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

**Chapter 2: Purchases are not Refundable**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Now that Elen wasn’t trying to use it to kill him, Ranma could look at the blade calmly for the first time, as did Tigre from next to him on another horse. It was a thick-bladed longsword with an odd looking, large, blue gem, about the size of a hand, set directly into the blade. The guard was of a crescent shape, rising up the blade’s length and centered with a large ruby. Ranma had noticed that ruby glowed whenever Elen called upon its power. The hilt below that was short but perfect for a woman to wield one handed, despite the size and weight of the blade.

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

“Or ya could just let me go. Or even just, y’know, move away from me.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“You can call me Tigre; I know my name’s far too long,” Tigre said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Sofy, Sasha?” Tigre asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In this manner the army’s ride through the countryside continued, nonstop at a nice, leisurely pace well into the evening, when they finally started to see signs of habitation in front of them as they exited the purposefully uninhabited area between the two countries. Once they were on a road, their pace increased. With that, they were back to Eleonora's castle as the light started to fade.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ranma laughed. “Lim, please, I **am** a weapon.”

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

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

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

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

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

Over the winter months Ranma had explained about ki to Tigre, and, once winter ended, Tigre had joined in with the many men in the village who were of an age to be formed into a militia. He trained with them not because he wanted to become stronger or be able to use a spear, but in hopes of eventually being able to build up his ki. He had noticed that his endurance had skyrocketed and his strength, too. Indeed, he had had to upgrade his bow several times after breaking the ones he had been using before. But he hadn't quite gotten to the point where he could manifest his ki just yet.

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

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

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

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

“What?” Ranma asked innocently.

“More magic?” Lim asked dryly.

“Kinda sorta,” Ranma said with a chuckle.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I don't know… I’d prefer to see her face before I say anything more to her,” Ranma teased.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**OOOOOOO**

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

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

Ranma said nothing for a moment, still staring at Lim's hair even now before shaking his head and explaining. “It's called the Dragon’s Whisker where I come from. It’s supposed to be, well, it’s supposed to cure baldness if you boil it in a soup. Let's just say I was starving at one point and ate the soup when I was younger before I could bother listening to the explanation.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I suppose…” Lim said slowly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**OOOOOOO**

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

**OOOOOOO**

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

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

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

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

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

“Why not?”

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

“What else could she be after?”

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

**OOOOOOO**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**OOOOOOO**

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

One, the woman had Arifar pointed slightly into Tigre's mouth. That would've caused Ranma to attack instantly, though he did know that Tigre was rather hard to wake. But the other thing, which stopped Ranma from attacking, was the fact that, since she was crouching there, facing away from him, Lim’s rear was pressed out towards him, and Ranma could see right up her skirt to her pert, panty-clad rear and long, powerful looking thighs. A part of Ranma’s mind noticed that her panties had a small bear print on it, of all things. But that did not in any way take away Ranma’s enjoyment of the rest of what he was seeing here. “Damn,” he muttered.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**OOOOOOO**

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

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

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

**OOOOOOO**

“I apologize for yesterday!”

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

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

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

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

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

“Punish how?” Tigre asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ranma laughed while Tigre just kept blushing.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ranma thought about it for a few minutes but then shook his head. “I can’t give you an answer right now. I like ya, Elen, but I don’t know enough about your rule or Zhcted as a whole to say it’s worth my loyalty.” While Lim bristled at Ranma’s tone and phrasing, Elen merely nodded, and Ranma continued. “Besides, despite what you might think, I don’t like thinking of myself as a soldier, as someone who has to kill. I’m still having problems with what I had to do during the battle, if I’m honest.”

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

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

**OOOOOOO**

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

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

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

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

**OOOOOOO**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**OOOOOOO**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“So, why not right now?” Ranma asked as they drank, returning to the previous topic as they cooled down a bit, stretching and moving in place so that they didn't cramp up later. Even Ranma had to: that was how hard Elen had pushed him. Oh, he hadn’t used the majority of hisThousand Needle Style or any of his ki tricks, but Elen had matched him physically better than most people had ever been able to. *She could take Ryoga, for certain, even that Taro guy, and could catch Happy, if not put him down.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Besides Lim, who are your subcommanders anyway?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

His liking big boobs couldn't even be called that—Ranma had never met a man who didn't like those except for lolicons, and all of them should just die, in his opinion. But the blonde hair of Lim was different. That as well as the way she reacted to his teasing and her serious, officious nature made Ranma want to tease her further. *Does that mean I’m a, whatchamacallit, sadist?*

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

He nearly bumped into the woman he was thinking about a second later, dodging around her quickly as she huffed irritably at him and moved to another room, carrying a large pile of paper. “What is that?” he asked, opening the door for her and letting her enter.

Lim paused, glaring at him suspiciously before nodding her head in thanks to the gesture and entering. Inside Ranma found another office, smaller than Elen’s, with bookshelves on either wall lined with books and ledgers of some kind, along with a table and a large tin of ink with a quill.

*I wonder if I could figure out how to develop pens*, Ranma mused to himself as he watched Lim put the papers on her desk and then sit down across from him, pulling out the first one.

“Paperwork,” she muttered in answer to his question. “An army doesn’t run itself, you know, nor does a county, particularly one the size of Leitmeritz. Just the army has created this pile, though. The amount of wages; the amount of food, horses, salary, bits and pieces of lost equipment to be replaced; whether or not those bits and pieces fall under what my lady needs to replace out of her war chest or what the soldier in question is responsible for; list of infractions, all of which result in a loss of pay; the number of arrows and lands heads expended and not found.”

“This,” she said, gesturing to the pile she had placed down, “is just what the army produced in the very short campaign with your people.”

“Not **my** people,” Ranma said, looking down at the paperwork. He'd learned how to read the local languages to a small degree, though their number system didn't make much sense to him yet. Looking around her desk however, he frowned. “You don't have anything to help you calculate?”

“Paper and quill,” she answered tartly, pointing at another stack of papers even as she pulled out the first sheet of paper from her work pile.

“No, I mean something to help you with figuring out the numbers,” Ranma said. “A soroban or something. Um, a calculation table is what they’re called.”

“What is a calculation table?” Lim asked, actually looking up at him now, her brow furrowing and her nose twitching in a way Ranma thought rather cute. “Is it some Brune device to help with numbers?”

“No…” Ranma said slowly, thinking back. “Huh, come to think of it, I don't think I've seen them here.” He thought about it for a moment and then smiled as he realized he’d just found something to do for the day. “I'll show it to you in a bit; I think I can make one easily enough. Where is your carpentry room or whatever?”

“Carpenter, not carpentry room,” Lim said pointedly, then pointed out the door and gave him directions. “Now leave me alone. I need to finish this. The sooner I do, the sooner I can find Lady Elen and make sure she, too, is doing her work.”

Ranma smirked at her but didn't try to tease Lim any further, heading out the doorway and following her directions down to a room on the first floor. He found the carpenters’ area, much like the blacksmiths’, was a separate section of the first floor area nearest the barracks. The room was lined with different tools, and there were several fletchers there and a few carters at work already under the direction of an older man.

Discerning him as the boss, Ranma asked the old man for a few pieces of spare wood, and, after glowering at him for a moment, the man tartly pointed a finger to another room at the far back. Ranma entered and found enough spare wood close enough to the size he wanted along with smaller bits and pieces of wood which he too could turn to a purpose other than using them to light fires.

Taking up a bench, he brought out his pocketknife, an object he knew that Tigre, and probably Elen, would love to see if their people could recreate. The blacksmith back in Alsace hadn’t been able to, though and Ranma doubted the one here would have any better luck. With the dagger portion of the pocketknife, he began to carve the smaller bits of wood into small beads before drilling holes in the center of them with the corkscrew head.

At first the head carpenter’s eyes hadn’t left the odd tool in Ranma’s hands, but now as he looked at what Ranma was making, simple curiosity overcame his professional avarice. “Are you trying to make some kind of simple jewelry for someone?”

Ranma laughed. “Nah, though it is for a lady, yer right about that.”

From there Ranma went next door and bought several long nails, which he had the blacksmith fuse together and knock off their ends to make them simple poles. With twenty of them, he slid the beads onto each in turn, five to a pole, then created the frame for the soroban, or abacus, from some more pieces of wood. Then, certain it would all fit together properly, he began to put a finish on each piece in turn.

The carpenter had once more followed him and looked at it thoughtfully. “What is that?” Then he shook his head and asked, “And can I buy that amazing multi-tool thing off you?”

“No, ya can’t. It’s mine. Though maybe eventually I can help yer blacksmith make more, if he’s skilled enough. As for what I’ve made here,” Ranma smirked. “It's something to help someone calculate.”

The man backed away rapidly as if Ranma had mentioned witchcraft. “Okay, that's enough, thank you. I don't need to know more.”

Ranma looked at him quizzically, and a journeyman nearby whispered to him, “The master doesn't like math, like, **at all**. We blame it on his wife, really. There's no doubt in that pairing who really wears the pants in that house. She controls his purse so much he can't even go out drinking.”

Shrugging his shoulders at that, Ranma just nodded and left, heading back towards Lim’s office.

As he walked outside of the carpenters’ area, Ranma realized that it had actually taken him most of the afternoon to build his abacus. That time had been taken mostly by the metalwork, the woodcarving having been simple enough. But getting the blacksmith to agree to let him use his forge for working on nails like that and ruining them obviously for any other job had taken some doing, as had finishing the wood so that there were no splinters.

It actually looked pretty decent, if Ranma said so himself. *Martial arts carpentry really should be considered its own school rather than a subset of martial arts construction, but there you go.* The abacus was a light red oak color, and, while it wasn’t fancy, it still looked nice and worked too.

Having thought that Lim would still be at work, Ranma was surprised to find she wasn’t in her office. He found a maid, though, who directed Ranma to her room, where apparently Lim had decided to take the evening meal alone.

Outside her door Ranma paused, hearing a voice inside that sounded like Tigre’s along with Lim's own, and he frowned before thinking, *Acting out some kind of play?*

**OOOOOOO**

Earlier that day Tigre had spotted Elen sneaking off from the palace and had followed her. What followed was a fun and somewhat fascinating trip through the town, seeing the sights and just genuinely having fun. Tigre had even won a few prizes for Elen at a small shooting game set up along one street after making a fool of the owner. The target in question, a small doll like an armored knight, had actually been latched to its stand. But Tigre’s shot from behind had unhinged it.

The two of them eventually returned to the castle with Elen sporting a new bow in her hair and a teddy bear. The bear she had given up to Lim, seemingly to offset her fury at the idea of Elen running off like that and Tigre’s having ‘escaped’ from the castle.

“Why didn’t you escape when you had the chance?” Lim asked, looking at Tigre over the top of the bear. “Are you that much of an idiot or just lazy?”

“Ahh, I prefer to think I would keep to the terms of my parole rather than anything else,” Tigre said, a large sweatdrop on his head as he stared at the blonde.

“Hmmf,” Lim muttered, then, without another word, walked off carrying the teddy bear.

After that Elen had turned to Tigre and said, “Come with me; you’re about to see something hilarious.”

**OOOOOOO**

Knocking on the door, Ranma heard the hurried sounds of shuffling, and then the door opened, revealing Lim standing there primly. “Yes?” she asked coldly, glaring at him.

Ranma smirked, unable to stop himself. “Am I interrupting something?”

“Nothing!” the woman barked, taking a step back and looking around quickly, making certain Ranma was alone in the corridor. “You heard nothing!”

Moving around Lim quickly, Ranma entered the room and stared around at all the stuffed bears. “Cute,” he said simply, moving over and ruffling one of them, a small incredibly fluffy blue bear with tiny eyes and a large, red nose. “I never had any of these when I was younger, or any toys, really. My old man didn't believe in ’em, thinking they were a time waster, and with us living on the road it would’ve been hard to keep ’em in one piece, too. I remember winning a prize at a fair once, but even then the girl, a family friend, wanted a stuffed pig rather than a bear. Go figure.”

Ranma had long since made the decision to never mention his whole fiancée situation here in this new world. It wasn’t like any of that mattered, since there was no way back home.

Lim sniffed haughtily. “There's no accounting for taste. Now, what was it you wanted?”

“Oh, right,” Ranma said, looking at his hands and holding out the abacus. “This is what I was talking about earlier. It's called an abacus or a soroban where I'm from. It can help you with your calculations.”

“How?” Lim asked, looking at it blankly. When Ranma explained, Lim's eyes went wide and then wider still at the implications of what he was saying.

“I've never heard of anything like this,” she said, quickly taking the abacus from him and then doing a few rough calculations. What normally would have taken her some time on paper only took her a few moments on the abacus when she figured out how to use it. “This, this could be a major trade item! For a time, anyway. It's too simple to really create a monopoly, but we can gain quite a bit of favor by handing them out to various lords and nobles and maybe one or two missions to different trading towns with more. No,” she said, muttering and walking off, brushing past Ranma. “No, a better idea would be to…”

At that point the door closed behind her, leaving Ranma in Lim's room alone. “Well, hell. I knew she’d like it, but that much? I just hope she remembers to use it for her own work rather than just trying to make money off it.”

Then he looked around, staring at a bear that was on Lim’s bed, a nicely sized four-poster about a foot off the ground, and then out the window and down into the faces of Tigre and Elen. “Tigre, what were you doing down there?” he asked slowly.

Tigre sheepishly pulled himself up through the window while Elen’s cheeks were flushed with laughter and maybe a bit of drink, waved up at him happily waiting for her turn to head through the thin window. He looked back at Tigre and said, “Let me guess; you guys were out and about someplace when ya shouldn't be?”

“In a word, yes,” Elen said with a giggle, leaping upwards, grabbing the windowsill, and sliding inside quickly. “Then I wanted to show Tigre what Lim did with the teddy bears people got her. He was a little too loud, though, and had to improvise.”

*That makes a lot more sense than her putting off sparring with me for work,* Ranma thought ruefully. “And why didn’t ya invite me on this little outing?”

Elen laughed, not replying to that beyond clapping Ranma on the shoulder and moving around him to smile at Tigre. “We’re going to have to do that again someday, but I need to run down Lim before her greed gets away from her good sense. That abacus thing you were talking about, that'll help both of our paperwork quite a lot. Thank you, Ranma,” she said simply and left the room.

That left the two boys, one of whom was still looking rather awkward in the center of the room while the other one was still holding the large stuffed animal that had been on the bed, squeezing it gently. Then Ranma smirked like a shark and moved in for the kill. *Damn, is this what Nabiki felt like back home?*  “So the two of you were out together, like a date?” Ranma teased.

“No, not at all! She was just showing me around the town, we tried all of the various food shops and other things, and I even met some of her subjects too. They all really like her,” Tigre confided.

“Yeah, my friend, that's a date, at least in her mind,” Ranma said with a grin. “If you're not interested in her, though, you might want to tell her that quickly before she gets any ideas.”

“…But I'm a hostage,” Tigre said lamely, blushing a little at the idea of Elen being interested in him. “I don't have anything to offer her as I am. And we’re from two different countries. Heck, we fought one another a bare few days ago! You’re just letting those rumors going around the army get to you.”

“Nothing to offer except your skill with a bow, your mind, and that heart of yours. As for the idea of the whole different countries and enemies thing, who cares?” Ranma said with a chuckle. “Still, Titta is going to be so disappointed, though.”

“What?” Tigre asked, his blushed disappearing. “Why would Titta be disappointed?”

Ranma stared at him for a moment, and Tigre quickly grew uncomfortable before Ranma just shook his head. “Never mind. I suppose that the one inside the game doesn't always see it for what it is.”

*After all, even now I'm not certain which of the girls back home were interested in me for me, or were just there because of the various honor obligations.*  Looking back on it, Ranma knew, at least, that Akane had not been interested in him any more than she had been forced to be, and whatever interest there had been between them had faded quickly after Ranma started to learn from Tofu. Shampoo and Ukyo, though, those two were still up in the air, and Ranma kind of regretted not ever having figured it out one way or the other.

*Still, I'm in a new world without any of those honor obligations or anything else over my head and no perceivable way back. Might as well have fun with it after all, maybe even get a girlfriend of my own.* Even as images of Lim’s blonde ponytail again came to his mind, Ranma thought, *Now I just need to figure out how.*

**OOOOOOO**

“Take these with you,” Felix Aaron Thenardier said to his son, Zion. Felix was a giant of a man, standing well over six feet tall, with a large chest and a cold, grim gaze which caused weaker men to quail, though his son only looked respectful rather than truly fearful. “Burn Alsace to the ground if you have to, but conquer it for our family.”

Not questioning why his father wanted that, Zion laughed delightedly as he stared up at the two dragons above them before bowing heavily towards his father. “Your will be done, Father.”

As they watched the contingent of his army that would serve under his son for this campaign—around three thousand men plus the two dragons and a baggage train—march off, one of Duke Thenardier’s advisors, a short, elderly man named Drekavac who was commander of their dragon taming forces, asked, “Why Alsace, might I ask?”

“Alsace? It is indeed pointless: small, with nothing to offer, not people or resources, far too far away from the places of power. And yet Ganelon might try to move there. So taking it before he can move in is all to the good. Or even just denying it to him entirely without actually conquering it. Further, my son must get used to controlling the dragons.”

“And if the count is already on the move to Alsace,” Drekavac said thoughtfully, “he would not have brought anything that could face dragons.”

“Exactly,” Thenardier said with a chuckle in his subterranean sized chest. “Exactly. The weak will be cowed, and that viper will know he is nothing to the Rule of Strength.”

**OOOOOOO**

“What!? Why would they be coming here?!” Titta asked, looking at Bertrand in shock and fear. She knew nothing about warfare, but she knew enough to know that Alsace was well out of the way of the major powers in Brune society. There didn't seem to be any point to them coming here except for destruction and rapine.

“I do not know. It could be as simple as, perhaps, Duke Thenardier's son, Zion, holding a grudge against our lord,” Bertrand replied with a sigh, remembering that moment. “Both Ranma and Tigre were involved in that, and perhaps tales of Ranma's strength and power have gotten out, and the Baron is wary of another power player in the game. Regardless, they are coming here.”

“What should we do?” Titta asked.

“I will go and find Tigre-sama, but I think you need to warn the rest of the village and the county beyond.”

“I will get the word out, hai,” Titta said, nodding promptly. “How long do you think we have?”

“According to lords Mashas’ man, the enemy army is moving slowly. Why, I don't know, but they are. It won't even reach the edge of Lord Tigre's territory for another week, and then it's another, six days, perhaps, travel on horseback from there to this town, but there are numerous farms and homesteads along the way that they might burn out.”

“I’ll send runners along the road first and then let all of the other peasants know what's going on,” Titta said, grabbing Bertrand's hands and dragging him to where the coats were, nodding hurriedly to the man wearing Lord Mashas’ color. “But you need to go now! Find Lord Tigre; he'll know what to do!”

Yet despite Titta’s belief that they needed Tigre back, there were those who were not willing to wait for him to somehow return from his imprisonment in Leitmeritz. Among these were the two blacksmith sons, Duncan and Claus, who had begun to act as sub-officers to the militia, as well as the rest of that militia. These men had faced war and seen that they might not be able to fight as traditional forces, but they had skills and training, which could make them deadly.

Gathering together that evening, they decided to merge Ranma’s endurance training with Tigre’s training in hunting and using the bow. “We can't face a force like that in the open, but there are a lot of places along the way where the road comes close to the forests, up into the hills, and rocky crevices where we might be able to ambush them or at least get close enough to look at the army. I think we need to do what we can to slow them down, so that at least they're not sending out forces into the forests. We owe it to Lord Tigre to try, anyway,” said Duncan, and the other men nodded grimly.

**OOOOOOO**

The days after their capture had fallen into a kind of routine for Ranma and Tigre. In the morning or evening Ranma and Elen would spar, while every morning Tigre helped with the army's archers without fail, teaching them how to both shoot more accurately and faster. To Ranma’s surprise, Rurick quickly became the second best bowman in the army, second only to Tigre himself. A few dozen men even began training with Tigre to shoot from the saddle, which Ranma, knowing quite a bit about how the Mongols had created the world's largest empire, thought was a major force multiplier, and he wondered where Tigre had come up with it, since he hadn’t said anything about that idea.

*Mind you, the Mongols had those recurved horn bows, which could punch straight through Persian plate. Those were the best weapon for their kind of warfare,* he thought as he ducked under a slash from Elen. Today was an evening day, the light of the evening sun glinting off Arifar as he dodged it. Elen had been busy with her horse that morning along with Lim and a few of the townspeople who needed her intervention on matters between them.

He took a knee to the face in the next instant and then ducked wildly to one side as Elen flipped around him and brought Arifar down in a cut that would've ended with the flat of her blade right along his neck. “I don't know what you’re thinking about,” she caroled, “but concentrate on the here and now or this won't be fun any longer.”

“Right!” Ranma said with a chuckle, coming back to the here and now.

Inside, Lim looked outside of her window, shaking her head. The two combat junkies were at it every morning now, and though part of her applauded it, seeing her mistress exhibit the energy and willingness to push herself to new heights, another part of her deplored how their attitudes were magnifying one another. *I truly fear for the time when Elen forgets entirely how she should act in public in her position as Vanadis.*

“And she's sneaking off with this one every night!” she muttered, looking back at Tigre. He was currently helping her with the paperwork, since Tigre had wanted to give Rurick a chance to lead the archery corps, and both of them were using abacuses.

Lim had realized that something about Tigre had changed the past few days while around her. The fear and wariness he'd felt towards her had disappeared. A case in point of that was a second later when he looked up at her thoughtfully. “So you got this from Ranma?”

“Yes. Did he not share the abacus with you?” That name had stuck rather than the one Ranma used for it, sounding at least a little less otherworldly, pun intended.

“I don't think he's ever actually been around either myself or anyone else doing paperwork before. Still, for him to go out of his way to create that for you,” he said, looking down at the abacus in question, “that says something of his respect for you, I think.”

Lim flushed slightly at that, having seen some of the looks Ranma gave her hair and being rather flattered by them, then shook it off, and went back to work. A few hours later all of the paperwork was done, not just for the army, but also for Leitmeritz as a whole. What should have taken herself and Elen two or more weeks to get through had been finished in four days. *Yes,* Lim reflected, *my initial response to it was spot on.*  *This will be an immense boon to our country, perhaps the world, if it spreads far enough.*

Despite coming to some kind of understanding with Ranma and seeing many qualities in Tigre to like, Lim was no closer to understanding why Elen trusted and liked Tigre so quickly. If anything, Tigre had proven that he had nothing going for him beyond the bow, in her mind…

**Flashback:**

“You want to test me on other weapons? But Ranma and I told you I don’t have any ability with anything but the bow,” Tigre objected.

“Mah, mah, perhaps Ranma just isn’t a very good teacher. Just think of that,” Elen replied, launching a teasing look towards Ranma, who was standing to one side of where she and Tigre were facing one another in the middle of the training ground. Lim was there too, standing on their other side.

“Heh, well this should be fun,” Ranma said from one side of the training area, twirling a staff in his hand, creating a figure eight with it and then twirling it above his head like another person might play with a pen. “I tested him on staff, mace, dagger, spear, sword, hatchet, axe… If I could find it in Alsace, I tried it with Tigre. None of it worked.”

“I would still like to see this for myself, even so. Now, come at me whenever you are ready,” Elen said, a staff in one of her hands as well.

Tigre groaned but obeyed. First he tried a sword, a long sword like that which most soldiers used. He was disarmed and sent to the ground in an instant, only for the combat to stop as they heard a whimper of fright from Ranma.

He had leaped to the side to avoid being spitted by the sword, his staff flashing out to smack it out of the air. “Where the heck were you aiming that disarm, Elen!?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about. Although if I were a petty person, I might mention how you tried to cop a feel on me during yesterday’s spar when you disarmed me,” Elen said with a smirk, a slight blush to her face as she remembered that incident. It had been the first time a man had touched her in such a way, and she wasn’t certain how she felt about it or about Tigre and their deepening friendship.

“I apologized at the time, darn it!” Ranma huffed with a blush on his face, then screamed as Lim’s booted foot caught him right in the fork from behind, his senses having done nothing to warn him. He curled up around his personal pain, while Tigre winced and looked away. “You, you, gah!”

“That is the least you should expect after attempting to assault a Vanadis,” Lim said with a huff. That, and she wanted some payback for the fact that Ranma had nearly walked in on her bathing the day before. Her chastity had only been protected by Elen’s small pet, the baby dragon, Lunie. And, admittedly, Ranma apologizing and nearly knocking himself out by smashing his head hard enough to imbed his face into the ground.

“Lim, that was utterly uncalled for!” Elen said, though her twitching cheeks told the real story of her amusement. Then, while Ranma was still on the ground, she called Tigre to step forward again with another name.

But Ranma and Tigre’s predictions soon proved all too true. Any attempt by Tigre to even hold another weapon beyond the bow ended in failure.

**End flashback**

Just then, Lim’s musings was interrupted by Rurick poking his head into the doorway. “Lord Tigre, there's someone at the gate asking for you.”

Later Ranma and Tigre listened in shock as Bertrand told them what was going on in Brune. “Okay, a civil war I can understand, that even makes a kind of sense since Ganelon and Thenardier are the two strongest nobles and even connected to the royal house, right?” Ranma barely waited for the two men of Brune to nod before going on. “But what the hell is the point of Thenardier forces invading Alsace?”

“Two reasons I can think of,” Tigre said, much to Ranma’s surprise. The other young man’s voice was serious as was his face, and Ranma listened intently. “One, it’s more a political posturing move than anything else. There are lands held by several earls and other minor noble lands between Nemetacum and Alsace, which they will have to cross to get there, including Lord Mashas, a well-respected noble with connections in the royal cabinet. He cows my fellow earls and forces them to admit to his strength, which gives him a way to coerce them in the future.”

Tigre then scratched at his hair sheepishly. “And then there’s the fact that Zion might be holding a grudge for how we dealt with him before the battle on the plains. It might be petty, but it could work to give Zion some experience before he and his father take on Ganelon.”

Ranma stared after him, then shook his head, turned to the window, and, without even looking at Rurick, waved him away. “Yeah, well now we have to figure out what we’re going to do about it. Later.” He hopped out the window and was away an instant later.

But that wasn’t really an option for Tigre. Not only could he not get out of the castle as Ranma could so easily, he felt honor-bound to at least leave openly if he was going to break his parole.

At the main gate, however, Tigre found his way blocked by Elen. “And where do you think you're going at this time of night?” she asked mock-innocently, stepping forward with Arifar on her waist.

“Please let me pass,” Tigre stated seriously, his hand clenching around his bow. Yet despite that he couldn’t help but stare at her, once more clad in her everyday outfit. Since he had seen her in far less than that earlier that day at a small well on the outskirts of the castle, however, the look had a greater impact.

It took Elen’s words to bring him back to reality, and he shouted, “I need to return to Alsace at once! Once I have finished I will return, I swear!”

“What will you do when you get there?” Elen asked.

“Defend my fiefdom from Thenardier, of course!” Tigre replied hotly.

“How?” Elen asked, still calmly. “I know of your skill and even your friend’s, but together even the two of you would not be able to stop a whole army. So I ask you, what can you do? It’s a fool’s errand.”

“I, I don’t know.” Tigre faltered, then rallied. “But as long as I am there, I can do something! Think of some way to help my people!”

“What can someone so haphazard and unthinking like yourself possibly do?!” Elen shouted back, grabbing Arifar and pulling him out of his sheath. The magic blade immediately began to warp the air around it so that it nearly seemed to sparkle in the torchlight.

“If you wish to die that badly, you may as well meet your end right here, trying to run away after giving your parole. The outcome would be exactly the same either way!” Elen said, her voice only marginally calmer as her red eyes locked onto Tigre’s brown ones.

“Then you won’t let me go, no matter what?” Tigre asked softly

“Do you even understand what bugs me the most about this?” Elen asked, a scowl forming on her face. “Why don’t you use your wits? You and Ranma were able to create and act out a plan on the fly that got your people not only out of the initial assault in one piece, but protected them afterward during the rout as I led my troops against you. Why in the world are you now trying to run off without thinking when there’s nothing that you two alone could do?” she went on, putting a very slight emphasis on the word ‘alone.’

That and the direct look in Elen’s face, or perhaps the fact her sword was still pointed directly at him, made Tigre stop and think. *She’s not striking me down. She’s instead just, just asking me these questions, making me think. So then… What can I do not just to get her on my side now but to gain more help for Alsace.*

Truthfully, Elen had hoped to use this crisis in Alsace to get part of what she really wanted from Tigre: his skills as part of her army. If Tigre asked to formally join her army, Elen would be honor-bound to help his people. *Now to see if my or Lim’s idea of his challenging me to an archery contest is the more accurate.*

What Elen got was neither of those things. Instead she stared at Tigre as he bowed deeply and shouted, “Please lend me your troops!”

Elen stared him while the hiding Lim gaped in astonishment, then Elen started laughing, leaning on Arifar as she stuck the sword tip first in the ground, laughing as if she’d just heard the funniest thing in the world. “So audacious and bizarre, that’s actually kind of refreshing. Still, I can loan my troops to you, but it won’t be free.”

Gulping, Tigre asked, “What do you want?”

“All of Alsace,” Elen replied.

“If you will guarantee fair rule and make certain my people are looked after and protected, I will agree to your terms,” Tigre replied formally.

“Then it’s settled,” Elen said, internally doing cartwheels of joy. *Tigre and Alsace both. Hah, that’s like having my cake now and putting a down payment on one for the future at the same time!*

Lifting her sword in the air, she shouted that they were now going to go to war for the aid of Alsace, calling her troops to readiness. “Now, where is Ranma?” Elen asked, lowering Arifar and looking at Tigre. “I thought he would be with you.”

From nearby Rurick coughed delicately. “I'm afraid he's already gone, my lady.”

Rolling her eyes at that, she turned towards the nearest stable where her horse was already waiting, prancing there and eager to be off. “I should've expected that, I suppose. I’ll go and get him back. Rurick, Tigre, you two find Lim and get the army up and moving.”

She ignored the fact that Lim was nearby, having watched this from behind a tree, knowing that her friend would be back inside the castle for the two men to find later.  *Neither of us won this wager, I suppose, but my idea was closer, and I’ll count it as a win regardless.*

Ranma was a surprisingly long way away from her castle by the time she caught up with him, having even gotten out past the town and the outer wall. Catching up to him would have had a normal horse lathered and near to useless. But the bond between herself and her horse was such that the horse partook of some of Elen’s own bond to Arifar, and Elen caught to up with Ranma despite his head start. “And where do you think you're going!?”

“To help some friends,” Ranma said, slowing to a halt to look back at her as she shouted that.

Elen pulled her horse to a canter, moving around him for a moment. “And it doesn't bother you that you’re breaking your oath?”

“I'd be back,” Ranma replied with a careless shrug.

“You think you could fight a whole army yourself?”

Ranma froze at that and then sighed. “I suppose I could if I could contrive the right circumstances and there were no friendlies to be caught in the crossfire,” he said slowly, thinking of the Amazon technique, but that would only work if the army was all in one place. If it scattered, Ranma would be put in much the same situation he had been in when Elen captured him and Tigre: unable to defend all the people he had to on his own.

“I honestly believe you would have tried,” Elen said with a chuckle. “But now you won't have to.”

“What?” Laughing openly now, Elen used her horse to herd Ranma back to her castle as she explained what had happened.

When she finished, Ranma stayed silent for a moment but turned his feet back to the white-walled castle and the town around it. “Huh. Okay, not the way I would’ve done it, but I suppose it works. Though I suppose that now we have to figure out how to get your army there in time to save the day.”

The army, barely a thousand men, now moved quickly once more, with every man having a horse under them and carrying all of their supplies on two more. Even then, going through the Dinant plains and up into the mountains on the Brunish side of things and getting to Alsace in time should have been impossible.

But once they reached the forests on the Brunish side, once more Tigre’s skills as a huntsmen and Ranma’s own endurance came to the fore. The two of them split off, creating a trail of markers through the forest, while Ranma actually built bridges where needed by knocking down trees and created places where the army could gather at night. The job was still tough, but, thanks to the number of horses under the soldiers and Elen ordering them to eat in the saddle, they covered a large swath of territory far faster than they should have been able to.

On the outskirts of the forest, before it became farmland around the single town in Alsace, the army spent the morning resting, seeing to their equipment, and then they were off again on different horses this time. Having switched off every day, the horses were still fresh.

So when they saw a force of light cavalry racing down the road in the distance towards the town, there was no question: the army sped into a gallop, racing forward to, not intercept the other force, but to pin them into the town and wipe them out.

As Elen and Tigre led the army forward towards the town at a quick gallop, Ranma split off, racing to one side. He hadn't had a horse under him the entire time, but on foot had had a much easier time of it. Elen’s troops had gone on foot for some of the time but hadn’t been able to move fast enough.

“Where are you off to?” Elen shouted.

“I want to see this army for myself,” Ranma said with a shrug. “I also guarantee that at least a few of the people I've trained here in Alsace are out there somewhere trying to make it difficult for them.”

“He's right,” Tigre said with a nod. “Ranma’s been training us all on how to act and move in the woods, not just improve our basic endurance. And I trained many of them in archery and woodcraft too.”

Elen nodded and waved Ranma off. “Good lock.”

Ranma nodded back and then raced forward. No longer constrained by the army’s speed or the need to clear the path for them, Ranma moved as fast as a charging horse and was soon out of sight.

“What is with that man and his endurance?” Lim muttered from her place next to Elen.

“I have to wonder if he can turn it to anything else,” Elen said thoughtfully before blushing as that thought actually permeated her brain. Lim too blushed, and the two of them pointedly did not look at one another for a moment as their horses carried them on.

For his part Ranma raced through the farmland, eyes glancing this way and that, until he came close to where the woods abutted a farmer’s field. He entered it and moved straight southwest, sort of following the dirt road leading into Alsace, but far deeper into the woods than most would be able to see his movement.

This stopped suddenly as he was nearly shot by someone out of the woods nearby. He twisted, caught the arrow in midair, and shouted, “You idiots, it's me!”

Two men came out from the woods around him, having hidden themselves so well that even Ranma hadn't been able to spot them as he was running along. “Ranma? What are you doing here? Does this mean that Lord Tigre is here too!?” the man asked hopefully.

Once more Ranma had to admire the amount of respect and loyalty that the people of Alsace took in their lord as he nodded at them. “We’re here, and we brought a lot of help to. But I broke off to see what was going on at the front line.”

The men in front of him nodded and led him a ways through the woods to one side, then deeper up into the mountains towards where the forest began to end and be replaced by rocks. There Ranma found a small hollow between a few boulders. There the group of skirmishers met, men coming in one after another after Ranma and his two guides arrived there.

All of the men reported the same thing. The enemies did have skirmishers of their own, but they didn't make good archers and weren't familiar with the terrain. There had been a few short sharp battles ever since the enemy army had crossed Alsace’s border two days before, but nothing decisive one way or the other. The Alsace men had lost one man killed, but, by the count of these men, each of them had slain at least six enemies, mostly from ambush and then just running away.

Ranma didn't think that would be proven accurate, but he did believe that the enemy was having a harder time of it in terms of skirmishes. “But you haven't been able to get close enough to their main army?”

“Not yet,” said one of them, shaking his head. “But they pulled the skirmishes back the other day, so were hoping to at least get a glimpse of it soon.”

“Claus and Gaston are out there now with their troops. They're supposed to be doing the looking. And if their skirmishes been pushed back out again, both of them are good enough to know when to pull their men back.”

Ranma nodded and continued to ask questions about how the battles had been going. The enemy army hadn't found any people yet, Titta and the other townsfolk having organized a withdrawal of the countryside into the town and then up into the mountains. Ranma found it kind of ironic that those same mountains were what guarded the majority of the border between Brune and Zhcted, and that, by doing that, they actually moved closer to their new overlord’s center of power. *Huh… Might want to think about that further and much more seriously too.*

This meant there hadn’t been any actual full clashes, but skirmishing wasn't going to do enough to stop the invading army. The enemy army was still coming on like a hammer, fit to crush Alsace by its simple size and might. If Alsace lost its one town and the farms around it, the people who had escaped into the woods would soon either have to come out into the open or starve.

This was magnified a moment later when Claus, the youngest son of the village blacksmith, skidded into the hollow, eyes wide. “I've pulled my men back,” he reported grimly, heaving between breaths and not even acknowledging Ranma's presence for a minute. “We’re pulling out further back into the woods. We can't fight this army! We just can't.”

“What are you talking about?” Ranma said, reaching over and grabbing the other young man's shoulder, shaking him lightly. “Are we talking numbers, heavy horse, what?”

“Dragons! They have dragons!” the man babbled. “Two of them. One of them is a flying type and the other is a land type. We got close enough to actually look at them. It's why they pulled back the skirmishers; they know we’re not going to attack their army with those there,” he wailed.

“…Right,” Ranma said, letting go of the man. “Dragons, really?”

The man nodded weakly from where he had collapsed to his rear on the floor of the small gorge. “Really.”

“They've also sent out a heavy skirmishing party. Three hundred light cavalry broke off as we were watching this morning,” Gaston said, making his presence known as his men moved into the suddenly crowded gorge around him. Gaston was a young, spare man who was one of the best huntsmen in Alsace besides Tigre and a fantastic tree climber, often using that and ambushes to wait for prey. He also just liked to scare people, hence his sudden appearance.

As Ranma answered his contribution with a bland, ‘we know,’ Claus continued his breakdown. “That earth dragon will simply smash through the trees to get at us, and that air dragon can just swoop down on us and breathe fire, and we’re all going to die! They have…”

Growling, Ranma reached down and shook the man again, this time even harder. “Yes, dragons, I know. You have a Ranma, a Tigre, and a Vanadis. We can handle this. As for the main army…” Ranma said, moving over to a tree. With a single blow and an accompanying ‘crack!’ he shattered the tree, causing it to fall, whereupon he grabbed it and laid it to one side, a show of strength that caused every man there to gape at him. “I’ll need someone to spot in a direction to toss these, but I think we can really screw up their day.”

That gave the men heart, even the near-terrified Claus and his men, and Ranma went on barking orders. “Tigre and our new allies will deal with that separate force. Claus, you take most of these men and head back now. Gaston, choose four of your men to set up a series of ambushes against an enemy racing through the woods.” He smirked then, though there was no humor in the sight as he began to smash off limbs from the tree. “I’ll provide the reason for them to be so eager to come into our backyard here.”

With Gaston further up the mountain, calling directions, Ranma hefted the tree he’d cut down above his head and then heaved it forward, out over the trees. It was a smallish tree in comparison to some of the monsters around here, but it still was as large as a ballista bolt, if nowhere near as streamlined. As it flew, Ranma checked his body and his ki and nodded in satisfaction.

While he would have normally been able to toss the makeshift ballista bolt in a straight line without further strengthening himself, hurling it up and out of sight on a trajectory like this was tougher, and he had to use some of his ki to aid his strength. But not too much, thankfully, now that the enemy was in Gaston’s sight.

“You missed to the left!” Gaston shouted, sounding almost giddy. “The army’s stopped, though. If you can…”

Gaston broke off as Ranma ripped a boulder up from nearby. Ranma was able to throw this even more easily, and the giant ball rocketed up and out as Ranma shouted, “Just call me the living trebuchet, you bastards!”

Down with the invading Thenardier army, there was some consternation at first as they stared at the large ballista bolt that had slammed into the ground near to their line of march before flipping a few times. No one had been hit, but the sight of it said that something was out there, but there was no sign of what it could be.

But Zion wasn’t there any longer, having raced ahead with the light cavalry troops. That left one of his professional sub-officers in charge. He quickly ordered what remained of his light cavalry out in that direction as a screen, while pushing his few skirmishers out along the other side out into the woods there, to make certain there wasn’t a second jaw to this trap.

“One ballista, though, won’t be enough to stop us, but it could cause some damage if they get the range,” he was starting to say, when a huge boulder suddenly slammed into the serried ranks of his infantry to that side. The boulder snuffed out over a dozen men’s lives as it first hit and then bounced through the ranks, and men screamed and tried to get out of the way. “Shit! Order the army to spread out!”

“But Lord Zion will…” the other man began.

“He isn’t here!” shouted the sub-officer, quieting the other man as another rock flashed out, followed by another ballista bolt. The rock missed wide, thankfully, smashing into the ground in front of the army and ‘only’ killing two men there before bouncing away without taking any more victims. The ballista, however, smashed into the land dragon’s side, causing it to bellow in fury.

It hadn’t done any damage, not really, anyway, but the hit had been strong enough to have come from another dragon and thus aroused the somewhat tamed beast’s ire. It turned in the direction of the blow and took the next rock right on the head. That time it actually felt it, and it shook its head before roared and stomping towards where the blows had come from. In its primitive brain it had somehow realized that it was being attacked at a distance and meant to do something about it.

“Get the rest of the army out of its way and make certain the air dragon stays under control!” the sub-officer shouted, changing his orders as he watched the land dragon’s handlers being pulled after the beast and then stepped on as it walked on.

“The only one who can make the air dragon do more than walk is Zion-sama, but we can maybe hurry it along.” The second man, an equally middle-aged man, turned his horse away to do just that as more ballista bolts and rocks fell from the sky. As he did, the man muttered, “How the hell did the Alsaceans get two siege weapons up there, then hide them before we got here?!”

That was a good question, and, after the dragon had done its job, maybe they would find the answer, the acting commander mused before pulling his horse towards the opposite side of the road from the attack, shouting orders as he went.

The initial response from the remaining light infantry had run into problems the instant the entered the woods, as anyone should have been able to tell. Horses in a thick forest were a liability most of the time, certainly when in a hurry. To make matters worse, the Alsaceans opened up, aiming from up in the trees or scattered around the woods as they raced forward. They didn’t volley fire or anything. No, this was the same small skirmishing the few scouts the army had brought along had been dealing with since they entered Alsace.

But the light cavalry had not been part of that low-key warfare and now paid for it. More than a dozen men were unhorsed, most of them dead, before the others heard the blaring notes of the return order followed by the low, long bugle from the horns signifying that the dragon had come to the fore. With wide, fearful eyes, the remaining light cavalry split off to either side of the center of their line, leaving their fellows on the ground while creating two thicker squares of cavalry rather than a line. The horses still alive from the riders now dead whickered in fear and bolted away through the woods.

Then the land dragon slammed into the woods like a monstrous battering ram. The trees in its way shattered, and it didn’t even slow, racing on into the trees of the forest with a roar of fury, eager to get to grips with the thing attacking it.

The shrapnel this caused created the first injuries on the Alsace side of the battle. Two of the hunters took wounds to their chests, which knocked them on their asses, but their friends raced forward and grabbed them, pulling them further into the woods and away from the monster.

Gaston stayed in his position to give Ranma the angle the land dragon was attacking from, then clambered down the tree like a monkey, shouting, “It’s coming!”

“Right!” Ranma shouted, launching one more rock on a far steeper angle—Ranma wasn’t certain of the terminology. Then he was off and away, grabbing Gaston, heaving him onto a shoulder, and racing on through the woods. “We are out of here!”

Behind them the dragon chuffed as the rock smashed it on the snout, causing even more pain but no real damage, and the dragon went completely berserk, its speed picking up as it raged. But that rage had no outlet. Ranma and his fellows were long gone.

Within an hour, Ranma and Gaston had found the other skirmishers. Ranma did what he could to fix up the two injured, going so far as to actually heal them both, sending ki into their bodies to speed up the recovery. Both men exclaimed at that, then thanked Ranma for using his magic on them, but Ranma just waved that off before leading the way back to the town.

Outside the town they found Elen’s army forming up to march off, but Elen and Lim were missing, as was Tigre. Entering the town Ranma found all three, along with Bertrand, Rurick, and Titta. The sight of Titta there with her maid outfit torn made Ranma scowl, though he wondered why the hell she was here rather than in the church or out in the woods.

He didn’t address that, though, instead getting right to the point. “Hey, all. I’ve got good news and bad news. The good news is, me and the skirmishers might have bought us all a few hours to plan and prepare. The bad news is…the enemy has dragons. Two of them. One land, one flight type.”

That drew some grimaces all around and a gasp of fear from Titta, who clung to Tigre’s side. Elen, though, just nodded. “They can be tough, but Arifar and I can handle them.” She then grinned, tossing her hair over one shoulder. “Don’t worry, Ranma, you can just go on and play with the human soldiers. Leave the real dangers to me.”

Ranma’s eyes narrowed while Lim groaned and put a hand over her eyes. “Ooh, was that a challenge? I think it was. Oh, it’s on now, Elen.”

While his wording was a bit odd, Elen got the gist of what Ranma was saying and laughed, nodding her head before becoming serious. “So, how many men are we dealing with?”

Ranma waved at Gaston, who reported to Tigre, uncertain what was going on here or how his lord had gotten a foreign noble like the silver-haired Vanadis to aid them but not questioning that yet. “Myself and the other skirmishers have been in contact with the enemy army since they crossed into Alsace, milord. Um, I wasn’t one of our officers, but I know how many men we’re dealing with. They had at least three thousand, maybe as many as four thousand.”

Looking over at Elen, Tigre raised an eyebrow, and she nodded before they both went back to listening to Gaston. Those numbers were about what they had expected to face given the speed at which the Thenardier army had been moving.

“Most of them are heavy cavalry and infantry, with a force of light cavalry and only a handful of skirmishers. That last group is down to four or five men at best unless they’ve added to them from the rest of the army,” Gaston went on. “The main force is moving slowly, but the light cavalry force broke off this morning to head to the town, which…” Gaston finished with a smile, “I suppose you already knew about. Although we thought Lord Zion Thenardier himself was with them.”

“He was but got away, darn it,” Tigre said with a sigh, his arms tightening around Titta.

It was only now that Ranma noticed both that his friend’s hand was hurt and that his bow was broken. Gesturing at them, he asked, “What happened?”

“I, Lord Tigre saved me!” Titta said, torn between crying at her recent ordeal and smiling at her lord and not-at-all secret love interest. “Lord Thenardier attacked the mansion and found me within, but I ran outside onto the balcony and, and when he, he tried to… Anyway, Lord Tigre shot him through the hand.”

“I was honestly hoping for a head shot, but the balcony’s rail was in my way, and I couldn’t quite get the angle. So I went for his hand instead,” Tigre said with a sigh.

“Then a second later he fires through several dozen yards of wood to take out an enemy archer with the man’s own arrow after catching it in midair,” Rurick said, clapping Tigre on the shoulder and smiling proudly.

“Huh, so that training I put you through paid off?” Ranma said with a smirk, causing Tigre to groan and Titta to huff.

“Dodge is not training; dodge is very poorly disguised torture,” Tigre retorted.

While Elen and the others looked on in amused confusion at that, Ranma turned to Titta. “But why the hell were you still in the mansion? Why weren’t you with the rest of the townsfolk in the church or out hiding in the woods?”

“I couldn’t leave my post! I was left to watch over the home while lord Tigre was away!” Titta said heatedly.

Ranma stared at her, then groaned and put his head in his hands. “You think he wouldn’t have preferred that you were safe rather than the manor!? How do you not know that of Tigre yet!?”

“He’s right, Titta. If it’s a choice between you and anything in the mansion, even the Black Bow, I’d take you being safe any day,” Tigre said with a firm nod. “It was brave but very foolish.”

This caused Titta to look between the two men and begin to cry softly, nodding her head.

Resolutely looking away, Ranma turned to Elen and asked, “So, how are we going to do this?”

**OOOOOOO**

“What do you mean, they ambushed you!?” Zion shouted, then winced as his hand was seen to by his physician. “Careful, cow, or I’ll have your head!” he barked to the old woman, then turned back to his officers. “How the hell did they do that!”

“As we’ve said all along, Zion-sama, we have had trouble with skirmishers from the woods. Our forces are ill-suited to fight in the forests that make up the majority of this territory,” the older sub-officer said, his tone respectful. “They somehow set up some kind of way to hurl boulders and ballista bolts at range. We lost nearly a hundred men and more horses to that attack, and the land dragon went out of control when it was struck. But it wasn’t injured, just enraged. As far as we can tell, though, we didn’t kill a single one of them, and we have no idea how they did it.”

Before Zion could say anything to that, a cavalryman pushed into the tent, going to one knee in front of Zion. “Milord, we have spotted the enemy banner! The troops facing us come from Zhcted!”

“WHAT?!” Zion shouted, then bashed his free hand down on his camp table, spilling a goblet of very expensive wine onto its side where it dripped like blood to the ground. “That traitor, Vorn, I’ll have his head! Muster the entire army! We march on them at once! And make certain the land dragon is kept to the fore!”

**OOOOOOO**

After they had put together a plan to take advantage of their greater maneuverability and the continued over-confidence of their enemies, Ranma joined Tigre and Elen at the front of two-thirds of their forces, with Lim leading the others off, led in turn through the woods by the local skirmishers. Two dozen more Alsace men had joined their forces, armed with long spears, leather armor, and bows. They didn’t fit in with the well-accoutered troops of Zhcted, but they were willing, and most of them were decent archers. They moved to join Rurick and his troops around Tigre on foot.

They were joined at the last moment by Bertrand, carrying six full quivers on his horse and his own body. “With this, I doubt even Tigre-sama will run out of arrows! Although you will still need to worry if someone gets close to him.”

“True enough,” Tigre said with a smile, looking over at Elen and Ranma. Ranma just laughed, while Elen promised that no one was going to get close to him.

The battle began a few minutes later as the heavy cavalry of both sides started to move towards one another. But the first casualties were caused by Tigre, who was able to shoot further and faster than anyone else among the few mounted archers was. His arrows penetrated the helmet visors of four men in quick succession, so fast even Ranma had trouble following the arrows, and he blinked, only now realizing that his red-haired friend was using his family’s Black Bow.

For a second Ranma took the time to glare at the thing, which had always given him some weird vibes. But he turned away as the others archers slowed their horses and dropped from the saddles to open fire. None of them could fire in the saddle yet. That training would take a good long time. At the same time, Tigre’s people set out their long spears in front of them, and the heavy cavalry dressed their lines, charging forward in a spread out line and impacting their opposite numbers.

The battle became general for a moment, and Ranma, out in front with Elen, struck out all around, using a staff from the saddle. He didn’t kill many of those he struck, but his victims certainly didn’t realize that death would have been a softer option than the broken bones, shattered armor, and simple unconsciousness they were plagued with as Ranma’s staff flew around him in a wide, almost unseen barrier of ki-infused wood. Elen was doing much the same, Arifar lashing out to either side; her horse attacking, kicking, biting, and head-butting; and showing what Ranma would have called a perfect example of Jinba Ittai, the art of horse and rider as one.

At first Ranma and Elen’s assault seemed fit to break the enemy’s line. Then the line shifted suddenly to either side, as its members didn’t so much move as flee what was coming up behind them.

The land dragon roared as it marched forward, crushing one man underfoot. Its smell having made their horses throw them off, it then killed four more Zhcted troopers with swift bites from its jaw or slashes from its forward-most claws.

Looking at it, Ranma snarled and launched himself forward off the saddle, rolling as he landed, and raced forward, using his staff as a pole vault to fling himself further upward and forward. “I believe this is my dance!”

Elsewhere, Elen was too closely embroiled with her own surroundings to interfere at first, so she fell back, trying to regain some distance in order to read the flow of the battle. When she did, she sent a runner out and back to sneak around into the woods to find Lim and her portion of the army. By the time she turned back to deal with the dragon, not only had Tigre attempted to deal with it in the same way he’d kill a wyvern, but Ranma was far too close for her to use Arifar.

Ranma landed lightly on the dragon’s head, his hand flashing out to crash into the thing’s snout only to bounce off as if he had hit stone. “Hard!” he grunted, then the land dragon tried to shake him off, failing miserably as Ranma held on with one hand while gathering ki into his other hand. “Fine, let’s see if you can take this!”

Changing his target, Ranma’s now glowing fist slammed into the dragon’s eye, not once, but several dozen times, then a hundred, as his fist flashed into the Amaguriken. A sound like some kind of gong reverberated after each successive hit, grabbing the attention of the hundreds of soldiers spread out over the battlefield.

The land dragon went berserk under Ranma, bucking and heaving, and, just as Ranma’s fist broke whatever thin, clear rock that was guarding its eye, the thing finally broke his grip on its snout, flinging him away. Its eye had burst under Ranma’s blows, but he was hurled into the air.

Flipping through the air, Ranma landed among a group of still organized Thenardier soldiers onto the back of one of their horses, landing on its feet first. Balancing there easily, Ranma used a single blow to smash the horse’s owner out of his saddle and then smacked his hands down on the saddle. Using that as a pivot, Ranma kicked out rapidly to every side of him, hurling other people out of their saddles.

Unfortunately for Ranma, the land dragon had followed him, and, in doing so, Elen couldn’t get a clear shot on it with her weapon’s magical attack. The attack wasn’t very good at discerning friend from foe, and Elen refused to catch any of her troops in it. Irritably she sounded the horn call to retreat, but by then it was too late, and the land dragon was on Ranma once more.

Crossing the distance far faster than Ranma had anticipated, Ranma barely had a moment for his instincts to scream a warning before he leaped out of the saddle he had momentarily commandeered. Then the land dragon’s claws sliced the fleeing horse into pieces before barreling into the other Thenardier men around Ranma.

“Get out of the way, Ranma!” Elen roared, her voice carrying with all the expertise of a warlord on the battlefield.

Ranma grunted but continued to dodge around for a bit until he had led the dragon away from some of the Thenardier and Zhcted troops on the ground, having noticed that more than a few of the ones who had been unhorsed by their suddenly fearful horses were still alive.

Soon enough, though, Ranma was far enough away for Elen, and she launched her attack. With Arifar pointing at the dragon, Elen roared out, “Ley Adimos!” This attack consisted of a large current of dense air which lifted the land dragon off the ground. Once it was in the air, thrashing and fighting wildly to get free of whatever was holding it, the air suddenly started to shear in two directions. The air then split the dragon in half, almost like a wind shear attack of unimaginable power had hit it.

Staring at the remains, Ranma walked through the rest of the current battlefield unmolested, the surrounding Thenardier forces now in full retreat. “Yeah,” he said to Elen as she reached him on her horse. “I’d rather you not use that kind of attack on me. Wow.”

Elen laughed but soon turned her attention to the rout. For the death of the land dragon hadn’t been the only blow the invading forces had sustained. Limalisha had been launching her own attack elsewhere. She had pulled many of the Thenardier reserves out of position with a ruse using horses, then had ambushed them, overrunning them entirely, and was now behind the Thenardier army, threatening their camp.

But for all his faults, Zion did have a kind of courage. And it was this courage that saved his forward most troops for the moment. “VORN!!!” the young man roared, marching forward. “VORN! I challenge you to a joust, Vorn! The winner wins this field without further lives lost! Will you accept, or are you a coward, hiding behind the skirts of the Vanadis you sold your nation to!?”

Ranma and Elen looked at one another and said as one, “Is he mad!? We’re winning…oy, don’t copy…stop that!”

They were about to laugh, but then from nearby they saw Tigre break out of a clump of soldiers, Alsace and Zhcted alike. Ranma groaned, and Elen shook her head, leaning down to Ranma. “Is this some man thing?”

Nodding gravely, Ranma watched as Tigre handed off most of his quivers to Bertrand. “Yeah, kind of. I think it was the hiding behind the skirts line. I know that would’ve worked on me too damn easily.”

“Ohoh, even though you could wear a skirt half the time?” Elen teased.

“Meh, my old man pounded into my head this whole women are weak thing, though I don’t believe it any longer. Is he going to just use a bow?” Ranma muttered, cocking his head and watching. “Huh, well if anyone can use a bow and arrow in a joust, it’s Tigre.”

“It’s good you no longer believe that rot. I’d have to really use Ley Adimos on you like you requested a week back,” Elen huffed, then she smiled as she watched Tigre shoot four shots. The first three all hit the same point on Zion’s shield, despite Zion being the one to use his shield to block them. “How exactly did he figure out how Zion would move his shield like that?”

“Tigre and bows are a mystery to me. He’s just that good. And one more…” The two watched, and, as Ranma had said, Tigre fired one more time before the charging Zion reached him. That arrow pierced Zion’s shield at the weakened point, punching straight through his forearm underneath it. “YES! Couldn’t happen to a nicer cockroach!”

Elen laughed, then stopped as, when Tigre turned to either take Zion hostage or finish him off (which Elen knew was unlikely, given Tigre’s personality), the rest of the Thenardier remaining cavalry charged forward followed by their infantry.

She raced forward too, shouting over her shoulder, “Talk later; let’s finish this now!”

Ranma nodded and raced forward on his own two feet after her. He took a moment to nod at Tigre and shout, “I bet that felt good!”

“I don’t like hurting people most of the time, but that was quite satisfying, yes,” Tigre replied, shooting so fast he emptied another quiver in less than a second. Ranma then was too busy with the fight to talk further.

But this turned out to be mostly the last gasp of a beaten force. Zion used the cover of his army to retreat to his camp, which was still secure thanks to the presence of the sky dragon. Uncaring about the fate of his army, Zion immediately climbed into the saddle of the sky dragon and ordered its tethers cut. Under his command, the dragon leaped into the sky and was soon gaining altitude as he shouted down, “As if I’ll let a bow-using, jumped up peasant like you kill me! You just wait, Vorn! You and your new masters will all be crushed by my father along with your precious Alsace!”

Craning his neck, Ranma watched this with a scowl. Then he grabbed a spear from nearby, heaving it into the air. It came close enough for Zion to pull the dragon to one side, but that was all.

“Damn it!” Elen muttered. “After all this, he’s going to get away!”

“He’s going to get away? Is there anything I can do?” Tigre muttered, staring above them. Then he seemed to blink and stared down at the Black Bow.

As Tigre did, Ranma’s eyes narrowed as if he was sensing something just at the edge of his hearing, inaudible but there.

Elen reacted an instant later as Arifar began to glow at her waist. “Ho? You want to help him, I take it? You little two-timer,” she said affectionately, stroking Arifar’s hilt.

With permission from his master so given, Arifar glowed, and a fast wind began to emanate from the weapon, moving toward and then coalescing around Tigre’s bow, sliding along the length of the string to the arrow. There the wind began to become more and more visible as the Black Bow glowed with some kind of inner light.

Pulling the string back, Tigre aimed upwards, deducing where the flying dragon would be before firing. The arrow was like a bolt of dark blue and white lightning, composed of the magic of the bow and of Arifar’s wind, rocketing into the sky. It was moving so fast that it was doubtful, even had Zion seen it coming, that he could have dodged it. Instead the arrow struck with all the power of a tornado condensed into an area only a few yards across, shredding a wing, the side of the dragon, and Zion himself. The remains slowly started to fall backwards toward the ground, the dragon already dead, unable to even scream a last cry.

Below, the men among the Thenardier army who were able to see this act did just that for the dragon, letting loose a loud wail as Tigre collapsed back, nearly falling out of the saddle. Then, as Ranma reached up to catch the other man, Elen roared, “Tigrevurmud Vorn has shot down Zion Thenardier!”

As that magically augmented shout carried over the fields of Molsheim, men all over the battlefield threw their weapons down and raised their hands in token of surrender. The battle for Alsace was over.

**End Chapter**

A lot of this could be described as canon but with Ranma additions to the side. However, nothing that had already been done would have changed the invasion of Alsace, and, of course, Tigre would react the same way: after all, even with Ranma by his side, he’d learned that Ranma alone couldn’t stop an army (he could actually, but not with friendlies around, as Ranma thought about).

As for Ranma’s showing against the land dragon, there was only so long Elen was going to wait before killing the thing. Ranma has endurance and speed, the dragon had armor (and no pressure points) but would never have been able to hit him, it’s too slow. It would have taken him a long while to take down, though he could have blinded it relatively quickly. After that it would have gone mad, but killing it would be a lot tougher.

However, after this is where the story really goes off the rails, LOL!!! I am honestly looking forward to that most of all (yes, I know this isn’t a surprise, LOL).