Zhcted, but now, I think he's here. That man is very, very dangerous."

She told the others about Red Beard's background as well as what was known about his appearance, primarily the big, red beard that gave Kureys his nickname after which Ranma frowned, tugging at his pigtail. "I haven't seen anyone like that. Then again, I haven't been able to work all my way back down the gap yet. Maybe I should try?"

He made the statement into a question looking to Tigre and Eleonora. While Ranma knew that he was a more dangerous combatant than either of them, he also knew they had him beat when it came to strategy.

"No, I think we need you here," Tigre decided after a moment of deliberation. "Let Duncan and the others you sent on that mission report back before we do anything like that. Besides, could you fight your way through whatever regiment or division is protecting him to get to the Red Beard?"

"Heh, well, eventually, maybe. Although making Beard Red or whatever stick around that long would probably be impossible," Ranma answered easily, smiling as he said it as if to make it a joke, while internally, he was wondering if he should do that exact thing. There were a few tricks he'd yet used in this campaign, or indeed at all on this world.

But once more, he shied away from doing so. There was a difference between killing someone with his bare hands or even by a thrown rock and consigning several thousand men to being battered or crushed to death through a ki attack.

The others chuckled, but Ludmila shook her head, pointing out that, "Even if they were able to kill Red Beard, while that will no doubt remove a lot of their strategic flexibility, it might not cause Muozinel to retreat if he has competent subordinates."

"Heh, at this point, he might not have many of those left. At least not at the regiment level. Still, what should we do then? I mean, if we get back to the Charles Gap, I can build more obstacles," Ranma volunteered. "But with how fast the enemy's learning, even trying to take advantage of that kind of thing might be a mistake."

"Considering how they can move their troops around most of those things if they don't mind leaving their supplies behind, that would be a yes. Regardless, we need to meet up with our supply train for now. We can think of how to hold the enemy up more at that point," Elen reminded everyone, particularly Ranma. "Unlike you, Ranma, most of our people need weapons, and particularly arrows, to be worth anything."

Tigre clicked his fingers. "Right! I need to learn how to use your ki space, Ranma. You have no idea how many quivers I've gone through since this campaign started."

Ranma chuckled at that but didn't reply. While Tigre had taken to his training regimen pretty well overall, he was still a while away from having enough ki to consciously work with.

Maybe another year or so. Or... well, there was that thing with his Black Bow and shooting down Lord Pimplemore when he tried to fly away on the dragon. But that bow still weirds me out.

“Remember, this entire campaign is basically a holding action. There’s no way that they can move enough supplies through the mountains for that Army. That’s why all of the Muozinel regimens have their own baggage train. But those supplies can only last them so long. So if Thenardier can reclaim Southport, this army will have to retreat, and we win,” Ludmila reminded everyone.

While Tigre just nodded, Ranma scowled, as Eleonora, with Elen speaking for them both. “I didn’t like that assumption before we arrived here in the gap, and I don’t like it anymore now. You’re putting a lot of faith in someone who wants to grind your bones to powder, Tigre.”

“That might be true but remember what Regin said.” Although Tigre didn't notice, the Princess's name brought an even deeper scowl to Eleonora’s face. “Whatever else he is, Thenardier is a patriot.”

The next second he winced in pain as Eleonora’s fist thumped into his shoulder with punishing force. “Ow! Was that for!?”

“Don’t you know you should never mention another woman who’s after you in front of a woman who is already courting you?” Eleonora barked.

Tigre blushed at that, eyes roving to Ranma and Ludmila, who, without even looking at one another, started to move a little faster than Eleonora and Tigre’s forces. Ludmila was a little more reluctant to leave, but right now, she had no energy to follow this conversation down the rabbit hole.

“You’re on your own, dude,” Ranma shouted over his shoulder, cackling internally all the while.

OOOOOO

Having left a majority of his army behind, Duke Thenardier had returned to his lands far more quickly than most would’ve ever thought possible. Dragons, after all, could carry quite a bit and still move at their top speed. Slow that top speed might be, especially for the Suro, who he had left behind, but they could sustain it forever. So long, that is, as they had food.

This was an issue that Thenardier had to deal with for a while, deep as he was into Ganelon’s territory. Ganelon had torched most of the crops on his land, poisoned the wells, killed all the animals and driven his own people out before Thenardier had attacked.

However, stripping the rest of the Army of all of its supplies of meat and water had allowed him to do so. This no doubt meant that many of his troopers would die for lack of water, but that was a necessary sacrifice, and Steid would keep the army moving.

Beyond the dragons, Thenardier only brought fifty men beyond himself. More, it had to be said to feed them to the dragons if need be. But thankfully, that hadn't proved necessary, and his party arrived in his lands barely five weeks after having received word of Southport's fall.

There, he sent out orders to gather supplies that would be sent to the Army under heavy escort. Normally, he would've given this job to Armand, but when the man met Thenardier on the march to Southport along with a force of militia from his lands, Armand was not himself.

The man stood taller than even Thenardier, his armor and muscles bulging as normal. And yet, his face showed that he had been drinking heavily of late. There was also a certain weakness, almost fear to Armand's face and body language that Thenardier immediately noticed.

"Are you sick?" he asked, scowling angrily at the man. "Or have you discovered the weakness of the bottle? I will not tolerate that in someone in my employ, Armand."

"I, none of that, my Lord. Drinking, that is. the drink is a means of coping," the man stammered, looking anywhere but at his Lord. "I have been coping with my failure, with my weakness!"

Growling angrily, Thenardier strode forward, grabbing the man by the throat and lifting him up off his feet. "What in Triglav's name are you talking about! I already know that the Princess has somehow been able to find enough proof to legitimize herself, something that should never have happened on your watch, but..." Thenardier frowned as the man's arms weakly grabbed at his forearms, but with no hint of their normal strength.

Thenardier slowly retracted his hands from around the man's neck, pulling away easily from his grip. "What is wrong with you?"

"The, the black-haired warrior, the pigtailed one. He did something to me. When we fought. Ever since... I am, I am too weak to put on my armor! I'm too weak to lift a sword! I can't, that is..."

"Some kind of spell?" Thenardier mused, a wholly unknown feeling rising within him as he thought about it. *Is this perhaps fear? I haven't felt this since I was sixteen and outgrew my father and brothers*

But the idea of having someone take away his strength like that, that was horrifying to a warrior. And especially so in Felix Thenardier's case, who, like all of the Thenardier Dukes before him, embodied the idea of the 'Rule of Strength.'

"I, I do not know my Lord. The warrior first buried me in the snow, and it was so deep that I had trouble moving. Then he struck me in several places with some kind of heated poker or something similar. I couldn't tell you where, but regardless, ever since, my strength is not... What am I without my abilities as a warrior!" Armand wailed.

Without another word, Thenardier turned away, grabbing up his sword and turning, swinging it once. The look on his former subordinate's face as he saw the sword coming was one of relief even as the blade passed cleanly through Armand's neck, removing his head from his shoulders.

With that dealt with, Thenardier chose another nobleman who had answered his summons to lead the relief convoy carrying supplies to his army. He sent all his regular troopers with him and half of the assembled four-thousand and eighty-three-men strong militia force. This left him with a little over two thousand barely trained troopers, but even so, everyone knew it would be the two dragons, the double-headed Gara Dova and the fire-breathing Prani, which would win them the day.

So, it was a confused wizard who came to Duke Thenardier as they waited just out of sight of the port. The army was hidden beyond a few hills, with the men following orders to remain out of sight or be fed to the dragons. The dragons muscled so they could make no sound. "My Lord, why do we wait?"

"Supplies," Thenardier announced simply. At his wizard's confused look, Thenardier smirked, nodding his head toward where the city was. "I have passed word to my surviving agents within the city, telling them that we are here and to inform me of when the enemy's supplies have arrived in. I will wait until the Muozinel navy offloads their ships, and then I will attack. Losing those supplies will harm Muozinel's ability to project military power for years, and they will help Brune as we deal with the damage our Civil War has caused. Thus, we will both cripple Muozinel's abilities to supply its army in the field for a time and enrich ourselves."

"You are not concerned about the enemy army breaking out from Charles Gap?" the wizard questioned, frowning thoughtfully.

"I received word that the Silver Meteor Army had arrived and intercepted the enemy army and that many of the Knightly orders had moved to engage them as well. Yet, even so, they are too small, and even with this... Pigtailed warrior, I doubt they will be able to hold for too much longer. In so doing, they will be ground under, weakening my last opponent in this war and leaving the Muozinel army tired and easy pickings for our dragons."

Thenardier's tone was cold, although he smiled with something approaching admiration. "It is a pity. I won't be saddened by the traitor Vorn or the war maiden who suborned him dying, let alone the troops from Zhcted. But the rest, for all their misguided choice of causes, are patriots too. It is a pity to see such die. But in the war for thrones, you either win, or you die."

At that, the wizard's questioning look disappeared, and he bowed from the waist with a happy smile. "Let it be so, my Lord." *And let the cursed Black Bow be destroyed! Or at least forgotten once more to history. The Viralts are more than enough to worry about it you!*

Thenardier's small force stayed there for six more days before word finally came that the offloading of the supplies that Thenardier wanted to seize had finished. Then, he ordered his army to advance, the two dragons moving forward from different angles as he led the militia forces along the shoreline, attacking Southport from along that edge, moving up and over the walls with surprising ease thanks to the dragons grabbing everyone's attention. Within half a day, Southport was Thenardier's once more, along with the needed supplies.

Though no one among the mountains knew it yet, Muozinel's great gamble had failed. And with it, any hope of conquering Brune.

OOOOOO

Unfortunately, news of that disaster would not reach either army moving within the Agnes Mountains for some time. Which was why the Silver Meteor Army had once more retreated to meet up with a supply convoy once more before planning out their next move.

To the surprise of Tigre and the others, Gerard, Lord Hughes' son, led this group. He had led the first such convoy, but none of them had seen him since. Tigre shook his hand, noticing the other young man looked exhausted. While he was in decent enough shape, the high altitude of the mountains did not agree with Gerald at all. Still, he had led a large group of donkeys through the mountains to the meeting point had drained him. The way had been so hard that the donkeys had been carrying only about a third of the weight they could have, and Gerard reported they had lost two of them to precipitous drops. But they still had carried enough arrows to replenish Tigre's horse archers and enough food to keep the Silver Meteor Army in the field for another few days.

"How are the bulwarks going?"

"Slowly," the man replied tartly, shaking his head and downing half of his wineskin before continuing. "With the number of horses you're all using, we've been forced to split our donkey, on gathering arrows from the local lords and getting them up to you." Those lords hadn't been able to supply much in the way of people but they were at least making enough arrows to keep the army going. "That lack of animal power limits the amount of work we've been doing. Hells, we've only got three oxen to help!"

“What's this?” Ranma asked, as he helped unload the mules.

“Kind of like what we were doing first,” Elen replied, “only bigger. Instead of a line across the gap, we ordered Gerald and Captain Marsh to throw up a series of forts. Simple things, but easy to defend, with which we can interdict the gap.”

At Ranma's confused look, Elen explained further. “Remember, that army, is getting further and further from its own supplies the more we hold them up, the more that army has to eat through its own supplies. Supplies, which have already been badly hit by you and yours. This whole campaign has been about buying time. If the enemy gets past us, we wanted something in place to stop them as a last, heh, gap, measure.”

“Indeed, but I have to warn you, that's why I am up here. We are also coming to the end of our supplies,” Gerard interjected, having finished his wineskin. “We aren't still getting food from the locals, but it's coming in more gradually, more miserly now. And we are running out of arrows as well. Arrowheads specifically. The locals don't have access to enough steel or even iron to keep making them as fast as we have. And don't get me started on leather, material for the forts or the rest of what we need. It isn't pretty.”

Elen and Tigre both scowled at that, while Ludmila frowned pensively. “So we need to change our tactics, use more rocks and other such instead of arrows. We can't be careful with the rest of the material of war, but we can do that at least.”

“Yeah, but... I don't think we're going to get the chance,” Ranma answered. When everyone looked at him, Ranma shrugged. “The enemy's been changing tactics and defenses on us all along, like pushing light infantry up into the mountains around the gap. We can still move through the mountains, but at this point, your attacks take too long to set up. Can we even get into position to attack them without fighting a few pitched battles, that in turn warns the main army we're coming?”

“Ugh,” Tigre muttered, shaking his head. “That is what I was afraid of. I don't think we're there yet, but we might...”

At that point, a sentry raced toward them, his shout interrupting Tigre. Reaching the officers, he went down on one knee in front of Elen and Tigre. “My Lord, my Lady, reports are coming in from our pickets. There is a light infantry regiment coming towards us, with more units visible behind them, coming from different directions.”

“See what I mean about how quick they are to change tactics? They're learning,” Ranma growled, shaking his head. “They must have sent these guys after the fuckers we fought last night and trailed us somehow without our outriders catching 'em.”

Soon enough, the army was moving once more, pushed further away from the pass by this heavily reinforced regiment. They were able to ambush its front ranks the next day, but the

damage had been done, as Ranma had warned. By the time they had broken contact with that group, the main enemy army in the gap had pushed forward, **hard**. Covering more than sixty leagues in a day, which, given the terrain was incredible.

Thanks to Ranma and a few other scouts they were able to keep track of the Muozinel forces while the Silver Meteor Army scrambled to try and get ahead of them. There, they found a small pass leading down to the gap where Gerard and Marsh had built their forts. And unfortunately, the Muozinel Army had also pushed several of its regiments ahead of its main force once more, and those regiments were already attacking the new forts.

Despite Gerard's words, the forts, two of them, were actually pretty decent fortifications. The central keep was a simple affair, three stories tall palisade with stone around its base. the outer wall was also wooden, lined with dirt and marked here and there with stones, not nearly as strong as the main keep, but decent enough.

Both were being besieged by two regiments of Muozinel infantry. These were further backed up by archers, more archer units than Ranma had seen in one place before. Another few cavalry companies moved around them, protecting them from any assault out of the mountains.

Or they would have if they were facing normal troops.

Ranma, Elen, and Ludmila raced ahead of the rest of the army, with Tigre following with the horse archers behind him. "Spread out!" Elen ordered. "Do as much damage as we can, break the enemy cavalry to let Tigre and his men do their thing!"

"Teach your father to suck eggs, Elen!" Ludmila retorted, twisting to aim her horse's charge towards one portion of the enemy formation which had in turn begun racing their way.

For his part Ranma simply smirked, crossing the intervening distance faster than the others, causing Ludmila's eyes to widen. "I knew he had speed to spare but that much?"

"Meh, I'm certain he's got some horse somewhere in his ancestry. Although I'm waiting for him and Lim to go all the way to confirm that, obviously," Eleanora chuckled as she too twisted to the other side of Ranma's charge.

Like the tips of a trident, the three of them slammed into the enemy's formation, if in very different ways. Elen's Ley Adimos hit first, hurling men and horses, slaying many before she crashed into the same part of the ruined formation, her horse moving faster than any on the field, Arifar's air magic around both raider and horse as she slashed and hacked her way into the enemy.

Ranma was next crashing into and through the center of the enemy's line, leaping up and kicking out so hard he sent the men on either side his charge off their horses and into

several others on either side. Only his first two victims died, but men and horses all stumbled, getting in one another's way, causing even more chaos than Elen's assault.

To his right, Ludmila struck in turn. Laviyas' attack created a field of ice spikes that slew a dozen men, through which she rode, Laviyas a lance with a large tip of ice that skewered men and horse alike.

The Muozinel troopers rallied quickly encircling the super-powered combatants, but there weren't enough of them to stop Tigre and the horse archers from moving around the melee to both sides, coming together before attacking the flanks of the forces who had been attacking the forts.

Archers turned, dueling with their horse-using fellows, and men fell on both sides while the rest of the Silver Meteor Army came down out of the pass and into the Gap. Those units though soon found themselves fighting another two light cavalry regiments which had come up the gap to reinforce the attack. The battle became general in front of the forts, infantry fighting cavalry in one place, another infantry regiment continuing its assault on the southernmost fort, matched by the pike company in residence and the heavy infantry that Tigre and Elen had left behind, along with the single company of archers within the fort.

Elsewhere the attackers of the northern fort had turned entirely away, and were now reforming their lines, moving to attack Tigre's horse archers. Tigre fell back and away from them, only to be attacked by the remnants of the group that were still swirling around Ranma, Elen and Tigre. Most of those men died, but the infantry closes the range, and their archers, more numerous than Tigre's horse archers, began to empty saddles.

Ranma hopped from one horse to another, lashing out with a punch that caved in a man's helmet and snapped his neck hurling him off his horse into the horse of the man beside him, that horse fell to the ground ribs broken and Ranma leaped forward once more batting aside a saber before his return blow shattered the man's scale male-clad chest.

As that man tumbled back out of his saddle, Ranma stood there for a moment, ignoring the bucking horse under him as he stared around. The battle was extremely chaotic at this point, and both sides were taking casualties. *Which favors the Muozinel forces, damn it.*

But beyond the current battle, Ranma could see a long line of dust coming towards them from the Brunish side of the gap. "Huh..." Ranma leaped through the battle towards his friend, but before he could reach Tigre with the news, there was a frantic sound of drums, and waving flags. Evidently the enemy had seen something too.

Tigre barely looked away from his work of sending arrows out into the enemy ranks as Ranma landed lightly behind him on his horse's rear. "We might have some reinforcements coming. I can't make them out yet but...never mind. Heh, it looks as if Regin's finally decided to join the party.

In the distance, the creators of the dust appeared, a solid line of heavy cavalry. From their ranks the red horse on the blue background of Brune flew, along with four other banners, each of them representing a different Knightly Order. Ranma had no idea what each signified, but he was damn glad to see them.

The enemy was unable to disengage in time to meet this new defending force, and as Ranma rejoined the battle, the combined might of four Orders crashed into the battle, crushing and continuing to roll through them, causing chaos and death swords and lances running red with blood.

The charge of the Knightly Orders broke the center of the attacking enemy army. That, coupled with the attack from the Silver Meteor Army and its superpowered leaders caused the enemy to sound a desperate retreat. The last of the enemy units to pull away from the forts did so now, still under control, but unwilling to stand and take the enemy assault.

As they did, Captain Marsh and the pike companies were up and over the ditches, crashing into the enemy in front of them, then pushing on, while the rest of that heavy infantry of the Silver Meteor Army moved forward, joining the assault. And now, finally, the enemy's control and command finally shattered, and men began to just flee.

As a few companies of knights moved further down the gap to make certain they had routed their enemies, the rest of the Silver Meteor Army retired past the forts.

Ludmila's troops, still the most rested and least battered of them all, broke off to help continue work on the palisade between the two forts, which almost looked complete from Ranma's perspective.

Beyond that, a camp was laid out, complete with its own defenses, larger than average tents, and men moving around in places, preparing the camp further. Swiftly, the four of them were led by their new allies to the largest of the tents. Outside of which, Tigre was astonished to find a familiar face waiting.

"Tigre-sama!" Titta shouted, rushing forward and embracing her Lord and not-so-secret beloved the moment his feet touched down.

Tigre had been staring at her so much he hadn't anticipated her near-Amazonian hug and nearly stumbled but caught himself with one hand against his saddle. The other hand had automatically gone around Titta's waist, a fact that caused Elen's eyes to narrow dangerously. "Whoa, now! Titta, what are you doing here? This close to a battlefield is no place for you."

"You left me with the Princess, and I certainly wasn't going to be left behind again!" Titta said tartly, pulling back just enough so that she could pinch his side. "Besides, I've been this close to fights before or have you forgotten Alsace. And... and I didn't want to go any longer without seeing you."

Elated at seeing Tigre after more than a month apart, Titta dared a kiss on the cheek as she finished speaking. Then she pulled away just enough to send a glare at Eleonora as she hopped off her horse before taking possession of Tigre's arm, pulling him towards the tent. "But I would be remiss in my duties if I didn't tell you that the Princess and her advisors wait for you inside. But promise me, Tigre-sama, to come and see me when you can?"

"I promise, I'll make time to have a picnic with you or something similar once this campaign is over," Tigre promised, causing Titta to smile in delight.

That smile disappeared as Elen grabbed at Tigre's other arm. "What the heck do you think you are doing?" Eleonora growled, stalking forward.

"Greeting **my** Lord after a long absence," Titta retorted, putting a very subtle emphasis on the word 'my' while hugging Tigre's arm to her tighter, pressing her modest chest against his arm. "Whatever is it to you, Lady Elen?"

"Why you..."

"Enough. You three can have your, your tawdry romantic comedy some other time," Ludmila ordered, shaking her head as she moved towards the tent flap. "We are still on a campaign, Eleonora, or have you forgotten?"

With one final glare towards Titta, Eleonora huffed and pulled an admittedly unresisting Tigre out of the younger girl's grip, moving him towards the tent. While he would never say it aloud, Tigre was never really at ease with Titta flirting with him. He saw her too much as a sister for that.

Ranma chuckled, following behind the others. *That is never going to get old, is it? Being on this side of the romantic comedy, I mean.*

In the tent they were ushered into, the Princess waited on a camp chair that had been decked out with several expensive-looking furs. Dressed in a white dress with a burnished chest plate over it, Regin looked regal and commanding, a far cry from the timid, scared thing Ranma and the others had met months ago. Her eyes lit up with delight at seeing Tigre, her royal mask of calm assurance falling away as she smiled happily at him and gestured him to a seat by her right hand. "Tigre, please, have a seat. We have a lot to talk about and you all have been the ones at the sharp end of this war so far."

On top of using the shortened version of his first name this was a bit of symbolism that even Ranma couldn't miss, and glancing at Eleonora and at the fuming Titta, who had the look of someone who just realized that they had just lost whatever progress they'd made, Ranma had to look away to bit his lip to keep from laughing. Ludmila also snorted, looking away, as she wondered what Tigre was doing to attract all of this attention. *That is not to say he wasn't, dare*

I think it, quite impressive when he rescued me in the attack on our camp. And his skills are equally impressive. But even so, to have both a Vanadis and Princess after his affections...

Elen huffed, plopping herself in a chair on Tigre's other side, holding his hand very deliberately for a moment before looking around at the others already sitting there. "Introductions are in order, I think."

Her face losing some of its delight at seeing Tigre, Regin nodded. "This is Lord Auguste. He is the leader of the Calvados Knights and was the first of the Knightly Commanders to join our cause."

Auguste was a large man (not that this was saying much, all of the Knights Commanders were large men) with dark brown hair, brown eyes, and a short, wild-looking beard coupled with a well-kept mustache. His laugh was just as grandiose as the rest of him appeared, as he guffawed at that. "Hahaha, more like I only needed to be convinced of Her highness's legitimacy, as you well know, Tigre."

Tigre smiled at the other man, nodded as if he was a friend. Later, Tigre told Ranma that this was indeed the case. Auguste had served as a man-at-arms to Tigre's fathers, Urs, before Urs had sponsored him to the Calvados Knights, where he rose rapidly through the ranks.

"Beside him is Emil, commander of the Perche Knightly Order." This man was a morose looking fellow with dirty blonde hair, a very short goatee and mustache. He simply nodded as he was introduced, staring hard at Ranma.

"Knight Commander Scheie isn't here at present, having volunteered to command the ongoing efforts to route the enemy we found here. He leads the Lutece Knights. And across from you, Tigre, is Edmund, Leader of the Red Blade."

"So, you are the one called the Servant of the Gods?" asked Edmund, his tone serious, while two of his fellows both rolled their eyes. "The one whose actions showed the faithful that Princess Regin has been blessed by those on high?"

This man was dressed almost like a Templar would in earth, a white surcoat with a red-bladed sword in the center, and the image of the multi-rayed sun on one shoulder. This was the symbol of Perkunas, the chief god in both Zhcted and Brune. Edmund was also noticeably younger than the others. his armor, although of good quality, lacked the weight the others wore, although he was just as tall and powerfully built as the other commanders. He also lacked any kind of mustache, although his hair was long, and almost luxurious, falling to his shoulder in ringlets.

In her makeshift throne, Regin winced. Edmund wasn't quite a fanatical believer in Perkunas and Triglav, but he was close. He had been the one to have the hardest time accepting her as princess, knowing that meant she would be queen and believing that such was

frowned upon by the gods. He also still disdained Tigre for being an archer. Archery in warfare had long been sneered at by noble and churchman alike in Brune.

Ranma groaned shaking his head. "Please, no! First, I ain't affiliated with any gods, the churches that serve them, or anything religious whatso-fucking-ever. Heck, where I come from, we don't even have religions like yours. I'm just a martial artist with a lot of tricks under my sleeves."

"Sometimes literally," Tigre interjected, unwilling to let that go.

"Was it you or was it not you who I saw tossing people around like they were pebbles out there just now?" asked Emil dryly, his lips twitching, almost destroying the morose air the man held. When Ranma didn't answer, the man went on with a small snort. "If you can do that, there is no 'just' anything about you."

"I'm sorry it took us so long to get here Tigre, but Knightly Orders were not as organized for a long march as I would've liked," Regin interrupted before Edmund could interject once more, trying to get the conversation back onto a more serious footing, even as she very gently teased the older men all around her. "They are a little too used to fighting in their own backyards." Her eyes turned serious as she reached out to take one of Tigre's calloused hands in her own smaller and far softer ones. "You were not hurt, were you?"

"No, although the Silver Meteor Army has taken a tremendous thrashing these past few days. I haven't yet had a tally of this last fight, but we started out with three thousand horse archers. I think we have lost more than a third of my men since entering the Agnes Mountains."

Edmund sneered at the idea of horse archers and would have said something pithy in response, but Elen cut in before he could, her voice as pained as her lover, causing him to squeeze her hand. "I have numbers at least for my own Leitmeritz troops. We've lost at least half of the troops we started this campaign with."

At that point Ludmila interjected her own points. "My own troops took a pounding in this last battle. I know I lost at least a hundred of my cavalry, and more among my infantry. However, Tigre, you lose yet another point for not introducing me. Princess, I am Ludmila Lourie, Vanadis of Lavia and Olmutz," she said bowing fluidly to the young woman before moving to take up a chair to one side of Eleonora. "I was sent by King Viktor Arthur Volk Estes Tur Zhcted to aid Vanadis Viltaria in beating off this invasion of your lands. Muozinel is an enemy of both our nations, and at present it behooves us all to stand together against them."

The Knightly Order leaders all glared at the young, blue-haired woman. Although they hadn't met her in battle, Olmutz was one of the areas where Brune, Muozinel and Zhcted had fought over for decades.

The fact that Ludmila had actually bypassed their territory so swiftly that they hadn't even realized what she was doing until she was well past them also rather galled all of the Knight commandants, although Ludmila wasn't so coarse as to bring it up. No, she would remain silent on that, let it fester within them. That would be all the more satisfying.

"And that has nothing to do with wanting to fight Muozinel on our soil instead of your own?" Edmund asked with a sneer.

Ludmila was about to retort that in fact, was the reason why she was here, but before she could, Tigre interrupted, his voice firm and commanding despite his exhaustion and his normal self-effacing manner. "Enough. The regiments we faced today numbered barely a twelfth of the enemy's remaining forces. We need to make plans to further harass and halt their progress. We cannot afford to snipe at one another, my lords."

Frowning, Ludmila nodded, actually smiling at Tigre. "You just earned that point back, Lord Vorn. My lords, I will admit you are correct. But I am still here, and willing to help. Whatever payment my king demands will come from him, not from me. Personally, I am more than willing to fight the slaving scum of Muozinel anywhere I can."

The commanders of the Knightly Orders all looked at one another, but Regin spoke now, her own voice soft but still somewhat authoritative. "Lady Lourie is correct. At the moment, when Brune faces its worst crisis since its creation, we cannot turn aside aid no matter how unlooked for."

"The Princess and Lord Vorn are correct. And for myself, I have to admit to some shock at what the Silver Meteor Army has achieved here. We assumed the worst when we started to march, only to learn when we neared the entrance to the gap that you were already here and still holding the enemy off, despite being outnumbered astronomically. You all have performed a miracle here," Emil admitted, making Auguste nod his head.

"Thank you, but I think we are running out of tricks at this point, which makes me doubly glad to see you all," Tigre admitted with a tired shake of his head. "And the portions of our army we've been using up to this point on offensive actions are exhausted."

"In that case, we should move on. I have Gerard making a tally of the dead and gathering the wounded to get them to Ranma. Ranma, once he's ready for you, I'd like to ask you to take over the medical side of things. No offense meant, but I think you can do more on that score than in consultation."

"We can certainly take over fighting the Muozinel army for a time," Auguste boomed out with a laugh. "We brought with us five thousand knights and seven thousand mixed infantry and archers."

Tigre's eyes widened, and he thanked Auguste and the others profusely. That almost equaled the full force of the Silver Meteor Army including Ludmila's forces.

"Indeed. Gathering such numbers was why we took so long to get here. But now that we are, I believe that your army has fought more than well enough to earn a rest. You especially Tigre," Princess added with a smile.

"Is there any news on the port?" Ranma asked, leaning against the tent post, having let Ludmila take the seat originally meant for him, while Tigre just looked on, nodding his head to the princess's comment. Indeed, he looked as if he was about to fall out of the saddle now that the adrenaline of the battle was leaving his system.

The princess shook her head, a faint frown on her face. "I'm afraid not. Although from his former position in Duke Ganelon's lands and with the muds of springtime on him, I doubt that the Duke Thenardier will be making good time to say the least."

"We did," Elen Ranma and Tigre replied as one, causing the others to snort in laughter while the others all chuckled. It was true after all. The march of the Silver Meteor Army, and Tigre's Ride, were already the stuff of legends among the peasants.

"More to the point my lords, while you might have brought archers and infantry who can continue our work in attacking from the mountains and our hit and run raids, the majority of your troops are your heavy cavalry, whereas only a small portion of our army is," Elen went on, becoming sober as a thought occurred to her.

The Knightly commanders leaned forward in interest. "What are you thinking of?" Tigre asked.

Instead of answering, she turned to Ranma. "You're the one that's been sneaking in and out of their camps. Tell us what you can about their command structure. How do you differentiate from the different types of officers?" she ordered, all of her normal friendly playfulness when she talked to Ranma or Tigre in abeyance.

Nodding, Ranma did so, explaining how officers were marked out by different kinds of flags outside their tents, the tent color and so forth. Then, when he was finished, Elen asked, "If you went forward tonight on your own, how many camps could you sneak into?"

"I'm sorry, camps?" Regin asked. "What are you talking about?"

"The enemy army doesn't camp in one large camp, your highness. Instead, it has split its marching order into different regiments. At first, those were broken up by type of trooper. But the enemy was quick to mix in their archers with the rest of their commands even though they are still keeping them separate to avoid getting bogged down as they march. If a unit is slow to start moving, its position in the line of march is taken up by another. If a regiment has taken

damage, they fall back through the line of march and so forth,” Tigre explained, shaking his head in admiration. “It really is a very good organization.”

“And one that has made them extremely flexible in responding to our own attacks. When we attack one regiment, the next in line is quick to move up, and support now tries to outmaneuver us by moving into the mountains in some fashion. It’s only their lack of ability in such areas and the fact that for the most part, they seem to not be willing to move in smaller units than companies that have kept them from pinning us in place and overwhelming us with numbers,” Eleonora added.

There was some consternation at that from the Knightly commanders, and for a moment, the conversation derailed as they asked question after question about how the Muozinel army fought.

The Knights, above nearly every noble house, had fought Muozinel the most times, and to hear how they had changed in such a fundamental manner – greater organization, greater communication, and a more professional officer corps - disturbed them with its long-term implications.

It took a while to get the back to point, but when Elen asked if he had ever seen a symbol of a red and gold banner, Ranma shook his head, lips pursed in thought. “I... don’t think I did. Why?”

“Because that is the symbol for the highest military commander in the field,” Ludmila said looking at her fellow Vanadis thoughtfully. “It always has been. Even with all the other changes they’ve made, that wouldn’t have changed. What are you thinking?”

“We just got a major shot in the arm in terms of heavy cavalry, a unit we haven’t really been playing with all that much except in small hit-and-run type attacks. How well do you think your people would be able to move through the mountains?” Elen directed her question to the Knights Commanders.

“Honestly? Not very well. Our barding and armor are heavier than even your own lady Vanadis,” Auguste answered, looking over at Ludmila, whose lands, as the only major source for iron, specialized in heavy armor.

Yet despite that, Auguste’s words were simply the truth. Indeed, the armor of the Knightly Orders was among the heaviest on the continent, something that Elen had seen when she had battled Roland. Their horses were also heavier, bigger and stronger than most of the horses of the Silver Meteor Army. Elen’s white stallion and Ludmila’s own horse were exceptions, of even higher quality than the horses of the Knights having the same endurance as the regular Leitmeritz horses, but the strength and size of the larger chargers along with a degree of intelligence highly unusual in any horse.

They were also commensurately expensive. Easily five times as expensive, or more once you added in the cost it took to train them. Horses like that were insanely hard to come by, and few other breeds were as hearty or smart.

“More to the point, our horses aren’t bred for that kind of environment. We wouldn’t be able to use the same kind of slopes your troops could. We... might be able to if we removed all our armor and the barding, but even then, it would be hard for our horses. Although recall we don’t just field heavy cavalry,” opined Emil. “I would wager our archers and infantry could make that kind of a trek easily.”

Again, this was only the truth. Every member of a Knightly order, their mounted Knights, the archers and infantry, were among the best trained and experienced troops that you could find on the whole of the continent.

“That helps, but to really push the enemy off balance I wanted us able to take advantage of your cavalry,” Elen scowled, leaning back and almost seeming to slump in her chair, an annoyed expression on her face. “There goes that idea.”

“Not necessarily,” Ranma hummed thoughtfully, tapping his chin. “You were thinking about getting Tigre in range to take this Red Beard guy out, right?”

“Red Beard or whoever is commanding this force,” Emil cautioned, although he looked a little confused as to why Ranma and Elen were talking about Tigre as if he would be the one to take the shot alone.

Still, he didn’t look down on Tigre for the bow at the side of his chair, so Regin, watching the discussion but not participating now that it had turned entirely to military matters, would take what she could get as the man went on. “If I was Red Beard, I would probably have stayed at the fortress that the old King put up and concentrated on fortifying this side of it. If they hold that fortress, they have another route into Brune despite the difficulty of the terrain.”

Tigre grimaced. “Oh damn it, that wouldn’t be fun at all. Just imagine the ongoing grind of mountain warfare we’d be faced with. For years, probably.”

“Yeah...” For a moment, they all looked at one another, not liking that idea at all, but Regin spoke up now, shaking her head. “No. Muozinel won’t do that. I won’t deny that Red Beard could be in that fortress, but the enemy has taken Southport. They don’t want just a toe in the door, they want to take control of large swathes of Brune territory. Nothing less will satisfy, not after an invasion on this scale, with this much prior planning having gone into it.”

While the others thought about that, Elen frowned. “I wonder how they were going to deal with the dragons... It isn’t impossible without Viralts... or Roland’s Durandal, I suppose. But any direct conflict sure as heck is. Send an army against a dragon in open combat, you only get a bunch of dead soldiers.”

“Poison, pit traps, or simply marching around them,” Ludmila agreed, counting points off on her fingers. Ranma scoffed, muttering about Elen being a ‘kill-stealer’ and Tigre sat calmly, not wanting to mention the Black Bow. “Although the very idea of training dragons is just insane.”

Regin looked uncomfortable at that, and unfortunately. “Yes well, thankfully Thenardier’s family has never shown the ability to do that before. So it’s possible Muozinel doesn’t think that he will have been able to do so after Tigre killed one in the campaign last summer.”

All of the Order Commanders and even Ludmila, looked at Tigre in shock while Elen beamed proudly beside him, and Tigre just looked a little sheepish. “Er, I, um, I had help from Elen and her Arifar, and um, this heirloom of my family. It did most of the work.”

Deciding to save his friend from trying to explain the mysterious, and in Ranma’s opinion still creepy, Black Bow, Ranma tapped the table gently. “We’re burning daylight people, and I know Tigre at least needs to get some rest. So, let’s get back on topic. Anyway, something my scouts and I noticed in the days leading up to our retreating was that the enemy units were starting to bunch up bigtime. We were taking too many of their commanders out, so they needed to combine their regiments. Now, I ain’t saying Red Beard’s out there, but if we can keep taking out their officers and signalers, that trend’ll continue.”

Tigre nodded. “Ranma’s right. We saw a lot of their units were like that and have taken advantage of it numerous times. The troops they sent up into the mountains weren’t, but that was mostly just a sign of how many more men they have than us.”

“And that one night attack was a planned aberration, troops specialized for that kind of environment,” Ludmila opined. “The impact is already being felt throughout the enemy army.”

“Right,” Ranma nodded emphatically. “We use the knights as fast as we can. Hammer them from the front, force them to push more units forward, then have Tigre come down from the mountains somewhere and snipe this Red Beard guy.”

“What does ‘snipe’ mean?” Edmund wondered aloud.

Ignoring her own interest in the answer to that, Elen asked, “How much longer can you sneak into their camps?”

“The scouts can’t. I can, but even then, getting past the guards on the various tents without being seen is impossible.” Ranma shrugged. “But that doesn’t mean I can’t bull my way through and back out. I can do a lot of damage.”

Elen grinned then, pointing at Ranma excitedly. "Actually that isn't all. With your ability to carry rocks and stuff around, I wager you could trick them into thinking a passage or crevice is less passable than it really is. We can use that as a way to get Tigre in place."

"If you can do that, we could actually add another dimension to the attack. Use our troops to attack from either side. No matter how large an army is, if they are being attacked from three sides, they won't be able to bring their numbers to bear and will also feel a sense of panic. It will take iron control to get the enemy out of that trap, regardless of numbers!" Auguste enthused.

"Hmm... I can't say that keeping our mounted companies in reserve sits well with me, but you're right. We need to fight here on the floor of gap for us to get the most out of our tactics and abilities," Emil muttered.

"I'll volunteer to lead the rest of our forces in taking over these hit and run attacks and the attack with our infantry forces. If that is agreeable to you, brothers," Edmund inquired, looking over at Tigre and Ranma respectfully. "Scheie can lead the cavalry from the other side."

The other Knights Commanders all nodded in agreement, with Auguste speaking for the missing Scheie, while Ludmila suggested they not attack down into the gap. "Instead, stick to hitting the units already up in the mountains to ward us off with your lighter units. Those units still might have their command structure in place."

"I think I'll go with you, Ranma. I'm just as good as you are at moving around unseen, and even if I'm not," Tigre shrugged, patting the Black Bow with some affection. His feelings toward the weapon had changed since it had saved his life and that of his horse archers. "Flame arrows don't harm my effective range all that much. And there's nothing for causing chaos like a few good fires."

Ludmila frowned pensively thinking about their overall plan while Elen pouted for real this time, annoyed that her silver hair made it impossible for her to go with her boys.

And yes, that was how Elen thought of the two of them. Tigre was her man, period, full stop. Anyone who thought otherwise was just wrong, and if she had to kiss him into unconsciousness in public to prove it after this campaign she would do so. In turn, Ranma was her quasi-brother, who she wanted to look after as much as she had to beat other bitches off Tigre because of his ability to make trouble. *I know they can handle themselves in a fight, heh, if not in social situations. But being left behind like this is annoying!*

Ludmila's thoughts on the other hand was actually about the campaign as a whole. "That's well and good, but the army's engineers need to finish the palisade and the forts, so won't have time to prepare any more surprises for the enemy. Do you think you can both sneak into the camps at night and set up some more traps and obstacles?"

“I think I could, yeah. But you and Lavi-chan could probably put up a few obstacles yourself. Same with Elen and Arifar too.”

The two Vanadis looked at one another, somewhat chagrined. They certainly could use their magical abilities to dig ditches, create random, extremely hard ice walls and so forth. Especially near the palisade, where the gap narrowed a bit in comparison to the rest of its length. Then Ludmila registered the grumbling growl in her mind, and turned, glaring at Ranma. “What is it with you and shortening names, and what is a -chan?”

Ranma tried to compose himself into as innocent an expression as he could, something that really wasn't easy for him. Keeping any tells from his face in a fight was easy, but in a conversation it was much harder. “Not at all, if anything it's a term of endearment.” He then smirked. “Toward young children. Now, I know with her normal attitude Lavi's ain't as young as the other Viralts, but I figure, she just needs some fun in her life you know, and no longer act like an old, stuck-up biddy.”

As Elen burst into laughter, Ludmila glared at Ranma, Lavi's power appearing around her spear like a penumbra of intense cold, causing those sitting on either side of her to shy away. “It is only my good manners that keep myself from skewering you where you sit.”

“Think ya meant ya'd try to skewer me. And there ya go with the nickname thing, Mila,” Ranma teased. He'd had quite enough of the serious conversation for now.

“Ahem!” Regin interrupted, trying to avoid looking at the bemused, somewhat shocked faces of the Knights Commanders around her and the fact that Regin also found what Ranma had said quite funny. “If we can get back on topic for just a second. Lady Lourie, you can skewer Ranma in a moment. For now, I think that we have a plan going forward. Does anyone else have anything they want to talk about?”

It turned out they didn't, and the meeting quickly broke up at that point, with Regin and Elen beginning a verbal war for Tigre's attention that Ranma cheerfully skipped out on, with Mila hot on his heels. She almost passed him when Titta looked to be trying to join in.

For the next few days, the infantry forces of the Knightly orders took over the battle to the forces in the mountains. They didn't move as fast as the Silver Meteor Army, and they lacked the magic of Elen and Ludmila. But they had better armor and gear than the Silver Meteor Army did, and the locals who had helped Tigre and his men learn how to find their way were just as willing to help the knights. These fights were often extremely sharp affairs, but it worked in curtailing what ability the Muozinel army had built up to working in the mountains.

Meanwhile, Ranma, accompanied by Tigre and backed by the scouts who were still with him, raided the enemy camps each night, striking one and moving on as fast as possible. Thanks to the amount of security the Muozinel regiments now employed at night, these attacks were very much smash and burn rather than sneak and withdraw types, but one thing hadn't

changed: nighttime operations like this, **especially** now with the moon at its lowest ebb, was incredibly tough for most soldiers.

For the men trained by Tigre and Ranma, it was simple enough. Every time Muozinel troopers tried to follow them out into the dark or laid an ambush, it was turned on them, and the scouts left their corpses behind.

Meanwhile, the enemy army continued to bunch up, but also continued on. Without any further attacks coming down out of the mountains, the majority of the army could move freely, although slowly thanks to the profusion of pits, ice walls, ditches and so forth they had to deal with. Yet, move they did, irresistibly moving forward. Until Elen and the Knightly commanders, the most experienced leaders among the combined army, decided that the time had come.

The Muozinel forces in the mountains had been ground down and diverted. The enemy now couldn't move its regiments as freely as they once had, and the enemy's higher echelons had been forced to take direct command. Tigre had even spotted the gold and red banner of a Muozinel general, although at the time the shot would have been impossible, even for him.

The mounted Knights of the Perche, Calvados and the Lutece Orders marched out. Pennants whipped in the wind from the tips of many a lance as they moved. Armor gleamed on man and horse in the midday sun, and here and there in their ranks the banners of their orders flew.

Since the Muozinel forces had their own outriders, the enemy of course saw them coming. As quickly as it could, the Muozinel army started to form up. The enemy infantry forces took the center, spreading to either side, each regiment linking up to one another, two regiments across, and four deep. The Muozinel cavalry were behind them, with little room to move around the infantry, which had been pushed forward in such a way as to cover the gap from one wall to another. More infantry units were behind the cavalry, but these units were understrength in comparison to the forces at the front of the invading army.

An army which, even now, numbered somewhere between thirty-eight to forty-six thousand men. But for all the enemy's regiments were still mostly there, few of them had signalers, bannermen, or officers beyond the company level. While it was still massive, the Muozinel army had lost a lot in terms of flexibility and organization. And, thanks to how long the Silver Meteor Army had held them up, the enemy had also started to show signs of not having enough supplies to go around. In other words, it was getting desperate to break through the Brunish defenders.

Within sight of the enemy, the Knightly Orders formed up into wedges, each Order forming a different wedge of more than one thousand, three hundred heavy cavalry, each man in the formation perfectly in place. But staring at it from nearby, Ranma could tell it was

different than any cavalry formation he had seen before. *The depth is way more, the width less, and there's a lot more space between each line of cavalry.* "What the heck is that formation?"

"It's one of the Knightly Order's specialties. Instead of a direct charge that hits the entire enemy line, that is a pulse charge," Elen explained from beside him. She would have preferred to be with Tigre for this, but her abilities leant themselves to this part of the battle more than the part Tigre was going to play. "Each line of heavy cavalry is going to hit the enemy formation, then split apart, shifting backwards and around their attack. The next pulse hits the same place, and so on."

Ranma whistled at her description. "That has to take one hell of a lot of coordination. And it's assuming that the first hit buckles the enemy line."

"Just watch," Elen replied grimly. "There is a reason the Knightly Orders protect a portion of the border that both Zhcted and Muozinel border."

As the cavalry formation charged forwards, Ranma watched, impressed as the first line, the line that held lances forward, slowed slightly, spreading even as they started to take arrow fire from the Muozinel forces. This allowed their second line forward, the two lines becoming one for a brief moment until the two lines of cavalry had switched positions entirely. Meanwhile, the Muozinel archers behind their lines couldn't drive their arrows through the heavy armor and barding of the knights.

Worse for the Muozinel troopers in front of the Knightly Orders, that second line wasn't armed with lances alone. Instead, they had crossbows, small and short-ranged, but able to be used from horseback.

As Ranma watched, each of those men fired their weapons into the enemy line at near point-blank range before breaking off like Elen had described. The second line, which was now the line which had been first, lowered lances, and charged into the Muozinel army's damaged battleline.

The Brunish chargers surged forward, crashing into the infantry troopers knocking them over while the knights stabbed with their lances, then as those lances either broke or became too embedded to pull out, abandoned them, twisting around, at the sound of a horn. It was higher and almost more of a staccato noise than strident sound of the Silver Meteor Army.

At that sound, each and every man in those formations, all four of them, obeyed with alacrity breaking off to follow their fellows. And behind them, came another pulse, and then a fourth, a fifth like a staccato killing machine.

"That's impressive as hell, but I think the enemies already reacting," Ranma observed, pointing.

Indeed, the frontline formations were breaking up, becoming more disjointed, allowing more archers forward. Meanwhile the flanks of the companies holding the flanks of the larger Muozinel Army formation moved inward, creating space. Space which the heavy cavalry started moving through. Neither of these moves were clean, and a lot of the troopers got in one another's way, but it was still accomplished quickly.

From Ranma's other side, Ludmila shook her head. "Don't worry. The Knightly commanders are no fools. Else my family would have shattered their power long since."

As Ranma watched the last pulse went in, and the strange horn blasted out once more. this time there wasn't any hint of a staccato sound, instead there were three blasts, one after another. The last two pulses of the attacks halted in place, twisting around and following one branch of their fellows, reforming quickly.

The knights formed into a more traditional wedge shape now and moments later met the charge of the enemy cavalry just as they were about to break inwards from the flanks.

Behind them, the entire front of the enemy army was in disarray now. And once more, the lack of a mid-tier officer cadre was visible. Shattered companies didn't work together, the regiments each tried to reform on their own, and the regiments barely communicated.

"Our turn," Elen announced with a grin, pointing to the other side of the formation.

Ranma nodded and raced forward. He still disdained horses, and now showed why, sprinting as fast as the horses around him could gallop. Then as Elen roared out, "Ley Adimos!" he leaped on high. The front of the enemy cavalry force exploded, horses and men thrown or broken by the magical assault.

Capitalizing on this as the pulses of the Knightly Orders had previously, Ludmila shouted, "Into them, now!" Leading her own heavy cavalry into the enemy formation, which was still moving forward, despite losing a dozen men in their front line.

A second before the two forces of cavalry crashed together, Ranma landed in among the horsemen, kicking out, punching, kicking, hurling men out of their saddles, adding a little cackle all the while, for the fear factor of course. It wasn't as if he was enough of a sadist to enjoy seeing grown men in pretty decently heavy scale mail go flying from a light punch from him after all.

Really, it wasn't.

Disorder and chaos reigned at the front of the enemy formation, the infantry formations that had previously been the targets of the Knightly orders slow to recover. The chaos was aided by the horse archers, who moved forward, and begun to target the infantry. But the Muozinel army had overwhelming numbers, and those numbers started to tell now. More

undamaged units moved forward, pushing through their shattered fellows, losing some cohesion, but coming closer to the enemy. Soon they would start to move forward once more to try and close with the knights or the Vanadis troops.

But that was all according to plan. Because those units marching forward, were the units at the side of the enemy's main formations. Seeing the horse archers engaged at their front, the enemy was caught by surprise as Elen's infantry, the pike companies and the Knightly Orders' infantry, both archers and regular infantry, came out of the mountains coming down a crevice that the Muozinel scouts would have sworn was closed off due to a landslide.

Courtesy of Ranma, of course. As had cleaning it up enough to get these men into position a bare hour before the battle started.

The pikes took a bit to form up, carrying those things through the mountains had not been fun or quick – it had taken them all of the day before to get into position – but then they started to move forward, pikes forward, with the archers behind, and the infantry spreading out to either side.

Several hundred meters well, well beyond the battle, Red Beard's second-in-command scowled, barking out orders. This sudden attack from his army's flanks had thrown off what little momentum he had gained. "How in the name of Vahram were they able to get that many archers forward? I thought they were still warring with our troops in the mountains!"

Until last night, that had indeed been the case. Now, however, thanks to Ranma, the Vanadis and the scouts the Muozinel troops within the mountains had been pushed back east.

Kashim frowned, his thoughts cutting off as he saw the hated redhead that had been leading the Brunish defenders since the beginning. He was sitting his horse on the entirely other side of the attack which had struck Kashim's army. And he was...

That was the last observation that the man made before Tigre fired. The Black Bow gave Tigre a range that even any of his previous bows couldn't match. Indeed, while Tigre had gotten stronger thanks to Ranma's training, the pull on the bow shifted to match. Now from the saddle, Tigre shot an arrow so far that even someone with ballista or even an early rifle would've had trouble matching the range, let alone the pinpoint accuracy.

The enemy commander collapsed out of his saddle, an arrow straight between the eyes. Before the men around him could even register his death, two of them fell, hit by a similar arrows one in the chest, the other in the throat.

That one was a little off target, admittedly. Tigre had been aiming for his head again, but the arrow had fallen slightly more than anticipated.

Four more arrows in quick succession followed, as the man around the former general's position realized that they were within range.

A second later, he raised his bow, firing a single arrow high into the air as he twisted around, racing back the way he had come.

Seeing the signal, from out of the mountains behind him came the last Knightly Order, the Order of the Red Blade, with a thousand heavy cavalry. They quickly spread out in a flat out charge, no pulse charges, simply crashing into the other side of the formation from where the infantry under Captain Marsh had attacked. The side of the formation that still had no idea that they were in danger this far back from the front, up until the knights crashed into them.

The flank of the enemy collapsed instantly. While a prepared infantry line with spears could turn aside heavy cavalry, an unprepared infantry formation had no chance to do the same, especially when the cavalry had momentum on their side. The Knightly Order ran roughshod over entire infantry regiment, then crashed into the next, who were still extremely disorganized from having their command group just summarily butchered. The survivors fled, further disorganizing the units around them, many of whom were already engaged in battle.

If the enemy had been able to contract, been able to reorganize themselves, they might've had a chance to survive this attack. They still vastly outnumbered the Brunish forces, after all. But this enemy had taken too many losses to their command structure, and the loss of a general was something no army could quickly get over, no matter how well organized. And they were being attacked from three sides, something no one, no matter how well trained could not but feel panic over.

The enemy instantly began to retreat, in drips and drabs. Some formations were still intact, mostly cavalry, and they began to retreat in good order back down the gap. But many broke as the Knightly orders to the front broke through with help from Ranma and Elen.

They left the intact units alone. Instead, they trampled every broken unit they could under their horse's feet, adding to the rout.

Still, there were a lot of enemy units retreating in good order, more than Ranma, once more perched on a horse, wanted to see. Although this time it was a friendly one, with Ludmila glaring up at him angrily. "Where the hell did you come from anyway?"

Ranma shrugged. "A battlefield isn't all that difficult to navigate, especially if you can take to the air like me. more importantly, there are still a lot of enemy formations staying together, and a few more still coming up from behind, damn, I didn't think they had a reserve. And... they have a lot of banners and drums. I can hear them from here."

"Dammit! We need to link up with Tigre. That has to be Red Beard!" Ludmila growled.

Ranma looked down at her, one eyebrow rising. "So he's Tigre now, is he?" he teased. "Are you going to throw in your hat into the ring for his hand, then?"

"D' don't be ridiculous!" Ludmila barked back, flushing. "Why ever would I go after someone who is already being l a fellow Vanadis, a princess and a maid?"

As if speaking about him summoned the redhead into being, Tigre pulled up beside them, with Elen making her way over to them quickly. "We need to sound the withdrawal," Tigre said without preamble. "That general was not Red Beard, and the enemy is bringing up more troops."

Ranma growled but nodded and pulled out a bugle, which he practically ruptured in the next instant as he blew three long blasts. It was the same signal that the Knightly orders had used when they reformed after their initial pulse charge.

Slowly the allied forces consolidated. This was hard because the enemy was once more pressing forward hard. Losses across the battlefield were slowly beginning to rise.

Ranma and Tigre were the last ones to pull back, along with Elen who took the abrupt turnaround more philosophically than either man. "Well, at least we shattered something like nine regiments today. That's something at least. It will take them a while to reform those units."

"Agreed, although not happy at how quickly they were able to get through the caltrops me and the other scouts laid out last night. Still..." Ranma shrugged I guess you call this a win although, I don't know for how long.

Tigre didn't answer. In the distance, too far even for him to shoot he could see another gold and red banner, appearing, rising from among a new unit of cavalry at the far back of the Muozinel army.

"I would agree with you my large friend, if not for the fact that this group is led by Red Beard, as Lady Lourie told us," said one of the others, an elderly gentleman, older than the others, of Lord Augre's age or slightly more with the eyes of a hard-drinking hard-charging man, but with the hands and body of a someone who certainly looked after himself. "That one's a demon in human form, and will keep command of his army like no other Muozinel officer ever would. No, they'll make straight for Southport, burning and destroying everything in their path. And once combined with their supply line, we will never be able to get rid of them."

Later that night, the meeting was not a happy one. The combined defenders of Brune had just used a magnificent trick, but one that could only work once. Now their true enemy had revealed himself, bringing even more troopers to the party than they had ever seen before.

"Damn it, no wonder we haven't heard from Duncan if this lot were also pushing into the mountains with this kind of numbers," Ranma grouched, a feeling of guilt going through him.

I hope I didn't send Duncan and his men out there to die. Shaking his head, Ranma concentrated on the here and now as Elen asked, "Is there still no report from Southport?"

Regin nodded, looking a little pale at the news that a brand-new host almost equal to the first in size. "Yes, we have reports that Duke Thenardier is now back in his lands, making a forced march along with three Dragon, to the port in order to retake it."

"If I knew how far away he was, I might have rethought trying to hold here," Tigre said softly, shaking his head. "With all the damage Ranma and the scouts did to their supplies, that army must be in danger of running out of water and wine, if not food."

"A scorched earth campaign then?" Rurick asked from where he and Gerard stood to one side of the ongoing meeting, causing all the Bruneman (and woman) to scowl.

"No. That is not something I will ever condone, let alone as wounded as our nation is already by civil war. Gentlemen, do you think that Duke Thenardier can take Eastport quickly, before this army can break out and make for the port?" Regin questioned looking at the others.

"No, your highness. While I don't see how the enemy will be able to stop Thenardier's dragons, he is still too far away to attack it quickly enough to help us. By the time he does take it, this army will be out and into Brune proper. Even should we, our forces that is, survive, the damage they could do would be tremendous, and then, they could simply retreat in the face of the dragons, using their purloined gains as supplies back through the mountains.

"That, plus the ravages of our civil war? Even with the planting season ahead of us, I don't see how our nation would be able to survive," Gerard added, his voice strained. He of all of them knew the most about the surrounding area, and how important it was to the rest of the nation given how much farmland had been ravaged during the civil war. While most of it hadn't been ruined, dealing with that damage, even moving people back into the war-torn zones, would take a lot of time."

"Furthermore, who knows, Red Beard might not even retreat. He might simply try to march around Thenardier, making for our own territories, where he'll find supplies aplenty," added the commander who had been worried about Red Beard before. "Few of our castles have enough men within to create a credible defense. They could live off the land until they got there, invest our castles, and then bring in supplies from their own lands if need be. We would have a devil of a time winking them back out."

"So, we still need to smash this army if we can't hold it," Ranma said, a hard knot having grown in his stomach as this conversation went on. "Or else hundreds of thousands of peasants are going to find themselves enslaved and sent off to die. "

At Ranma's blunt tone, everyone looked at him, then looked at one another. More words were exchanged, shouts, ideas, concepts, the names of a few castles bruited about

before they were shut down by Regin or Gerard, who said that most of those had been demolished as Duke Thenardier's family grew to prominence. Other names of places, where maybe they could create defenses for a time were also mentioned, but everything amounted to the same idea.

Once this army broke out into Brune proper, they could tie the Silver Meteor Army and its allies down with a portion of their forces and move on to resupply at the port or ravage the countryside. There was literally nothing that they could do to stop the Muozinel army given its size advantage at that point.

But there was something Ranma could do now, and after a few moments of contemplation he took upon that burden. "Can we get all of our people into the forts?"

Tigre and Eleanora looked at Gerard, who shrugged. "I believe we can, why though? Even if we fort up in here, it doesn't really change matters. The enemy can still just pin us in place with but a fraction of their numbers and push past us into Brune territory with the rest of their army. It will serve no purpose."

"No, that's not what I'm talking about. I'm not talking about manning the forts, I mean getting all the troops underneath in the keeps in the center, not on the walls," Ranma explained, a morose look in his eyes.

"That would be tough, but given our losses, I believe it's still possible, so long as we send our heavy cavalry back down the gap behind our lines," Tigre murmured, looking at his friend worriedly. "Why, Ranma?"

There was a look on that face that he had never seen before, a kind of resigned sadness as well as a grim determination. Next to Tigre, Elen too was watching Ranma closely. She had seen that face on people who were determined to do something they thought personally horrifying, but they also thought needed to be done.

"I have some tricks I haven't used yet. One of them is a bit... destructive. It's kind of hard to set up too, but with Ludmila's help, I think we can do it. The problem is it isn't very easy to aim."

Everyone kept staring at him, and Ranma sighed, "I'm going to destroy that army. I'm going to personally kill a large portion of mass of humanity. And you're going to help me, Ludmila, Elen. After all. the bigger this attack is, the better, right?"

OOOOOO

Staring ahead of his current position, Kureys cursed to himself, shaking his head slightly. Then he chuckled, setting aside the death of his second command, praising the War God that he had been able to convince the Emperor and the Council to add so much supply to his army. At first, they'd wanted to put literally all of their eggs - and bread, mead, and water - in one basket i.e. the fleet and the Marines that had taken Southport. But he had convinced them that his army needed at least two weeks more worth of food.

And then, had come along the losses against the Silver Meteor Army they had, a rather pretentious name in his opinion, but an army that fought like lions. *Mountain lions to be exact.*

Those supplies have forced us to move slower in comparison to what the original plan called for, but if we didn't have them, all of my units would have been without food or water for more than five days now. As it is, we're nearly out of food despite redistributing the supplies we can from the shattered units. Even considering today's disaster. And thank my innate paranoia I thought to hide my banner and let Kashim take command of the army.

Red Beard frowned in thought as he entered his tent, finding his advisors waiting for him. *The army's morale is near the breaking point, and not just because of the food situation. Whoever that pigtailed warrior is, he has destroyed my command and communication organization to a degree I would never have thought possible, and that plus the fact we haven't scored a single real victory against the Brune is having an effect, to say nothing of today! I am going to lash the back of Spy Master Hashan to ribbons for not telling us about that man!*

But for now, I have to decide whether to pull back or try to break through. Red Beard let the words of his advisors wash over him for a time, staring down at the map in front of him, stroking his luxuriant beard thoughtfully. After only a minute's contemplation, he decided. "We've come too far to retreat now. We need to break through this force, regardless of what happened to Kashim."

Around him, Red Beard's advisors and few remaining regiment commanders nodded. There was no sycophancy in that reaction, Red Beard had removed any such yes-men from his army long since. No, what he had built, almost from scratch at that was a thoroughgoing, professional, extremely self-reliant officer corps. *Most of whom have died in the past few weeks* he thought once more, a flash of real anger crossing his face. Who would've thought that someone from Brune would be able to come up with such underhanded tactics. "How many more days do we have?"

"Barely three. And that's with redistributing the supplies of the units who have simply disintegrated today. So don't even ask," his supply officer answered instantly. "I've already begun redistributing those supplies, what weren't ruined or destroyed in the rout before we started to restore order anyway."

"Is that enough time to get us out of the Charles Gap?" Red Beard questioned.

“A day to reform the army after its losses so far?” Another man guessed, peering over the amount the map of the gap that they had been making since breaking through the fortress. It wasn’t complete by any stretch of the imagination, but it was the best they had.

“Yes. That’ll be a necessity I’m afraid,” Red Beard nodded resignedly.

His own portion of the Army still had twelve thousand un-blooded men, their morale iron hard, and the rest of the army which had fought under Kashim earlier that day had something like double that number still intact and responding to orders. But judging by the shattered remains of the rest Red Beard had seen being corralled and re-organized a moment ago, he would be able to gain another ten thousand or more men if he took the time to do it. “Besides the process has already begun. Best to finish it.”

“In that case, we can make it, barely. From where we are right now it’s a day to reach the entrance to the gap on the Brune side. Say a day and a half to break whatever defenses are they are. But we can’t slow down any further.”

The man who was speaking looked over at the man who had spoken about logistics, who nodded firmly in reply. “By the time we break out, we won’t have **any** water left. We’ll still have food for one, maybe two meals for the entire army at that point, but no water or wine.”

He gazed at Red Beard speculatively, leaving unsaid the fact that would also include the officers. Red Beard had made certain that they didn’t eat any more than common troopers. They might have a few dainties, after all, despite his best efforts most of the officers were nobles, and they could bring along a servant and a single mules worth of luxury items. But that was all.

Most, had, smartly in his opinion brought food. Red Beard had also done so, and then had promptly started to share his food with his security cadre.

Red Beard simply nodded back, and the man straightened, saying, “With your permission sir, I’ll get to making certain the food and everything else is organized. Broken troops sometimes loot even after being brought back into line.”

“See to your own commands,” Red Beard ordered. “We will march in the morning, and we are not going to stop for anything. We have come too far to fail now,” Red Beard reiterated.

Many of the other officers left, leaving the man who had been marking out distances on the map and Red Beard alone in the tent. “You have concerns,” Red Beard stated, leaning back on his cushions, tugging at his beard as he looked at his oldest and perhaps greatest asset for this campaign: an exiled Brunish nobleman, who had been accused of selling his own peasants into slavery.

“Yes,” the man ground out harshly, “I do. If we can’t break through, we won’t have enough supplies to retreat with.”

“True. But I have taken the measure of this enemy army now. It is small, extremely well led and organized, and it’s what is that old Brunish word for an army’s spirit?” Red Beard interrupted himself, smiling almost whimsically.

“I don’t remember the exact words but I know what you mean. And I agree, they have great spirit. But does that matter?”

“They are very cognizant of their losses,” Red Beard said softly. “If we are quick about it, they will not be able to recover from this last battle, and we will be able to push them into the kind of fight that favors us. Straight on, numbers against determination. And you forget the logistical side of things. No army has an unlimited supply of arrows, food, supplies. They have fought the same kind of costly mountain warfare as he has and must be on their last legs.”

“You sound almost as if you almost respect them,” the former Brunish noble stated, scowling.

Red Beard chuckled dryly, turning away slightly as he picked up a wine glass. He had ordered a single cask brought for this meeting, but his officers, being no fools, had not overindulged. That left to him to finish after-the-fact, a most fortuitous state of affairs.

He took his time answering the question, before nodding slightly. “I do. I do indeed respect them, I’ll kill them the instant I get the chance, but I realize that if the Silver Meteor Army had been even a quarter of our own numbers, we would never have gotten this far. And we would’ve lost far far more men. Now, go get some sleep. You’re going to need it.”

The man nodded, then said hesitantly, “There won’t be any way around them through the mountains beyond today’s battlefield. Hells, I’m surprised they found trails that let them pull off that pincer assault even today!”

“I’m counting on it,” Red Beard chuckled. “I still have the manpower to pay that price. They never did.”

Red Beard watched the man go, taking another sip of his wine, then setting it down resolutely, before pulling out another map. This was a map of Brune and Zhcted, showing where Muozinel armies had invaded in the past. The map wasn’t all that good, showing scant details but even so it showed the most important cities and natural landmarks.

He then held his hand out, first over a portion of Brune then reminding himself “Ah yes, the debacle today was caused by the Knightly Orders.” Red Beard then moved his fingers slightly to cover the territory where the Knightly Orders held land. Seeing this, Red Beard smiled. “Yes, that will do nicely.”

Red Beard had plans. Oh, yes. While he was loyal to the Emperor, and to the system of nobility that stated that slavery was a fact of life and that put nobles him on top, he still understood that Muozinel had to change. The slave business needed to be pared back, needed to change somehow. It was holding Muozinel back on the international side of things. If they could make but one ally among the other nations, things would be very different. But they couldn't, because every other nation knew that their people were but slaves waiting to be chained to Muozinel, noble and peasant alike. That had to change.

And as conqueror of at least half a Brune, if not the entire thing, there were those reports on dragons that worried him quite a bit, Red Beard would be in a good position to make suggestions. To offer new ways forward, and to expand his influence further. "Oh yes, I have plans. But first, I need to destroy you, redheaded archer. Vanadis of Laviar and Arifar. And you, mysterious one. I will forgo the mystery of you, for the good that your death can do me."

OOOOOO

The next day, the enemy army began to move quickly, coming towards them in an organized assault, banners flying, regiments formed up in attack formations. They had not attacked during the night outside of a few skirmishes with light infantry moving forward. Instead, they concentrated on gathering up their smashed forces, perhaps adding a further seven thousand men to their line of battle.

The speed with which the previously broken army had come together both impressed and scared the more experienced officers among the defenders. All of them knew that even if there had been an existing chain of command, turning around a broken army that quickly was something almost magical.

Ranma sat on a stone set in the center of the gap, about a mile away from the makeshift palisade across the gap, the forts behind him on either side. Behind the rock hidden from the invading army, Ludmila waited, scowling. "Are you sure this is going to work?" Ranma had told her, Elen and Tigre what he was going to do and how, and while all of them were skeptical, had agreed to see if it worked.

"Heh, you just be ready with that cold shoulder of yours," Ranma quipped, pushing aside his worry about and dread about what he was about to do.

For several minutes he watched as the enemy came on, then leaped down, cracked his neck this way and that, and smirked. It was the most arrogant, most infuriating smirk he could put on his face, and he raced forward with that grin still his face, as he crossed the intervening distance, shouting over his shoulder, "I'll be right back for you blue gal!"

As he came, the enemy, having no doubt understood what Ranma was by this point, paused, the archers letting fly. Several hundred arrows came at Ranma, but he didn't dodge. Instead, he caught each one that would have otherwise hit him, then slid to a stop, several

meters into the any archers to range, holding up several bushels of arrows, then wagging them this way and that as if the enemy army was a bug he could wave away.

Then he hurled them into the air on a parabola that would Instead bring them back down among the enemy archers.

Even Ranma couldn't do that and assume that those arrows would still be traveling with enough force to penetrate armor, not even the light leather the enemy archers used. But they certainly caused consternation, and the arrow swarm coming towards Ranma stopped, as the men dodged and danced around, protecting their heads as best they could. Among Muozinel's army, the archers didn't have much covering their head bar a simple hood and leather mask instead of a helmet.

By the time the archers had their wits about them once more, Ranma had crashed into the front of the enemy forces ahead of him

That front was composed of the enemy's heavy infantry, spear wielders with heavy shields, but that didn't matter to Ranma, he simply dodged the spears like he was made of rubber, commenting as he did, "Oh so close, not bad, you almost had me!" As he ducked underneath and through the spears, before he smashed bodily into the shields behind, crashing through them and causing further disorder.

Ranma was only one man, attacking an enemy army numbered in the thousands. The rest of the army continued on for a time, but then Ranma pulled out from his ki space several stones, hurling them through the army, in both directions, shouting out, "Now that's just not kosher, here I am, almost begging you lot to kill me and you're going to ignore me? I call that rude!"

As the front of the Muozinel army tried to get itself organized, Ranma began to bounce through the leading regiments, hopping from one head to another, kicking out occasionally, but more often than not using his words to get a rise out of the enemy. This was why he had been up all night with Regin, and though his accent was horrible it actually lent his words even more emphasis, and making terms come out a little earthier. His comment of "You couldn't hit dirt with an arrow," became, "Your own shit with an arrow," and so forth.

He did do one other thing during this time, however. He targeted and killed every officer and signaler he spotted.

Soon, nearly the entire front of the Muozinel army was responding to Ranma's taunts. Yet he continued to bounce around, shouting and laughing at them, kicking a man high into the air to land among the spears and his fellows, riding a horse behind one man, patting him on the head like a child, before leaping off, taking the man with him, and using him as a flail on several others.

At the back of the army, Red Beard frowned angrily. The time he'd spent over the past day to reform his army had been a hindrance. But he had needed to take that time to fully reform his army, or else he would've lost large portions of his command permanently as they retreated every which way from the debacle that had just occurred. But now, this man with the powers of a Vanadis and far more durable than any he had heard of was holding up his entire advance.

And with him was another Vanadis. Red Beard saw the young Vanadis of Laviias somewhere in the center of the swirling mass of chaos. *But she's too far forward, and too alone. Could she have tried to come out and help her friend? If so, I am not going to ignore this opportunity!*

"Push forward more archers," he ordered. "Spread out our commands further and push forward two more companies of cavalry along the flanks. Eventually this man will retreat, he isn't immortal, whatever magic he is using to remain uninjured will eventually fade, and I want us able to cut him off from retreat." Yet even as he ordered this, Red Beard was frowning, wondering what the hell the enemy fighter was up to.

Ranma continued to drag men into his chaotic sphere of influence for a few more minutes before slowly falling into a spiral. Moving across a battlefield like this was only possible thanks to his mastery of the Aerial Style of Anything Goes, but even he had a hard time moving over such a huge area quickly enough so that the various people within his target zone didn't become bored or lose their angry battle aura. That would have been annoying.

But he did it. Ranma wove an entire spiral, keeping his own ki nearly ice cold, as cold as he could make it, so cold that more than one Muozinel trooper wondered why the heck their speedy, infuriating and chaotic opponent was so cold as to breath out a cloud of mist.

And then, Ranma's spiral finished right next to where Ludmila had been fighting. A very good defensive fighter, she had stayed put, using the stone which had initially hidden her from the enemy to guard her back. More than a dozen bodies lay all around her, testament to her skills. But not once had she used her powers, that would have disrupted the hot-cold air current that Ranma had wanted to create.

"NOW!" Ranma ordered the moment he landed.

In response, Ludmila raised Laviias straight up into the air and unleashed the power gathered within. Laviias had been on edge for days ever since Ranma's Lavi-chan comment, eager to use her powers on the brat.

For a moment, the people around them Ranma stared in shock as the very weather above their heads shifted, the wind picking up slowly, but then, drastically shifting, becoming a tornado, tearing people up and off of their feet, hurling them through the air, grabbing horses, weapons and more. Large or small, it didn't matter. The wind pulled them all into its embrace,

up and off the ground, flinging them around. And as Ludmila continued to produce the cold energy needed at the center, the tornado kept growing, spreading throughout the portion of the army that had been engaged with Ranma.

Thanks to his jumping around, taunting the common soldiers and killing every officer or signaler he found, that was a lot of the army, several of Muozinel's oversized regiments with more nearby. And the tornado did not stay put in the area that Ranma had been fighting. Instead, it spread, stopped only by the sides of the gap.

At its edges, it was actually survivable. But, for the forces of Muozinel, that hope was an illusion. Even the best riders among their cavalry lost control of their animals. Many were thrown from their horses and stared up in abject shock and horror at the tornado above them, while many were slain, trampled by their own panicking horses, who raced in either direction along the gap, desperate to flee from the natural disaster that had just sprung into existence above them. This caused even more damage to the Muozinel army as several hundred men outside the radius of the tornado found themselves in the way of the maddened horses. Orders came too late to just shoot them down, and the horses crashed into their fellows along the flanks of the Muozinel army or into the infantry, causing more damage.

The foremost regiments closest to the epicenter of the tornado were just gone now. A few screams still resounded from within the tornado made of those unlucky enough to have survived the first few seconds, but they quickly fell silent, pummeled to death or sliced into ribbons by the weapons that were in there with them. Only those at the edges survived, unhorsed.

Well behind the main regiments of his army, Red Beard stared at the distant tornado rising in the distance. The implication of that sight struck him within seconds, and he whirled, hopping off his cushions and racing to the end of his raised dais, bellowing, "Sound the retreat! Sound the retreat! We need to get out of that thing's range and prepare for an enemy counterattack. Given its size, the Vanadis should only be able to use that attack once, but if we are careful, we can crush their attempt to take advantage of it and then move on to crush their forts."

His small company of signalers needed no second urging, and a staccato beat flew out from his command platform, first pulling the regiments behind those who had attacked first back and away from that disaster, which continued to grow, fed now not by the weak, heated ki of the regular Muozinel soldiers, but by the magical winds of Arifar nearby. As Ranma had predicted, Elen didn't need to be at the center of the thing, only close enough for her attacks to feed into the outer edge of the tornado, not with enough force to overwhelm the spiral, but enough to add to the tornado's growing strength.

Meanwhile, at Red Beard's command, the army responded. Past the edge of the tornado, the army, which had been formed into assault columns, now spread out further to encompass the entire breadth of the gorge as the first regiments had. The intervals between

the regiments closed up, and the front of the army firmed as more archers moved forward. Although even as they obeyed, many a Muozinel man stared out through his mask's eye slits in fear at the size of the magical attack.

After more than an hour, the tornado began to dissipate despite Ludmila and Elen's attempts to keep it going, and Ranma stared down the gap from his place on the stone, his teeth bared in a snarl. The enemy army had retreated quickly, causing Ranma to once more feel a moment of respect for the enemy commander. Nor were those regiments turning back to the attack now that the tornado had begun to dissipate. Instead, still more men had come up. The front of the army was once more spread across the gap, not charging, not retreating, simply waiting. Behind them, the army's remaining horsemen waited to charge from the flanks, and the infantry too had been mostly moved to the sides.

Ranma knew that if he and the others retreated now, that army would attack again, only this time, the enemy over there wouldn't be tricked by his taunting assault. Instead, they would pin him in place with some of their army, the center portion where it was thinnest, while the flanks would just go around him. *That's what I would do.*

Ranma couldn't allow that. The enemy army still outnumbered them more than seven to one. Any renewed assault would be a disaster. *I have to keep the momentum, keep hammering them back! Damn it!*

With a grimace composed of both resolution and growing guilt, Ranma raced forward, leaving a shouting Ludmila behind and began to experiment once more with his life energy, as he had done on the trip down to Artishem. *The old way might have been slightly more destructive, and this way takes it out of me more, demanding I use my own ki to power it, but it will have to do for an encore.*

The enemy saw him coming, of course, and their archers, now fully integrated to all their forward infantry units, began to fire arrows in his direction. Where before the arrows had flown like hail, they came down now in a torrent, almost blackening the sky above Ranma.

Yet to Ranma, they felt like a torrent made of dull needles, useless unless they struck his eyes. And as he closed, one hand began to glow, a haze of heat rising from it, while Ranma's other hand seemed to turn blue from the cold.

Ranma continued to race forward, and now the enemy started to react, pulling the lines of troops ahead of him backward while those companies to either side made to envelop him. This was a classic tactic that Muozinel had used for decades to good effect in past wars.

But that was only if the Vanadis continued her charge. Ranma didn't, pulling up and leaping to the side, so far that he was once more in front of an infantry company just to the interior side of the right flank. Their men had barely a second to realize he'd shifted position to be in front of them in turn before Ranma attacked.

“Daichi no Kuikorosu Ryuuzo (Ground Devouring Dragon)!” he shouted, bringing his cold ki-infused fist into the center of the spiral he had just created with his other fist. Although not as massive as the Hiryou Shouten Ha had been, this attack tore into the front of the enemy army, shattering its cohesion once more.

Once more, a tornado appeared, but a vertical one this time. It tore into and through the horde of Muozinel troops in front of him, expanding to snatch up men and horses alike in a widening avenue of destruction.

Unbeknownst to Ranma, Elen and Tigre had raced forward behind him. The last of the light cavalry who had been sent around the main melee Ludmila and Ranma had been at the center of had fared only a little better than their fellows closer in, dumped off horses or forced to flee towards Brune and their defenses. They were now being hunted down by the vengeful Knights, those of them who were not staring at the first tornado or the one Ranma had just flung forward.

As she ran, Elen hurled her own attack forward once more, “Ley Adimos!”

The large ball of magic crashed into Ranma’s tornado, enlarging it as it had done before. Then the two of them broke off, racing to the other side of the gap and that flank of the enemy. There, men had hunkered down behind shields, tossed their weapons away and just clung to the ground like limpets, staring, while those behind them had already turned and begun to retreat, the vertical tornado not having spread to cover as much space as Ranma’s first attempt to become an air djinn. “Now to turn that retreat into a rout. Ready, Tigre?”

“Ready!” Tigre skidded to a stop beside her, raising his Black Bow as he breathed in, then out, reaching inside for that strange power that Ranma called ki. Tigre wasn’t certain on that score. He still felt that the Black Bow did something, had its own power perhaps, which drew from his body and that of Arifar equally, magnifying both. Already he could feel the same exhaustion that Ludmila was dealing with and he hadn’t even shot yet.

But Tigre persevered, and as the tornado started to dissipate, leaving a ravaged right flank of the enemy army, but one that had the depth to reform, His arrow gleamed black and dark blue. Pulling the Black Bow’s string back to his ear, he held it there, and Elen raised Arifar putting the blade right next to the Black Bow. The jewel at Arifar’s cross-guard began to glow, funneling air and magic into the glowing vortex around Tigre’s arrow.

Just as the enemy was recovering from Ranma’s second attack, Tigre fired. The arrow from the Black Bow flew forward, over the heads of the first groups of soldiers carrying a swirling, slashing mass of black and blue magical energy through the army at an angle. The arrow had been aimed from the leftmost portion of the gorge toward the center, where Tigre could see some kind of stand had been erected at the back of the enemy army.

And while Ranma's tornado had picked up and tossed people around, this attack tore them to pieces instantly throughout the area of effect. While that area was thinner than Ranma's second assault had been, just directly below the trajectory of the arrow, the devastation was almost as great, spreading not halfway through the army as Ranma's assault had, but all the way, cutting through every unit on that side of the gap all the way to the back of the army.

Seeing the energy attack coming, Red Beard bellowed, "OFF!" and dove off the raised platform which had been Tigre's target. He was followed by a few of his faster-thinking signalers, though many couldn't move fast enough to save themselves thanks to the signal drums they were carrying.

By the time the energy wave struck, it had shrunk dramatically from its beginning width, which let Red Beard roll clear, although his leg broke as he landed, and as he rolled, Red Beard felt something in his shoulder snap as well. But more than half his signalers had still been on the platform when the attack struck and were torn asunder, their blood and viscera spreading over the men of the logistics corps on the ground around them, most of whom had also tossed themselves to the ground in desperation to get away from the magical attack, one no one in Muozinel had ever seen or heard of before.

A nearby soldier slowly pushed himself to his feet, then, seeing his general scrabbling at the dirt and biting his lip to keep in a scream of pain, the man raced over, helping the noble to his feet. "M, my lord, what should we do?"

"Grab the reserve signalers! Get out a signal, reform the army, we, we need to... to.... no..." Red Beard trailed off, staring ahead of him to the end of the army in horror as, for once, all plans fled his mind. From here, he couldn't see through the men between him and right flank, but he could see that men there were already pulling back, already turning away entirely from the enemy. "No, by the war god's fiery anus, **no!**"

Facing the right flank of the Muozinel army, Ranma was once more gathering his ki, charging forward into the holocaust he had created, roaring out, "And third times the charm!"

The Muozinel Army had faced Vanadis for centuries. They understood the limits of the Viralt weapons, the number of times their magic could be used in succession, how large their attacks could be. Indeed, there were even treatises on each Viralt within the Emperor's library. As a result, they knew how to combat them: with numbers, time and enough men. Gain distance spread out, exhaust them, kill. Simple plan, hard to execute, but a plan built on hard-earned knowledge gave the Muozinel Army the ability to face magic without having any of their own.

The size of the first attack had appalled the Muozinel troops, but they could have gotten past it, knowing that such an attack would have taken all the energy of the Vanadis in question.

However, the sight of Ranma unleashing a similar attack on his own without the Vanadis of Laviás, an instant later shattered that theory.

And when Elen and Tigre attacked, the Muozinel Army discovered to their horror that there was another Vanadis on the field. Worse, it was one whose power they had no idea of. A power that had just slaughtered several of their heretofore intact regiments on the left flank, units which had been moving forward to take the place of the regiments shattered in Ranma's first attack, unlike the ones which had been hit by Ranma's second attack.

Now here was Ranma once more charging forward, apparently willing to launch a third attack. Even if they couldn't understand his words, any trooper who saw him racing forward could tell his intentions.

The officers might have thought this a bluff. They might have ordered a controlled, organized retreat. The common soldiers, the men at the tip, the men who had been suffering these magical assaults, seen their friends and comrades slaughtered, seen more than half their army disappearing in less than an hour after days on end of fighting through the Agnes Mountains, of being beaten again and again? Those men could no longer sustain their courage in the face of such magic.

As Ranma charged forward, all discipline fled the remaining enemy units. Men scrambled away from his charge, pushing at their fellows, some even taking up weapons to desperately cut their way to safety, screaming in their own language, "The Air Djinn, he is unkillable, flee, flee!"

That spread fear like wildfire throughout the army, aided by Tigre's attack not having left much of the army's left flank. Gone was the well-oiled, well-organized military force that the Silver Meteor Army had been fighting for several weeks. Now it was every man for himself, scrabbling at one another, trying to get away.

From his position at the army's rear, Red Beard and his shattered command group tried their best. But Ranma's depredations over the past few weeks had cost the army a lot of the mid-to-high ranking officers. Moreover, Tigre's assault had removed still more of the upper echelon, particularly among the signalers and Red Beard's advisors, including the Brunish expatriot. This left a gap that could not be filled now as fear spread like a plague.

Red Beard's magnificent army broke. Weapons, armor, anything that could slow a man from fleeing was dropped by the wayside as men desperately attempted to get away from the tornado, which, a moment later, sprang into being for the third time.

Less than an hour later, the enemy was in full flight. Muozinel's finest army had been smashed, and it was Ranma who had done it. What remained was a fleeing horde of former soldiers, thousands strong, but whose will was utterly broken. There just weren't enough commanders left, enough will left to bring them together again.

Ranma stared at it all as the various Knightly Orders raced past him in their vaunted companies, pennants whipping in the wind, a roar of, "For Brune and Princess Regin!" following them on the wind. The most rested of the Brune forces, despite their efforts over the last few days, it would fall on them to harry the enemy all the way back to the fort originally designed to protect the Charles Gap.

Other units, pulled from the Knightly Orders and led by the scouts Ranma and Tigre had trained, would move through the mountains. They would be ready to help the Knightly Orders should they need it to reclaim that fortress and secure the Charles Gap once more.

But Ranma didn't even see them. Didn't have any care for the future or the plans. He didn't even notice Elen and Ludmila moving towards him or how Tigre made to follow, only to be intercepted by a pale-faced Regin, who had followed the rest of the army out from within the keeps.

All Ranma could see were the droves of bodies, the windrows of corpses, men and horse and unidentified bits dumped here and there for miles down the gap from where he stood. All of them dead by his hand. The ground of the gap was stained so red it looked like rust for miles. Even the mountainsides around it, be it cliff or slope, were splashed with blood and gore. *At, at least Tigre's attack didn't leave much behind. I, my attack... it...*

Ranma knew that he had killed a lot of people before this. Even in the short campaign against Ganelon's creature, Greast, he had killed several hundred people. And in this campaign, he had doubled or even tripled that number. But that was pocket change in comparison to this. And killing so many at once, in such a manner, that was worse. *They, they didn't even have a chance to fight back!*

He had known that this would happen when he used his Hiryouu-based attacks, and he had hoped to avoid doing so, to avoid getting so much more blood on his hands. But it had been this or letting this army crush their final defenses and go on to ravage Brune's countryside, to kill innocent men and women enslave them, which Ranma thought was rather worse than death.

Yet standing in the middle of literal miles of slaughter, that thought was scant comfort. Ranma had just personally massacred, not fought, not killed, **butchered** tens of thousands of men. Men who hadn't even had a chance to fight back, men who, for the most part, hadn't even the chance to flee. So many sheep to the slaughter.

Suddenly, Ranma found his gorge rising, and he keeled over, throwing up on the ground in front of him. The stench, the smell, the whinnying cries of wounded horses. Everything got to him all at once, in a way that battle never had before as something small and almost innocent within Ranma died.

Elen rushed towards him, but Ludmila got to Ranma first, pulling the pigtailed warrior into a tight hug, soothing as he wept. "There, there, Ranma. It, it should never be easy, never be something you relish. Let it out."

She looked up at Elen, who, with a nod, joined the hug, adding her own voice to Ludmila's, soothing him almost as if he were a child afraid of the dark. If Ranma had had this reaction to anything else, including his ridiculous fear of cats, Elen would have made fun of him, would have teased him incessantly. But this? No. Now Elen only felt sympathy. Soon Tigre joined them, reaching into the hug to add his support in the form of a grip on Ranma's shoulder.

As Ranma began to collapse into unconsciousness, the emotional drain of the moment proving too much, Ludmila slowly turned him over to his friends, blinking and looking away as Tigre looked at her in gratitude. *Now isn't the time to wonder about that feeling of butterflies in your stomach, Ludmila.*

Instead, she turned her attention to her second-in-command, the young Lord Gerard, and Rurick. All three looked at Ranma, their faces both awed and sympathetic, before concentrating on Ludmila. Gerard acting as their spokesperson. "Um, Milady, should we join the pursuit? The Knightly Orders might need some help to really harry that army into the ground. Some reports have already made it back to us that some of their men are reforming."

Ludmila turned to look down the gap, frowning, then she shook her head, feeling queasy herself at the amount of dead and blood everywhere she looked. *I am used to causing death, but not on this scale. And Tigre, he struck that platform where the enemy commander was. So he must be dead, although sending someone over to make certain is a good idea.*

Turning back to the three men, Ludmila stiffened her spine, her voice firm, showing none of her own horror at what she had helped to do. "No, let them go. They're beaten. Let the survivors run back to Muozinel with tales of the giant tornadoes and the arrows of the Archer that tore their army apart. Instead, send a group of soldiers to see what they can make out of the wreckage of that large platform the Muozinel troops erected at the start of their attack. I'll want a report on what they find... tomorrow. Not today."

Hearing a noise from where Ranma and the others were, Ludmila turned, watching as Tigre pulled Ranma into his arms, standing up with his friend as Elen hovered beside him, supporting Ranma's head and upper body. "Let them go," Ludmila repeated as she watched the three of them. "There's been more than enough death today."

Nodding, the three men moved off to their various commands, and Ludmila turned, joining the others as they returned to the fortress. The War of The Gap was over, and the Silver Meteor Army had one. And in the end, all it had taken to win was the loss of Ranma's innocence.

OOOOOO

While this decision by Ludmila was the right one in terms of humanitarianism and the emotion of the moment, it was also the wrong one. Because contrary to Ludmila's prediction, Red Beard had survived. He now sat astride a horse, with a group of light cavalry around him as they raced back to Muozinel territory, hoping to reach and maybe retain control of the fortress, although Red Beard had scant hope of that.

As he rode, Red Beard seethed, his mind awash in fury and grief. Gone were all thoughts about the future and his long-term ambitions. His army, his magnificent weapon of conquest, had been slaughtered. And he would have revenge!

I will have my vengeance pigtailed one. Whatever it takes, whatever I must do, It will see you slain for this day's work! I swear it on the Emperor's name!

End Chapter

Chapter 11: Iron Rusts

From the main gate tower situated over Southport's main entrance, Thenardier stared out over the city, having turned his back on the horizon a moment ago. He would be going in that direction soon enough. Right now, the city demanded a few more minutes of his attention.

The fires were nearly out now, but Muozinel troopers and civilians were still being ferreted out by the city's inhabitants. Some of them would be torn limb from limb, Thenardier knew and approved of. The invaders had not been kind to the city, and Thenardier was quietly furious about it. Not because he had any sentimentality for Southport or cared about its people. But this was one of the two cities that looked to him as their lord, and Thenardier believed that any affront to it was one to his own person. And as all Brune knew, Thenardier would not forgive such.

But the good news outweighed the bad, in his opinion. The small army, which had come over the Straits with Muozinel's supply train, had been broken. They had been taken from behind by Thenardier and his men when all of their attention was on the dragons after Thenardier's attack force had secured the transport ship. The goods aboard those ships would serve Thenardier well, funding the rest of his campaign to become King and into his reign afterward.

The fact that some of those goods, in particular the riches, gold, jewelry, expensive clothing, carpets and so forth, had been stolen first by the invaders as they pushed out slowly from Southport was something that the Iron Duke didn't care about one way or the other. If the people who had owned those baubles had been strong enough, they wouldn't have lost them in the first place, and if so, why should he care about their opinions or well-being?

This also extended to the slaves that had been aboard three of the supply ships, their former goods having been offloaded during the occupation. A few other ships had already left laden with slaves taken from Southport in the initial assault, and Thenardier was somewhat pleased about it. The slavers had removed the poor and riffraff from the city, but there the slavers had stopped. After all, the Muozinel army had needed a workforce here to unload their supplies, let alone keep the smithy, textile workers, and rest of the things they would need to supply their conquest of Brune.

The survivors of Muozinel's invasion had been in a prime position to see what would happen to them if they were not productive. And with a little bit of prodding, Thenardier knew they would be more than willing to work for him even harder so that such a fate could never again befall them.

As for the slaves still on ships in the harbor when he took them, Thenardier had already sentenced them to his mines in Nemetacum. After all, the mines always needed more workers. They were already on the way to his city in chains and a small band of thirty men watching over them. *Speaking of forces being sent out...*

"Have the supplies been sent to the Army?" he asked without turning around.

One of his supply officers hastily replied in the affirmative. Two of the dragons had been sent loaded with foodstuffs for the Thenardier's army to meet it on the way so that they could turn their attention to the Silver Meteor Army or the invading Muozinel army coming through the past. Whichever emerged victorious from the campaign in the Charles Gap.

"And the rest of our men?" Now he turned, looking at one of his officers, a separate lieutenant from his own lands. The man was known as a very stern disciplinarian and had originally come from Southport, so was the obvious choice to leave in command of the force that Thenardier would be leaving behind to restore order within the city, and make sure that the ships he had taken would remain in his hands and undamaged by the furious citizenry of the city.

"Sire, I've stationed the majority of our men on the docks themselves. Lookouts are on the wall at intervals, while I have ten roaming groups of twenty man minimum moving through the city at all times," the man replied crisply. "We've instituted a curfew and a rationing system so that the locals can be fed more regularly than they were during the invasion. With that and the fact we're not stopping them from taking revenge so long as they don't start fires, I feel that we can keep order after my lord and your dragons leave."

Thenardier nodded firmly, then turned around, moving towards the doorway. "I will hold you to that, Penfield. Be certain of it."

Soon, Thenardier joined the last dragon to leave, the double-headed one, and a group of seventeen men, who would be going with him back to the rest of his army. A little under a week

later, outriders from his army reached him, bearing news that Steid felt could not wait. And reading the missive, Thenardier agreed.

Rumors had begun to spread about a victory in the Gap. The invading army had not just been halted long enough to learn about his own victory and know that they could not conquer Brune. Instead, the entire invading army had been smashed to ribbons, a scant few thousand retreating down the Gap. Apparently due to magic, either created by two Vanadis working together or Ranma of Alsace, the same warrior who had fought and captured Roland last autumn.

That kind of total victory was something that Thenardier had not anticipated and reading about it having possibly been Ranma who did it, Thenardier suppressed a shiver as he recalled what had happened to Armand. Losing all of his strength and physical power was a horrifying thought, and Thenardier resolved to have one of the dragons detailed to dealing with Ranma if he could do so.

Staring to the northeast, Thenardier stroked his beard thoughtfully. "And yet, they are still positioned near the Gap..." Thenardier fell silent, picturing his mind's eye a map of Brune. He didn't know the rest of the country as well as his own lands, but he had the general geography memorized. So he knew that the Silver Meteor Army's current position gave him an opportunity.

Quickly, he cut orders and sent the runner back to the army. He wanted the army up and moving by the time he arrived. With the Silver Meteor Army so far away from their own territory, Thenardier could cut them off from the lands of the Knightly Orders and the area across the Resia which had joined them. *And once between them and their lands, many different options will be available to me. All of them bad for the Silver Meteor Army.*

OOOOOO

After the campaign in the Charles Gap had been decided, the Silver Meteor Army had pulled back away from the Gap. Not far, only to the nearest keep, its original residents having fled or been killed by one of the slaving expeditions that had raced ahead of the main Muozinel army. The type that the Silver Meteor Army had smashed before reaching the Gap. Since then, Gerard had used it as a base of operations to bring in supplies for the army. This made it a natural place for the army to recuperate.

Ranma had gone with the other officers, for once actually riding a horse, if a sack of flour could be called riding it, as after his collapse, Ranma was practically unresponsive, forcing Tigre and Eleonora to set him on the horse and tie him there. This near unresponsiveness

continued when they arrived as Ranma isolated himself in his room, alone with his grief and horror.

Every time Ranma closed his eyes, he came back to that moment, his treacherous mind replaying the end of the battle, when Ranma had realized what he had done. The blood sprayed around the Gap, the body parts strewn everywhere, the dead lying in piles scattered around the gap, their faces contorted in pain and terror, the smell. It all came back to him, and more than once, Ranma found himself screaming, crying, or throwing up into a basin Titta had set aside his bed.

Central to Ranma's being was the Code, a system of beliefs he followed as a martial artist. It wasn't just the hoary old homilies Genma had tried to instill in Ranma without following most of them. Ranma had developed his own Code over his lifetime, and a major part of that Code was that all life was precious.

This had been heightened to a new degree in his training with Tofu and then with Oden. Here in this new world, where conflict was so raw and widespread, he had to modify that aspect of his morality. Life was still precious, yes, but the lives of those on your side were more precious than the enemy. Sometimes you had to kill in battle to save lives on your own side.

But this, it hadn't been a battle. It hadn't even been murder. It had been straight up, unmitigated **slaughter**, the equivalent of a child using a watering hose to drown an anthill.

And Ranma was the cause of it. Ranma had killed thousands of men, who, at base, might not have been bad people. Might have simply been following orders. Now, Ranma was locked in his own mind, unable to rationalize his actions after the fact, to come to terms with what he had done and unable to push past it.

Tigre, Elen and Ludmila attempted to help as best they could, but this was something that Ranma needed to work through on his own. Perhaps if Sofy or Lim, or maybe even Valentina were there, they could have gotten through to Ranma, but none of his three friends had the right words.

After two days of trying to help him through it and letting the army's leadership devolve to Regin and the Knights Commandants, it was clear that Ranma wasn't listening to any of them. He only responded to anything said to him by grunts or shakes of his head, pulling away from them even as his own mind and memory rebelled.

"We've both been there before," Elen said, nodding her head to Ludmila. For once, neither of them was willing to argue or bring up their old rivalry. "Killing is just part of being a soldier, kill or be killed. But using magic as we do sometimes, it makes it so impersonal and almost surreal the first few times. It makes the killing so impersonal and so easy that it's horrifying. And neither of us have ever done anything on such a scale before."

"Agreed. I remember the first time that I killed a large group of bandits with my Cielo Zam Kafa," Ludmila admitted. "I don't know how I would've reacted if I had killed several thousand men with it at once. And that is not considering that by Ranma's own admission, he wasn't raised as a warrior, rather as a martial artist, whatever that might be and he sanctifies life. Ranma will need time to get through this, and that's about all the help we can give until he's ready to listen."

Tigre nodded solemnly, shaking his head. He had no experience with what Ranma was feeling. Oh, he had caused a lot of death on his own in that battle, but his own morality was a mixture of a huntsman's and that of a nobleman. The men he had faced were simply the enemy, and as much as Tigre would have preferred to simply be a provincial Earl, he had been trained from a very early age to understand that enemies of the nation deserve no mercy, much like an animal taken on the hunt.

Tigre had tried explaining this to Ranma numerous times, hoping to help him, but nothing had sunk in yet. "He's listening to us. It's just that he needs to really understand that what he did was the lesser of two evils, and until he does, nothing we say is going to help." He looked over at Titta. "You'll keep watch on the door?"

It wasn't a suicide watch, not really. Tigre didn't think Ranma would take his own life over this but he also didn't his best friend to fight the nightmares on his own.

Titta nodded her head firmly. "Leave it to me, Tigre-sama. I'll keep Ranma fed and force him to change his clothing, at least. Healing his heart and soul, I have to leave to you, but at least I can keep him clean." Her small button nose wrinkled as she looked into the darkened room Ranma had been assigned when they arrived. "And that room needs an airing out too."

Smiling at her, Tigre patted her head, amused by the pout on her face as he treated Titta like a child once more. But then Tigre froze when Titta gave him a quick hug, pressing her small chest against his stomach before she pulled away, heading into the room with Ranma.

To one side of the doorway Elen scowled, glaring after the maid, her arms crossed under her bust, bringing Tigre's attention to it despite all he could do. "What am I going to do with you, Tigre?"

Knowing that Elen didn't like Titta or anyone else being affectionate towards him, Tigre defused the situation quickly by stating simply, "Whatever you want? After all, you own both me and Alsace."

"That's right," Elen laughed, her anger instantly dissipating, as she took one of Tigre's arms in her own, squeezing her chest against his side and leaning up to give him a kiss despite Ludmila glaring at them both. "And don't you forget it, **my** Tigre."

"Could you please, act appropriately in public!" Ludmila growled, tempted to poke Elen with Lavias but deciding against it for now. For some reason, she felt more annoyed every time she saw these little moments between Tigre and Elen. "Public displays of affection and jealousy are beneath a proper Vanadis of Zhcted. We have a duty to uphold the dignity of our station."

"Jealousy being beneath a Vanadis? Do you want to take that statement back before I start laughing at its absurdity, or should I just start calling you the pot calling the kettle black now?" Elen countered archly.

Growling, Ludmila hefted her weapon, but Tigre quickly pulled himself away from Elen, gesturing down the hall. "Er ladies, we do have a meeting to get to, so can we move on, please?"

Both Vanadis subsided nodding in agreement, because despite Ranma's convalescence, life went on.

Over the past few days, the army had regrouped, and a tally had been taken. While their preferred method of warfare in the mountains had kept their losses to a minimum, the Silver Meteor Army hadn't been all that large to begin with, so any losses hurt.

The units which had come out of the Gap campaign in the best shape were Lady Este's pike companies. In the two battles they had taken part of the pikemen had acquitted themselves well and had performed excellently on the field engineer side of things, but they hadn't faced the attritional warfare the more mobile companies had.

Since the campaign had ended, Captain Marsh and Gerard had basically taken over the running of the army, while Tigre met with various local nobles, those that had survived up to this point, along with the Princess. At the same time a few of the nobles who had backed Regin, had also arrived with their men. These armsmen had gone through some of the training that the regular Silver Meteor Army troopers had, but not all of it, and their equipment and organization still relied on their personal preferences and the nobles who they were sworn to.

Mashas and Hughes, who had arrived more than a month before their fellows, had made themselves busy behind the lines. Mashas led his men and Hughes' troops around the surrounding lands, wiping out a few bandit bands who had sprung up in the turmoil of the invasion, as well as smashing two smaller Muozinel forces who had somehow kept clear of the Silver Meteor Army when they marched through. Hughes had instantly started to help his son in organizing the army's supplies, keeping it flowing even as those supplies, particularly steel and iron, became ever scarcer.

Yet while those tasks had been difficult, the horse archers, men and horse alike, Elen's troopers from Zhcted and the irregular infantry, and to a lesser extent Ludmila's troops, had all been pushed to the brink of utter collapse in the campaign in the mountains.

The Silver Meteor Army had entered the campaign in the Gap with three thousand horse archers, further organized into what Tigre after consultation with Ranma called fire teams of four. With them came the two pike companies from Osterode, making up a little over four hundred men. One heavy infantry battalion of a thousand two hundred men, two light infantry battalions of nearly two thousand five hundred men, two light cavalry companies of over five hundred men, and a reinforced battalion of archers with a thousand, five hundred men. The scouts, and around three hundred heavy cavalry rounded out the Silver Meteor Army's main combat strength, coming to a total of around nine thousand, five hundred men.

The horse archers had lost almost nine-hundred men and more horses in the campaign in the mountains. The heavy infantry had lost far less, only two hundred men all told. In contrast, the light cavalry and infantry who had been fighting it out in the mountains had been mauled, the cavalry losing more than a third of their number and the infantry a full half. The archers too had been hammered, losing six hundred men in the various engagements.

The heavy cavalry, Elen's troops, had lost a hundred and ten. In comparison to the losses they had given the Muozinel army, their losses were almost insignificant. But to the Silver Meteor Army it was a grievous total.

All of Tigre's men needed this downtime desperately, not just in terms of themselves but also in terms of equipment. While Gerard had been keeping up a steady supply of bows and arrows, the rest of the equipment needed for an army to function had been equally hammered in the mountains. To say nothing of the number of horses lost.

Despite all of that and Tigre's sadness at the lives lost, the army was, relatively speaking, in one piece. Better, they had been reinforced somewhat in the days since they had moved here.

Yet, they still had another enemy to deal with. So, Tigre knew that they could only spend so much time here before they had to move on.

However, as he sat down next to the Princess at the conference table, that kind of future planning was not what he had in his mind at present. Instead, his mind was on a comment a soldier had made as he and the Vanadis passed. The man had looked past them towards Ranma's room, then called Ranma the servant of Perkunas. Indeed, the man had even called Ranma's grief a, "Sign that the messenger is still mortal as the rest of us, here to deliver the hammer of Perkunas and Triglav no matter how sad it makes the messenger himself."

To say Tigre had mixed feelings on that point was an understatement.

He held his peace, however, as the Princess began the conference. The young girl looked around the table, her expression seeming a bit hesitant. But due to her training over the winter, she hesitated only a brief second before speaking, addressing the men and women around the

table in a formal tone. "Ladies and gentlemen, at this time, we have a report from the order of the Holy Rose that they have taken the fortress at the far end of the Charles Gap."

She held up the note that had been delivered to her that morning, smiling gently at the remaining Commandants and then over to Tigre, deliberately avoiding looking at the nobles who hadn't taken part in the campaign. They had arrived far too late to be awarded any 'glory' for simply taking part. "I have already ordered Commander Auguste and his men to remain there to guard against further incursions through the Charles Gap. Tigre, I have also written out orders for Duncan and his scouts to remain there. They were a major part of the reason why Auguste was able to take the siege equipment Muozinel army had left there intact. That equipment will serve the Calvados Knight in good stead defending the fortress until they can be relieved."

"Agreed, Your Highness." Unlike Regin, Tigre did not dare use a more familiar mode of address in public, already feeling the looks he was getting from the other nobles and, well, Elen's normal scowl whenever it came to Regin. "The scout troops are at your service just like the rest of the Silver Meteor Army."

"Thank you. You do your station as a noble of Brune credit." Regin let her smile widen slightly as she looked at Tigre, enjoying simply smiling at him and the look in Elen's face as Regin subtly flirted with Tigre before her face firmed and she looked around the table again. "That goes for you, Lord Vorn, Emil, Scheie, Edmund, Hughes, Gerard, Mashas. Because of all of you and your men, and the absent Ranma, Muozinel's invasion of our country has been defeated. It will be a decade or more before they become a threat to our realm once more."

There was a scattered round of nods as the leaders of the Silver Meteor Army and its allies smiled grimly. Although only a few of the nobles didn't look somewhat dyspeptic, not having been included in Regin's address. Yet everyone there knew that the reward for a job well done, and when the Princess spoke again, her words bore that out.

"Unfortunately, Muozinel was not the only enemy that Brune is faced with currently. The other enemy is internal: Duke Thenardier, his army and his dragons."

The word dragons sent a quiver in of unease through even the leaders of the Knightly Orders. All of these men knew that the only people at the table who could fight dragons with any chance of victory were Elen and Ludmila. Numbers mattered not at all against dragons. No weapon not blessed by the gods could harm them, and no man had the strength to fight one.

But the Princess didn't allow them to dwell on it for more than a few seconds. "To save this country we all love..." she paused, looking at Eleanor and Ludmila then, a faint smile on her face, "well, most of us anyway."

Both Vanadis acknowledged the point with a nod, and Regin went on. "We must move to combat Duke Thenardier. We will not make plans for that eventual confrontation so far

ahead of time, but I would like a timetable, as well as an accounting of our forces now that more of our allies have joined us at last." The final words caused still more wincing from most of the nobles there, bar Mashas and Hughes, who had been busy supporting the Silver Meteor Army in other ways, and Regin went on, seeing that her message was received. "After that, we will hear from a few agents of the prime minister who has been sent here on the state of the nation as a whole and Southport in particular."

"Can we trust their information?" Elen questioned quickly. "The last one we met with wasn't exactly subtle in showing that approved of Thenardier rather than Tigre and his association with me."

"I don't approve of your association, although I will admit that approving of Thenardier is a bit beyond me," Ludmila quipped, shaking her head and turning back to the Queen. "Before anything else is discussed, I need to address an assumption you just made. I regret to inform Your Highness that my troops and I will be leaving as soon as my men and horses are rested. My orders were to help Brune and Vanadis Viltaria against Muozinel. I have no orders to help in your civil war, and unfortunately, family honor requires that at the very least I do not take up arms against an old family ally."

"You mean the other half of the Nemetacum's domination of the iron and steel trade," Regin replied tartly, causing Ludmila to flush a little. But she didn't look away from the accusing glare Regin was sending her way.

It was no secret that her family and that of Thenardier controlled the lands, which provided Brune and Zhcted with much of their iron and steel production. Indeed, even Asvarre and, to a lesser extent, Muozinel and Sachstein depended on those two areas for their iron ore. Not nearly as much as their own countries, admittedly. Sachstein and Muozinel both had sources of iron themselves, although not as easily worked.

Still, the mix of foreign and domestic trade had made both families very rich. And generations ago, the Thenardier and Lurie Houses had forged an alliance between them to dominate that trade.

"To put it bluntly, highness, yes. In the past, our families have worked closely together for our mutual self-interest. I do not personally approve of Thenardier, nor how he interprets his family's motto of the Rule of Iron. But it is a consideration. So too is the fact that, unlike Viltaria, I do not have any existing reason to convince me to sacrifice my troops in this war."

Ludmila held up a hand when both Elen and Regin made to speak, going on firmly. "And I say again that I do not have orders to take part in your domestic affairs. Indeed, judging by the King's tone and wording when he gave me my orders, I rather think he would heartily disapprove of my doing so."

"Even if staying out of it means that your country will be conquered by Thenardier and a horde of dragons in the future?" asked one of the Knightly Orders commanders, the dapper gentleman Emil. "If you'll forgive me, Milady Lurie, that seems somewhat shortsighted."

"Perhaps in your opinion. But should dragons ever invade Zhcted, there will be more Vanadis to combat them. And it's up to the King to make policy. I can question, but I cannot refuse," Elen replied firmly. And in this case, as she had already pointed out, she had every reason to obey his unvoiced orders. Despite her growing approval of Tigre, she had no reason to get involved in this.

"Ah, let her go," Elen said, waving her hand airily. "She didn't bring enough troops in the first place, so their absence won't matter much, and if Ludmila is too scared to find out how she'd fare against the enemies our weapons were supposedly created to defeat, it's no skin off my back."

"I'm almost tempted to stay just to show you up, but I got enough of that having ridden to your rescue once already," Ludmila retorted with a smirk. Her shot hit home far more than Elen's had in the first place, and Elen bolted upright her chair, glaring angrily at the other Vanadis who simply smiled back, gripping her weapon tightly where it lay next to her chair.

"As much as I would like you here to help us against the dragons, I can understand your position, Ludmila," Tigre said, smiling over the table at Ludmila and efforts to defuse the tension between the two women, while the other men at the table simply exchanged sparks, enjoying the show and not entirely because watching two enemies of their nation argue like this was amusing. After all, what man didn't like a good catfight? These men were knights, not Saints. "Do your men need horseshoes or other supplies? We don't have much metal at the moment, but if you are under some kind of timetable..."

"Hmm... your generosity and understanding do you credit, Tigre, three points. I'm not under any type of timetable, but I do need to leave soon," Ludmila replied with a smile at Tigre before looking towards the open doorway leading out to the rest of the keep. "I would prefer to wait until Ranma is on the mend. He has proven himself an able comrade, much like you have, Tigre, and I wish to see for my own eyes that he is on the road to recovery."

She looked over at Elen, who was sitting across from her on the other side of Tigre from the Princess. "And with me gone, Elen will need Ranma's help against Thenardier's dragons."

Before Elen could retort, the Princess clapped her hands once. "Are you willing to continue to sit in on these meetings and offer advice, or would you like to recess yourself now?"

"I can offer advice, Your Highness. But this far removed, I don't think making any kind of set plan would be in your best interests," Ludmila warned. "You said it yourself earlier."

"Perhaps not, but an overall campaign objective might," Tigre objected. "And any help you can offer on the logistics side of things would be a help."

From then the meeting moved on to more serious topics, and after the logistics of the recuperating army was discussed, the objective of their overall campaign against Duke Thenardier was set. Several of the Knightly Order commanders advocated for another campaign of maneuver and misdirection. Others argued for a quick march to Nemetacum to capture the city and Duke Thenardier's wife.

However, this idea was shot down for the simple reason that none of the people who had met the Duke personally believed that doing so would matter. Even Regin didn't. "She might be my Aunt and the two of them might love one another, but the Rule of Iron doesn't have any room in it for sentimentality. He would simply come on, daring us to kill our hostage. No, it is the Duke himself we must attack."

That was the strategy they would follow going forward. To bring the Duke to battle, kill his dragons, and destroy his army, the Duke's true power base. After the war, the Duchess could be dealt with far more easily.

That was easier said than done, especially with Regin and a few of the noblemen who made up the Silver Meteor Army, including Hughes and Bertrand kept on repeating the fact that Brune could not support a long-term war. Too much of its lands had been ravaged. Further damage, especially to areas that had yet to feel the scourge of war, would harm Brune as a whole, something they had to avoid.

In turn, Tigre was adamant. "I understand your reasoning, and I even understand the point about thinking long-term. I fully agree that we cannot afford a campaign that isn't settled this year. But our army is vulnerable in a set-piece battle. Yes, we have the pikemen, and we have the Knightly Orders, but our horse archers are best used in hit-and-run actions, and our scouts, who surely proved their worth in this last campaign, are woefully overtrained for that kind of battle."

"And there's the report that Thenardier has **three** dragons to his name now," Elen repeated firmly, glaring over the table at Ludmila. "Without the budding potato with us, that means that even if Ranma and I can deal with one dragon apiece, another dragon could be free to ravage the army."

Ludmila exploded out of her seat, slapping the table in front of her with both hands, releasing Lavi as she did. "Who are you calling a budding potato!?"

"Indeed, making comments on one's appearance like that is beneath you, Lady Elen," Regin said firmly. "And name-calling has no place at this table."

Elen smirked, glancing down at her own chest, then over at Regin, before looking over to Ludmila, then nodded her head, her tone falsely apologetic. "My apologies, Your Highness."

Gritting her teeth, Regin ignored that look, wondering idly if Elen ever let up with her teasing. *Drat her and her sinfully attractive body! You might have seduced Tigre to your cause, but I swear I will seduce him right back to mine!* "I accept your apology in precisely the same manner in which it was given," she replied.

Tigre looked around the room at the other men, who were looking back at him. One or two were smirking while the others simply saying with their eyes, 'This is your problem, deal with it, young man,' and he coughed delicately. "Perhaps we should get back on topic?"

Eventually, the two sides of the argument came to a few compromises. The Silver Meteor Army would move out in segments, far enough away to avoid being attacked all at once but close enough to provide some support if need be. The scouts would be sent out first to find the enemy army and any information on their plans or what happened at Southport.

Meanwhile, the majority of the Silver Meteor Army would prepare to move toward the capital once the army was fully recovered. In this manner, they would hopefully force Duke Thenardier to fight them on their terms. And when the army marched, Elen and Ranma, and Tigre would go with the scouts. Their objective would be to find the dragons and bring them to battle.

Tigre's inclusion was a surprise, and Regin made to protest, but Tigre held up a polite hand, explaining, "I will remind Your Highness that it wasn't just Ranma who helps to utterly destroy Muozinel Army. I still have no idea where it came from, or what manner of enchantments are placed upon it, but it is clear that my family's Black Bow is a weapon of power. And if I can use it, even if only in conjunction with lady Elen's Arifar, that gives us another means to combat dragons. We have to use it."

Soon after that, the meeting ended, and the leaders of the Knightly Orders and the other noblemen started to leave, talking in small groups about this or that issue facing the army as it recuperated. Elen was amused to note that one of those issues was finding enough metal to make stirrups and horseshoes to replace those damaged or lost in the campaign. That and buttons, knives and other things.

Gerard had done such a good job of keeping the supply of arrows coming that they had gone through a lot of the metal in the area. And of course, the largest source of steel in Brune was not about to give them any. Nemetacum had stopped selling iron and steel to the rest of Brune from the moment that Zion Thenardier had returned from the debacle on the Dinant Plains. And it was starting to become troublesome throughout the nation, much like food had been in the past winter.

Luckily food at least wasn't an issue at this point, nor was leatherwork. And the... debris... from the Muozinel Army would give them enough resources once it was collected. That process had barely begun, given how exhausted the Silver Meteor Army was, but Lord Mashas and the other lords supplying the manpower now, Elen knew it wouldn't be a problem for much longer.

"By the way," Edmund asked as he made to exit the room. "You should know that rumors of how we defeated Muozinel have begun to spread through the common folk. Just as fast as any other rumor, alas." The man's face indicated that he wasn't all that sad about it. Ranma's attitude towards the faith of the ten gods had annoyed him, and using Ranma's own abilities to continue to spread the idea that he was some kind of angel, amused the man greatly.

Tigre nodded seriously. "I was actually going to bring that up myself. I don't know how Ranma will react when he hears those rumors or when someone calls him an archangel to his face. Laugh, at first, but after that, I have no idea."

The others who knew Ranma well enough, including Regin, also looked both amused and worried. "Just as long as he decides that desecrating sanctified temples is the best idea to finally kill that rumor among the troops and the priesthood, I think we can live with Ranma's displeasure," Regin stated hesitantly. "Still, I hope he doesn't resent it too much. I was actually tempted to try to take that rumor and run with it in an effort to erode popular support for Duke Thenardier among the peasants around here and within his own lands."

While Tigre shook his head rapidly to indicate his opinion on that idea, Elen and Ludmila both blinked in surprise at that and spoke over one another as they exclaimed, "Wait, Thenardier has popular support!" They then turned to one another, growling out, "Don't copy me!/What was with that, you budding potato!?"

As Edmund snorted and left, Regin brought their attention back to her as she stepped around the Vanadis to take Tigre's arm in her own, heading towards the doorway. "Unfortunately, he does, at least according to a few men I've had sounding out the surviving local population and news I've gotten from the Prime Minister since I began to meet with the Knightly Orders. During his war against Ganelon many of the common folk and even much of the merchant class came to believe that he was the better option. Now with Ganelon gone, many of those selfsame people believe him a strong, capable ruler, far better than an untried Princess."

"Ugh. I was about to make a joke about being better than Ganelon being a very low bar to clear, but this goes back to that whole 'no woman can rule' concept you Brune people have huh?" Elen grumbled, shaking her head, while Ludmila scowled once more agreeing with her fellow Vanadis.

"Exactly. Here in Brune that is not just a random societal rule, but one that the temples have long supported along with the nobility, so making any headway against it is going to be

difficult. However, I **didn't** help that rumor about him spread, so when Ranma learns that the rumor of his angelic origins has gained strength since the events in the Gap, please tell him that," Regin said, shaking her head. "I would dislike being the target of Ranma's annoyance, regardless of the fact that he probably wouldn't do anything physical to me."

At Ludmila's confused look, Elen snorted. "Heh, that just means Ranma would prank her, probably in an extremely embarrassing way."

"Exactly," Regin agreed, shivering. "I've seen enough of his pranks over the winter, thank you."

"Don't worry," Tigre soothed, walking beside the Queen even as Elen growled and grabbed his other hand pulling his arm into her chest, the feeling of it causing him to flush a bit. "Given Edmund's comments earlier, I can think of no other person who would better serve as a target for Ranma's annoyance about that if it comes to his attention."

"I rather think that doing so would give him another reason to recover," Elen snickered.

OOOOOOO

Two days passed as Ludmila's troops prepared to leave, gathering spare horses for themselves from those which had somehow survived the Muozinel Army's destruction, as the rest of the Silver Meteor Army recuperated and scavenged their own supplies from the wreckage of the battlefield. There were also, of course, large-scale burial details still going on even now, more than a week after the final battle. Funeral pyres were set up, with the enemy's dead simply dumped on them to burn away, but there were so many it was harsh duty and even the heartiest of soldiers couldn't work at such things for very long.

However, by this point, Elen had had enough. That evening, as she nestled into Tigre's side, Elen decided, "I think that Ranma's recovered as much as he's going to with our hand-off approach. It's time for some tough love."

Scratching his chin with his free hand, Tigre nodded thoughtfully, then leaned down and kissed her on the cheek. They weren't in public at the moment, instead having retired to Elen's quarters for a private dinner, so he was fine with showing Elen some affection. "That's not a bad idea, frankly. It's evident Ranma's not going to be able to deal with his grief on his own. But how to do it?"

"You leave that to me. Just talk to the locals and get me some alcohol."

Confused, Tigre nodded at that, and their meal continued. Thankfully it didn't take him long to find a local who ran his own distillery, and soon, Elen had a jug of the man's finest in hand.

That very night, Elen headed to Ranma's quarters, finding the door closed. Titta had just left Ranma about an hour ago and had reported he had eaten and changed under his own power but had not responded to any of her attempts to start a conversation.

Raising a delicate foot, Elen lashed out with a kick, shattering the door off its hinges and sending it flying into the room.

At the noise, Ranma sat up abruptly in bed, only for his eyes to widen at the sight of the door flying towards him. Hopping up and off the bed, he landed lightly on the flying door, stopping its spin before kicking it to the side, landing crouched on the bed as he glared at Elen. "What the hell, Elen!"

"Oh please, as if one measly door would hurt you," Elen scoffed as she strode forward, plopping herself to one side of Ranma, waving the large clay jug she held in his face. "I see you're actually able to interact with the world around us again. Good. Now, drink up."

Ranma glared at her, but seeing the smirk on Elen's face and knowing it about as well as he knew his own, Ranma knew she wouldn't give up. So he held out a hand, and took the jug from her, taking an incautious gulp. Liquid fire moved down his gullet, and he gasped, nearly tossing the jug aside, only for it to be grabbed out of his hand by Elen.

She downed a pull of it quickly, licking her lips. "That's actually pretty good."

Gasping, Ranma shook his head, thumping his chest with one hand. "Pretty good?! It tasted of cinnamon but feels like I just ate a torch or something!"

"I know, it's quite tasty. I might want to convince the farmer who distilled this brew to come to Leitmeritz. Or Alsace at least," Elen said with a laugh.

"What do you want, Elen?" Ranma grumbled.

"I want you to get out of your funk!" Elen declared, poking Ranma in the nose, then the cheek, and then near the eye before Ranma batted her hand away. "I understand why you have been depressed. I even respect you for feeling so much guilt about what we had to do in the Gap because you should. It was horrible. But it was also something we **had** to do, and now you need to get over it. We've still got Thenardier to deal with after all."

"How would you know..." Ranma growled out before pausing, looking at Arifar where it hung at Elen's side.

She smirked at him, nodding her head once. "Yeah, of anyone, one of us Vanadis would know what you're going through, Ranma. It's very different, making war like we do, killing like we occasionally do. But look at it from the other side of things: Muozinel wanted to enslave, conquer and kill. Our enemies want always conquer Zhcted's land, take the Vanadis and make us whores or worse. Never embrace using your power like that but always realize that if we have to, we need to shoulder the burden of doing so. Understand?"

Honestly, Elen felt Sasha or Sofy would do a better job at explaining this, but she hoped her words got through to Ranma right now. They couldn't afford to send him off to Legnica, and who knew where Sofy was right now?

Ranma heard all this, and while it really wasn't all that different from what Elen, Milly and Tigre had tried to tell him before, now Ranma finally admitted he needed help. "How do you deal with the nightmares?"

"I picture the faces of the men under my command, the citizens I protect. And I know that if I don't use all of my power to defend them or if I don't use just enough power to defend them, I do those men and women a disservice. For you, Ranma? I suppose in your case, just think about right and wrong." Elen shrugged her shoulders. "Like I just said, Muozinel started that war, and for every person in that army, a dozen slaves would've been sent back into Muozinel. So, while what you did was horrible, it really was the lesser of two evils."

"I don't think that's going to help my nightmares much," Ranma grumbled, although he did nod in reply. "Still, I understand your point of least."

"Good. Because Ludmila's going home leaving us in the lurch, so I'll need your help against the dragons," Elen answered, thrusting the jug out towards Ranma again.

Ranma took a long draft of it, causing Elen's eyes to widen, and when he handed it back, his face was noticeably a little bit redder than it had been. *I guess he can't hold his liquor?*

Frowning now in puzzlement, Ranma let loose a tiny hiccup before pointing at Elen. "Dragons, right? That's the main problem."

"Right. I think in terms of quality, the Silver Meteor Army can match any other army in the world and overmatches Thenardier's, at least in terms of the regular troops. I have no idea about his organization or officer's core. But dragons are another matter entirely."

"Cool." Now was Elen's turn to frown in puzzlement, not understanding the use of that word, but Ranma went on before she could question it. "That sounds great, just awesome." He thumped a hand against the nearby wall of the keep, and tiny cracks appeared on the stone. "I get one dragon entirely to myself, got it?"

"I'd normally get angry at that tone, and you trying to demand something from me," Elen huffed, pushing Ranma hard in the shoulder just as he removed his hand from the wall and reached with his other hand to take the jug again. This sent Ranma falling backward onto the bed, and she went on. "But since Thenardier has three dragons to his name from the latest rumors, I'm perfectly happy with you taking one on your own."

"Good. The idea of pounding on something that can really take it and dish it out sounds great to me right now. I'm done killing people that can't fight back," Ranma grumbled, rolling onto his side to glare at her.

"I think a lot of soldiers would really hate the fact you think they can't fight good enough to matter to you," Elen chuckled. "Now come on, get up, let's go see Tigre."

Ranma allowed Elen to pull him to his feet, but this appeared to be a ruse as Elen next felt his hand sneak around her body to grab at the jug again, dancing out of her reach even as she tried to grab at him. She watched in shock as Ranma several more gulps from the jug, his throat working visibly before he pulled it away from his mouth. His face was now heavily flushed, his eyes had closed partway, and he seemed almost to sway on his feet. "Dammit, Ranma, drinking your nightmares away is not what I had in mind!"

"Hadn't even thought of that, *hiccup*," Ranma hiccuped, holding one hand over his mouth. 'Scuse me. Just, my old man always liked to get drunk, but I never saw the point to it, kind of hated the idea, really. The whole loss of control thing. But it is kind of nice to deaden things up a bit."

Before Elen could respond, Ranma was moving towards the doorway, calling over his shoulder, "By the way, wha's this about Ludmila leaving?"

"She is not really part of the Silver Meteor Army Ranma. Ludmila wasn't sent to join us, she was sent to fight Muozinel. And, in case you haven't noticed, she and I have this whole rivalry thing going on," Elen answered dryly, moving to follow him.

"Rivals, ha!" Ranma turned, turning in place a few times, almost as balanced as a ballerina for all the fact that he was twirling in place like a top before he looked back at Elen. "You don't know the meaning of the word! At least Ludmila's never tried to ambush you in the shower, attacked you while you were sleeping, or used her curse form to spy on you and get between you and the girl you might've thought you liked."

Blinking, Elen opened her mouth, then shut it, shaking her head. There really was no simple response she could make to that statement, or rather, statements. "I don't suppose she ever has, no. But Ludmila doesn't have orders to help us against Thenardier and her family has long-standing ties to his."

"Why should that matter? It's an alliance between people, right? Hard Ass is an ass, she should feel bad," Ranma quipped. "Have you asked her to stay?"

Elen stiffened, and Ranma laughed, shaking the jug in front of her. "Come on! You just said this Thenardier has three dragons. So unless Tigre has gotten to the point where he can use the power of that freaky bow of his, we need a third person to come to them riiiiight?"

Grabbing the jug out of Ranma's hand, Elen downed the rest of it, shaking it back at him in a mockery of what he had been doing a second ago. "It's not that simple, and you know it. I'm not about to bend to the point of asking her for help, not now, not ever. And there are her troops to consider too. Ludmila would have to create the same deal I've got going with Tigre, but I doubt Regin has anything to offer her." *Well, except ownership of the Nemetacum mines, but I doubt Regin would go for that.*

"But yer not denying that we could use the help?" Ranma asked, then blinked. "And Tigre hasn't gotten to the point where he can use that freaky bow regularly, right? Because that would be freaky too."

"No he hasn't, although I still have questions about that Black Bow too. Where it came from, for one thing. And where it gets its power from for a more important second point. But no, he and I have been practicing recently, and while we're able to draw out the power of the Black Bow together almost on-demand now, he can't do it on his own," Elen grumbled.

And most of the time, it seems as if the Black Bow just leeches Arifar's wind power. It might multiply it and then shoot it way further than I can alone, but that's a much different thing than having its own power as it did back in the Battle of Molsheim and against the Muozinel army. Really, it just seems as if the Black Bow's only interested in helping when it's serious, which is odd on many levels.

Shaking her head, Elen turned her attention back to Ranma. "Anyway, Ludmila is many things, but she isn't flexible, and she's already determined that fighting Thenardier isn't her duty. From her perspective, she's right, and for Milly, *snicker*," Elen snorted, "duty always comes first."

Frowning in thought, Ranma waved a finger in the air as he walked down the hallway, ignoring the looks he was getting from other people he passed by. "You got a point, I suppose. Still, if she's going to bail on us, that means I get to take a heck a lot of fun out of her."

Elen snorted, debating within herself whether or not to stop her friend, then shrugged, following after. *I wonder what he means by 'take a lot of fun out of her'?*

Outside, they found Ludmila leaning on Lavi as she stood by a group of horses. She seemed to be talking to the farrier as a few of his aides went over the horse's hooves by torchlight. She looked up as Elen approached, her eyes widening slightly at the sight of Ranma

next to her before Ludmila smiled. "Ranma, it's good to see you up and about..." Her voice trailed off as she noticed the red color on Ranma's face, and then her eyes twitched over to Elen. "You didn't!"

"How was I supposed to know he couldn't hold his alcohol, and besides, he seems to be a pretty functional drunk anyway."

That was as far as Elen got before Ranma crossed the intervening distance and tried to grab Laviias out of Ludmila's hand. She tightened her own grip, but that only served Ranma's real objective perfectly. She soon found herself being tossed through to crash down nearby.

"I hear you're running away, running away, running away like a little girl!" Ranma trilled, his tone even drunker than it had been when he and Elen had been talking in the hallway. They had finished off the jug between the two of them as they walked, but Ranma had taken the lion's share.

Before Ranma had spoken, Ludmila had been glaring at Elen as a sailor would upon learning someone had started an open fire aboard a ship to cook with. But as she pushed herself to her feet, Ludmilla's glare changed targets to Ranma, only for her eyes to widen as Ranma dashed forward. She tried to leap backward, but she wasn't quite fast enough to get away from him as he played with her cheeks, grinning cheerfully. "Well, don't worry, little girl, I'm sure we won't be needing ya here, just run home and play with yer dollies."

Growling angrily, Ludmila raised the butt end of Laviias, aiming for Ranma's chest, or perhaps a little lower down. But Ranma seemed to fall backward onto his back of his own accord. "Eh, eh!?" Ludmilla gasped, then gasped again as she felt Ranma kicking up at her chest, hurling her backwards a bit.

In response Laviias' business end came around in a series of sweeps and jabs as she shouted, "How dare you! I have done my duty as my King dictated. Not all of us can fight for friendship's sake alone, Ranma! I have a duty to my King and to my men, not to lead them into a fight from which we would gain nothing."

Ranma didn't seem to hear her, instead swaying around her blows like he was made of parchment. He also seemed to be dodging under and around her blows a lot more than she was used to seeing. At one point he even seemed to lay down. But when Laviias came down in a sharp strike toward his head, Ranma's feet came up and over, grabbing the staff before the tip could hit his head.

The next second, Ludmila found herself flying through the air to crash into Elen, who went down with an oof, her laughter cutting off abruptly as her back slammed onto the ground. "Does the little girl want to play? I suppose we can play once before you have to run away."

"Get off," Elen growled, pushing Ludmila off her, standing up as well, Arifar in her hand now, watching as Ranma casually tossed several of Ludmila's troops away, their swords having been torn from their hands, now stabbed to their quillons in the ground. *Morons, should've known not to interfere. I hope their bruises teach them a lesson.* "Ranma, you're drunk. Why don't you go sit down somewhere and wait for it to pass?"

"Nooooope. not sitting, too much laying down. Hasn't helped, and everything's a littllllle not great now, buuuutttt..." Ranma paused, drawing out the word, then giving both of the Vanadis a grin, as he spread his hands, and then bent backward, so much so that both women were afraid they would hear a crack from his back, until he was doing a handstand without any hands. Instead he was using his head, swiveling around on the ground like a top to look at them, something that both women felt was strangely disturbing. "One thing that always made me feel better was a good fight."

With that, Ranma pushed off the ground with his head and performed several cartwheels towards the two Vanadis, lashing out, a foot flashing out towards both Vanadis. Both of them blocked the kick aimed towards them but were still sent skidding backward. Elen recovered first, and growling sent a cut towards Ranma's chest, then fainted towards his face before stabbing again towards his leg.

He can just heal whatever I do to him anyway, and Ranma might be right. This might be the best way to really get him over his funk. Although I gotta say drunk Ranma's taunting kind of sucks in comparison to his normal stuff.

Even though he seemed to bite on the feint, Ranma dodged the follow-up strike to his leg by going down onto his back once more. Seeing this, Elen was kind of confused. She had fought him more than often enough to know Ranma's preferred style, and this wasn't it. *Ranma should've taken to the air just then. Instead, he's going to the groundDDD!!!*

That was all she could think before Elen was forced to use her forearm to block a punch. The blow sent a tingle of pain up and down her arm, but she ignored it, wrenching her arm back out of Ranma's grip before it could close on the hand holding Arifar. *And he normally doesn't go for grapples!*

Once more, Elen's thoughts were interrupted as instead of grabbing at her wrist, Ranma's hands wrapped around her thigh. She's found herself flipped up and through the air as Ranma shouted, "Heheheh heave-ho!"

While Elen used Arifar's magic to stop her flight and then dive down towards Ranma, Ludmila had begun her own attack, a series of stabs from Lavias' ice-enhanced spearhead, followed by a roundhouse blow from the butt end of it. She had seen Elen use her own magical weapon and assumed that Ranma's skin would be proof against its edge.

This proved a moot point because none of her strikes landed. Once more, Ranma dodged around them as if he was made out of parchment rather than flesh and bones, falling backwards onto his back and then rolling this way and that before suddenly his hand grabbed at Laviyas right between her own. "Not again!" Ludmila shouted as she was hurled to one side.

Unlike with Elen, Ranma didn't let up on Ludmila, racing after her. She rolled with the impact to the ground, thrusting out back towards him, but Ranma contorted underneath the blow and then kicked out upward, striking the same point he had previously grabbed, halfway between Ludmila's hands where they held Laviyas' shaft. The weapon flew out of her hands, her grip overcome by Ranma's strength, and then Ludmila found herself tripped by Ranma's other leg, landing on her stomach.

Above them, Elen had to break off her own attack, dodging to one side of the tumbling flying spear of Laviyas, which had reverted to its normal form after leaving its owner's hand. A quick gust of wind from Arifar caught the other Viralt and sent it down towards the ground, but before attacking once more, Elen paused, a grin appearing on her face. "You know what, I think I'm done with this now. Have fun, Ranma."

The cause of Elen's sudden pacifism was the fact that Ranma had sat on Ludmila's back. Now as Elen watched, he proceeded to tickle her, behind the neck, over the shoulders, and to the sides. "Little girls get tickled!"

"Unhand me youaaahha, you oaf! How, ahahaha, how dare you! When I getttahaha free..." Ludmila tried to cast out between laughing, trying to free herself, and getting nowhere. She was able to look past Ranma up into the sky, though, and seeing the gleam of silver hair hanging in the nighttime sky, shouted. "What arehahahah, you waiting for, Eleonora! Give meeehehehe a hand."

"All right." With that, Elen began clapping slowly.

"Curse you, Viltaria!" Ludmila shrieked before succumbing again to Ranma's tickle torture.

Watching this, none of the surrounding troopers who Ranma had tossed away wanted to get involved, although they were quite angry at Ranma's treatment of their lady. Even so, self-preservation meant they stayed where Ranma had tossed them.

Salvation instead came from Tigre. He had heard the commotion and come out of the keep and now quickly put an arrow to the black bow, firing it towards Ranma.

Ranma rolled off of Ludmila, dodging the arrow easily. The next few made him back away rapidly as he drawled, "Whadja do that for? I was just having fun."

His friend's tone of voice caused Tigre's eyebrows to twitch, and he looked at Ludmila. But she rapidly shook her head, pointing to where Elen had just landed. "Don't blame me. It was all Eleonora's fault."

"I just wanted to give him a bit of a drink, get him out of his funk bit, not get him drunk! How was I supposed to know he was a lightweight and would do all this!" Elen tried to defend herself. "Besides, you all seem to be forgetting it seems to have worked too!"

Tigre already had another arrow to his string and pulled back, feeling the black bow's spirit or whatever it was rousing itself, a sense of laughter coming from the bow. And for a moment, his thoughts mirrored Elen's earlier thoughts on this point. *So you only get involved when things interest you, huh? Better than nothing, I guess.*

"Ranma, you're drunk. I thought you said that was something your father did that you never wanted to do," Tigre spoke calmly, despite the strain on his arm.

"Meh, it made the pain a bit more bearable, for a time anyway. After that, it was just an excuse, I guess," Ranma grumbled, although everyone within earshot could hear a difference in his voice now. It was almost back to normal. Then Ranma sighed, raising his hands up from his waist to his neck, breathing out deeply. Blue light flashed from within his mouth for a second as Ranma used his ki to speed up his metabolism, burning through the alcohol in seconds.

When he spoke again, his voice was back to normal. "As for the rest, that was a mix of needing something physical to help me over my funk and wanting to tease Ludmila for leaving us in the lurch."

"I was never with you in the first place," Ludmila muttered, shaking her head and promising herself to get some revenge on both Viltaria and Ranma in the future. What form that revenge would take, she didn't know. But it would be humiliating in some fashion that she was certain of. "And I have explained my reasoning until I am blue in the face, to you, Tigre and Viltaria. I do not need to do so further."

Ranma grumbled something under his breath that sounded like, "Well then, don't expect me to apologize", causing Ludmila's glare to strengthen it to the point where, if she had the magical ability, Ranma would've been turned to ash on the spot.

Seeing the battle, if such it could be called, was over, the men Ranma had smacked around got to their feet, grumbling as Ludmila turned to Tigre. "Thank you for your help, Lord Vorn. Unlike some people I could name, I can see that you can at least see when a maiden is in distress rather than focus on the comedy of the moment. Five points."

Elen ignored that, moving over to Ranma and smacking him on the back, then pulling him into a one-armed chokehold. "So the next time you're in a funk, I should just kick your door in down and drag you out for a spar then? Sounds like fun."

Ranma chuckled, broke out of her grip, and got Elen into a one-arm hug as he whispered, "Thank you," before moving over to Tigre. Elen smirked behind him, then moved over to Tigre as well. "But what was that, Ranma? Your entire combat style changed."

"That is the drunken fist. It's a kind of martial arts based upon the feeling of bonelessness you get if you're really drunk, that and grappling." He smirked at Ludmila, shaking his head with a chuckle. "You're lucky. The guy I fought who used that technique was a pervert. He'd have done a lot more than tickle you."

Ludmila's face turned apple red for a moment, and not just because of embarrassment. Before Ranma could set himself, Ludmila thumped him hard on the chest with a punch, causing him to release a gasp of air, as Ludmila turned in a huff, but Tigre stopped her with a hand on her shoulder. "Now, now, let's not separate angry. While Elen might not have gone about this correctly, she at least has gotten Ranma out of his room. And you're going to be leaving tomorrow in any event, correct?"

"That's right, I intend to head directly towards the Knightly Orders territory, then through it to my own. It's the easiest and fastest route back to Olmutz. That's why it's been used as an invasion point so often," Ludmila answered wryly. "I don't doubt this is the first time a force from Olmutz has actually marched into Zhcted and back out peacefully."

Then Ludmila frowned, shaking her head. "Honestly, I might not even be staying there for very long. When I left, there was news that implied the Horse Lords might be preparing to invade. I've never fought them, so I don't know how serious that rumor is, but the life of a Vanadis is never dull, so who knows how long I will be staying at home?"

The four of them reentered the keep, heading up to Elen's room, which was not at all coincidentally across from Tigre's room. They found Titta waiting for them, placing a large tray of food and drinks on the table. Turning, she wagged a finger at Ranma, admonishing him, "You need to eat! You've barely been touching your food for the past few days, and what you've eaten, you threw up after."

"Yes, yes, oh great and powerful maid," Ranma retorted, rolling her off his eyes at her. He then backed away rapidly when she grabbed up a flask of cold water. "I'll be good!"

Ranma really, **really** didn't want to deal with being a woman right now. He knew as a woman that he was a little more emotional, and after the roller-coaster emotions of the last few days, Ranma didn't think he could deal with that on top of it. *Let me get my nightmares under control, then maybe.*

Titta huffed but then wrapped Ranma up in a hug. "Don't make me worry about you so, you big oaf! I know what you did was horrible, but I also know what those people would've done to Brune and women like me, let alone the children. I'm sorry you had to do it, but I'm not sorry that it happened."

Ranma nodded, patting her on the back, looking a little awkward only to be rescued by Elen, gesturing Ranma to sit across from her and Tigre and to dig into the food. Ranma did so with a will, as banter and teasing went around the room. All of the others were happy to see Ranma slowly returning to himself, and knew he needed this, so for once, Eleanor and Ludmila set aside their normal badinage, which gave the night a more pleasant, laid-back feel.

However, the next day, Ludmila still left with the dawn. The only one of the others awake was Tigre. He walked Ludmila out to her horse, helping her into her saddle and then smiling ruefully up at her. "I hope you don't feel too poorly about after last night."

"The only ones I feel poorly about from last night are Elen for causing it and Ranma for his assault upon my person," Ludmila answered tartly. But then she smiled and reached down to shake Tigre's hand. "You comported yourself quite well both last night and throughout the campaign. I believe Lord from that you get a full fifty points from me for our interactions. See that you keep it up next time we meet."

"I'll try to," Tigre said, nodding farewell and stepping back as Ludmila turned her horse to join her men. Soon enough, the column was out of the cave and moving out of sight, down the road and towards the lands of the Knightly Orders.

OOOOOO

It took Lim several weeks to travel to the edge of Brest. At that point, the rumor of war with the Horse Lords had been replaced with the reality of refugees fleeing deeper into Zhcted territory. She stopped a few of the better-dressed or organized refugees, asking where they had come from, what had been happening, and, more importantly, where the Horse Lords were supposed to be and where Valentina's army was. Most of the time, Lim didn't get the answers she wanted, but eventually, Lim discovered that Valentina and her army were indeed in the field, having marched from her own territory and into what was supposedly Lim's. There were some rumors of battles but nothing decisive.

After that, it took her another ten days – due to bad weather and her horse coming up lame, to find the other Vanadis and her army. When she did, the men of Osterode were setting up camp. And while they had purportedly been in the field for nearly the entire summer so far, they still were well-organized and alert, something Lim nodded approval of even as the patrols moving around the camp spotted her coming. "Halt, who goes there!"

"I am Limalisha of Brest, wielder of Muma, and I have come to make common cause with Lady Valentina. Take me to her," Lim ordered. With that, she held up Muma and watched

with well-hidden amusement when the mens' eyes widened. Moments later, that response repeated as she was quickly ushered into the camp by the captain of the watch.

As she was ushered through the camp, Lim looked around and interest, remembering what the King had told her. Whether or not to report anything to King Victor was a different matter, but she was interested to see what was behind the rumors that seemed to worry him. *I know she gleaned quite a lot from her conversation, but what she has made of them is a mystery.*

At first, all she saw were pikemen. Their heavy chest plates and lack of vambraces or shields made them distinctive even without their large pikes. There were several hundred crossbowmen and several dozen men whose purpose she couldn't quite figure out. They were armored in brigandine suits like the crossbowmen but didn't have visible weapons. All told, she felt there were about two thousand men. A small army, but seemingly well-trained.

There also seemed to be a group of field engineers, fifteen or perhaps more, men who were in charge of setting up camp, directing soldiers to create a barricade around it. That was quite a bit more than most armies would have done, and Lim wondered why. *For that matter, Lim thought, looking up at the sun, why is the army stopping here in the first place?*

She voiced that question to the lieutenant who was guiding her through the camp, and he scowled. "We fought one pitched battle with the Horse Lords early on in the campaign milady. But ever since, they haven't really tried to challenge our pike. Instead, they've been attacking us at night trying to perform hit and run attacks or just avoiding us entirely using their greater mobility. We've tried to bring them to battle a few times, but this time, the Horse Lords aren't playing by the old rules."

He then smirked slightly, looking over to the side to where a large group of carts was arrayed in lines. Each of them was separated by a certain amount of distance, and there were marks around the cards, along with guards. "Then again, neither are we."

Lim's brows furrowed at that, and she stared at the carts but then turned away, finding that they were already at Valentina's tent. A tent that, Lim was interested to note, wasn't any different than any of the others. There was a small black flag outside, but that was the only marker that this tent held anyone more important than the soldiers around them.

Inside the tent, Valentina was scowling down at a map, if it could be called that. After her interaction with Ranma and the concept of topography and other skills that Ranma had brought to mapmaking, Valentina wouldn't call this more than a painting, really, and not a very good one. *Thank Eris the Horse Lords have never developed horse archery like Tigre was when I was in Brune! They would've shot my army to pieces by now, gunpowder or no.*

At first, Valentina's army had surprised the Horse Lords with their speed. The use of smaller mule-pulled carts allowed them to move faster than they had in the past, even though

the amount of baggage they had to move had increased thanks to her sling-throwers and their special ammunition.

But from the start, it became apparent that this Horse Lord Warmaster was smarter than the last clans she had dealt with. First, he had sent what amounted to a spoiling rate into her territory, forcing her to respond. She destroyed that force swiftly, bringing it to battle as they had been able to in the past and crushing it without any need to use her new weapons.

But after that, the Horse Lords' tactics drastically. Before, bringing the enemy to battle would be as simple as marching into view of their main army. Then the Horse Lords, feeling challenged and having quite a bit of disdain for infantry, would charge. And, after Valentina had instituted her pike companies, that meant they would be butchered. Obviously.

Before that, their charges had been terrifying things, the speed and dexterity of the Horse Lords and the slashing power of their sabers proving dangerous to even armored knights. Their javelins could also puncture heavy armor or knock a man off a horse, which, at a full gallop, was just as deadly. But Ezendeis' attacks and field fortifications could defend against such, and Valentina had developed a tactic that armed the third row of a pike company armed with large tower shields. When the enemy entered javelin range, they would shift forward, protecting themselves and their fellows, then, as the javelin storm subsided, would fade back, letting the pike-armed lines set themselves for the charge.

Now, the Horse Lords weren't doing any such thing.

Instead, the horsemen circled away after hurling javelins at her men. They hit and ran in small groups or avoided combat entirely. Indeed, judging by what the few locals her army had met could tell her, the Horse Lords didn't seem to be congregating in any large force, instead being broken into several dozen small bands. It was almost as if the Warmaster had known that he couldn't face her pikes.

Which is possible, Valentina admitted, biting at one of her fingers as she stared at the map. *I need a place where they will have to bunch up, or maybe a place I could get ahead of them, but no, that wouldn't work drat it, given how diffused they are.* "So perhaps fortify a target that they can't ignore, one they have to gather together to destroy?"

"Having trouble, Lady Estes?" a well-known if an entirely unexpected voice spoke up from behind Valentina, and she turned quickly from her map table, staring at Lim in shock.

The man who had brought Lim through the Army camp out towards his lady. "Lady Valentina, Lady Lim here says that she is..."

He was interrupted as Valentina began to laugh, shaking her head from side to side as giggles erupted from her, staring at Lim's face and then the weapon on her back. "Well, this is a reunion I had not expected! Welcome, sister."

Lim smiled, some tension in her shoulder she hadn't even been aware of before disappearing. "I've been hearing about the invasion of the Horse Lords for several days now. How can I help? I regret that Brest doesn't have any forces available to send, not yet, at least. Give me a few years to work with the locals, and that will change. But for now, I'm afraid all I can offer is my own mind and Muma."

"That should be enough," Valentina answered, still smiling brightly. *Of all of the possible candidates for Muma I could have thought of, Lim wasn't among them. Still, perhaps she should have been.*

It was not because both of them were interested in Ranma. That was a secondary consideration to Valentina's mind. Although, the fact that Lim was here meant that Valentina's odds of seeing Ranma sometime this year rose dramatically, which set the black-haired woman's pulse racing a bit. But no, it was Lim's ability to organize and lead that made Valentina so happy to see her.

"Lawrence, could you ask the cooks to prepare something for the two of us? And a bottle of the mulled cider? I think Lim and I have much to discuss. My first question, however, is perhaps the most important." Valentina motioned to the map behind her. "How good are you at sneaking about, and how good are you at map making? I need a place where we can force the Horse Lords either to come to us or attack them when they bunch up."

Lim frowned, stepping up to the map as Lawrence left. "Lawrence told me something about how the Horse Lords are fighting now. I can understand your frustrations. But I think that attempting to plan out a fight like that is going to take too long. Certainly too long for my new subjects. And I think you might be going about this the wrong way."

"Have I mentioned how happy I am that someone responsible is wielding Muma now?" Valentina asked, giggling again. "Having a weak county directly next to mine has been a nightmare more often than not."

"Especially given the King refused to allow you to conquer the whole thing?" Lim teased gently, to which Valentina held up a finger, indicating a touch.

Then she turned back to the map frowning thoughtfully at it as she pulled out her satchel from behind her. Setting it down, she pulled out some of the royal maps that she had been given of Brest. But few of them had much more to tell than the painting that Valentina was using currently. "First thing I do, I'm going to make a much better map of Brest than this. Honestly, these are just pathetic."

"Tell me about it," Valentina groaned, flopping into a chair, causing her chest to jiggle in a way that grabbed Lim's attention for a second before she looked away, shaking her head. "I began that work in Osterode at the same time I began... to follow up on my conversations with Ranma in other ways. But you said something about me going about this the wrong way?"

"I didn't mean to offend you. But I think that finding a place where the Horse Lords would have to attack you is not going to happen unless you allow them to travel much deeper into my territory than we should."

"The town of Cindwar," Valentina agreed with a nod, indicating the one well-marked area on the map. "That is a thought. But I take it you have a better idea?"

"I do indeed. Instead of using an existing target, why not see if you can trick the invaders into attacking one that doesn't exist? They are running around in small groups here and there correct? Then why don't we do the same, or at the very least, appear to?"

Valentina frowned, staring at the useless map for a moment, biting her finger again as she thought things through. "Appear to break up to chase down the various raiding parties, say thirty or forty pikemen and crossbowmen each, enough force to seem too small, but to actually be able to deal with those raiding parties. Then, continue my march deeper into Brest with half of my army, small enough at that point to perhaps be enticing enough to bring the main force of the Horse Lords to battle? That could work. **If** the Horse Lords don't think about simply defeating my smaller bands in detail. I'm not willing to send my men to their deaths like that."

Although if I break up my slingers too, they could see off any attacker. But... but would they really be that effective? Especially if I can't use them on a large scale? I don't want the enemy to become aware of them until I can use them to deliver a decisive blow. Since the gunpowder weapons were so new, Valentina was still groping her way towards a true combat doctrine despite having drained Ranma's brain on that kind of thing as best she could.

"Then leave the main army under someone else's command, and change the composition of some of these smaller forces. You lead one, I'll lead another, and then you can triple down on a third in terms of crossbowmen."

"That could work, although..."

The two of them kept talking as the meal arrived, hammering out a plan, which hopefully would see off the Horse Lords invasion. Eventually, they had a full plan, and Valentina smiled, ringing a bell to summon Lawrence back. "I think we're done for tonight. If you could find Lim a tent, please? Set it up next to my own for now. We'll be changing the order of march tomorrow morning, so inform the captains there will be a meeting early tomorrow."

Lawrence bowed quickly, and as he left, Lim turned back to Valentina. "You didn't seem worried by the way that about the Horse Lords attacking your main army while you are away."

"I didn't, did I?" Valentina chuckled. "For one thing. I trust my captains in terms of their leadership skills. I've been working with them on our new tactics for months now, and before that for years. Surely you could name officers among Elen's troops that you would trust so much."

"I can, but it is your faith in your new tactics that I'm questioning. You've been awfully cagey about what those are, after all," Lim hinted. "Do they have anything to do with those carts out there?"

Valentina chuckled, setting her chest to bouncing in a way that would've been incredibly distracting to any man in the tent and which caused Lim to once more shake her head. *Good grief, I know that Valentina is nearly as large as Sofya, but being subjected to it once more is somewhat annoying.*

Unaware of the other woman's thoughts, Valentina brought her finger up to her mouth. "That, you will have to see. I think you'll get quite a surprise out of it."

OOOOOOO

Ranma's recovery wasn't as quick as his sudden turnaround after Elen had gotten him to drink and talk would have made people believe. He still had nightmares about the battle in the gap and wasn't sleeping well at night. At times, he was also quieter, introspective almost, or rather just out of it, staring out into the distance. Yet as a few more days passed, there was a marked difference from one day to another.

However, on the fourth day after his recovery began, news came from the scouts they had sent out to find Duke hard cases army that caused a jolt to go through the entire Silver Meteor Army. "What do you mean, they've passed us by?" Regin asked, shaking her head in some confusion.

"My lady, we went straight south towards Southport, but when we started to hear rumors from the peasants about the army, we tried to cross its trail. But Thenardier's army isn't making straight for us as we thought he would. Instead, they're looking to cut us off from our territory across the Resia," Asher reported.

While the other Lords and commanders all began to mutter in shock at this development, Tigre leaned back, thumping a hand down on the armrest of his chair. "They stole a march on us. We all thought they would be slower to move and would then come straight at us. That we had all the time in the world to recover."

"Instead, they've taken the strategic initiative away from us," Elen agreed, tugging at her hair furiously.

She stopped, a hint of red appearing on her face as Tigre gently took her hand away from her hair, holding it with his own for several moments before letting it go. "Your hair is far

too pretty to tug on like that, my lady," he whispered before saying in a louder voice, "Besides, we can beat ourselves up over something that's already happened. We need to move on."

Regin frowned, shaking her head. "I'm sorry, but I don't understand."

"With this move, Duke Thenardier has given himself the opportunity to choose how our confrontation goes, Your Highness. He can either march into the Knightly Orders lands, doubtful admittedly, or can march to the capital," Lord August said.

"Both of those are doubtful, admittedly. If Thenardier tries to march on the capital, we can attempt to cut the angle on him and catch up, although he will still be able to decide the location of our confrontation. Never a good thing," Emil opined.

"He can come directly after us, having cut our supply lines, and force us back into the Gap ourselves," Gerard muttered. "That's what I would try. Keep us penned in, let us just die on the vine, or better yet, send in the dragons to finish us off."

"Or, he can cross the river into Silver Meteor Army territory, leaving a token force at the river to hold us up while he ravages our lands from one end to the other coming back to finish us off," Tigre said grimly.

Ranma shook his head. "No way. I wager he knows how fast we can move, with using me like a mule and actual mules for our baggage train. He might get across the river, sure, but we'd be on him fast. The dragons are the issue, but over the river, we could use our knowledge of the terrain to starve his whole army. I don't care what kind of training they have, that'll make the dragons go crazy.

"Maybe. But we'd be gutting our own lands. No, our best bet is to go after him now, use our greater speed to surprise him, prick him a bit, then force him to come to us," Elen scowled, slapping the table for emphasis.

"We don't really have a choice," Tigre admitted. "We have to move the army to at least look as if they are going to try to attack him in turn, but I don't think he has any idea about our scouts. Maybe not even the horse archers."

"I would not countenance acting upon that belief, Tigre," Regin shook her head. "As I said a few days ago, Thenardier has quite a lot of popular support. His peasant and middle-class supporters aren't willing to take the field with Thenardier, but they are more than willing to pass on information. The use of our horse archers and Ranma's... action in the Charles Gap have no doubt reached his ears." Regin then paused, thinking. "Your scouts, I am uncertain about."

"Her Highness is correct. So long as his spies aren't part of our own command staff, I don't think the importance of those scouts will be obvious to anyone who has not faced them in battle," Emil agreed. "We didn't understand it until we talked it over with you all and took part

in the first battle of the Gap where we saw the impact your scouts had on the invasion's organization."

The Silver Meteor Army members wisely kept their mouth shut. That battle was actually nowhere near the first battle of the Gap, just the first one the Knightly Orders had participated in. To call it the first battle seemed to denigrate their sacrifices up to that point. But right now, it was more important they keep projecting a united front. With that in mind, Tigre turned the conversation to how quickly the army could get moving. Nobles and Knight Commandants began to leave the conference table one after another to start the march.

Ranma was the first one out the door. To hurry the rest of the army along, he had volunteered to use his ki space once more to carry most of their equipment, barring food and boots. That would let the rest of the army move at almost the same speed the Silver Meteor Army had done to get to the Charles Gap in time to stop the Muozinel Army. Without the Silver Meteor Army's baggage to see to, the rest of the allied forces supplies would be spread out, lightening the workload of the mules and making them move faster in turn.

Within an hour, Tigre, Elen, Ranma and the horse archers and scouts were on their way, ranging far ahead of the rest of the Silver Meteor Army.

OOOOOO

The Silver Meteor Army's use of horse archers was indeed known to Duke Thenardier, and as the Silver Meteor Army became aware of his own army's movements, Thenardier and Steid were talking about it. "Hit-and-run attacks, feints, long-term campaigns," Steid frowned, staring after Duke Thenardier's spymaster as he left the tent, counting out the things that a horse archer unit could be used for. "Screening enemy movements for certain. I think we need to be aware that once our scouts start to come into contact with the enemy, these horse archers will quickly blind our army."

"True. Trust Tigre Vorn to come up with a unit that makes use of archery," Thenardier snorted, shaking his head. Like many a noble in Brune, he disdained archery as being beneath a noble's honor to use. Killing your enemies should be done up close and personal, after all, to say nothing of what the gods said about such coward's weapons.

However, he wasn't stupid enough to overlook how dangerous archers could be. "And they have access to the Knightly Orders as well. That is quite a dangerous punch if only one they can use once."

"I will instantly start to train the Army in anti-archer tactics and shield maneuver," Steid answered.

Thenardier scoffed. "Our shields will not stop the crossbows that the Knightly Orders use. We will lose quite a bit of our front-line to them if we cannot bring our dragons to bear. Slow the army's march. We will spend half the day working on maneuvers. I want the army to be able to strengthen or weaken segments of the line at need."

"You do not intend to cross the river?" Drekvac asked questioningly. "I thought that was the entire point of our current operation."

"No," Thenardier answered coldly. But then, seeing that Drekvac needed more explanation, gave it, "As ravaged as Ganelon's lands and the lands around Southport are, we will need that land intact, especially the people there, the original peasants and those who fled there last year. I will not further weaken Brune by devastating another large territory like that."

He smiled thinly. "Examples may be made in the future if the Lords and people of that land do not capitulate to my rule after I defeat the Silver Meteor Army. But, we will continue to march in that direction, to make it seem as if we will do just that."

Steid nodded, looking down at the map and already trying to decide their future tactics against the enemy army. "Should we use our dragons right away or put them in a position to attack the Silver Meteor Army from several different sites?"

"That will be determined on where we allow the Silver Meteor Army to catch us up," Thenardier laughed. "They will quickly learn that catching a dragon is a very foolish thing to do."

True to Steid's prediction, however, and far faster than Steid or Thenardier had ever expected, the army's outriders and scouts, although in Silver Meteor Army parlance, they didn't deserve that term, began to take crippling losses within two days of information on the horse archers reaching them. It became so bad that Steid was forced to take personal command of a company of the outriders just to make certain that the enemy wasn't setting up the ambushes ahead of the army, let alone shadowing their march. Within a week, he sprang two such, taking some casualties from the horse archers and gaining experience fighting them.

"They are deadly, my Lord," Steid admitted that evening, as once more, the main army set up camp well before the sun went down. "I lost fully half of my command. They have little to no armor, can travel far faster than we can, and simply kept their distance, buffeting us from every angle with archery."

"Yet you were able to break off?"

"Eventually. I ordered my men into a copse of trees and then tried to ambush them in turn. It didn't work, but it at least allowed me to break contact by sacrificing several more

squads as the rest of us fled,” Steid admitted before steeling himself, looking down at the ground from his position on one knee in front of his Duke. “I regret to report that I saw Vorn leading them. But I could not bring him to battle. I apologize for my mistake, my Lord.”

Thenardier’s mouth firmed into a grim line, and he grabbed the armrests of his camp chair, his hands causing the wood underneath them to creak alarmingly. He had not forgotten that it had been Earl Vorn who had slain his only son, and of the entire Silver Meteor Army, it could be said he hated Vorn the most, even as he respected him. “If you were anyone else, Steid, I would have you flogged for such a failure! You will make that up in battle, I trust?”

The blond man nodded his head once. That was enough, and Thenardier turned to other things gesturing his general to rise. “With the horse archers now fully engaged with our own outriders, how far behind do you think the Silver Meteor Army is?”

“I have no idea, my Lord. They could have split off a small portion of their force and sent these horse archers ahead with multiple horses to cover greater ground. But even with that, I’m astonished they were able to catch us up so quickly,” Steid admitted. “Let alone done as much manage to our own outriders as they have.”

Thenardier grunted, frowning as he stared down at a map. “There is a little hill nearby. We will move the main army there. The dragons will be separated into a separate camp several miles away from the main army. One of them, the Suro, will stay within the army camp, hidden.”

Steid blinked, then looking down at the map, his brows knit in concentration. “You mean to offer a seeming mistake to draw the Silver Meteor Army into attacking. If the Vanadis and this Ranma warrior are with Vorn, they will attempt to attack our camp.”

“Exactly. But when the Vanadis and Ranma do attack, they will learn that the third dragon is within our camp, and we are prepared for them.” Thenardier smiled grimly.

Nodding thoughtfully, Steid made a suggestion. “My Lord, this is a good idea, but it will take some time to set up. We will need to be more aggressive in our own outriders so the Silver Meteor army’s men cannot get close enough to see the missing dragon. And I think we might also have another opportunity here if we are sneaky about it.”

Thenardier listened as Steid outlined his idea and eventually nodded. “Yes, it is always good to have a backup plan. See to it, Steid. Do so well, and you will redeem yourself in my eyes.”

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Tigre's men did indeed see the two dragons moving out and away from the enemy army. "I don't trust it, but they certainly are seeming to split off the dragons from the rest of their army," Tigre shivered a little as he spoke, shaking his head. "Where did Thenardier come up with that double-headed monster! Those dragons are the strongest in the world and should be death to any human who comes close to them, no matter their age."

"Ask better, how the hell Thenardier's able to get those dragons to do anything in the first place," Elen grumbled. "We really should have emphasized that more when I wrote my reports to my king. Maybe Ludmila would still be here if so."

"Who cares? Two heads, one head, it'll still fall eventually," Ranma said with a smirk, cracking his knuckles. His nightmares still hadn't gone away over the past week, although they had lessened somewhat in severity. But he was still looking forward to fighting something that could really fight back.

"So, you think we should attack their main camp?" Tigre asked quizzically.

Instantly the martial artist shook his head. "Attack, no. Sneak in, yeah. You're right about them sending those dragons away being a little weird. But if they think we're going to attack either the dragons or the army, they won't be ready for something subtler, and me and our scouts specialize in that. If we're lucky, maybe I can even find Thenardier and end this, drag him before the Queen."

Ranma fervently hoped so. *I don't think I have it in me to take part in a big fight again. Or, or to kill anyone for a good long while, anyway.* The very idea made him want to throw up.

"Don't count your dragons before they hatch, Ranma. Thenardier might not be as famous as Roland, but he is still one of the strongest knights that Brune has produced in the last fifty years. He might even give you a run for your money."

"All the better!" came the obvious reply, and Elen laughed, rolling her eyes. But she agreed with Ranma. This was a job for the scouts, not the horse archers.

As evening turned into night, Tigre led the horse archers through the very diffuse line of scouts Thenardier's army had posted around the army. The two sides had been sparring all day, the losses piling up on Thenardier's side in ones and twos. This was evident now in how few outriders were left to patrol the area, letting the horse archers close to the enemy camp. Close enough to provide aid if need be.

Once they were hidden away, Tigre and Ranma led the scouts forward, leaving behind a grumbling Elen tugging at her hair. The silver of her hair was quite distinctive, and unlike the two men, Elen had no training in sneaking around unseen. *Ugh, the moment this campaign's over, I'm getting Tigre to teach me how to hunt. Huh... wait a second, that sounds like it could be really romantic too. Yes!*

Shaking her thoughts of sharing a tiny tent with her man and what they might have to do to keep warm, Elen moved to a nearby tree, climbing up it as stealthily as she could. Hidden in its boughs, her hair now covered by a cloak, she perched there, watching the camp through beady eyes. If her two friends needed her, Elen wanted to be ready.

The added light from the moon made it harder for the scouts to cross the relatively open terrain around Thenardier's camp. There were no broken rocks or crevices to cover, and the moon was so bright that any movement could be spotted at any time.

The Duke had chosen an area where several large farms met. The farms' separating fences had been knocked down, and his army's camp, some eighteen thousand strong, spread out over the area.

The farmhouses, though, had been left up, and they were an obvious target. But men stationed on the rooftops of those houses, coupled with the patrols moving around the camp, made it much tougher to get close.

Yet with Ranma in the lead and Tigre following after, the group of twenty men eventually crossed the open ground in small groups, meeting up after. After putting a few tents between them and the outside of the camp, Tigre gestured, separating his men into groups of three or four, with one group of four staying where they were, hidden. These men would prepare fire swingers to cover the group's escape if need be. One of Elen's ideas, fire swingers were rope bolas, the ends of which were wrapped around small clay jars containing vegetable oil. With the rope being further soaked in a scentless oil, fire swingers could be lit and burn quickly.

Tigre led two of the other scouts forward toward the nearest farmhouse. Ranma leading another two, although he didn't make for one of the farmhouses. Instead, he made his way around the camp, wanting to get a feel for it. The other group spread out, their mission to find and ruin any supplies they could without giving their presence away.

Meanwhile, Ranma would hunt for some of the command tents, and Tigre would look around for anything unusual. Elen wasn't the only one wondering about the whole dragon-controlling thing, after all.

But almost as soon as he had broken away, Tigre realized that the enemy army was, while not waiting for the scouts per se, were prepared for trouble.

Sticking his head out around a tent, Tigre ducked back, flattening himself on the ground, one hand moving in a hand sign to send his men to the ground likewise. They hid themselves away just in time as a patrol of ten men carrying torches moved past them.

But almost as soon as that patrol had passed by, one of his men signaled that they needed to move quickly. Skirting around the tent and passing directly behind the patrol, they

passed just out of the torchlight. Moments later, a second patrol went across the same area where they had just been hiding, crosswise from the first.

“Do they know about us, do you think?” one of his men whispered in Tigre’s ear.

“I don’t think so. Any enemy would rather keep us out of the camp in the first place.” *Unless this was a trap for Ranma specifically? They can’t know I’m here, I’ve only worked with the scouts once before. But no, if they know about his abilities, they wouldn’t have sent the dragons away.* “But there are still far too many people awake at the time of night.” Tigre shook his head. “We’re going to have to be very cautious here.”

The next moment, Tigre nearly bit his lip off as he saw Steid. The Thenardier ducal house’s general was famous in Brune for his unwavering loyalty and skills with sword and army both.

He was just at the edge of Tigre’s sight through the camp visible, for as he went from one of the farmhouses to another through some torchlight. But he moves too quickly for even Tigre to get a shot off, entering another tent and disappearing out of sight within a nearby tent. Tigre waited a few minutes, then scowled. *Would it be too much to ask for there to have been torch in there! Just a silhouette would’ve been enough!* Steid was well known as Thenardier’s right-hand man, and removing him would have been important enough to take a chance.

“Lord,” one of the men whispered, pointing in the opposite direction of Steid. A slightly larger patrol sat there, squatter than the others and marked with some kind of darker mark around the top. In front of the tent were several men working on various equipment, talking quietly around a campfire. But, there didn’t seem to be any torches near the back of the tent, which could be a supply tent of some kind.

Tigre took this all in with a single glance and nodded at the man who he spotted it, indicating he should lead them off through the bustle of the camp. *I suppose Steid will have to wait. I’m certainly not going to try and enter the tent to remove him.* Even with his strength training from Ranma, Tigre knew his limitations.

Other scouts were having no better luck, retreating often, hiding even more often, and becoming kind of frustrated. But they persevered, and after far longer than it should have taken, they started to find their targets. Most weren’t marked as the one Tigre found, which turned out to be tent assigned to the camp’s water reserves. Only the fact their mules were kept nearby gave the game away.

For his part, Ranma had not run into any of the problems the others did, having stayed to the outer edge of the camp. But like the others, he had seen how many people were still up and about despite it being well past the middle of the night. *Still, they’re making the same mistake so many people make: thinking that carrying a torch will let you see in the dark better. It really, really doesn’t,* Ranma reflected as he reached what had to be the paddocks.

But looking at the number of horse-shaped shadows there, Ranma frowned. He looked at one of his companions, gesturing the man near, intending to whisper in his ear. Unfortunately, that worthy was Goru, the same scout who always tried to joke around with Ranma about his curse. Now he twitched, miming a whimper as he pushed Ranma away slightly. "The only way I'd let you whisper sweet nothings to me is if you were in your female form, Ranma."

Ranma quickly got the man in a chokehold and continued to whisper into his ear. "Like the comment is pretty darn funny, but not the time for it!" he growled. "Now, have we been all the way around the camp? We didn't double back or anything? If so, where are the rest of this army's horses? There's only a few hundred here."

The man nodded, as did their third companion, Samuel, who whispered, "Yes, my Lord, we doubled back a few times, I'm not certain how often. But we certainly haven't seen any other horses or heard them either. Unless... could they be mixed in with the rest of the camp? Or kept in the center?"

Depending on the size of army, horses would normally be separated into paddocks or tethered in the same area since that made caring for them easier and kept the camp cleaner as well. Keeping them in the center of the camp made more sense, though.

Looking in that direction, Ranma frowned. Most of that area of the camp was out of sight from here, but he hadn't seen any sign of more horses or any other animals there. *Still, they could be nearer the center of the camp regardless. That would be weird, but Thenardier doesn't organize his camp like the Muozineli or we do, so maybe? Still, that's a minor mystery. It doesn't matter compared to what I'm really after.*

"All right. You two concentrate on running off these horses slowly. Don't be seen. I'm going to see if I can pay Thenardier a visit."

The two men made to protest, but Ranma glared them into silence. As good as the scouts were, Ranma was still better simply because he could take the air and jump over tents or people and land silently. *And as much as I don't want to kill anyone again, I could also easily fight my way out of the camp.*

Reluctantly, the two men nodded and began to move towards the horses.

Moving silently through the camp, Ranma avoided a few of the patrols, sometimes by jumping left or right so far that he put several dozen tents between him and them. Sometimes he entered a tent quickly, knocking those within out silently with pressure points before moving on. Doing so, he soon came to the protected area at the center of the camp, where he found several supply tents and, to Ranma's shock, one of the dragons. *What the fuck!? I thought they moved them all ou... oh you sneaky asshole! You thought our horse archers or me and Elen would attack, and wanted this dragon here to combat us, maybe?*

The beast in question was the Suro, the same kind of dragon that Elen had killed in the Battle of Mosheim. It had been made to crouch down, sleeping on his stomach, and so wasn't visible from a distance save by the large tent covering it. But the monster's head was sticking out of the tent, and though its eyes were closed, it still exuded a certain monstrous menace.

Grimacing, Ranma retraced his steps making certain to make even less noise than normal. He then moved around the dragon's rear, searching out a tent that looked opulent enough to belong to a Duke. *He's got to be somewhere near his overgrown guard dog, right?*

Soon Ranma spotted a tent that was different than the others. It was larger, painted black, with a dragon's face painted on a flag outside of it. There was even a light still on within.

Smiling grimly, Ranma made his way towards it, only to pause, as suddenly, the alarm was sounded nearby. Three of the scouts had been found, unable to get away from one of the patrols. They'd killed several of the patrolmen, but the damage was done. At the same time in the distance, the sound of battle also rang out through the night.

Near the edge of the camp, the three men with the fire swingers heard that noise and saw the camp rousing itself quickly. Far quicker than they had thought it could. "Damn, that's torn it. Come on," the leader of the fire-starting scouts, a man name Parsu muttered, lighting up his fire swinger and hurling it away through the camp. Given the weight of the rope bola, it flew quite a way, and when it struck, fire quickly spread as the small clay bottles within the balls burst.

Elsewhere, two more teams of the scouts did much the same thing, attacking people nearby, then fading into the darkness. No matter how many torches there were, there was still more darkness than light in the camp, giving the scouts the chance to break contact. But that didn't mean all of them were able to do so.

Tigre raced out of the tent where he had lit a fire among some of the food supplies. As he came out of the tent, he found his companions fighting a group of five men, as more men bearing torches raced toward them between the tents. Instantly the Black Bow was off his back and arrows flying. Two men fighting his own died before torches fell to the ground, their owners struck in the stomach or neck by his arrows. "Time we left!" he hissed, another arrow on his bow, and his men obeyed with alacrity.

Where they had been slowly releasing the horses from their ties, Goru looked at his companion, who looked back, shrugging his shoulders. "Well, there's all these horses, aye? Be a shame not to."

Goru grinned, and both men pulled the stakes holding the horses to their position, then pulled themselves up onto their backs. A smack to the ass, and the horses, already spooked by the smell of smoke and the fires, were moving, with the rest of the horses fleeing with them out into the night.

In contrast, Ranma didn't run. Instead, he moved towards Thenardier's tent as silently as he could. *Take him out, and this war is over!*

Yet somehow, the older man must have sensed the movement in the dark behind them because he turned, bringing up his massive sword faster than Ranma would've thought he could. The sword's flat side took the blow, shattering, but Thenardier was already falling backward, grabbing at a nearby brazier and hurling it at Ranma. "To me, to me! Intruders, assassin!"

Men all around charged to defend their Lord. At the same time, the Suro roused itself instantly, turning in place, tossing the tent, which had hidden it off as it roared, filling the night with sound.

That roar was so loud, it was like a physical force, causing many of the men nearby to stumble backward. One of the scouts had been trying to keep to the shadows nearby and stumbled into the tent, where several men had been grabbing at weapons and trying to strap on armor before rushing outside. Now, as their tent collapsed, they stabbed at the figure of the scout, who stabbed back. Blood flew, drenching canvas, and both men fell.

Men raced between Ranma and his target as the dragon turned, snarling and bellowing, moving forward like a slow avalanche, crushing men and tents as the dragon moved. But Ranma dodged to one side, then leaped over two intervening tents, landing in front of Thenardier again, ignoring the dragon, which was far too slow to matter.

Thenardier grabbed a blade from one of his men, holding it in an expert grip as he snarled, waiting for Ranma's charge. "Come on then!"

Ranma launched himself forward, batting aside the blade, his other hand crashing into Thenardier's chest. But the man somehow took the blow, stumbling backward instead of being bent double, and had pulled his sword back fast as well. The next second, he lashed out with a kick of all things, then stabbed at Ranma when Ranma leaped up over the blow. Two more men nearby thrust up at him with spears, and Ranma was forced to dodge away.

Nearby, Asher had ducked down into a tent, his blade out and stabbing as one of his men followed him in. Within seconds all of the men, slower to rouse than the others in the camp, were dead, and Asher was passing through. HE took one glance outside, taking everything in while staying hidden as more men raced towards Ranma. And to one side, Asher could see the dragon smashing through men and tents towards Ranma.

But he could also see Thenardier, and for a moment, Asher's thoughts paralleled Ranma's earlier ones. "Kill the Duke, this war's over..." He exchanged a glance with his man, who, after a moment's hesitation, nodded.

For her part, Elen and the horse archers with her, a small band of fifty admittedly, had found themselves utterly surprised. As the conflict within the camp began, Elen leaped down, about to bark out orders, when a sudden noise from behind caused her to turn.

Out of the darkness, a dozen riders rode, their blades gleaming. Elen's eyes widened, and she raised Arifar, blocking a strike meant to take her head off, riposting swiftly, taking the man in the leg and dumping him from his saddle with a cry of agony.

Her men weren't as lucky. Several died as they found themselves on the ground against the cavalry. Still in their saddles, others wheeled but only had time for a single arrow at best before the light cavalry hit them. Men on both sides fell, and everything was chaos and carnage as Elen desperately fought back, Arifar running red with blood as she shouted, "Northeast and southwest, break out and circle back in!"

Some of her men obeyed. Others found themselves unable to break off, too sharply pressed. More men fell, but Elen's own horse flashed through the night, his white color making the stallion stand out sharply. Two enemy horses found themselves smashed aside, then it reared, hooves crashing into the head of one of the enemy before Elen leaped for her saddle. Then her sword was flashing out in a flat arc, wind scintillating around it. A flat blade of cutting wind-lashed into the woods, slicing men and trees alike, as she targeted the next group of enemies moving through the copse towards the embittered company. Trees toppled, and men fell in pieces to the ground, and then Elen turned, stabbing out, doing her best to help what few of her men still lived in the melee.

Suddenly, an arrow flew overhead, smacking into the eye of one of the attackers. A moment later, Elen saw Tigre and seven of their men raced out of the camp, narrowly dodging a hail of arrows of their own. Taking a glance at the camp, she could see that the men on the rooftops of the farmhouses were no longer there, and two of the patrols had also been swept aside. The horse archers who had broken out of the copse earlier at her orders hadn't returned. Instead, knowing they would have trouble discerning friend from foe, they had targeted the easier targets of the infantry patrolling the edge of the enemy camp.

"Thank the gods for smart soldiers!" she cried in delight, Arifar flicking out to one side as her horse bucked, his back hooves smashing into the side of another horse, breaking its rider's leg. Three more men died in quick succession, and then she was out of the copse, leading the survivors of the assault in the woods out to join their fellows.

Back in the camp, Ranma backed away as the men with spears pressed towards him, grabbing up a nearby brazier and kicking it in their way before leaping into one of the roving patrols. Men flew backward, still alive but out of action, while others went down, their limbs locking together or just spasming in pain from pressure points. He then reached down, grabbing up the torches the men had been using, hurling them out to slap into a few supply tents nearby.

Then the dragon was on him, and Ranma leaped up, his fist flashing out to slam into the dragon's jaw. The blow rocked the dragon's head to one side but did little damage as the dragon continued to barrel forward slowly. A claw reached up for him, but Ranma dodged away. Then the dragon was snapping at him again. But once more, Ranma was able to dodge, returning a blow to the side of the head once more. Once more undaunted, the dragon continued to attack him, pushing him further away from Thenardier. *Stone and sword, damn it. I can't hurt it, but it can't hit me, so stalemate.*

Behind the dragon, Thenardier took this in at a glance and scowled angrily, both at the sight and the fact that there was so much fire around to let him do so. Thanks to the fire swingers and the scout's works, fires had spread all throughout the camp by this point, lighting the area almost as much as it would have been in the daytime, if in a very different manner. Shadows danced and moved, and chaos had spread from one side of the camp to the other. From where he stood, Thenardier could see two of the farmhouses were burning, and dozens of tents, some random, most not, were alight. The braying of mules and shouts of men filled the night with noise.

Thenardier knew that both his army and his life were in danger now. The enemy had attacked him in a way he had not expected, and he needed to both defend himself and bring some order to the camp before his men started to panic. "Bring up archers! Use spears to drive him back," he ordered an officer nearby, then pointed at another, one of his scribes, who had stumbled out of a nearby tent, "You, find Steid. I..."

The man's widening eyes were the only warning Thenardier had or needed. A veteran of a dozen wars, he was moving even as the fact he was in danger registered. The sword stabbing into the area at his side where two pieces of his armor met skittered along its edge, and he finished the twist, a gauntleted fist catching his attacker in the side of the head. Another man lunged, and Thenardier met him, sword to sword, pushing him back. The attacker was good, deflecting Thenardier's blows with the sword he'd picked up after his family's blade had shattered. Yet he was no sword master, and within seconds, Thenardier ran him through.

Kicking the body off his blade, Thenardier bellowed, "CALM! I will have calm damn you. Split into squads, put out the fires and obey your officers."

Men nearby heard his words, and resolve filled them even as Ranma continued hurling men left and right, dodging around the dragon to do so. The dragon showed no care for its allies if such a term could be used, and more than one enemy Ranma knocked down found himself crushed by the dragon's paws. Then Ranma froze, staring past the dragon, toward where Thenardier stood. Stood over two bodies that Ranma knew. "Asher, Lars!"

Ranma's inattention cost him, and the Suro's bite took him in the shoulder and side. Ranma's endurance training, which he had recreated from the Bakusai Tenketsu training Ryoga had gone through saved him. Although not by much, as bones in his shoulder and arm

shattered under the bit's strength, and the dragon lifted Ranma into the air, shaking him like a dog with a small toy.

Ranma roared aloud in pain, his free hand coming up, blasting a Moko Takabisha into the dragon's closest eye as the hand in the beast's mouth tried to lash out with another ki blast inside the thing's mouth. It didn't break the crystal substance over that large orb, but the blow to the inside of its mouth evidently hurt, and the dragon wrenched its head sideways, squalling in pain.

Bone and ligament tore, and Ranma screamed as his arm was almost torn from his socket, the bones in his shoulder breaking the skin, blood flowing in rivulets. Unable to concentrate through the pain, Ranma didn't control his descent as he normally would. He crashed into several men in the dark, knocking them off his feet as he rolled to a halt nearby, only slowly pushing himself to his feet.

His ki healing had been trying all along to heal his wounds, and now it went to work quickly. But with his entire arm mangled from his wrist back, and as golden ki flared around his wounds, he slowly pushed himself to his feet, barely dodging a spear thrust. But he kept his eyes on the area around Thenardier through the chaos, and his pain-filled eyes widened at what he saw there.

Asher tried to push himself to his knees, all sense having been smashed out of him. A shadow fell over him, and he looked up. Duke Thenardier stood above him, sword poised.

Thenardier stared through the smoke and chaos toward the pigtailed warrior, watching as his arm healed itself through some sorcerous means Thenardier had never seen the like of before. But the dragon was already trundling towards him, and nearby, Steid was restoring order, aided by Thenardier's earlier bellow. Locking eyes with Ranma, Thenardier smiled cruelly and then stabbed down.

"NO!!!" Ranma screamed, then had to dodge away as the dragon once more attempted to stomp on him. Arrows began to arch out of the night towards him, and all around, the army was contracting like a great muscle almost, trying to crush him. All the while, Thenardier was smiling towards him, the fires all around lighting his face like the devil in the pit.

And elsewhere, two more roars were heard. The dragons camped a distance away had reacted to the fires, Drekavac driving them now towards the battle. **"FUCCCCCKKKKKK!!!"** Ranma howled like a wounded beast. Then he was gone, leaping up and away, out into the fires. No longer hesitating, men who got in Ranma's way died, their armor exploding from his blows or sent flying, broken. Soon he was out of the camp, racing towards Elen and the other survivors as they gathered, the horse archers slaying any target they could even as they pulled back.

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While small in terms of numbers, the final tally was quite horrible for Ranma, Tigre, and Elen. These men, the horse archers and scouts, were men they had trained for months, known as individuals in the case of the scouts and many of the cavalrymen. And in one horrible night of surprises, they had lost many of them. "We're down to ten horse archers," Elen said softly as they rode through the night. "One or two more might show up at the rally point, but not many. That's more than thirty men at least dead. I can't believe those light cavalrymen were able to sneak up on us!"

"We were complacent, I think. We thought we had their measure, but Thenardier and Steid, at least, are deadly opponents," Tigre admitted. "Our losses were just as bad in the scouts. I think I saw Klien, Lefton and Samuel fighting surrounded by men. I did my best, but I don't know if they were able to escape."

"Klein and Baker are dead. I saw them go down," Arthur reported sadly, shaking his head.

"I saw Asher and both his men die," Ranma growled, his hands clenching and unclenching as he rode one of the horses which had followed the others, its previous rider dead behind them.

"Dammit!" Tigre grunted, Asher's name a blow to his gut. A young man who Tigre had thought of as much a friend as a vassal ever since their days in Alsace. *How am I going to tell his brothers, hell, his parents that Asher is dead?*

"If it's any comfort, I think we did a lot of damage to their supplies," Goru said, his tone somber for once. "And it will take them a while to put those fires out, let alone take a tally of what they've lost."

"It isn't, but thank you for the attempt, Goru," Tigre answered, shaking his head with a sigh.

Ranma breathed out, his anger leaving him slowly. Now he remembered what he had done in escaping the camp, the men he had killed. But most of all, he remembered Asher being run through by Thenardier and his inability to save the blacksmith's son from Alsace. *Elen was right. If we don't do all we can to protect our own, we aren't worthy of leading them. I can't afford to hesitate.*

It wasn't his hesitation or anything that Ranma had done which had led to Asher dying, of course, just the vagaries of battle and Thenardier's skill. But the thought at least helped Ranma push further past the horror of his actions in the gap. "What should we do now?"

“Retreat,” Elen replied seriously. “The rest of the army needs to be brought into action. We need to keep on blinding Thenardier and prepare to use the Knightly Orders and the rest of our army as best we can.”

Both her listeners nodded, and they all fell silent, wrestling with grief and anger at how the night had gone.

The group pushed on through the night, reaching the rest of the army early the next day. Thanks to its mules and Ranma having taken so much of their supplies head to dump them here, and the good maps, which allowed them to choose a suitable place, the army had made very good time. Soon they would be within range to strike at the enemy or pull back as need be.

But, as Regin pointed out, all this still left the dragons.

“The dragons will be sent after us first and on their own,” Ranma said, shaking his head. “Those things are not good working with others. The Suro killed dozens of men in the camp debacle. They’ll be sent at the army first to soften us up, and then Thenardier will throw in the rest of his forces. That means me and Elen can deal with them.”

“I would’ve thought that would be the opposite way around,” Scheie argued. “Or perhaps Thenardier would use them to attack from one direction and the army to attack from the other?”

“I doubt it. When it comes to the dragons, I don’t think they have enough control to do that kind of thing. Besides, this wasn’t a total loss, as one of our scouts pointed out,” Tigre answered. “Thenardier’s army lost a lot of its supplies. and what do you think will happen if those dragons go unfed for a long time?”

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This was indeed a problem, which Thenardier and Steid were discussing the afternoon after the nighttime battle. “They destroyed the vast majority of our foodstuffs, my Lord, and unfortunately, this area has also been fought over this past year. These fields lie fallow, and there is no hunting to be found. I am sorry, my Lord, we did not think of infiltrators, only the horse archers, Ranma and Viltaria’s combat abilities when we made up our plan.”

Thenardier grunted, shaking his head. “The ambush went well enough, and the rest of your plan worked. The majority of our light cavalry were able to get away in the night and are now available to us for whatever we wish them to do.”

That had been part of Steid's plan. While many of their fellows fought and died against the enemy horse archers and the dragons grabbed Vorn's attention, more men pulled out west, moving somewhat towards the center of the country, staying out of sight as much as possible. Some of those men had turned back to further obfuscate things during the night, which was where the attack on the horse archers had come from. But even with most of those men dead, a little over two thousand men were now out there, waiting for Steid to join them and be a dagger in Regin's back when the time came.

"Agreed, but the rations issues are a serious one, especially after events in the campaign against Ganelon. My Lord, our men's ability to keep fit is more fragile than I would like, despite our having been able to rest them for a time after that campaign ended. Even a short-term disruption in food is going to have a major impact now." He smiled wintrily. "Thankfully, the dead horses and men from the other night have left us with sufficient food to feed the dragons, at least."

"We could push on and over the Resia," Steid suggested. "I could lead the cavalry on a screening attack while you reached and crossed the river."

"No." Thenardier shook his head. "We will attack instead and use those men as you initially suggested."

"You have such faith in my dragons then?" Drekvac chuckled. "Excellent."

Thenardier snorted. "I have faith in their strength, wizard, although I also saw that Ranma warrior heal what wounds the Suro was able to do to him within seconds. I wonder if indeed the dragons can deal with him at all, let alone Viltaria."

Drekvac smirked. "All you have to do is give the order."

"Hmmm..." Thenardier stared at him for a time, then shrugged. "The dragons will be useful in defeating Viltaria and Ranma. We will send them forward, with the rest of the army behind. Well behind them. The Suro ate seven of my men last night after things settled down, apparently in just a fit of pique for not being able to bite Ranma in half," Thenardier chuckled at that before sobering. "You will leave now, Steid. I trust you to know what to do."

Steid bowed and left the tent quickly, leaving Drekvac and Thenardier alone. The Duke looked over to one side of his tent, where the shattered remains of his sword lay, before glaring over at Drekvac. "You best hope your dragons succeed killing the Vanadis and Ranma. Or else you will pay for their weakness."

Drekvac bowed his head but did not bother replying further, turning aside and leaving the tent quickly. Outside, he fought back a sneer, his features shifting to a distinctly inhuman configuration for just a moment before the demon disguised as a dragon tamer recovered his self-control. *Thenardier should learn where the power in our relationship really lies! Still, I too*

want Ranma dead. An anomaly like him is worrisome. And then there is the user of the Black Bow... So I will continue to help Thenardier's position, come what may.

Inside, Thenardier's thoughts ran somewhat parallel to Drekvac on that score as he stared at his sword once more. His legacy, not just the sword, but his son, who he had lost similarly.

"I will have your head for this," Thenardier hissed. "You and Vorn. You will both pay! Pay for the effrontery to my house and the death of my son! It's been a long time coming, Vorn, but justice is at hand. I hope you like these last two nights on this earth!"

OOOOOO

The morning of the sixth day after Ranma and Tigre's aborted attempt to infiltrate the enemy camp, Tigre stared across the field at the enemy army, marching towards them. He and the Silver Meteor Army had fallen back, trying to tire the enemy out. It had worked too, as the enemy's own outriders had fallen back almost entirely, and Tigre had seen the exhaustion and fear on the faces of Thenardier's men from a distance.

But Thenardier's hold on his army wasn't going to break just because of that, and eventually the enemy army had turned back towards the Resia and the way across it into the Silver Meteor Army's allied territory. The threat from that had forced the Silver Meteor Army to close the distance, dragging Thenardier's attention back to them and to court a full-scale battle.

In front of the enemy army, as Ranma and Elen had predicted, the three dragons moved in a very loose triangle formation. The Suro was on the right and forward of the Gara Dova at the back of the triangle. Across from the Suro was a fire-breathing dragon, the one, according to rumor, which had torched Ganelon's city of Lutetia.

"They're trying to make us decide which dragon to go after. They're so far apart we can only attack one, while the other has a free run at the army," Elen murmured.

"While the rest of Thenardier's forces wait behind the dragons. We could swing wide, my Kinghts and those of my fellows," mused Emil. "A sharp attack to the flank, while they are concentrating on your fights with the dragon. And I would stack my Perche Knights against any ten of Thenardier's."

"Remember that his army still outnumber us. He could use the dragons and the threat from a portion of his army to pin us in place, then turned the rest of his army to face you. Do you think you could win despite that?" Tigre asked, generally interested in the answer.

“Perhaps. But we could pull back at any time as well. It’s worth a try anyway.”

“We’ll think about it once those three dragons are pinned in place. Do you think Thenardier will push any of his own and forward to help them if Ranma or I go forward?” Regin asked, unwilling to let the Knightly Orders loose just yet, fear roiling within her, although anyone looking at her would not have been able to tell that. Once more, Regin wore the same armor that she had worn during the last days of the campaign in the Gap, portraying herself as a warrior Princess, staring down the hated enemy. But inside, Regin was still the same scared, scarred young woman Tigre had met in the refugee camp the year before.

Astride his own horse nearby Tigre, could see that Regin’s hands clenched on the reins so hard her knuckles had turned white and knew what acting so composed in the face of this battle was costing her. He gently reached out a hand, taking one of her own in his squeezing. “I don’t believe so. As Ranma said days ago, no matter how disciplined an army, they won’t be able to withstand the sight of their own dragons killing their own people.”

Elen saw this act and rolled her eyes. *Bah, Tigre’s too nice for his own good. But if he wasn’t, he wouldn’t be my Tigre, would he?* And given the nice make-out session that she and Tigre had that morning and late last night, Elen was feeling quite magnanimous right now. She smirked at Ranma, gesturing to the two dragons. “Which of them do you want?”

Scratching his chin thoughtfully, Ranma debated. “I don’t know. My head’s saying, I should take out the fire-breather. I took this Phoenix pill thing, old world, which might make me immune to fire, although I’ve never really tested it on an actual fire, just scalding hot water and steam. On the other hand, my heart is saying go for the Suro. I owe that beast a beating.”

He suddenly snapped his fingers, then looked around at the others inquisitively. “How good are a dragon’s other senses? Their hearing or smell, I mean.”

“It depends on the type. From what I know, Suros have very good hearing, whereas aerial dragons have an insanely good sense of sight but no sense of smell. Fire dragons can’t taste or smell anything but have better hearing than the others according to the books I’ve read about them anyway,” Tigre responded, causing the others to look at him in surprise. “What, I’ve read a lot of books about hunting. A few had stuff about dragons in them. Mostly about how to get away from them if you have to.”

“Makes sense, I guess,” Ranma grunted, turning back to the dragons. “The problem is, thanks to that triangle formation, if Elen and I concentrate on the two dragons to the sides, the Gara Dova can just barrel straight across and smash into our army.”

“It might, but we can retreat faster than it can move, I think,” Edmund declared.

“Our cavalry can, our infantry, though? Besides, the rest of his army can just follow the dragon, move around it, and attack faster than we can run, pinning us in place for it. No, we

have to take out all three dragons,” Elen sighed, then looked at Ranma. “You’ve got an idea, I take it?”

“Yep. After all, leading one dragon to another should be simple enough, and I’d wager once the Suro tries to take a bite out of the two-headed one, their orders are going to go by the wayside, right?”

“That still bothers me,” Elen grumbled. “The air that Dragon Pimple Face had, that made some sense. A Suro being trained since it’s hatching, that’s a little believable if someone found a dragon egg and could get it away from the mother. But where did Thenardier gain three dragons at once, all of them trained so well that they don’t need riders to tell them what to do?”

“Something to discover after the war is over. Although, I think I’ve heard tell of some kind of wizard or mage being employed by Duke Thenardier’s family in the past,” Regin frowned thoughtfully, her hand still in Tigre’s own, feeling the warmth of his gentle touch.

“And why are they in a triangle formation? Putting some distance I can understand, but that much distance and that formation too? And look how far their armies’ disparate companies are spread out as well. It’s a very loose formation for any kind of battle,” Mashas muttered.

Elen hesitated, then looked over at Ranma again. “They probably are worried about a certain tornado attack. I don’t doubt they’ve heard about what happened in the gap, probably long since.”

Hearing that, Ranma grimaced. “They’ve got a kind of point, but I’m...” He shuddered, shaking his head. “There is no way I’m ever doing that again. Not to people who can be just torn apart in...” He shuddered, then resolutely pointed towards the dragon, remembering what had happened to Asher his face firming. “That, that is what I want. A challenge. So let’s get this party started.”

On the other side of the battlefield, on a raised dais that had been set up hastily by his men, Thenardier snarled happily as he saw the distinctive silver hair of the Vanadis racing in one direction and another individual racing on foot towards the Suro. Turning his spyglass in that direction, he saw Ranma, remembering his features easily from the battle several nights ago. “Yes, that is him.”

He turned to several of his senior commanders. “You all are in charge here. I will be countering the moves of the Knightly Orders. They will certainly try to flank us.”

“What if they split up and attack us from two sides, sir?”

“Doubtful. The Knightly Orders would lose much of their striking power if they did that, with the Calvados Knights guarding the Gap.”

“And how do you know, which direction they’ll be coming from?”

Rolling his eyes and wishing he had two Steids, Thenardier turned back to Drekavac, pointing at the Gara Dova. “Turn that creature on Ranma the moment he is engaged with the Suro.”

“My Lord, if both dragons are fighting in the same area of the battlefield, they might accidentally attack one another, and it will take only one incident to turn them against one another entirely. Ignoring the actual target,” Drekavac warned, having no idea of what Ranma’s initial plan might have been but knowing his control of the dragons had a weakness.

Thenardier scowled. “Very well, wait until one of the other dragons is injured then and send it forward. But keep it where it is for now. Simply being there, the Gara Dova will protect the front of my army, allowing me to concentrate on the flank attack.”

With all his trained outriders having been swept aside in the days since the night assault, even with Thenardier predicting it would be coming, the flank attack of the Knightly Order’s present heavy cavalry crashed in unopposed against Thenardier’s left flank. This wasn’t a pulse charge like the Knights had used against the slave country army in the Gap. Instead, the Knightly Orders had spread out in two wedges, charging different positions on the left flank. Crossbows twanged, downing the men who had hastily formed up a line to face them. Shields came up in response to that hail of crossbow bolts, but even a small crossbow like the ones the Knights used from horseback were able to punch through most of the infantry’s shields.

Then the cavalry of the Knightly Orders was crashing into the enemy line, scattering its first, second and even third rows. The companies on the left flank of Thenardier’s army shattered like glass, and the knights rode on, crashing into the second group.

There discipline prevailed, holding, giving ground and dying, but still retaining their formation, unlike the first company. And as they did, infantry units behind them charged forward. Two lines of infantry moved to support their fellows directly, while two more lines spread out to either side.

Hoarded archers, fully four thousand, began to fire at the Knights as well. Although their armor was proof against most arrows, their horses' barding was a different story, and the poor beasts began to die quickly.

Soon enough, another bugle called, and Thenardier led his own heavy cavalry units around the back of his formation, intent on hitting the flank of this attack in turn.

Behind the charge, Emil had pulled back and away to get some distance and try to figure out what was going on in the battle. Instead of crashing entirely through the enemy army, the separated army formation had worked for Thenardier. Although the first few companies they had struck were utterly destroyed, the second had only been mauled, absorbing the impact

with their own bodies most of the time. His sword ran red with blood from the first portion of the impact, and he knew he had killed at least twelve men. *But the enemies discipline has held, curse it! And we've lost our momentum.*

Seeing the enemy's own horsemen beginning to shift around to the orders flank, he sounded the recall, once, twice, thrice.

Disciplined beyond any other unit which could be found within Brune or nearly any other country, the Knights instantly obeyed, pulling away as best they could. Men who could get free moved to help their fellows, cutting down anyone who got in their way. A small reserve of two hundred from his own Perche Knights came forward at another retort of Emil's horn. These men fired their crossbows then kept their distance, reloading with some difficulty shooting once more instead of joining the tumult.

The Knights soon pulled back and away from the infantry, putting some distance from them and even dressing their lines before Thenardier and his heavy cavalry hit them. Horses whinnied, and men fell and died, but even so, the Knightly Orders were just simply **better** than the majority of Thenardier's people. He lost more men than they did, and he had no local commander who was willing to use his own initiative without Steid. His infantry couldn't come up in support and fast enough, and Thenardier was forced to pull back his own troops, lest the better armored and better-trained knights overwhelm his cavalry without that support. The knights didn't pursue, falling back as a unit, their pennants flying unbowed in the wind.

Thus the flank attack was beaten off, although not as decisively as Thenardier would've hoped. And in the center of the battlefield, things were also not going the way he had hoped.

OOOOOOO

Ranma charged towards the Suro, bellowing a battle cry of a sort. "Come on, you overgrown turtle, let's get it on!"

The Suro undoubtedly did not understand what Ranma was saying. But even a stupid animal would know a challenge when it heard it, and the dragon's white eyes locked on to Ranma as it continued its ponderous way forward, roaring its own battle cry in return.

And then, Ranma's scent wafted to the dragon. Instantly it knew this little creature in front of it was one that had gotten away a few nights ago and that had hurt the dragon's mouth. The wound had healed since, but the memory had not gone away, and it bellowed again, rumbling forward even faster than before

Instead of crashing together like two opposing forces, Ranma ducked underneath the claw grabbed from the dragon, a fist rocketing up into its neck. The blow didn't do any damage, despite actually lifting the front of the dragon up a few inches and creating a sound like a ballista bolt crashing into a castle's wall, Ranma pouring his ki into his physical strength. Not his

speed at this point, against the Suro that certainly wasn't needed. Ranma then rolled out from underneath it, dodging an attempt to step on him and leaped up onto its back.

The dragon whipped its head around, trying to bite him out of the air as it had during their last battle, but this time Ranma wasn't distracted. Ranma grabbed its jaws, holding them open for a moment. "Moko Takabisha Barrage!"

Releasing the jaws, Ranma thrust his fingers into the dragon's mouth for a brief second. Over a dozen small golden spheres flashed out, crashing into the inside of the dragon's mouth, bruising it in numerous places before Ranma pulled his hands back, flipping away through the air.

The dragon snarled in agony but didn't relent, charging forward, trying to bring its forward paws to bear on Ranma, although its shoulders didn't allow it to reach up far enough. As long as he was more than ten feet off the ground, the only way the Suro could hurt Ranma was with his mouth, which he had just shown was vulnerable in turn.

Sliding around an attempt to ram him with its snout, Ranma grabbed at a ridge of scales on the dragon's face. The dragon instantly twitched its head, trying to throw him off and succeeding before Ranma could attack its eye. Hitting the ground feet first, Ranma rolled backward, then kicked off the ground into the air over the dragon, intent on landing on its back.

The dragon tried to rear backward, but its body was indeed like a turtle: it didn't have enough flexibility to do so.

Ranma landed on its back, then slid down to its neck, slamming blows into the back of the Suro's head. The dragon groaned, those blows finally getting through its armor as once more Ranma concentrated on using his ki to further heighten his strength. Not very well, but it was somewhat painful, like someone tapping you in a sensitive place just a bit too hard.

In response, the dragon twitched and tried to toss off this annoying creature like Ranma was a fly. But it couldn't. It then tried to turn its head again to reach back and bite Ranma off its shoulder, but that only brought one of its eyes in range. "Kachu Tenshin Amaguriken Blinding Barrage!"

Ranma's fists hammered into the eye several hundred times in a second. Those eyes were covered by crystal, hardened against anything man had ever made thus far in this world. The ballista bolt would've shattered on impact, a battering ram would have been ignored. Even many of the guns in Ranma's own world wouldn't have been able to do anything to those eyes. Ranma's own hands broke under the repeated blows, the bones first breaking then shattering throughout his fingers and hands as he continued his assault, blood flying.

But Ranma ignored the pain, and several seconds later, the eye's crystal shell shattered, followed quickly by the eye underneath it. Ranma's hands were both bloody up to the elbow,

and not just from the dragon's blood either, but Ranma ignored that, leaped away from the dragon, which bellowed and screamed in pain, bucking hard its whole body spasming.

As the dragon screamed, Ranma's injuries began to heal, golden fire flashing across his hands as he smirked evilly at the creature. Now it was slowly backing away, angry and nearly mad with pain. But half of its world had just suddenly gone black, and very suddenly, the Suro, whose armor was proof against all but another dragon's claws and fangs, understood that perhaps its race wasn't alone at the top of the food chain.

Ranma didn't give it time to recover, darting forward again. Coming in at its blindside. The dragon smelled him coming, twisting around its neck and lunging forward as fast as it could to bite him, its mouth opens to bite once more. But the Suro just was too slow. It had learned, though, and kept shifting its head randomly, spraying blood from its ruined eye all around as it tried to keep Ranma from targeting its remaining eye.

It took him more than ten minutes, but eventually, Ranma was once more perched on the back of its head again, the dragon still twisting this way and that beneath him, desperate to get him off, knowing that the little creature could hurt it. Again, a sound almost like a machine gun thrummed over the medieval battlefield, and Ranma grimaced as his hands once again were torn and broken by the impacts.

Yet his grimace was next to nothing to the dragon's scream of pain and terror as its whole world went dark.

Once more, Ranma leaped clear, the glow of his ki again appearing all over his hands, healing the wounds quickly even as he was in the air. Ranma rolled away from the dragon for a few seconds, then popped to his feet. "Now you're blind, you slow-ass turtle with delusions of grandeur! You coulda been something, you coulda been a contender. Now you're just a walking target," he taunted.

EEsh, that was horrible. My old man would slap me on general principle for such a bad example of Anything Goes Taunting. Ranma really didn't have a lot to taunt a dragon, though. And besides, from what Tigre had told him, his tone of voice was what would matter, that and his smell, of course. *I might as well be singing to the beast.*

Not that Ranma was about to try, instead he shouted, "Over here, over here you, you overgrown iguana! I fart in your general direction!"

The Suro, completely blind, could smell Ranma and began to move in his direction. Ranma kept a certain distance between them, always just ahead of the dragon, leading it towards the Gara Dova that had made up the point of the draconic triangle.

It was only as he turned to make certain nothing else had changed on the battlefield that Ranma realized the Gara Dova was no longer there. Instead, it had shifted to the other side of the battlefield and was fighting Elen. *Well, crap!*

At the other tip of the triangle, Elen had an easier time of it than Ranma, at least to start. Charging forward on her stallion, a ball of wind appeared around her, letting the two of them shoot forward even faster than Ranma could run as Arifar's gem glowed with his magic. The Prani set itself and breathed in before releasing a gout of flame.

But as the fires hit Elen's wall of air, the fires of the Prani were redirected all around her. And while Ranma had trouble hurting his dragon, Elen did not. Covered by a near inviolate bubble of air, she charged forward as the dragon attempted again to lash out at her with her fire. Then, as Elen came close, she jumped off her horse, which instantly twisted away and raced back toward the Silver Meteor Army, showing once more the intelligence of the breed.

The air bubble around Elen burst, taking the last vestiges of the last fire attack from her, and she twisted around, using another standing to one side of the dragon as it turned, lashing out with claws and then another fire attack. This time, Arifar's air magic became not a circle, but a wall, pushing back the fire Dragon blast backward into its mouth.

This didn't do the fire Dragon any damage. After all, its stomach and throat were proof against the dragon's own fire. But the blowback left the Prani unable to breathe fire for a moment due to blowback. The next second, Arifar's attack enveloped the Prani, as Elen shouted, "Ley Adimos!"

Like the Suro back in the Battle of Mosheim, the Prani soon found itself torn apart.

As dragon bits fell all around her, Elen's horse turned back and was soon nuzzling into her back. "I know, that was rather quick, wasn't it," she murmured, turning to her horse and pulling herself up into the saddle, shaking her head. "Unfortunately, the next one isn't going to be as easy."

With that, Elen turned to look toward the Gara Dova. But the largest of the three dragons had already started toward her, covering the distance faster than she had expected. "Crap. When I tell you, run, alright?"

Her horse whinnied even as it shifted from a near-standing start into a full charge. Not a minute later, Elen barked out, "Now!" the horse instantly turned, and she launched herself from the saddle, intercepting a much thinner, much weaker ball of fire cutting through it with a slice from Arifar.

But to her shock, Elen's return shot was absorbed by the Gara Dova's armor. Before this, the armor on the dragons had seemed an affectation, something to show Thenardier's troops that they were tame. No matter how thick the armor, it was next to nothing to the dragon's

scales. But this time, the armor seemed to suck in Elen's magic in a way she had never seen before, and Elen gaped at it, her eyes wide. "That's impossible!"

Then the Gara Dova lunged forward faster than the other dragon had moved. One of its long necks reached for her while its other head swept in from the side. Shaking herself out of her momentary shock, Elen leaped into the air, using Arifar's power to fly upwards, then lash out with an attack at the head of the dragon, which wasn't covered by armor.

But while the air slash did strike the dragon on the side of the head, the attack didn't do anything but annoy it, and she was nearly bitten in half for her troubles. This dragon was not only faster but had a far faster reaction time than either of the others Elen had fought. "No wonder these Gara Dovas are the Kings of the dragon," she muttered subdued, flipping herself through the air but not fast enough to avoid the other head coming in from the side.

Elen found herself smacked out of the air like a child's ball, crashing into the ground with bone-numbing force. The next second she was sent flying backward, her clothing in tatters as arcs of pain spread across her body from a blow delivered by the dragon's front paw. Landing heavily on her back, it was all Elen could do to roll away from an attempt to stomp her into the mud of the battlefield.

"Thank god for the toughness training Ranma put me through this past winter. And here I thought he was just a sadist!" Arifar came up, stabbing forward into the side of the dragon's stomach, but the metal of the armor there robbed the attack of its force, and Elen quickly

Again and again, Elen attacked only to find her strikes doing nothing. Only once, when she struck the dragon's tail, did the dragon even seem to feel it. The strike seemed to enrage the dragon further, and the Gara Dova's attacks became more frenzied, harder to predict. Elen was sent flying more than once by the dragon's strikes, only Arifar's wind-based shield and her toughness training keeping her in the fight.

But as she wearily pushed herself to her feet once more, Elen saw Ranma's ploy and smirked, seeing his plan was working. *So I've got to keep the Gara Dova's attention on me.* Once more, Arifar's gem glowed, and Elen rose into the air, darting forward.

OOOOOOO

Behind the battle, Drekvac too saw what was going on and had been trying to grab the attention of the plodding Suro as it was led slowly towards the other dragon. But it wasn't responding to his mental pressure and Drekvac dared not let his demonic aura out, surrounded by so many humans and with a Vanadis nearby. *The Vanadis must not learn that my race still exists, not until we are ready. But damn it, that means the dragons will soon turn on one another. I cannot stop it!*

Still, he reflected, looking closer at the battle between the Gara Dova and the wilder of Arifar. The Gara Dova is proving more than a match for the Vanadis. Even better, its armor is performing very well too. That is excellent to know, whatever happens today.

OOOOOOO

No longer interested in actually attacking the creature, Elen zipped in and out, using Arifar's power to stay in the air and move fast. In and out and around she went. Not needing to bother with attacking and not worried about defense let her use Arifar's magic to move much faster than before.

For many of the watching soldiers, it was like watching a small sparrow trying to worry at a bear. The bear couldn't hit the sparrow thanks to its speed. But, neither could the sparrow hurt the bear. Instead, it simply bothered the bear, causing the bear to concentrate solely on taking it out.

Of course, the soldiers on either side of the battle didn't have much time to worry about this. By this point, they had their own concerns.

For his part, the sight made Ranma jealous the instant he saw it. "Oh, now that just ain't fair. How come Elen gets to fly, but I haven't figured out a ki technique to do that yet?"

Elen heard this and laughed. "Oh, don't be like that. I'm sure you'll figure out something eventually." Even as Elen spoke, she turned her attack slightly around the Gara Dova, leading it to the side toward the Suro.

The two dragons crashed together, and instantly the Suro tried to bite at the other one, gnawing at one of its legs as its front claws sliced long gashes into one of the Gara Dova's legs.

At the same time, one of the Gara Dova's heads darted down, biting deep into the armor of the Suro's back, the armor not stopping the attack much, although the larger dragon was unable to get at the more vulnerable neck or head. Claws gouged, blood spurted, and Elen laughed again as she landed on the top of one of the heads, trying to stab Arifar's down into its I again.

This time it worked, and the second head lost one of its eyes, although she was flung clear, so quickly and so fast that she couldn't then dodge away from the thin stream of fire the dragon sent her way. Elen defended herself with Arifar but still found herself falling, only to be grabbed out of the air by Ranma. Ranma flipped the two of them and landed, setting Elen on her feet and the two of them looked at one another.

Ranma looked at the Vanadis in his arms, blushing brightly as he noticed that Elen was covered more by bruises than clothing at this point, the dragon's attacks having done a number

on her combat uniform. Hastily he set her down, then pulled out a shirt from his ki space.
“Here.”

Rolling her eyes, Elen pulled the borrowed shirt, one of Ranma’s silk shirts, over herself.
“It’s not like the dragon cares, Ranma. Or is it that hard for you to ignore it yourself,” she teased.

“Bah, more like I don’t want ya flashing yer boobs at two whole armies. Heh, where’s your dignity as a Vanadis!?” Ranma asked, trying to pitch his voice to sound like Ludmilla.

Elene burst out laughing as she finished pulling down the shirt, hefting Arifar up from where she had stabbed the blade into the dirt below them. She then looked back at the two monsters fighting nearby. “So, she would we just retreat and let them...”

That was as far as she got before one of the legs on that side of the Gara Dova was able to dislodge the Suro’s bite from his leg. A large chunk of flesh came with it, but the dragon was freed once more, and now both heads darted down. They grabbed at either side of the Suro’s neck and tore.

The sound this made was like the noises of shattering stone and warping metal mixed in a rather unholy union. A second later, the Suro’s head came entirely off, flopping to the ground at the Gara Dova’s feet.

“Yeah, so much for that idea,” Ranma grumbled, crouching down as his eyes flitted over the Gara Dova, looking for weaknesses besides the eyes.

“It’s entirely immune to my powers. I tried to attack it dozens of times before I saw what you were up to, but nothing worked. That armor it’s wearing sucks up my attacks somehow,” Elen admitted, working out the kinks in her shoulders and neck as the Gara Dova turned its attention on the two warriors once more.

“Is it just the armor?” Ranma asked as the two of them darted forward. The Gara Dova lowered its heads to meet them, one had darting towards Ranma, the other towards Elen. Both attackers leaped up and over it, but unlike the Suro, this one could follow that movement, standing upright again and lashing out with fire towards them.

Ranma grunted in pain as the flames hit him, and yet the heat of them didn’t bother him. *Okay, so that’s been proven. Good to know for the future. That is if I survive long enough to make use of it anyway.* Landing on the ground, Ranma kicked off quickly, racing upwards again. His blow caught the dragon on the snout, doing no real harm, but snapping his neck upright

Elen darted in with a whoop, slashing at its neck. Arifar’s edge, made to be unnaturally sharp even without his wind power, still did nothing, the magic of it being sucked away by the armor. And as sharp as Arifar’s was normally, magically honed that edge to an impossible degree like all the edges of the holy weapons.

Yet it did nothing to the scales of the dragon. Instead, her attack did nothing, and she was flung away the next second. Stopping her fall in midair made Elen completely open for another blast from the other head. Only Ranma's hasty Moko Takabisha crashing into the head, sending the head sideways from its initial angle caused it to hit Elen in her side, hurling her down into the ground rather than biting her in half.

The blow was still hard, though, one of the worst she'd had yet and Elen crashed into the ground, wincing at the pain, even as she rolled with it. "Damn, that's gonna leave a mark."

Meanwhile, Ranma had landed on the dragon's back, his fists pummeling into metal and scale alike. His hands started to hurt once more, skin fraying away, under the multiple impacts just like before. However, the metal of the creature's armor was dented by his assault before he was shaken off.

Yet like Elen before him, Ranma wasn't able to dodge the next attack, the whiplike tail slamming into his side, and he grunted as he was hurled through the air. "Holy crap!" he shouted at the top of his lungs before he slammed into the ground nearby, rolling as he did. "That's about as hard as I've ever been hit."

Elen raced to them, a tight grin on her face. "Welcome to my world, Ranma."

The two of them looked back at the dragon as both heads roared, sending out fire towards them, which Elen dealt with by a wave of her sword. "This isn't going to be easy."

"No, but I think I know a way through. That thing's armor isn't up to stopping my fists, whatever its anti-magic properties. If I remove it..."

"You remove its anti-magical properties. That'll do," Elen nodded, and the two of them stood up again, charged forwards as one towards the dragon.

OOOOOO

Having fallen back to his observation tower after he attempted to flank the Knightly Order's own such assault, Duke Thenardier stared at the battlefield. In particular, he scanned behind the Silver Meteor Army as much as he could and to the side just at the edge of his vision where the Knightly Order's mounted contingents were reorganizing themselves again.

Behind him, his men on the left flank were doing much the same, restoring order on the left flank from the battle there. Unmolested thus far, the right flank still stood firm, and the center too shifted away once more from where it had bunched up against the left flank.

The knights had cost him something like three thousand to four thousand men, Thenardier estimated, but he had beaten them off, and he had cost them in turn, at least five hundred knights, likely more lay dead along with his soldiers.

He had already taken in the battle around the Gara Dova at a glance. One way or the other, he couldn't do anything there. Feeding troops into that kind of maelstrom would serve no purpose.

But with the two other dragons dead and the Gara Dova keeping Ranma from performing whatever had decimated the armies of Muozinel, that allowed him to assault the main rebel army. He turned his spyglass in that direction, seeing the flash of the princess's armor once more, smirking slightly. *Regin styles herself a commander of soldiers now? After the debacle on the Dinant Planes? That is bad comedy. She and Vorn will learn what a true warlord can do.*

He turned his head to gaze at his own army thinking, then deciding within an instant. His left flank had been badly mauled, but it was reforming. And while his center had taken casualties, he still outnumbered the enemy. "Signal the army. Heavy cavalry will form to the left flank between it and the Knightly Orders. I will join them soon. The infantry will advance in two wide columns, moving around the battle in the center. I want this understood. You are not to become within arrow's reach of that fight. Steer clear of it but attack the enemy as best you can.

All of his present subordinates and Thenardier missed Steid. This would have been a much smoother operation if he were here instead of off leading the light cavalry attack. As it was, it caused a minor delay, shifting into two columns moving forward.

With that done, Thenardier turned his attention to the knights once more, leaving the platform. It was time for this battle to end.

OOOOOOO

Tigre watched the battle unfolding, worried for all that he seemed calm. Watching his two friends fight it out with the dragons was nerve-wracking. And seeing an opportunity to snipe Thenardier pass him by on the flank was frustrating. But he thought Thenardier would stay well away from the flank, controlling the army from his observation platform as Steid dealt with the assault.

Unfortunately, while he could see the observation platform, it was only in the range of his bow if the Black Bow's spirit was willing to cooperate. And at the moment, it didn't seem to be.

Seeing the enemy army reforming and moving towards them was actually a bit of a relief, and he turned in his saddle, shouting out commands to the buglers there, ordering not only the Silver Meteor Army's regular units but the men of the nobles who had joined them since the Gap campaign and the infantry from the Perche, Lutece and the Order of the Holy Rose.

Given their disparate ranks, Regin should have been the one doing this, even if the orders themselves came from Tigre. Tigre was, after all, a mere Earl. But seeing Regin nodding her head to every order he gave, and keeping her horse directly next to his, none of the various lords were going to argue. Instead, they too smiled to themselves as they moved to obey the low-ranked Earl as if he too was a Duke. It looked as if he might be bypassing that rank for an even more illustrious one in the future. If they won the battle, that is.

Soon, the Silver Meteor Army was prepared. The Pike companies moved from the center of the front line to either side of their position as the horse archers raced forward to engage the incoming enemy in a swirling dance of hit and run type combat. The heavy infantry formed up in a line between the two pike companies, bolstered by the infantry companies from the Knightly Orders, who moved forward with the assurance of trained, experienced veterans going about their business. In the center around Tigre and Regin on their horses were the remaining archers of the Silver Meteor Army, a force several thousand strong, bolstered by the archers the various nobles had retained to their control rather than releasing them for service in the army.

Behind them and to the flanks were the men-at-arms the nobles had brought with them, the men who had only been trained with the rest of the Silver Meteor army in fits and starts throughout the winter. Many had been elevated to Knighthood by Regin, and Tigre knew they would fight courageously but would lack the discipline of the real Silver Meteor Army troops.

The movements bar the movement of the noble's troops was done quickly and efficiently, but seeing Regin wearing a conflicted expression, Tigre smiled, reaching over to take Regin's hand, squeezing it once more. "Don't worry. Thenardier might have more men, but he is not ever going to outfight this army. With the dragons out of the way, it will come down to willpower, and people fighting for the rightful Queen will always outfight people fighting for someone who rules through fear and oppression."

"Thank you, Tigre," Regin smiled at his attempt to bolster her spirits. "It is just, we are all, well for the most part anyway, people of Brune. We shouldn't be fighting one another. This isn't like the fight against Muozinel. This is the first time I see Brunemen fighting one another through my actions. I know that is only half the tale, yet, even so, I can't say I am not looking forward to this."

Tigre might have corrected her at any other time, considering that he blamed Thenardier and Ganelon for all the troubles besetting Brune in the past year and even before that. But right now, he had to concentrate on the battle, as their allied heavy cavalry reformed once more, coming close to fire their crossbows before wheeling away when Thenardier's heavy cavalry tried to close. "They won't win the battle there. Thenardier's there himself, drat it. And he has a large advantage in numbers, three to one at least. But they've pinned the heavy calvary in place, so we won't be flanked ourselves. That's good."

He stopped speaking for a moment as he spotted what looked like an officer, an infantryman wearing better armor than his fellows at the front of the battle. An instant later, when the horse archers once more pulled back, the Black Bow was in Tigre's hand, and he was aiming towards the officer. For any other man in the world, perhaps even Ranma, the enemy officer would still have been several hundred yards out of range. To Tigre, it was a difficult shot, but...

A second later, that man fell, Tigre's arrow having taken him through the narrow eye slit.

A moment later, as that portion of the attacking formation faltered a bit, several other men fell to the horse archers' arrows. But the enemy had archers also, so the cavalry troops were taking fire in turn. Saddles were starting to empty, even though the horse archers, trained by Tigre and now led by Rurick, had adopted the same kind swirl in, retreat and attack again style of warfare that had so flummoxed the Muozineli.

Three more arrows flew from Tigre as the enemy army advanced, but then, with a scream Regin tugged at his arm, shouting, "Behind us, the camp!"

Tigre turned, twisting in the saddle, staring down the slight slope towards the distant camp.

OOOOOO

Ever since they had left the main army, Steid and Duke Thenardier's light cavalry had done everything they could to move out of the area where the Silver Meteor Army troops were operating against their fellows. Nearly two thousand strong, they had moved directly west, then down south and around, moving mainly at night even after Steid was certain they had gotten away undetected.

With no subcommanders he could trust or maps to aid in creating a regroup point, Steid had been forced to do it this way, keeping his troops together entirely. However, thanks to a full moon, none of them had lost their way, and he had only lost fourteen men and horses to mishaps along the way. And even better, the Silver Meteor Army had grown complacent. They only had a paltry screen out around them, and as it became clear that Thenardier was courting a full-scale battle, that too had faded out.

The day of the battle had proven quite frenetic for Steid and his men, a hard march the night before followed by Steid himself leading the men forward in small groups to a copse of trees behind the Silver Meteor Army's camp. Which itself was only a few hundred yards away from this side of the battlefield. The work was slow and had only begun when the Silver Meteor

Army had drawn into combat formation, though it had sped up a bit after the sound of the dragons roaring reached him.

Now, as the sounds of combat grew louder over the slight hill on which the Silver Meteor Army was situated, Steid climbed back down from the tree he had been using to observe events. "Form up in groups of twenty. Be ready to spread out the instant we get out of the tree line. We'll wash over the camp first, then hit the back of the false princess's lines like a boar through glass."

It wouldn't be that simple, of course, but after days in the saddle, moving at night and little rations, Steid was aware he had to keep his men's spirits up. Indeed, he was rather worried that the lack of food, coming once more after the events in the campaign against Ganelon, would have a detrimental impact on their combat ability. Yet there was nothing for it now.

Several men grinned avariciously, one of them even going so far as rubbing his hands together, but he stopped as Steid glared at him. "We will kill everyone we come across. We will not stop to loot, simply kill and move through their camp to attack the army from behind. Is that understood?"

"Just the people or the animals as well, sir?" said one of the more serious of the officers.

Steid thought about it for a second, then shook his head. "Just the people. We cannot afford to let the main Silver Meteor Army have any time to prepare for our charge. But we can use torches," he ordered, pointing at a group of his troops, all of whom quickly made up some quick torches from scattered foliage. What they couldn't kill, they would destroy.

Quickly, the light cavalry was on its way. The instant they were out of the woods, Steid bellowed the command, the group moving at a quick trot, then charging the last hundred yards as the enemy camp roused itself to its peril.

A second later, they were hitting the few pickets left behind, cutting them down. One of them tried to fight back, holding up two of Steid's men with a but he was quickly slain, and then the light cavalry was in and among the man behind in camp. They sliced this way and that at the camp followers, nobles who had remained in the camp, and various servants and cooks.

OOOOOOO

Tigre stared, horrified, but not at the implications of this assault. That barely registered in the face of the personal cost it might extract. "Titta! No!"

Putting spurs to his force, Tigre tried to push his way through the archers and other men around him as they too became aware of what was going on. Discipline broke for some of the men, who raced back themselves in an attempt to defend their lords or friends among the camp workers.

But even as he did so, he knew that he would be too late. *No! No! Titta!*

A voice spoke in his head, then, a voice he knew came from his Black Bow, the timbre of it the same as the laughter he had heard from it and the few words he could remember from the Battle of Molsheim. ***“Would you save her if you could? What would you give to do so?”***

“Anything,” came the instant reply from Tigre, as he paused, frustrated in his attempt to push through the men around him to race to the camp’s defense. Even now, the flanks of the enemy light cavalry assault had turned inwards and were racing up the slight hill to the army’s back. The archers around him were taking them under fire, but the attack from the front had just reached their range as well, and the archers were forced to split their fire.

“Swear it. Swear it on your blood.”

“I swear it. Take for me what you will. I will pay the price, so I swear on the name of Vorn.”

The voice laughed, a tone of good-humored yet perhaps somewhat nasty delight, and yet, when it spoke, the voice was serious. **“The contract has been made Tigre of the house of Vorn.”**

Instantly, the Black Bow began to gleam with dark cobalt and black light. **“Use it. Use my power now, and save your girl.”**

At any other time, Tigre would have protested using the words ‘your girl’ to describe Titta. But now, he simply nodded, put an arrow to his string, and pulled back, staring into the wreckage of the camp. Instantly he picked out Steid, but he wasn’t Tigre’s target. Instead, he was looking for Titta.

A moment later saw her, racing away from two men chasing her on horseback, while the others were starting to reform, having slain everyone they could, moving to join their fellows in the assault on the army’s rear. Men there were already dying, but that too didn’t matter to Tigre. **“Titta, duck!”**

Tigre didn't know how his voice carried over the growing tumult around the army and the carnage around Titta. Perhaps it was another sign of the favor of whatever deity had blessed his weapon? Who knew? But somehow, Titta had looked up at just the right time to hear him.

Now she dove forward, her hands over her head. The next second, the arrow lashed over her head at around chest height to a man on a horse.

The energy of the arrow had been scintillating black and dark blue as it flew, and then when it struck one of the men chasing Titta, the arrow seemed to explode, hurling men and horses alike in every direction, their bodies riven. The man who had been the target of the arrow had simply disappeared.

Steid had seen the blinking black and blue lights on the hill and leaped off his horse, shouting out for his men to get off their horses, to get out of the way. Many had obeyed, but more than half had not, and died in that instant, horses and men alike torn to pieces by the magical assault. Most of the others lost control of their mounts and were hurled from the saddle to land with neck-breaking force on the ground. Others still were just simply unhorsed instead of being slain.

Looking around, Steid took stock of what he could see of the battle quickly from his position just on the other side of the enemy's former camp. Much of the destruction of that camp had ended with the deaths of the men who had been doing it, the wind of the magical assault having also put out the few fires they had already begun. He had lost several hundred men in that attack, and most of the rest of his men were unhorsed now. Yet they still were behind the enemy's rear and still armed. "CHARGE! For Duke Thenardier and Brune's true ruler!"

While Tigre had been going desperate at the danger to Titta – who, being no fool, was hiding among the camp's wreckage now - Mashas had begun to reform the army as best he could to face this new attack. But Steid had timed his assault perfectly. The horse archers had given away, shifting to the sides, their quivers empty and were now peeling out and away from the battle. The two columns of Thenardier's army had charged the last few hundred yards, crashing into the front line to either flank, spreading towards one another and putting pressure on the center and sides.

The pikemen couldn't pull back. Trying to maneuver the pikes like this was next to impossible once they were engaged on one front. Elen's men held the pike company's flanks, curling back slightly. The front, too, was holding strong. But all of this meant that the men-at-arms of the allied nobles and the relatively inexperienced but well-trained skirmishers to fighting the light cavalry. Men began to die

The archers of the Silver Meteor Army were still killing men in droves, but the damage was done.

Worse was the impact Tigre's attack took out of him. As soon as the arrow had left his bow, Tigre gasped, shuddering as something was torn out of him. *Is that my life energy that Ranma's always talking about! By the gods, I feel like I just tried to run a marathon after fasting for a month!* He slumped in his saddle, nearly dropping his bow, and might well have done so if

not for Regin grabbing it and his arm, stopping his slump and moving her horse against his, pulling Tigre against her.

The Silver Meteor Army was now beset on nearly all sides, with its leader unable to effectively command for now. The back of the Silver Meteor Army, which had never formed into an actual line, began to buckle as men died. The more disciplined units held their ground together, but the men-at-arms holding the rear started to break, falling back into the army's formation, stumbling into the archers and ruining their formations in turn. They even pushed them back into their fellows at the front, a cascade of disorganization.

Across from them, Duke Thenardier saw this and bellowed in triumph and was about to order his heavy cavalry in before his shout of triumph turned to one of anger. The Knightly Orders had reformed and were now coming in again, having pulled so far back they had circled around behind his heavy cavalry, almost to his infantry. And this wasn't a spoiling assault like the last one. Their crossbows were slung this time, and their lances couched.

"Dammit!" he bellowed out commands, and his own heavy cavalry pulled from the flank and around. The two cavalry forces crashed together with a sound that rang out over all the other sounds of the battlefield, and Thenardier could no longer follow the main battle.

Without his cavalry to envelop the enemy line, the back of the Silver Meteor Army started to regroup against the dismounted light cavalry. For all their fury, none but Steid were armored in anything beyond brigandine armor, and few even had that. The harder they pushed forward, the more died.

Slowly, Tigre came back to himself. Surveying the battlefield, he saw how events were unfolding and how Lord Mashas had taken command at the back with a few other nobles, both Gerard and Hughes fighting alongside him, although he saw many other nobles lying on the field where they fell. Pushing away from Regin, he thanked her in a low voice.

Then he pulled another arrow out of his quiver with a shaky hand, looking around for Steid. He was attempting to reach Mashas, cutting men down with almost frightening ease as a force of forty men followed him, pushing deeper into the Silver Meteor Army's formation. But Tigre refused to let that happen. "Not today, Steid."

He began to bellow orders to his archers, shifting their attention entirely onto the light cavalry, letting the pike and the others fight it out for the front. "Aimed fire, not volley!"

The archers with that order started to snipe through or over their fellows using their higher position on the small hill. The light cavalry fell in groups of four or five, and then as they faltered, Tigre let fly.

Steid had just cut down the last armsmen between him and the old Knight Steid, but he didn't even have time to gasp before the arrow impacted the side of his forehead. He was dead instantly, collapsing where he had been standing.

Without Steid to inspire them, the light cavalry either broke or died to a man within seconds. And finally, Tigre and the Silver Meteor Army had enough time to reform.

Tigre shouted orders, pulling the men back and further up the hill into an ever-tighter defensive formation. The two pike companies slowly shifted sideways towards one another, the men of the Knightly Orders pulling back in squads to bolster the sides, where many of Elen's troopers had died, along with many of the armsmen and Silver Meteor Army irregular infantry. The depth of the front line wasn't what he wanted, in no way, shape or form, but it was holding on that front, for now, letting Mashas and the few surviving nobles to reform the army's rear.

Yet even as his archers went to work on the frontal assault once more, men were starting to break through that Pike line, attacking the men behind the pikes. Looking around, from his vantage point on the horse, even as he fired his bow so fast that he emptied two quivers, and his fingers began to tingle, Tigre knew that they were in danger of being entirely enveloped. Once that happened, the enemy's numbers would wear them down.

Elsewhere, both Ranma and Elen had taken hits from the dragon. It was a lot faster than the others, and even with one eye gone, thanks to Elen, it still had three of them. But Ranma's plan to remove the armor finally worked as the battle elsewhere began to turn against the Silver Meteor Army. As Elen watched from above the dragon, the armor to the dragon finally broke in places. Soon those places became the majority as Ranma continued to tart in, pummeling the armor so hard it sounded like a group of children going mad on a church bell.

With a final resounding clang, the largest piece of armor fell off the dragon, and Elen raised Arifar above her head. "Ley Adimos!"

The dragon died, the slice from Elen's sword chopping through both heads at once, almost covering Ranma with blood. He glared at her, and she shrugged apologetically before turning her attention to the larger battle, her teeth clenching even as she ignored how battered and weary her body was at the moment. "We need to get involved quickly!"

Ranma looked around, then snarled as he saw Thenardier among the swirling chaos of the cavalry battle. "I have a date with Thenardier. You take his main army from behind."

Elen nodded firmly, whistled, and her horse appeared, having put some distance between itself and the conflict. Pulling herself wearily into the saddle, she patted the stallion's flanks as it whinnied at her worriedly. "Almost done. And then we can all rest."

With that, she charged towards the embattled silver meteor Army, hammering into the back of the attackers' lines, shouting out her fury. "Ley Adimos!"

Behind her, Ranma moved in the almost opposite direction, racing towards where Duke Thenardier had led his heavy cavalry against the Knights.

There, quantity was overwhelming quality, and Duke Thenardier cut down one knight before barreling his horse into that of another. The two of them exchanged blows, then Duke Thenardier ran him through, grabbing the man and flinging him in the path of another knight while turning to exchange blows with a man he recognized as Scheie, leader of the Lutece Knights. "You will pay for what you have done to our beloved country, Felix!"

"I have done nothing but remove the weakness rotting Brune from within, Scheie. After this turmoil passes and I am king, I will make Brune stronger than ever before! It is a pity you will not be alive to see it."

The man fought valiantly, but soon he was battered out of the saddle, unable to match Thenardier's strength. Thenardier was about to finish Scheie then he heard a shout from above him. "Death from above, bitch!"

Two feet slammed into Thenardier right between the shoulders with bone-numbing force, hurling Thenardier out of his saddle, and although he rolled with it, he felt his armor denting badly from the impact. Indeed, both shoulders now felt badly bruised, and he couldn't turn his neck without pain. Given Thenardier's insane levels of endurance to pain and injury, that was saying something.

When he looked up, he saw a Ranma, completely covered by dragon blood, perched in his saddle a second before the pigtailed warrior launched himself forward. "That was for Asher, Hard Ass."

"Am I supposed to know who that is?" Thenardier snarled. He then raised his weapon, slashing at Ranma. But Ranma ducked underneath it so fast that Thenardier couldn't do anything but raise the shield in his other hand, which shattered from a single blow.

Growling, Thenardier dropped the ruined remains at his feet, kicking it forward in an effort to halt Ranma in place. It worked, and Thenardier got his other hand on his sword, wielding it in both hands as he attempted to keep the other man away.

Within seconds, this attempt failed. A blow took Duke Thenardier in the side, his armor denting badly under the impact as he was sent stumbling back, his ribs shattering.

The next second, Ranma's blow smashed into Duke Thenardier's face, shattering bone and covering his face in blood, hurling him off his feet.

However, Duke Thenardier still retained his sword and thrust it up with all the strength of the desperate when Ranma charged him. *No, no, this blasted, gods cursed foreigner will not...*

But Ranma held out a hand, and the tip of the sword stabbed into his palm, penetrating straight through. Then Ranma wrenched his arm to one side as he kicked out, his foot hitting Thenardier's wrists. The sword, a blade he had made for this battle after Ranma had destroyed his family's blade, was wrenched out of his hand to land several feet away. And as Thenardier, defenseless now, watched, Ranma's hand glowed golden, healing before his eyes.

At that, Thenardier knew he had lost. Vorn and the princess had done a better job of gathering allies than Thenardier had servants, and it was over. Everything. He had rolled the dice for the game of thrones and lost the last throw. *But I will not go before that simpering bitch in chains!* "Finish it!" Thenardier growled.

Ranma grimaced but nodded, raising his foot and bring it down on Thenardier's head, crushing it beneath his heel.

Shaking his head, Ranma wiped his foot on the man's corpse, still dripping from dragon blood, then launched himself upwards, fists and feet flying in different directions, hurling three of Thenardier's men who had been pushing through the tumult to his aid from their saddles. "Duke Thenardier is dead! Duke Thenardier is dead! Surrender, or join him. Surrender, or join him!"

Soon this call was taken up by the men of the Knightly Orders, and beyond them, the rest of the Silver Meteor Army. With nothing to fight for, few surviving nobles or officers among their ranks and facing Ranma and Elen, without dragons to hide behind, the fight instantly started to go out of the Duke's army.

The battle was won, and the civil war of Brune was finally at an end.

OOOOOOO

The death toll after the battle was grim. Thanks to the charge from behind, several nobles and most of the retainers died. The armsmen who hadn't trained full time with the new volunteers over the winter had died nearly to a man bar those belonging to Mashas and the lord of Territoire. And even their men had taken a pounding.

The Silver Meteor Army's logistics corps had been wiped out bar Titta and two other survivors. Both cooks, they had hidden in their large pots as the attack began.

The horse archers had lost another four hundred men on top of the losses they had taken in the Gap. Elen's troopers had also taken losses, as had the heavy infantry, down to half their pre-battle strength and in no position to fight another battle. The pike companies had

been hammered, losing sixty men, although they were still combat-worthy. The irregular infantry who had seen battle in the mountains and then again at the end of the campaign, had been hammered worse than any other unit and were down to barely a fourth their original strength. The archers had lost forty-nine men dead, with several others wounded.

The Knightly Orders had also been mauled. They had killed at least two, maybe as much as three times their own number, but Thenardier's swift response to their attacks had cost them heavily.

Their infantry forces had also taken a pounding, although not as bad.

All in all, it was clear the Silver Meteor Army had come within a hairsbreadth of losing the battle despite Ranma and Elen having sidelined the dragons.

"That charge from behind, that was masterful! And so was the fact that they were even abler to be there, let alone the fact we had no idea they were out there," Tigre said, watching as Ranma worked on the wounded, grateful that Ranma was willing to do so after such a hard days' fighting.

"True. I have to think that maneuver came from Steid. He is known as Thenardier's right-hand man for a reason," Elen muttered. "Or was, I should say, seeing as they are both dead."

"So what now?" Ranma asked, not turning from his work. Working his way through the wounded on both sides was making him smile, making him push aside the last vestiges of guilt from what he had done in the Gap. *So long as I can heal, can help instead of kill, I will be alright, I think. I just have to remember that.*

"Now? The civil war's over. Regin will send a small force under Hughes and Lord Mashas to arrest Duke Thenardier's mother. She will be offered a choice, execution or banishment to a temple to Mosha. Her lands and that of Thenardier will be turned over to someone else. Beyond that, we're going to head to the capital to meet with the Prime Minister and, hopefully, the king."

Yeah, no. I don't want to be anywhere near Minister Punchable, Ranma thought to himself, although he was smiling and nodding as he did. *So all that's left is the mopping up and rebuilding, huh? Which means,* Ranma thought, as he healed a gut wound that would have seen the man dying in agony, *I'm done with Brune for now.*

It took several days for the army to recover once more and, most of all, for Ranma to finish healing the wounded. With the medics of the Silver Meteor Army dead, he had to train Thenardier's men up to their standard, which was very hard for various reasons. One man was executed for refusing to help a common-born Silver Meteor Army trooper. Another was found stealing from the patients.

But eventually, the wounded were all cared for as best Ranma could do. Those who couldn't walk were placed in carts, loaned by a few local peasants. Others came forward to help, being paid from the pay chest of Thenardier's army. The princess herself paid them, and the peasants watched in shock as she pitched in to help wherever needed around the army. The rumors about this spread almost as fast as the tales of Regin's victory, and more help came in every day until finally, the army was ready to move on.

As for the prisoners, they had their armor and weapons stripped off and placed in a giant pile. Lord Emil assigned half his men to watch it until more carts could be organized to come and pick it up.

With all of that accomplished, the Silver Meteor Army, the few surviving nobles and the Knightly Orders marched on the capital. Word had already arrived from the Prime Minister, who formally acknowledged Regin as the princess, telling her that Nice would be open to her army.

Hearing about that one evening, as they set up camp, Ranma could only shake his head. "I still have an issue with that asshole, you know. And this whole on the fence stuff he's done, I don't like that at all."

"I understand your feelings, Ranma, But Badouin is kind of necessary to keep the country running, you know," Tigre drawled.

"Agreed," Regin said with a weary nod. "I realize that from your perspective, his actions seem cowardly, but..." she shook her head. "One thing that I learned long before I was sent to the Dinant Plains is that the honor of an individual cannot be the same as the honor of someone serving a throne or sitting on one. We must do what is best for the nation."

"That might've been profound sounding if we weren't talking about an asshole coward," Ranma grumbled.

Regin ignored this regally, going on with her explanation as if the pigtailed warrior hadn't interrupted her. "And his neutrality allowed the lands around the capital to rebuild, from the disaster I led our army into and the infighting that resulted around Nice afterward. Brune will need those lands, and Nice too, intact and producing goods as we go forwards into Autumn."

This became apparent as they came closer to the capital. For the first time in a while, the troopers saw people out in the fields. Dozens of farmers looked up as the army moved along the road towards Nice. As they came closer, Regin saw that Nice's outer walls were festooned with people cheering, throwing garlands, and shouting in triumph.

As they were about to enter the city, the army paused, with a carriage moving forward as the Silver Meteor Army units dressed their lines and moved into what could charitably be called parade formation. The open-top carriage had been sent to them by the Prime Minister

the day before, and now Regin sat in it, resplendent in a white dress and tiara, as Tigre shifted uncomfortably as he sat beside her. "Are you sure that Elen can't join us?" he asked.

"Positive," the princess replied firmly. She is a foreign national and a Vanadis, a deadly enemy to Brune. Regardless of your agreements with her..." the princess ground out, "and be certain that I will be looking for any loopholes in that agreement Lord Tigre. I will have you freed of that woman's clutches."

Sitting next to her lord, Titta was dressed in her normal maid's outfit, although her hair had been done in a new style falling all around her head in loose ringlets. She nodded her head in firm agreement with the princess, and Tigre sighed, leaning back and looking down at his clothing uncomfortably. "I suppose the same can be said for this outfit. I feel somewhat ridiculous right now."

Then Regin smiled at him as they passed into the city proper, and a wall of noise hit them. Cheering, shouting, shouting for the Lord marksman, shouting for good princess Regin, for the victorious princess, and more were heard amongst the tumult, and for a few moments, Regin busies herself with waving at the crowd.

Then, Regin happened to look behind the carriage, only to have to stop herself from frowning. Instead, she employed a skill she had learned years ago, speaking without her mouth seeming to move from its faint, welcoming smile. "Tigre, I see Elen back there, Scheie, Emil, Mashas, and the others. But I don't see Ranma. Where has he gone off to? I realize Ranma has an independent streak but this is ridiculous!"

Tigre didn't even bother to look behind him, he simply kept on smiling the tiny smile and wave that Regin and Titta had drilled him on over the past few days. *I wonder how long I can do this before my arm starts to hurt. Will it be a longer or shorter time than if I was shooting my bow?* Aloud, Tigre said simply, "He's gone."

"What do you mean 'gone'? He, you and Elen to a lesser extent, are supposed to be given awards, riches. The gratitude of a nation. I am going to be knighting Ranma and giving him land," Regin nearly snarled, her self-control still in place, though somewhat fraying as she turned to look at Tigre.

"I understand why you want to," Tigre said, "but Ranma, well, he was fighting for friendship's sake alone, Your Highness. He made a kind of promise to me, Titta, and the rest of us. He would stay until Thenardier and Ganelon were dealt with. And then Muozinel invaded. So we just added them to our list of enemies. Now, Thenardier is dead, and Ganelon is gone. So Ranma is free to leave."

"He couldn't have waited?" Regin pouted a little. "A lot of people are going to ask questions, you know!"

“Ranma said goodbye to Elen and me last night. Or rather, he left a note on my bed that I found this morning,” Tigre answered ruefully. The fact he had been in Elen’s bed all night letting Ranma have the opportunity to leave that note was not something he was going to share with anyone, let alone Regin.

“And I rather think that all of this, the crowds, your desire to give him land, the questions, all of that is why Ranma isn’t here. I told you, he doesn’t care about accolades or money or power. Ranma fought for friendship’s sake. And now that the fighting’s done, he’s gone.”

Regin had to look away lest she start scowling, but even as she restarted waving at the crowd, she acknowledged the fact that matched with what she knew of the cursed warrior. But almost all her advisors had indicated that tying Ranma to the crown was something she had to do, much like with Tigre if on a less personal level. “Where would he go then?”

Tigre shrugged. “To Lim, Valentina, or Sofya, I suppose. Whichever Ranma can find first, or perhaps whichever he thinks is in danger.”

At that, Regin sighed then went back to smiling at the crowd and waving. “In that case, I suppose his fate is out of our hands now. But don’t you dare try to run away as well, Tigrervurmud Vorn. I have plans for you too...”

OOOOOO

By the time Regin and the others were entering Nice, Ranma was already crossing Resia, having traveled through the night nonstop. He thought that perhaps ignoring the fact the princess and told him he would be a part of the whole ceremony today might make the princess send people after him and Ranma really didn’t want to humiliate anyone at the moment.

The nightmares had finally stopped after he had spent days healing those wounded in the final battle against Thenardier. That and the fight against the dragon had put everything into perspective for Ranma.

And now, he was free. If Tigre was ever in trouble, Ranma figured he would come back and help, but right now, being away from obligations, from even his friends, suited him just fine. *And besides, I’ve always wanted to see how it in passable those mountains really are,* he thought to himself, beginning to laugh as he sped up his pace, racing away towards the Voyes Mountains and perhaps his next adventure.

End Chapter

