This chapter has been edited by *Hiryo* for his Ranma-mastery, and *Michael* for his skill with spotting mistakes large and small.

**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 yelped, 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, haahahahha! 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.”

“Hmmf,” 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.”

“Mmhmm, 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.

“Weeeeelll, 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 cavalrymen 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!”

**OOOOOOO**

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.

Ellen 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 hisThousand 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.

 “Hmmf,” 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 Drekavac 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,” Drekavac 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.

**OOOOOOO**

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 to 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 lock.”

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 the 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**

This has been edited by *Michael* and *Hiryo* now. Thank them both for their efforts please.

And now, canon is shot out of a cannon LOL!!!

**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. “Hmmf, 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.”

“Hmmf, 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?”

“Hmmmf, 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, Lavias 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 southeast 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 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 Togrun. 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 groused, 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 then 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 gulley. 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 head 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 armsmen.

 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 or 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, “Eleeeen. 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 Lavias 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 Lavias’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. “Hmmf, 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 Lavias 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 Lavias back, scowling. “Hmmf, 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, but your 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

This has been edited by *Hiryo*, and myself, but I don’t doubt that we missed small mistakes. Hopefully no large ones though, and I hope that you all enjoy the chapter, late though it is.

**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 among the most fertile areas on the continent, two of whom were deep, fast and wide enough that people 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 really 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 a muddy morass, 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. Yet 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 Alsacian 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.* Elen was even 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 and 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 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, in order 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 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 much faster than any of the others, and far more accurate to boot. 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, with the defenders caught 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 foolish enough 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 to remain this dilapidated. 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 begging permission. “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 to talk to and be around. 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 peasants, 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 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’re 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 when I have to trek through mud like this, 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, perforce 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 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 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 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 changed their plans 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 cavalrymen 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 cavalrymen 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.

“Hmmph, you’re 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 cavalrymen, 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 of the cavalrymen 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 that 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.”

“Hmmph, 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 as 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 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 back one hundred percent!*

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 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 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, soaked enough 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… 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 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 uncertain about romance and women in general given his other form, his general handsomeness and his abilities as a healer, but Sasha reflected it might be caused by his curse. *Perhaps he’s had problems with women because of it?* 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 that 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 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 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, as 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 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 that 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 for 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, which had allowed him to cut the doses. 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 even 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.

**OOOOOOO**

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 their rather short 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 drown 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, 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 that 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 as close as it was, coupled with 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 for the rest of the day,” 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 waggled 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 her hard enough she broke his grip and before 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 him 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 came 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 a spar, rather it was an ass-kicking. Ranma had very, **very** rarely been overmatched this 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 s 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 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 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.

**OOOOOOO**

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 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 that 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.”

**OOOOOOO**

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.

“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 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. 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 far enough 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. He had taken money to add something without 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 that 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 fast enough that Sofy began to have trouble keeping track.

“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.

*As 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 soooo 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… huh 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.

*Or… 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 was so uncouth as to not even seem to notice 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 and I have seen both those countries. I haven’t been into Mouzinel for obvious reasons, thus I suppose you could be from there, but your coloration certainly doesn’t match the men of Mouzinel I’ve seen.”

“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 take notes about Ranma’s ability to heal Sasha. 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. It just makes sense traveling together.” She was 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 and 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 that 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 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. 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 also 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 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 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 several generations, or the holder of Muma for being 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, thus 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.”

**OOOOOOO**

“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 and he was a knight. Therefore 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 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 trying 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 two 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 powerful and learned, a master politician and general, 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.*

**OOOOOOO**

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 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 as 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 by the king to do that. No, Valentina had investigated Ruslan’s death because she had genuinely respected him, and while she had not had any passionate desires to him, she saw Ruslan 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 this 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 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 Lavias 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 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, enough that Sasha had to strain to hear her despite just being across the table from 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 as 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 that 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 move in that shadow world even if I wanted to. 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 quite frightened at the moment, doing so would be disastrous. “That is more than acceptable. Indeed,” she said with a smile that was 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?”

**OOOOOOO**

“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. 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 sure he would be able to remain unseen up a tree this time of year given his red hair. He had instead 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.

**OOOOOOO**

“Lord Roland, we have incoming horsemen!” shouted one of the new his light cavalrymen, 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 calvary 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 Calvary 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 get your orders from the King himself? And if not, how can you be 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 new 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 is 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 that 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, I don’t want to be surprised by any further 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. Now, 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 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 that 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 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 turned back to Ranma and watched as a blast of cerulean energy flashed out from his 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 from 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 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.

From that beginning 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. They 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. 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. “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 tried to keep track of 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, 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. 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. “You’re the first man I’ve used it on.”

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 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 damaged those dams, this area will never be the same, rather it will become a quagmire.” 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 that negligent dealing with Tigre’s arrows from his Black Bow 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 he should have. Instead, Tigre had flipped himself up and around his horse, 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.

**OOOOOOO**

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 bake 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 day 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 is 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 that 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 his 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 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 hard enough to shatter it and then the rock behind it. But even then, he rolled with it, coming back in quickly.

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 that 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.

“GRAAAHHH!!! 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 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 heavy, far heavier than it looked (which was saying something. A normal woman with her build should never have been able to lift it.

But Sofy managed with some difficulty, 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**