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 south was a large town called Territoire, ruled by a Lord Augre. He was Tigre’s current diplomatic target, since it was well known that he was deeply unhappy with the ongoing civil war. Ranma hadn’t entered his lands beyond talking to a few outlying farms, though Augre’s westernmost neighbor hadn’t been so lucky. Having heard from others that this man believed he could get away with raping and abusing his people, Ranma and his men had ambushed the man when he rode off to ‘inspect’ some of the farms. Neither the man nor his guards had survived that meeting.

That had happened a few days ago, and since then Ranma had discovered that the civil war had gone cold thanks to news of Zion’s defeat having begun to spread. With Thenardier’s attempt to utterly terrorize with the speed and ferocity of his forces having failed, both Ganelon and Thenardier were busy gathering allies and mustering forces now for a more serious clash. Thenardier was literally forcing his neighbors to choose between joining up with him or being wiped out.

*Not that Ganelon’s any better,* Ranma thought to himself as he marked down a few more details on his current map, which was about the lands of Brune just southwest of Mashas’s territory. Here the land of Counts really began, with each Count owning several large plantations and a single village or the equivalent. These lands produced most of the cotton, silk, and other such materials for Brune, and the lords here were far richer than those to the east, though not quite as much as the lords further west or southwest, which, Ranma had been told, was where the mines that produced metal, stone, and gems were located.

There were also a few larger rivers here, ones that needed bridges to cross. And Ganelon’s influence could be seen here all too easily. The burned out hamlets, the tales of men press-ganged into work forces and their women taken, abused, and sold into slavery abounded. It was a rich land, but right now all too much of it looked like 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 our disease is being helped along by a poison someone has fed you over time that further diluted your blood and thus your body’s ability to combat both the original disease and any flu or other simple diseases that came around.”

Hearing that Sasha’s post-orgasmic good feeling disappeared instantly and she bolted upright, shock and horror overcoming the past few moments of bliss. “What, who!?”

“I’ve got no idea. Although if I heal you and it gets out, well, then whoever has been doing it might act. Beyond that, it’s someone else’s problem. Healing you is mine,” Ranma said.

Frowning, Sasha nodded, struggling with the idea of someone in her employ—it had to be someone here in the castle: she had never lived long enough anywhere else—would have done this to her. She looked at the maids, who also looked horrified, and then to Lim. “Lim, go to my captain of the watch. Tell him to lock the castle down. No one gets in and no one gets out.”

Lim raced off at those words, and then Sasha turned to her two maids. “Natasha, go down to the kitchen and prepare a light meal. As you are doing so, talk about this young man and how he has told me he can heal me. Look at everyone’s expression as you do and see if you can spot anyone acting worried or out of the ordinary. Let’s see if we can startle the person who had betrayed me into doing something foolish.”

The maid called Natasha was the older of the two maids, a matronly woman with a dumpy sort of body but the eyes of a schemer behind a pair of small glasses. “Of course, milady. Any requests for the meal?”

Looking over at Ranma, she asked, “Do you need anything for this?”

Ranma nodded, standing up himself. “We’ll need water, several pitchers of it, but I’ll get those myself. Some oranges and a meal with garlic in it would be good, a light one for now, then a heavy steak or something after we’re done.” He snapped his fingers. “Oh, and a change of bedding will be needed at that point too, but first towels, a lot of them, and maybe a bucket or something. You’ll be sweating to get rid of the bad muck I can’t cleanse that way.”

 Honestly, Ranma was just guessing as to what would happen on Sasha’s end here, never having healed someone of something so major before which affected the entire body. But he felt it was a good guess.

Sasha nodded at the second maid to show Ranma where the water was and to send someone with some towels. By the time Ranma was back with two large barrels of water, Sasha had changed and was now lying naked on her bed covered by several towels. At the sight of that Ranma blushed and looked away. “Um, are you sure you’re all right with that?”

“Certainly. I don’t want to ruin my Vanadis uniform, after all,” Sasha said with a smile, pleased with Ranma’s reaction. She wasn’t interested in Ranma, not as something permanent anyway, he was far too childish seeming. But if his healing her affected her body the same way his ‘scan’ did, then she was going to go through with her vow of sleeping with the doctor who healed her she’d made a year ago, come what may.

“Wait, that thing was a uniform? You know what, never mind,” Ranma said, shaking his head and setting the barrels of water down against the far wall between the small bed table and the row of bookcases. “Let’s do this.”

Sasha wordlessly nodded, and Ranma sat on the bed next to her, noticing that her Viralt had been moved to lay on the bed next to her head, their blades crossed. They gleamed with some kind of light as Ranma glanced at them, but stilled as he turned his attention to Sasha. “All right. I’m going to start now, okay?”

 Flushing, Sasha found her body tightening up in anticipation, and she nodded. “Do it.”

 An instant later Ranma’s ki was flowing into Sasha, the warmth it brought rising within her, sending tingles throughout her body from his hand. *Oh my word, yes…* She bit back a moan, her head lolling back as she felt her body beginning to heat up.

 While Ranma’s ki did have the effect Sasha had felt the first time, that was not all. Her body temperature rose dramatically as if she was having a full body fever, and she began to sweat madly, like someone had tossed her into the world’s hottest smithy. Yet, as the heat rose, so too did the feeling of Ranma’s ki, and she began to moan, her body twisting this way and that, the feeling she was getting now well beyond what she had felt the first time.

 For his part, Ranma was again blind to this. His eyes were closed and he was concentrating on directing his ki into her body. First he sent a pulse towards her heart, cleaning it of any taint and reinforcing its strength for the duration of the operation. Then he moved to her lungs, doing the same there, then her intestines, and finally he began to slowly clear out the poison and the bad shit in her blood.

 At that point Sasha had already reached completion twice, but the feeling of her blood being cleaned like that was not nearly as pleasant, and she groaned as she turned to the side, regurgitating a very nasty looking kind of black and red paste from her mouth into the bowl that her maid had brought.

 Immediately her second maid, Jayne, rushed forward and held the bowl for her until Sasha stopped, then moved it away and helped her drink some water from a glass. Then fifteen more glasses, then even more as the feeling of Ranma’s ki running rampant through her body once more began to make Sasha whimper in pleasure. Jayne quickly changed out the now drenched towels with fresh ones and began to bathe Sasha’s forehead with another, blushing all the while at the sounds her mistress was making. *My word, maybe I should feign some kind of illness to get Sir Ranma to use the same technique on me*.

 This process was not simple, and it was not quick. Ranma and Lim had arrived at around noon. By the time Ranma was done, it was deep night out, and Sasha had basically gone through every towel in the castle as well as both barrels of water. She had even eaten, somehow, mainly thanks to Jayne. But, despite that, her body was now feeling better, almost keyed up to a degree. *Oh my word, my body feels more energetic and fitter I than I’ve felt in three years! And I know just what I’m going to do to with my newfound energy too…*

 Ranma finished cleaning out the marrow throughout Sasha’s body of the illness and the poison before doing a final check from head to toe, making certain he hadn’t missed anything, ignoring once more Sasha’s shaking under her grip. *Only a little more, Sasha. I’m sorry it’s been painful, but we’re almost done.*

At the same time this had all been going on, two people had been caught trying to leave the palace. One of them was caught, while the second got away escaping over the side of the wall somehow. Under Lim’s harsh questioning, the man, who was a worker in the kitchen, admitted to being in the employ of the man who had gotten away, a young scribe. He had been ordered to add the poison in very clear, explicitly delineated amounts over the past few years. At first he hadn’t known it was poison, but he had figured it out of late, and the only thing that had changed was that he had demanded more money. The man would be executed for treason once Sasha was up and about enough to look into this event further.

That night, however, such things were as far as they could possibly be from Sasha’s mind. She looked at Ranma with half-lidded eyes as he smiled and opened his eyes.

“Well, I think we’re in the clear, though I’d like toooo….” Ranma trailed off as he stared at her, a blush rising to his cheeks as he finally realized that those noises he had heard hadn’t been caused by pain as he had thought.

Sasha lay there, her hair in disarray, sweat matting it to her forehead and the pillow. Her face was flushed, her eyes half closed, and at some point the towels covering her had slid off, exposing her body, which glistened with sweat in the light of the nearby lamp. Her breasts, smaller than Ranma’s female form, were high and firm on her chest, capped by light pink nipples which were hard and distended. Her waist was thin and toned, and below that a tuft of dark blue hair winked at Ranma before he tore his eyes back up to her face.

“Mmmhmm, I can tell, Ranma. My body feels amazing~~.” So saying, Sasha reached up both hands to Bargren, which blazed with fiery light for a moment as if shouting their joy at her recovery before she set them down on the bedside table with a languid hand. Then, fast as lighting she reached up and pulled Ranma’s face down toward her own, kissing him hard.

Ranma flailed for a moment, gasping, but this only allowed Sasha’s tongue access to her mouth. His arms windmilled for balance but Sasha just pulled him down easily to land on top of her, not releasing her grip on the sides of his face. Eventually Ranma’s flailing ended, and he started to kiss back.

One part of him was kind of startled by this, but the rest of him was going, *She’s hot, willing, and you don’t have any obligations to anyone, Ranma. Go for it, man!* An image of Lim flashed across his mind for a moment, but, even there, they hadn’t gotten beyond the getting to know you stage, so, whatever this was, it shouldn’t get in the way of something happening there in the future. *And besides, given the fact I might’ve been helping her reach the clouds and rains several times over the past few hours, I really don’t have a leg to stand on when it comes to refusing to do it the old fashioned way.*

 But there was one thing Ranma had to know. Putting his hand down to either side of Sasha’s head, Ranma pushed off the pillow and pulled away from her needy, questing mouth just long enough to ask, “This, where do you want this to go?” kissing Sasha between each word.

 Sasha replied in the same fashion, kissing and licking at Rama’s lips and neck. “I promised myself years ago that I would sleep with the doctor who healed me, Ranma. Then you came along with that darned ki technique of yours! I need this! My body is still feeling like it’s on fire and I **need** you right now!!

“As for after,” Sasha pulled back a little, breathing heavily. “I’m not interested in a long term thing, Ranma. I’ve got too many duties, too many demands on my time. *One of which will be to find who had a hand in poisoning me!* “And you have your friendships with Elen and this Vorn fellow pulling you back to Brune. So I have no designs on you beyond this night.”

So saying, Sasha’s hands moved from Ranma’s face to his shoulders and twisted so that Ranma was now under her rather than vice versa. The sight of her breasts, swaying above him just stopped all his higher brain functions, allowing Sasha to continue speaking without interruption. *“*But that is for later. For tonight, I want you, and,” she smirked, grinding her hips against Ranma’s lower half. “Mmm… I think you want me. Isn’t that enough?”

“Ghhmmm, I guess if you put it that way, yeah, it’s enough.” Ranma said, grunting a little at the sensations Sasha was pulling from him. “But, um, this, this is my first time…” he admitted, looking away rather shamefaced at that admission.

Sasha’s face softened noticeably at that and she reached down with a smile that mixed tenderness with pure lustful wickedness in a way that Ranma would never have thought possible. “In that case, Ranma, look on this as a learning experience on many levels. After all, you’ve already learned your ki scan can have some interesting effects. Let’s see what we can learn together, all right?”

Leaning down, Sasha licked and nibbled at Ranma’s neck and ear. “Don’t worry, Ranma. I’ll be gentle,” she breathed out onto his ear.

For a moment, Ranma blinked. “Um isn’t that supposed to be the guy’s line in moments like this?” Then Sasha kissed him, and Ranma decided he was done thinking for the night.

End Chapter

No lemon just yet guys, sorry. I know that was a nasty tease of me, and I normally don’t do that, but I have gotten into the habit of only using lemons at very important points with important characters. Sasha isn’t going to be a part of the main pairing, and indeed she won’t be a main character at all, so using the first lemon in this story with her would have been a waste. This way, however, Ranma will get some experience which can be useful later on.