

I can't draw.

This has been edited by Hiryo and myself using Grammarly. Although I would still wager there are numerous Dragon Naturally Speaking issues despite that. Still, I hope there aren't enough to bother your enjoyment of the chapter.

Chapter 9: Marching and Trolling

After about ten minutes of futilely glaring at the axe as Limalisha moved Muma this way and that, Ranma finally decided to stop letting the fact that it was still laughing at him bother him. Meanwhile, Eleonora's thoughts had moved on from her initial shock at this sudden shift. While she had never thought Lim would become another Vanadis, she understood that each of the magical weapons looked for something different in their users. *How else could you explain someone like Eleonora, a foreigner, becoming a Vanadis for Zhcted or Elizavetta with greedy grasping nature or Ludmila, with her inherited stick up her ass?*

"I'm wondering what you're supposed to do with such a tiny little thing. It certainly can't have the heft or range of the warhammers and battleaxes we were playing with to see which would suit you best. Unless o'course there's magic involved," Ranma finished in a drawl, adding an eye-roll for good measure.

As if it understood Ranma's words, Muma's chuckling in Ranma's mind shifted, changing from that of a young boy who had just seen something amusing to a sort of sinister chuckle. Ranma reflected it sounded exactly like the kind that a young boy would use when he was trying to play with ants and magnifying glasses.

Hefting her Viralt, Lim smirked at Ranma. "Let's find out, shall we?"

Ranma shrugged, then leaped backward doing a triple flip in the air – just to show off, honestly - before landing nearby, one hand in front of him, beckoning, the other cocked back. "Who am I to say no to an invitation like that?"

Letting out a totally inappropriate chortle at that, Lim charged forward, smiling widely, wider than most of the smiles Ranma had seen on her face up to this point except for when they were alone. He just thought that even if that was the only thing that Muma did for her, it would be a good thing when the battleaxe in her hands transformed. While it looked the same for the most part, its size changed between one eyeblink and the next, becoming massive, at least twice the size it was previously.

"What the heck...!" Ranma exclaimed, leaping up and away.

The axe slammed down, where he had previously been standing, and Ranma kicked out at the weapon's side. But at a nonverbal command, a weapon shifted again, becoming much the same size as the war axes they had been practicing with for the last month. With that, Ranma's kick that would've sent him flying to the side while overbalancing Lim missed, leaving him in midair with his leg out.

Below, Lim twisted in place, bringing her axe up again, shifting once more into a giant form as she sliced at him.

Ranma was still able to dodge upwards, proving once again that the laws of gravity and momentum were his toys in the air, while Elen watched and laughed. A moment later, Ranma had crossed the distance faster than Lim could retract her weapon and a kick to the chest was barely blocked by the axe's shaft, hurling Lim off her feet. As she rolled and came up to a crouch, Ranma relaxed, cocking his head to one side. "Okay, I'll bite. I have to assume that its weight doesn't change at all?"

"Not only does its weight not change, but Muma's impetus doesn't change. I don't even feel any drag through the air when I'm using it, which I certainly should when it's that size," Lim stared down at the Viralt, shaking her head in shock and some bemused wonder. "Either that, or it's already given me an immense boost to my strength."

"Eh, it won't give you an immediate leg up like that. Sasha and I talked about that once, and while it will let you gain strength and speed far faster than most and access to your inner life force, that is more subtle than quick. Ooh, although you won't feel the cold anymore," Elen replied, snorting. "No more winter coats for you."

Lim looked at her childhood friend thoughtfully at that, then clicked her fingers as an idea occurred to her. "Do you know anything about the Vanadis that previously owned this weapon, Eleonora-sama?"

"You can't call me -sama anymore." Elen then laughed wildly, thrusting her fist into the air as the implication of that hit her. "Yes! Finally, I'm going to get you to stop calling me that and running after me to make certain I'm not 'acting beneath my station'."

Lim blinked, and Elen spelled it out for her. "You're a Vanadis too now, you know. And we're all equal."

At that, Lim blushed, not having realized that point and uncertain how she felt about it. Despite the fact they were best friends, being equal to her lady was something Lim had never thought of herself as.

"As for your question," Elen went on, frowning pensively. "I don't remember much about Olga. I certainly never met Muma's previous wielder, but I think that Sasha and Sofy both mentioned her. Something about Olga being from the Horse Lord lands and young to boot. I

think Sofy also said something about her basically not taking over her lands? I mean, she showed up, took the oath and then disappeared.”

Frowning further, she tried to remember what Sasha had said on that score and then click her fingers. “Olga wanted to go on some kind of journey or something, to get used to the idea of the weapon, and her duties as a Vanadis, looking at how various lords ruled their lands or something.”

Frowning at that, Lim shook her head. “That is not how I would’ve done things. Especially if, and I think I am right on this, that Muma had gone unclaimed for many years before it found Olga?”

“You know, that actually is not a bad idea,” Ranma said almost at the same time, causing Elen and Lim to look at Ranma in surprise, and Ranma went on, gesturing to the southwest across the river. “You probably should get used to Muma as fast as possible. Maybe by, let’s say, heading across the river, see if you can find any of the bandit bands that our scouts have been reporting?”

Many of the scouts had already crossed the river, moving ahead of the rest of the army to scout out the land and check on the various nobles who had said they would be willing to support Regin’s move across the river via goods and supplies. A few had filtered back, reporting that the territory was somewhat lawless, with few nobles in the area retaining enough manpower to patrol their lands, and several bandit groups had formed taking advantage of that.

“We do need to wipe away those bandit groups,” Elen agreed, smirking at her friend. “And trust me, that little show you just pulled put on does show that you need some time to get used to that weapon. Probably more time than it took me to get used to this boy,” she’s patted the hilt of her sword fondly.

Lim slowly nodded her head. The size-changing thing had thrown her off, and if Ranma had been serious, he’d have beaten her instead of just kicking her away as he had. “Agreed.” She frowned, thinking about it for a moment and slowly, Lim’s frown turned upside down. “A thought occurs. Given Ranma’s own experiences, acting as a poor peasant woman moving from one place to another, perhaps even pushing a cart or something similar would be more than enough of a disguise to allow the bandits to come to me.”

“Heck yeah,” Ranma snorted, then looked over the river and back to Lim. “In fact, I think I’ll join you. Unless you need me here, Elen?” Ranma deliberately did not look at Elen as he asked this question, knowing what he would see there.

Elen was indeed grinning like the world’s snarkest pumpkin, so much so that Lim blushed, muttering “Eleonora-sama!” under her breath.

“Ah, ah, ah, there’s no sama there any longer,” the other Vanadis caroled before nodding her head to Ranma. “But sure, I don’t need you here for this Ranma,” she gestured over to the number of trees that Ranma had already downed and brought to the river, stacking them in neat piles on the Silver Meteor Army’s side of the river. “You’ve done your bit. Now let our carpenters do theirs.”

Grinning, Ranma excused himself and returned a moment later, dressed as one of the locals. His silk pants and shirt were gone in favor of heavy leggings and primitive cotton shift. Moreover, Ranma had changed into his female body, causing the cotton shift to bulge out in a way that had several nearby workmen gawping and Muma’s laughter starting up once more.

Ranma was philosophical about that, actually. First, she figured that, like Arifar, exposure to his curse would let Muma slowly get over the humor of it. And second, Muma’s giggles weren’t anywhere near as annoying as the twin cackles of Sasha’s weapons. There was something more innocent about Muma, maybe? Ranma wasn’t certain how to describe it. *I got the distinct impression that Sasha’s weapons consider themselves bad boys, outside of their loyalty to Sasha. This one sounds almost guilty about laughing now.* Ranma was certain, however, that it was a boy’s voice, unlike Sofy or Ludmila or even Valentina’s weapons.

The redhead blinked as Lim smacked her fingers in front of her face. “What were you thinking of just now?” she asked, dumping a small bag of things in front of him.

Ranma looked at the back, then smirked, looked back at Lim and asked innocently, “Did you want me to do something with that or...”

Lim rolled her eyes and made a ‘get on with it’ gesture, causing Ranma to smirked snort at her. “Bah, I see it now. You only keep me around as a pack mule.”

“Strange, I don’t think that a pack mule is the kind of animal she thinks about when she looks at you. I was thinking more stud-horse, despite it being a mislabel right now,” Elen quipped.

“Eleonora-sama!” Elen shouted, now blushing hotly.

“But your stud-horse didn’t answer your question, Lim. More time in the saddle might be needed to break him in,” Elen smirked at her now furiously blushing friend before looking over at Ranma. “What were you thinking of?”

“The different personalities of the Viralts I’ve interacted with.”

“Ooh, and what do they sound like?” Elen wondered. *I know my Arifar is a teen boy, but what about the others?*

“Yours is a teenage boy, Sasha’s two preteen troublemakers. Mila’s weapon sounds like an elderly grump, unused to laughing at all. Sofy’s is a young woman with an off-center sense of humor.” Ranma counted off on his fingers. “And Valentina’s Ezendeis sounds like a female emo who will only let loose a chuckle occasionally.”

He paused, then frowning. “I want to say Ezendeis is a bit of an Edge Lord, one of those people who’d say stuff like ‘revelry in the dark’ and paint everything black. Can’t say entirely why I think that just from a laugh, though.”

“And what about Muma,” Lim asked, patting her weapon, while Elen tried not to collapse to her knees at the idea of Ludmila Lourie’s weapon being a crotchety old woman.

Ranma answered Lim’s question while Elen’s shouts of ‘that fits, that so fits’ resounded around them. “A younger boy, maybe nine or ten, not a preteen yet, and much more innocent-sounding. Mind you, that’s all I’m getting because of the types of laughs they have at my expense, so take it with a grain of salt.” Ranma snorted, then winked over at Elen. “Although I do agree with you, the crotchety old woman thing definitely fits Mila.”

Rolling her eyes, Lim turned away, grabbing up a change of clothing and heading for the keep to change.

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Elsewhere, as her men finished preparing to march into Brune to help against Muozinel, Mila frowned, looking around, her eyes narrowed and a snarl on her lips.

“My lady?” one of her officers stammered, somewhat put off by the sudden change from formally serious to this vengeful, angry look.

“Why do I have the impression that someone just made a joke at my expense, and one I would find most vexing?” the Vanadis asked, before shaking her head out of the strange mood, and returning to the pain of all good generals: logistics.

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Soon Lim returned, her appearance greatly changed. Gone was her normal green armor and in its place the kind of clothing that any wondering peddler would wear, matching what Ranma was already wearing. Which, of course, was what Ranma had intended. It was just another part of the disguise, like the elderly packhorse they were using, which Ranma had scrounged up while Lim was changing.

It dawned on Lim then that this little operation of theirs would probably take a few days, and they would spend that time together alone, with no other duties to get in the way. At that thought, Lim found her pulse quickening. At the same time, her smile changed ever so slightly in such a manner that Ranma began to blush looking at her, but an answering warmth entered her own expression.

The two had not much time together since the Silver Meteor Army had begun to mobilize. Ranma had pushed the newest band of scouts and saboteurs hard, trying to complete their training, to let them join the others who had already begun to move off in various directions. Not only would the scouts be moving ahead of the Army gathering intelligence, and when they started to clash with the enemy forces, doing what they could to sabotage them, but groups of them, normally four-man teams, were being left behind in the territory on this side of the river.

They would help keep order, helping the Lords who were not going into battle to maintain control of the refugee camps as those camps slowly began to come apart. That process had already begun. Many people had already begun to find new jobs, settling new farms and so forth. Only about a third of the refugees would be remaining as refugees until the war was over and they could head back home. The rest either didn't really have enough back home to care about leaving behind, had skills in demand now, or had too many dark memories to want to go home.

This is going to be a treat, Lim reflected, then felt Muma's eagerness, the weapon having sensed the bloodthirsty nature of her thoughts on the bandits they might be, *In more ways than one, apparently.*

Elen pulled Lim into a hug, then did the same to Ranma, grinning at both of them. "Take care of one another and have fun." Then her face sobered and she shook her head. "We won't be having much fun when we meet the Muozinel army in battle, believe me. As much as their entire society is based on something I find abhorrent, no one's ever accused their soldiers of cowardice."

Ranma nodded, then gestured Lim onto the cart and leading it down towards the ford the moment Lim was sitting on the cart. The cart was actually empty, except for some food, but there were a few bundles here and there of torn rags that made it look as if it had something else within, and along with the single aging packhorse, completed the image of two peddler women very much down on their luck. Now that the winter had broken, that disguise would be more than enough to convince anyone that they were peasant travelers, ripe for the plucking.

Elen watched them go, hearing Ranma's comment of, "I'm going to have to teach you how to move like a servant, aren't I? You got too much ego in your walk."

"You are the last person to speak to anyone of ego!" There was a pause, then Lim's voice went on, "What do you mean anyway?"

"Well, peasants all move like..."

Then they were out of Elen's hearing range, and Elen chuckled before sighing and turning straight west, staring towards where Tigre, Regin and the Knightly Orders were. It still ticked her off to remember how Regin had convinced Tigre to come with her but that was neither here nor there now. Watching Ranma and Lim, even in his female form, just made her miss Tigre more. *You better not do anything with her, Tigre, just remember you belong to me!*

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At that moment, Tigre and Regin had just arrived at the headquarters of the second Knightly Order that they trying to visit. They had been traveling slowly with much fanfare and panoply through the lands policed by the Knightly Orders to try and convince the Knightly Orders that Regin was truly the heir apparent to the throne instead of the only female among three pretenders. This had worked the first time and they saw no reason to change a winning formula.

News of Muozinel's invasion from the desolate mountains to the far southwest had yet to reach this territory, and the Silver Meteor Army's messengers had yet to catch up to them. They hadn't even run into any trouble from bandits here, the Orders having kept their lands clear of brigandage as the rest of Brune collapsed into war and chaos. Even the roads were in good repair, which even most of the Army's territory couldn't claim.

Indeed, the most dangerous thing for Tigre at the moment was Regin slowly stepping up her flirtations with him. Touches on shoulder and hand had changed to touching his face and hair on this journey. Smiles had become warmer, and her modesty was slowly disappearing, despite all Titta could do to get between them.

These things were slowly having an effect. Even though Regin had been forced to dress and act like a boy for much of her life, Regin was still a beauty, if not to the same level as Elen. And even though Tigre was as dense as the mountains, through which he had hunted most of his life, he could tell that Regin was genuinely interested in him.

Coming to grips with that thought was something else, and what to do about it, something else again. Nor was this the time to about such things in Tigre's opinion. Especially since he and Elen had come to a kind of understanding over the winter. That moment near the makeshift hot springs had not been the only such private moment they had shared.

This would all change once news of the invasion reached them, but that had yet to happen just yet as, indeed, Tigre had all of a day before that news would arrive.

But as staid and normal as it was around Tigre and Regin at that moment, elsewhere, on a small island that looked to Albion as one of its least important ports, a young girl was staring up at the ceiling of the room she had rented for the night. Or rather, where the roof should have been. Currently, there was a giant gaping hole in it, while shouts and howls of anger reverberated through the in from down below. Muma had left his master, and in so doing, had not been gentle.

Olga's hands still twinged from where she had been trying to hold on to the Viralt, confused and somewhat frightened about what had just happened. But a final image and fought from Muma, the image of Zhcted's king, accompanied by a snappish and almost derogatory feeling, had caused Olga to release it, at which point it had smashed through the roof above her like a stone hurled from a catapult.

I am no longer a Vanadis, Olga thought, still somewhat shocked. I didn't even, I didn't even know that was possible! And yet, the last image that her weapon had sent her was too powerful one for her to ignore. The King had recalled Muma because she had proven to not be loyal to Zhcted.

Olga shook her head at that, wondering how anyone could think she would be. Olga came from the Horse Lords and had never wanted any kind of power over other people and certainly hadn't wanted to fight for Zhcted, the nation that was the historical enemy of her own people. The weapons power had been great but the responsibility? No, Olga had wanted no part of that.

Instead, she had used being a Vanadis as an excuse to leave the heavily patriarchal society of the Horse Lords and travel the world. She had seen quite a lot of Zhcted in that time and then left it behind, heading into Brune, then to Albion, where this had happened.

Now, Olga scowled in annoyance, then glanced at the window and then down at her small, spare frame before nodding. She opened the window, a tiny thing and wriggling out quickly. *Best not to stick around and answer uncomfortable questions. And then, perhaps, I will join the Farseeker, its captain did offer me a place on his crew, and the ship's mission is a fascinating one.* Having been trained as a medicine woman before Muma came into her life, Olga knew many healing ointments and other things that made her invaluable on any ship. And the idea of trying once more to get into the Unknown Lands to the far West intrigued her immensely.

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Ranma and Lim were barely half a day's journey away from the river before they had their first customers. Not that those customers enjoyed the experience, of course.

"Well, now, what do we have here, boys?" The man who addressed them looked like the most prototypical bully-boy that Ranma had ever seen. In fact, it put Ranma in mind of an old anime she had watched. *A lot of the bandits in Slayers were kind of generic and this guy would fit right in. His men, too, seem almost prototypical bandits*, she thought while the group of peasants turned bandits around them made loud guffaws at the lady's expense leering at them. "What you got in the cart, girlies?"

"Our wares and tools," Lim said simply, looking around.

As she did, Ranma winced. There was no fear in her voice. *Whatever else we see over the next few days, I can already tell one thing, acting is never going to be something Lim can do well. At least not if it forces her to act meek. Still, it doesn't seem like acting is very necessary at the moment. Crud, these fools are incompetent.* Ranma had been looking past the bandits that had rushed out of the woods to surround them, and she didn't see any archers staying behind or any horsemen.

"Hand over all you got, and maybe we won't hurt you much. Hell, you might enjoy it," the bandit's spokesman said, laughing wildly.

Lim looked at him, then over at Ranma, and Ranma shrugged her shoulders, indicating that there weren't any watchers staying back from the rest of the group. "We're clear."

Before Ranma had even finished the sentence, Lim was off the cart, Muma in her hand and enlarging quickly. The axe grew to about half the size it had been when Lim had first used it during her short match with Ranma, crashing into the ground by the expedient course of cutting through one of the larger and more obviously leering bandits.

The man was bisected, Muma cutting him in twain, sending blood and viscera in every direction. Then his body disappeared as the battleaxe crashed into the ground where his feet had been. "Explosive Quake!" Lim roared. The ground underneath the blow exploded in every direction, creating a giant ditch in the ground in the middle of the bandit band, hurling several off their feet, burying others, simply tearing the closest two in two by the explosive force of the attack.

She twisted the battleaxe sideways, amazed anew at how light it was. It was almost as if the entire thing was made of aluminum or something similar, some insanely light metal. It didn't even weigh as much as a wooden battleaxe of the same dimensions would.

Putting that observation to one side, Lim cut sideways through another bandit, scattering his remains over several more as they charged forward's. Horror and shock were visible on their faces, but these were desperate men who knew only a noose awaited them. And they were no strangers to violence, although Lim reckoned they weren't so used to seeing entire people cut into ribbons like this.

On the other side of the cart, Ranma had been far less murderous in her attack. Ranma didn't hold that against Lim. Indeed, from the lewd glances and ribald comments the bandits had been making to one another, Ranma wouldn't have any issue with wiping these fuckers off the face of the earth. But no. *Advertising, that's the thing* she thought, as she very purposefully knocked out six of the attackers, their bodies to the ground like puppets with their string cut, while Lim basically hacked her way through the others.

"Still, while I don't mind putting down rabid dogs in human form like this, that was kind of overkill," Ranma observed after the last bandit had fallen to a pinprick touch on his neck, gesturing to the area around them which had been liberally coated in blood and viscera. The last of the bandits had been the only one to realize that, yes, running was the best thing to do. Far too late to do any good.

Lim shrugged her shoulders, looking down at her weapon. "I rather think that a battleaxe would normally not have a means with which to knock an opponent unconscious, and whatever your initial impressions was, Muma is quite bloodthirsty. More so than I think Eleonora-sama's weapon is."

"Ehh, I think that the Fire Twins are just as vicious, but whatever," Ranma shrugged her shoulders, which did interesting things to her chest. Unlike Lim, Ranma had disdained binding her chest up, which Lim could not help but notice at the moment.

"Perhaps so, I would imagine the wounds fire can cause would call for that type of mindset. But why did you leave so many alive?" Lim asked quizzically, then she smiled somewhat vindictively. "Wait, are you going to..."

"Yep," Ranma snickered. "Call it advertising. "A battlefield like this is going to get noticed quickly, especially with summer here and people starting to move around again. So, I want a message to go out to other bandits. Groups like this always know where one another's areas, to avoid conflict so..."

With that, Ranma held up a finger which began to glow. "First, I'm going to do to them what I did to that group of pirates that attacked us on the road to Sasha's city. And then they are going to wake up here among their bodies and do the obvious thing: panic, run to their

fellows with word of what happened and then realize precisely how weak they are now. What you did, and that weakness is going to spread and cause fear, pushing the bandits either into banding together, making them easier to find or to just run.”

Lim nodded, reflecting on that Ranma was smarter than most people would think upon first meeting him outside of the healer’s tent. He was no strategist but he did sometimes come up with some interesting tactics on the fly.

“Have you discovered how to use Muma as you wanted to? Or do you think we should keep going?”

“I think we should keep going. It’s not as if we’ve actually gone that far.” Lim looked at the mule, snorting irritably. “Do you think we can leave the horse and the cart behind now?”

Ranma nodded quickly. “Sure, put some packs on your back, and we’ll still look like merchants, only even worse down on our luck. And when it comes nighttime, we can push on.”

“I’d rather not, but yes, I think we need to put more distance between us and Eagle’s tower before we run into any truly dangerous bandits.” Lim nodded.

The two of them moved on quickly, running into no trouble for the rest of that first day out. The next day passed wetly, rain beginning early and going through much of the day, leaving them wet and annoyed. But as evening came upon them, Lim and Ranma met up with a group of the scouts who had already crossed the river ahead of the Army.

Normally, they had would’ve broken up into smaller teams, but this one was a full four-man squad, with one of them injured. Ranma recognized the injured man as one of the recruits from the refugee camp as he was treating him, while two of the others had originally been archers that Tigre had taken under his wing. The last was a farrier that Ranma remembered only vaguely, but who the others looked to as a leader.

At first, the four men thought Ranma and Lim were travelers until Ranma pulled back her hood. “Hey, you four, what’re you up to?”

Ranma’s red hair was quite distinctive, and the group went from wary and concerned to respectful and relieved in an instant. “There are at least two large bandit bands out here, Milord, Milady,” the farrier said, going up in Ranma’s estimation as he used the masculine form when addressing Ranma. Regardless of her current body, Ranma preferred that form very much, thank you. Alas, few would use it without Ranma scaring them into doing so.

“We’d been attacked ourselves a few days ago, a half-day’s travel from here,” one of the archers said, gesturing to himself and his companion, who was working out his shoulder and collarbone now that Ranma was finished with him. “We slipped away from the woods, and few

among them that attacked us 'ad much woodcraft, and we ganked several with our arrows before fading back. Then I tended to Alric's wounds."

"The other band is a little more serious. It's made up of bandits and former men-at-arms," the former farrier explained. "They are better-armed and better led. What's worse, rumor among the peasants I spoke to is that one of the local lords might be backing them. And as for the other lords around here..."

The scouts all exchanged glances, then the farrier turned his head back to Ranma and Lim. "We memorized dozens o' coats of arms before we were allowed to cross the Resia. Several noble's who promised ta support the Silver Meteor Army wit' supplies and'd bend the knee to Regin are hedgin' their bets."

Lim waved that away. "Of course they are. They're nobles. Especially in a civil war like this, you don't survive if you are willing to jump ship from one to the other so quickly. And especially considering that these nobles will have been among those who gave of their manpower to the Royal Army that my lady smashed."

"I wouldn't use the term smashed," Ranma murmured, smirking a little wickedly. "That makes me think there was some kind of strength in the thing being hit. Smooshed would be better, since that army was rotten to the core."

All of the men there laughed at that. Brunemen to a man, they well understood by this point what had really gone on that night when Elen had launched her sneak attack and how the Army had been so decisively weakened from within.

"Do you have any idea where this second more dangerous bandit group is operating from?" Ranma asked, concentrating on something that they could do something about. The nobles who were trying to play both sides were something that the princess and Tigre would have to sort out.

Two of the scouts pulled out maps, extremely detailed ones, more so than most maps the local nobles would have access to.

Part of their training with Ranma had been on topography. Few of the scouts had really mastered it to Ranma's level, but those that had would, when this war was over, probably be able to name their price as surveyors. Ranma knew that more than a few of them were thinking of creating a kind of guild for themselves, selling their services as a group to whoever could purchase it.

Now she looked at the map with interest as the former farrier, and the others conversed for a few seconds, before slowly marking out a portion of the map. Ranma looked at it and then up at the scouts, one eyebrow rising and one of the archers obligingly moved a tiny pebble onto the map denoting their current position.

Lim also examined the map closely, taking a certain delight in how informative it was. It wasn't nearly as detailed as the maps that had been created to cover the Silver Meteor Army's territory over the Resia, those maps were things of delight, whereas these were somewhat cruder. But they still retained information about how dense the forests were, marked out minor rivers and the areas of farmland the scouts had moved through up to this point.

This included a narrow road that ran through the area where this better-led bandit group operated. Ranma pointed out, then looked at the scouts. "It's one of der favorite stomping grounds, yah. Most people goin' through that area disappear, leastwise according to the peasants."

"Good. I figure that we can get away with the poor little waifs who have lost their way thing one more time. And that looks like a great place to do it."

The scouts left that night, pushing on to get back to the rest of the army with their reports. Other scouts were still in place and moving further away from Eagle's Tower, but the farrier had made the call that Lady Viltaria at the very least needed to know that some of the nobles who had agreed to supply them might not, in fact, have those supplies to give, let alone be on their side.

Lim informed Ranma that it wouldn't matter, though. She had personally created the logistics corps of the Silver Meteor Army over the winter, and though their supplies lacked in variety, they made up for it in amount for now. They would be able to march deeply into Duke Thenardier's territory before needing to live off the land. If even a few of the nobles along the way could give them supplies, they would be able to extend that quite a bit.

Later on their third day out, Ranma was proven correct: they could pull off the innocent peasant women on their travels one more time.

The attackers didn't bother with blustering this time. They came straight out of the bushes in a pretty well-planned ambush. Several of them grabbed at the two women as others pulled back bowstrings, shouting out, "Surrender or die where you stand."

Neither woman, of course, stood still. Ranma's fist met one bandit's face, and even though the face was concealed behind a makeshift helmet of some kind, it was dark out, so Ranma didn't get much detail, both face and helmet were shattered by that punch, the man flopping backward dead before he hit the ground.

Muma flew out from its sheath at Lim's back hidden underneath her pack, slicing into one bandit as he closed, then enlarging to block a sword thrust, before the return blow cut through sword and swordsman's chest, before she leaped upwards, using that as a pivot point to head into the air, bring the axe down as Ranma took down another attacker, letting Lim concentrate on the archers. Muma's sides blocking a few arrows as they flew towards her.

Twisting Muma around, she crashed it down into the ground, and another attack lashed out, the ground in the way of the attack becoming spikes, stabbing upwards. "Rock Spike Strike!" This time it was a more focused assault instead of a wide-angle one that exploded on impact with the ground. Instead, it sliced through the ground towards the archers. Those archers and a portion of the forest around them exploded, hurling the archers every which way to fall lifeless to the ground.

Ranma had dealt with the attackers around her by that point, leaving only one of them alive to answer questions. That one screamed as a kick utterly ruined his kneecap, a light kick from Ranma admittedly, he didn't want the bone to explode and the man to bleed out. But still, the bones shattered, and the man fell to the ground screaming.

One of his fellows turned, about to run the wounded man him through before Ranma's next blow caused the man's head to fly off his shoulders. This was followed by Ranma dealing with the last two attackers in likely manner.

As the din of combat settled down, to the low whimpering one man alive, Ranma stared down at her hands, shaking her head sadly. *I know it's normal in this world, but I think if I ever get used to how easy it is to kill here, I don't think I'll be able to look at myself in the mirror.*

Seeing that look, Lim sighed, moving over to Ranma and putting an arm around her shoulders, shaking her head. It still bemused her that Ranma, one of the most dangerous combatants she had ever met or even heard of, came from a place that was so safe that taking lives seemed so oddly foreign to her at times. Despite that, Lim would give what comfort she could.

The redhead looked at her, laying her head against the side of Lim's lightly in thanks, then gestured down to the prisoner wordlessly, asking what they would do with him. Lim's lips twitched into a faint scowl at that before she whispered into the redhead's ear. "Follow my lead. You can heal his knee, correct?"

Ranma snorted, and Lim's smile turned into that of a smirk. "In that case, we have a carrot to go along with my stick."

With that, she moved to stand over the man, glaring down at him like an angry goddess. "This is how this is going to go," Lim began, nodding to Ranma.

It took a second, but with Lim's earlier question, Ranma realized what Lim wanted and held out a hand over the man's wounded knee, the hand beginning to glow with ki.

Both the movement and glow cost the man to flinch, but Lim's voice grabbed his attention. "You tell me where your bandit camp is, and my companion will heal your leg so you can lead us to it. Lead us false, and I will cut off both legs. Try to lie or bluff and we will leave you here as a cripple."

Ranma winced a little at Lim's words but continued to go along with things, keeping her glowing hand above the bandit's knee. When the man stammered that he agreed, her other hand moved quickly, one finger heating up via her ki and touching into the Moxibustion Weakness Point before another finger hit another pressure point slightly higher up the back. "That will deaden your pain," she said, even as the man opened his mouth to scream at the heat of the first touch.

Since the second pressure point had indeed deadened all feeling from the waist down, the man's eyes widened in shock and surprised relief. He stared at Ranma in awe as she began to heal his wounded knee. "The Maiden of Mercy! I have heard rumors that there was someone who could heal with a touch moving among the peasants, but..."

At that, Ranma grumbled a little, but that was all. She really didn't have as much of a problem with that rumor as she did about the Servant of The Gods thing the priests had passed on. But Lim frowned, taking in the man once more, then looking around at a few of the other dead on the ground, her eyes narrowing.

"So, you truly are not peasants turned brigands. You are armsmen. Did your Lord die, and no one else agreed to take you on? Or, are you still in the employ of someone?" *Let us see if the rumor the scouts passed on is correct.*

The man blanched, but Ranma moved her hand away from her knee, leaving the wound only partially healed, raising one eyebrow. "Answer her questions, please," the redhead demanded, then, deciding to add a bit more to her good cop routine, leaned forward just slightly to give the man a look down her cleavage. While she really didn't like doing it, even in this world, Ranma wasn't above using her feminine wiles if circumstances warranted it.

It worked, the man's eyes widening, then looking between the two of them, licking his lips lightly before stammering. "Your word of honor that you will not kill me?"

Lim scowled but nodded, before hefting Muma in one hand, the battle-axe having shrunk down to a more manageable level again. "If you answer our questions. And only if you answer our questions."

Gulping, the man answered. He worked for a local Lord, a minor Earl who had decided to use the backdrop of the Civil War to enlarge his lands, a goal that made Ranma idly muse, "Is the man that greedy or that stupid? I mean, the minute Thenardier or someone else more powerful learns about it, he'll be crushed."

"It is not so much stupidity as believing that the war itself is none of his concern. I would wager there are other lords elsewhere doing the same thing under Thenardier and Ganelon's auspices. Many nobles only see things in relation to what they personally can gain," Lim advised before asking the brigand to go on.

The lord, whose name Ranma had never heard before and promptly forgot, sent this band out to ravage the lands of his neighbors and specifically the strongest of them. At the same time, he was offering safety and protection to his own people. This dual strategy had been working well up to this point, even in winter.

Ranma wondered why she hadn't run into this group or this noble on her earlier run to Saint-Groel but decided she must have cut through the woods too fast for entering the area they were operating in. For her part, Lim gestured over the man's shoulder, pointing out into the woods. "Is there any proof of this among your band?"

The man shook his head, replying, "Feh, no. None of us can read, who'dja think we are, nobles? Our orders were verbal and we received more by messenger."

"So, there is a messenger that presumably meets with the lord in person? Good. I presume then that there is also a specific place that you meet up with this agent?"

The man nodded, giving the description of a place a few days distant for a normal man. It was a tree among the forest that had been struck by lightning and then overgrown with golden ivy. With that and the vague direction the man gave and the knowledge that there was a small path leading to it, the two women would be easily up to find it and ambush the agent. The man even offered to lead them there, which Ranma agreed to, pulling her hand away from his knee and ordering the man to try and stand up.

He did so, then flopped back, and Ranma smiled sheepishly. "Sorry, forgot to cancel out the pressure point."

She did so quickly, and the man slowly stood up, staring down at his knee in shock. That kind of wound would have left a normal person crippled for life, in constant torment from the pain. Indeed, even a nobleman would never have been able to find a healer who could heal it to the point where they could actually use their leg again. It did not escape the man's mind though that the same hands which had healed his knee had also done the damage to it in the first place and he looked at both women warily. "Didja want to start off now or wait for dawn?"

"Now," both Lim and Ranma answered.

With his leg healed, the man led them quickly through the woods and with only about an hour of night left, the two women found themselves looking down at the bandit camp from where they had climbed up into the branches of a tree. It was hidden among the trees of a small dip in the land. Even their fires were well covered, showing how professional the armsmen to meet up most of their numbers were, although their patrol was moving through the camp rather than hidden outside it.

Those hints of professionalism availed them and not at all. After tying their prisoner to a tree – he might have been both afraid and given his word, but there was no need to tempt fate

– Lim started the party by launching one of her new long-range attacks directly into the center of the camp. This attack caused a massive fissure to open up along the ground, several feet deep and wide, causing much of the camp to fall into it, as well as hurling men and beasts off their feet.

Meanwhile, Ranma raced around the camp quickly, then into it from the other side, trapping the remaining bandits between the now charging Lim and herself. Before the bandits could realize they were under attack, it was pretty much all over. While Lim didn't have the speed of a more experienced Vanadis, she had already developed the strength of one, thanks to Ranma's training and her rapidly rising familiarity with Muma's abilities. As well fighting Ranma in hand-to-hand was a paddling waiting to happen unless you had the skill of a Vanadis.

Within minutes the last of the bandits had fallen, with Lim and Ranma had both decided that they would not be leaving any further survivors. There was no further need for advertising. This group's disappearance and what would happen later once Elen moved on their lord would be more than enough. Ranma then retrieved their prisoner, asking him to identify their band's leader, and the man did so with alacrity shaking in fear at once again seeing these two in action, this time from a safe distance.

Soon, Ranma had gone through the man's items, finding that their prisoner had told the truth: there was nothing incriminating on them. Their weapons and armor were better than most bandit stuff and far better quality than the pitchforks, Spears and hatchets of the first band they dealt with, but that wasn't so unusual. "If you want evidence of this Lord's plans, we will have to capture that agent."

Doing so was extremely simple once they reached the place the agent would meet the brigands. The two of them waited barely a day near the golden ivy-covered tree before the man appeared, which was good timing, admittedly. Ranma took him by complete surprise, leaping down from the trees where she had been moving through the branches silently, knocking the man out instantly. He, too, didn't have anything incriminating on him, but what he was wearing, a well-made doublet with leggings along with the pouch of money, and how well-groomed the man was just screamed nobleman to Ranma.

At that point, Lim decided that they should start heading back with their two prisoners. But thankfully, early the next day, after passing a somewhat unpleasant night with both of their prisoners tied to a nearby tree, they ran into another pair of scouts heading back the way they had come. They handed the prisoners off, with a report in hand for Elen. The agent even obligingly shouted threats and deprecations on them the instant Ranma removed his gag, wanting to retrieve his rope from the man, calling the Princess a betraying whore who, "Sold out her country to Zhcted for the cost of some turncoat Earl's cock!"

"Well, if that doesn't show him an enemy of the Princess and Tigre, then nothing well," Ranma drawled, pushing the man hard in the back, nodding to the two scouts while thinking violent thoughts. "Elen will want to talk to them both, I think."

"Will you not travel with us back, my Lord, my Lady?" The agent and the prisoner, whose name Ranma and Lim had pointedly not attempted to learn, looked quizzical at the way the two scouts had addressed Ranma and Lim, but Ranma ignored them, shaking her head. "No, we'll go back on our own." She smirked, pushing at the shoulder of one of the scouts playfully. "Or are you saying you could keep up with me?"

"God's no! I'd rupture myself tryin'," the scout retorted, shaking his head.

Lim chortled, nodded to Ranma, and the two of them left the scouts behind. Within seconds, both of them were running, sprinting faster than most men could in a ground devouring lope that left the scouts smirking and the two prisoners stunned. "She is Vanadis too then," the agent grumbled, shaking his head. "That explains how easily she overpowered me."

The scout who Ranma had been joking with sugar his head, making no comment on the man's noodle arms or lack of build. "Nope, Ranma is something else entirely. And I think that's enough talking from you. Let's get those gags on you two, and then we must be off. We might not be able to handle their speed, but that doesn't mean we should tarry."

However, Ranma and Lim did not head back directly. Instead, due to the weather turning against them, the two women decided to spend another night away from the ford at Eagle's Tower, barely ten leagues away from the river, as rain pelted down around them. Ranma found a tree whose trunk split upwards into four large boughs at the top with branches going every which way between them, almost creating a kind of upward grasping hand image.

There she quickly strung together to the tent that they had been using up above them, creating a canopy and giving them a bit more room as well as protection from anything on the ground. Then, as Lim watched, Ranma pulled his largest cooking pan pulled out from her ki space. A few branches that he had picked up as the clouds moved in on them went into the pan, and after a moment, Ranma had created a fire there.

The two women warmed themselves up above the fire, leaning closely against one another. While as a Vanadis, Lim didn't feel the cold as she once had, it was still highly uncomfortable to be so wet and bedraggled. Nor was Ranma immune to that feeling either. However, as they cuddled, Lim broached the subject that she knew would cause Ranma some angst. *It certainly is already doing so for me but it must be done.* "You realize that when we return to camp, I will have to move on quickly, right?"

Ranma looked at her quizzically. "No, what the heck are you talking about?"

Lim winced. *Oh, dear, this is not going to go easily, is it?* "I am now a Vanadis, Ranma. That means I am of the same rank as Eleonora-sama. I no longer serve my lady. I instead must serve the king and country of Zhcted directly as a Vanadis, and as such, there are duties and responsibilities I must see too, even discounting the need to present myself to the King directly in Silesia."

Ranma frowned, then slowly nodded. "I remember Valentina saying something. Something about Brest having been neglected badly or something like that?"

"Probably, I know it was a long while since the last Vanadis' death before Muma chose Olga. And even that was probably too quick if I am honest. Muma has shared some images of Olga with me." Lim shook her head. "Frankly I think she was far too young for the responsibility. The fact she literally ran away from the responsibility is not a surprise. But I cannot do the same."

Lim hesitated and then went on firmly, *I will not step back from this, no matter how potentially painful.* "That means I must travel to Silesia and give my vows to the land and country to him. Indeed, I will have to rush to get to the king before he recalls Muma once more. After that, I must take command of Brest. I cannot simply return to this war after I take my oaths. I must rule those lands, and doing so will be my calling for the rest of my life."

Ranma winced. "Which means you'll have to leave right away. Maybe this whole trip was a waste of time, then?"

"No," Lim replied firmly. "For one thing, I needed to have some time to get used to Muma's abilities and personality, which is rather more bloodthirsty than I expected and my new abilities. Further," Lim smiled, then kissed Ranma on the cheek, then down her jaw to her collarbone, where she began to lick and suckle at. "Spending time with you is not going to ever be a waste of time. Especially since my duties will, as I said, take me away from this war. And it will be who knows how long before we see one another again."

Ranma smiled, holding Lim there for a moment, then moving backward just enough to lean down to capture Lim's lips with her own. The two women made out for several moments, the only sound the rustle of the rain through the leaves around them, and slight whimpers coming from one or the other as their tongues began to move around one another like mating snakes, first in one woman's mouth than the other.

Finally, Ranma pulled back, allowing Lim to breathe. As she did so, her chest heaving slightly from the make-out session and growing arousal. Ranma smirked at her. "Remember, I'm not loyal to Brune. I'm loyal to Tigre, and I personally want to punch Ganelon in the balls and squish Thenardier's head like a grape. Once I've done those two things, I don't have anything holding me here. After that, all come to see you in your new lands. I promise."

Lim nodded, blushing brightly under Ranma's gaze, as she whispered, "I'll hold you to that." Then, she leaned forward, kissing Ranma again. This time, she slowly began to dominate the kiss, pushing Ranma backward against the bow of the tree branch behind them, her hands beginning to roam, causing a squeak to come out of Ranma's mouth that would probably have mortified the martial artist if she wasn't so busy becoming more and more aroused at Lim's touches.

Lime start:

Ranma continued to whimper as Lim's hands moved under her jerkin, pulling it upward and then off entirely, as Ranma feebly raised her arms at Lim's instruction. This allowed Ranma's breasts to bounce free, which they did so energetically. They weren't as large as Elen's or even Lim's, but they were firm, more than a handful, and with intensely red nipples, visible in the firelight behind the two lovers. And Lim had no hesitation to lean down to take one in her mouth, licking and nibbling at the hardening nipple.

The sensations going through Ranma now were entirely new. Lim had attempted this at one point in his male body, but nipples just weren't all that sensitive in his male form. In his female form, that changed greatly, and Ranma idly wondered how the hell he had not been feeling anything from the shirt before this without anything between shirt and nipple.

Then Lim began to suck at her nipple, and Ranma let out a moan at that point that was so loud. Lim giggled, pulling back slightly and smirking up at her lover. "Like that, did you?"

Ranma looked at her through half-slitted eyes, shaking her head as her breath came in gasps. "Jeez, is, is that what it's like for you girls all the time!? How the heck do you get anything done?"

"I rather think you're just extra sensitive," Lim replied diplomatically. "That and perhaps you can become used to such sensations."

Then she bent down to her task once more. That task being to make Ranma squeal.

Instantly Ranma started to do so, loud "MMMMs," and a "Yeee," resounding through the woods. But her mind slowly got used to the sensations, and Ranma was not one to just let Lim do all the work. She firmly began to push Lim away slightly, then leaned down and kissed Lim again.

While Lim started to dominate the kiss, this did allow Ranma to start to work on Lim's own jerkin, and Lim let her, allowing Ranma's hands, familiar hands now, to roam her upper body. She cooed into Ranma's mouth, then pulled away as Ranma began to play with her own breasts, her thumbs moving over her nipples in precisely the way that Lim liked. "Mmm, yes Ranma, that feels, mmm..."

Ranma left one hand on her breast, playing with her nipple, while the others slowly moved around Lim's body, gripping her rear and pulling her into Ranma. Lim moved with the movement, one leg going in between Ranma's, her knees moving up against Ranma's cleft, slowly moving up and down it adding a new sensation to Ranma.

This one wasn't so unfamiliar to him, as Ranma was used to being sensitive down there although this time there was no twinge of concern as Lim's knee went up and down his private

area, wetness and heat making themselves known. Lim knew that Ranma still had issues despite all she had done previously with his female form, so decided not to include any fingerplay, but playing with his pussy lightly, then dinging her clit seemed to be fine. The newest Vanadis watched as Ranma's eyes started to roll back and head before the redhead shook herself.

The hand that had previously been on Lim's rear started to move her, shifting Lim forward still more so that Lim's other leg them together. Now, their legs were in a scissor position, their pussies pressing against one another through their clothing. Yet despite that clothing, the sensation was enough to bring a moan from both women.

Then they were kissing, grinding, first slowly, then faster, harder. Ranma's hips rose, meeting Lim's downward strokes, as their legs dragged against one another, bringing a louder moan from Ranma than Lim had heard from her before this. "Oh, OOOH, I ca, I can't..."

"I'm nearly there too, RanmAAaAA!" Lim's moan rose in pitch, and soon both women were shuddering and gasping against one another as electricity went through their bodies, their breasts pressing hard against one another their mouths almost fused, as first Ranma, then Lim, went over the edge.

The two women stayed like that throughout the night, kissing, cuddling, and once or twice rousing themselves to once more scissor one another into oblivion. Not once did Ranma ask if she should change back to her male form. Somehow, the martial artist turned dimensional wanderer sensed that Lim wanted this moment to be about Ranma's female form, which she was willing to go along with. Ranma still wasn't as comfortable in her female body as she was in her male form, but Ranma now knew that there was a lot of pleasure that could be had in the female form.

Lime End

However, the next day, the two had to return to the reality beyond their makeshift love nest. The two of them wordlessly cleaned up the area and, with barely a word spoken between them, raced towards the ford. And they still arrived earlier than the two prisoners and the scouts with them.

Elen greeted them cheerfully from the top of her horse as she finished giving orders to one of her officers while the army began to move across the Resia. In the days that the two had been gone, the bridges had been finished, and now the infantry was crossing, the two pike companies Valentina had sent them moving in the center. Groups of cavalries had already begun to move along and to either side of their route to the various nobles who had agreed to back Regin with resources if not men, telling them of the Army's movements and intentions and what was required of them by the Princess. Viscount Augre had also arrived with the last infantry column, and his son, Gerard, had taken over the logistics corps of the army.

“He's been singing your praises, Lim, quite a lot frankly.” Elen giggled after summarizing for Ranma and Elen what they had missed, hopping out of her saddle to stand before the two lovers. “If not for the fact that he knows you and Ranma are courting, I would be on the lookout for his attempts to approach you in the future.”

“I am most decidedly taken, and I hope he respects that, Eleonora,” Lim said.

Elen noticed the lack of honorific and laughed, pulling her friend into a hug, then pulled back, her face turning serious. “You know what you have to do now, right?”

The other woman nodded, then gestured to Ranma, who had taken the time to heat up some water and turn back into his male body now that they were back. “We have already said our farewells, although we did discover some things you might wish to know.”

“Wish there was time for more farewelling then,” Ranma muttered, remembering last night, a blush suffused in his features, at the same time one came to Lim's face. She punched him hard on the shoulder. Ranma did the same to her, and they stood smirking at one another for a moment before Elen deliberately coughed before gesturing to one of her men.

Rurick nodded and was quickly back with two horses, saddled and supplied for a long journey. “You'll have to get going quickly. Heck, I doubt you'll be able to even stop in at Leitmeritz before you head on to the capital, but I prepared everything you need,” Elen intoned, then formally clasped her friend's forearm. “Good luck, and I hope that we see against one another soon. And, as a piece of advice, just let the king talk. He's a bit windy sometimes, but he is the king, so just letting him get on with things is the best way to do it.”

“So long as King Victor treats me as my own person rather than an extension of you, Eleonora, I should be able to stay on his good side. Considering how badly managed Brest has been up to this point, I imagine he will be more than pleased to finally have someone he can foist that problem off on,” Lim answered tartly. Then to Elen's surprise, Lim stepped forward and gave Elen a hug, which Lim would rarely do. “I do hope you take the time to come visit.”

She turned towards Ranma, smiling at him even as she continued to hug Elen. “Both of you.”

Ranma smirked at her, the look in his eyes making the drawling ‘sure,’ a promise, while Elen supplied that if she could, she would. “Although after this bit of errantry, I fully suspect the king to basically order me under house arrest in Leitmeritz for a time,” she finished ruefully.

For a moment, the three friends fell silent. Leave-takings were simple, and Lim and Elen had very rarely been apart for long periods since they had been toddlers. Indeed, the longest they'd been apart before this in their whole lives had been a single summer when Lim had been injured early in a campaign, forcing Elen to leave her behind until she could heal. But this leave-taking would be measured at a minimum in years.

Then Lim shook her head, smiled at Elen and pulled out of their hug. "Until we meet again, my friend."

Then she turned to Ranma. Before Ranma realized what she was doing, she grabbed him by the pigtail, pulling Ranma into a kiss, kissing him in front of the passing infantry. Needless to say, this drew quite a few catcalls and exclamations from the troops passing by, and Elen whooped. Then Lim pulled back, smiling at him again. "And I will hold you to your words, my Lord," Lim stated archly.

"You can bet on it, my Lady," Ranma said with a snort, then watched as she pulled away, leaping into the saddle. He remained there, staring after Lim as she crossed the bridges and headed northwest towards the Dinant Plains. Then he slapped himself in the face a few times, so hard it left a mark and turned to a smirking Elen. "Well, let's get this show on the road. We've got a pair of an invading slaving army to beat the shit out of and two assholes who need to be put into the ground."

"Eloquent as always," Elen laughed and turned back to her army as well, pulling herself back into her white stallion's saddle. "But you're right. Let's be about it."

Ranma and Elen led the Silver Meteor Army south until they reached the Royal Road, at which point they started to veer towards Nemetacum before they came upon another road. There, they started to move once more directly southeast. The army had barely begun to move down this new road, though, when a rider trotted up from the rear to the front of the march where Ranma and Elen were.

He whispered something to Elen, and she grinned, turning her horse out of the formation and trotting back down along the side of the columns of marching horse and men. Quizzically, Ranma moved after her, and soon the two of them were at the back of the column, watching as a group of riders approached.

One of them was redhaired, and Ranma shook his head in shock as he moved forward to take Tigre's bridle. "How did you do that!? You're what, nearly a month's travel away, and you covered that in less than a week?"

"Through grit, determination, and nearly killing seven horses," Tigre smiled wanly at him, then nearly collapsed out of the saddle, letting Ranma catch him with his free hand. "A, and knowing the direction you all were going to go, I cut across cross country through both unclaimed land and several farmer's fields. I even got an arrow shot at me once, not that that slowed me down much," the redheaded Earl added critically. "The farmer in question was a very poor shot."

Elen smiled, dropping down next to them, pulling Tigre into a sideways hug, as she gestured towards their baggage train. "Sad to say we don't have any carts, but we can set you

up on one of our mules instead.” Such was the need for speed, the army didn’t even have any medical carts. “I think we’ve got enough pillows to provide you with some padding.”

“Please,” Tigre whimpered as he tried manfully to ignore the fact that he had long lost any feeling below the waist. “My lower half feels like it’s about to come apart at the seams.”

“Well, we can’t have that. Elen needs some of those bits,” Ranma snorted, then as Elen blushed and smacked him on the arm, reclaimed Tigre, hefting him off of the ground over one shoulder in a fireman’s carry.

Tigre didn’t even protest, that was how hard he had ridden the horses. Indeed, he merely quipped, “Well, at least my bruises will be more evenly distributed over my body this way.”

That caused everyone nearby to laugh, even as many of the riders nearby looked at Tigre respectfully for his achievement. What he had done was truly a ride out of legend. Even a royal courier could not have done better.

About a week later, however, smiles were in stark abeyance as Tigre, Elen, and Ranma scowled, staring down at the map of Benjamin laid out on a camp table in front of them in Tigre and Elen’s command tent. It wasn’t just the fact that that map wasn’t a very good one in his estimation, causing Ranma to scowl. No, that had to do with the messenger across the table from them.

The man was a middle-aged, somewhat effete man wearing the royal colors of Brune. And he had brought a message from the Chief Chamberlain which changed everything.

The geography of Benjamin sometimes through Ranma even now. He had tried a few times to liken Brune to France, thanks to some of the names they used. But that wasn’t quite correct, and the border situation, and the terrain, always threw him.

Ranma had been told several times that the best route of invasion possible from Muozinel was through the territory that had been ceded to the Knightly Orders and the area of Zhcted that looked to Ludmila Lurie for leadership, represented by a kind of jagged segment of Zhcted ‘stabbing’ south and just a bit west of the Voyes Mountains. But the Knightly Orders operated out of several dozen castles, each of them highly defensible, from which they could interdict any invasion or raid from Muozinel or their northern neighbor. Even the peasants in that area were better prepared to flee their homes. And the rolling plains that interspersed the forests were perfect areas for the heavy cavalry tactics that made the Knightly Orders so dangerous.

It was even worse on the Zhcted side of things, where the Lurie line had long practiced what they called the ‘Strength of Steel’ defense. There weren’t as many people because that territory wasn’t very good for farming, but there were even more natural defenses, forts, and

Ludmila's own castle, which was big enough to hold an army and so strong it could sneer at sieges.

Eastward of the 'dagger' shape was the area of the border normally defended by Thenardier, leading to the tip of what Ranma couldn't stop himself from thinking of as the equivalent of the Gulf of Thailand or the Adriatic Sea. This area was heavily mountainous, and according to what Regin had told Ranma and the others at one point, the only way to invade through the mountains was slow going and defended by a large walled bastion. It had not been challenged in living memory simply because no army could make the march through those mountains.

From there, the mountains, whose name Ranma couldn't recall right now, moved further south and east until they met the gulf, becoming almost as impassable as the mountains between Alsace and Zhcted. The gulf itself was also dangerous near its tip, with numerous hidden shoals, nasty and ever-changing currents. That was why South Port was so, well, south, further down the gulf's edge towards the border with Sachstein.

But something had apparently changed. Because the message from Bedouin told them that the bastion had been taken by a massive invading army.

"Are we sure he's telling the truth?" Ranma complained, looking over at Elen and Tigre. "What I think about this Bedouin ass can also be said about his messengers that sneak."

"You really took his attack on Sofya personally, didn't you," Elen quipped, shaking her head. "You do know she doesn't need you to watch her back, right? And would be genteelly furious with you that you thought she needs you to fight her battles." *Actually, Sofy would probably find it sweet, right up until she rapped him on the head with Zaht.*

"Doesn't matter," Ranma looked away, unwilling to admit that Elen had a point. Heck, he could already feel the smack Sofy would give him. "Sofy's still a friend, and if you think I'll forget the ambush that asshole set up for her, you can think again. What's to stop Bedouin from setting us up in turn?"

Tigre coughed delicately, amused at his friend's reaction. "You must understand, Ranma, that Bedouin was acting in what he thought of as the best interests of Brune. He was wrong but he was acting as his station demanded. Personally, I cannot see any way he could gain anything from lying to us on this."

Crossing her arms, Elen turned from the map to stare up at the tent above them, thinking. "It makes sense. Since we passed south of Nemetacum, we haven't heard anything about the naval invasion that took South Port pushing out from the port. If it isn't doing that, then the naval force that took it isn't can't be very large."

The messenger coughed delicately. "Um, indeed. Lord Bedouin is receiving information from a few of Duke Thenardier's nobles which imply that the Muozinel forces which took the city are instead bent on reinforcing the city's paltry land-based defenses."

"Why keep them separate?" Ranma questioned, setting aside his animosity for the messenger and his master to look at him and Elen both. "I mean, if they have the force to invade, why split like this?"

"Because they could probably transport either the supplies for the Army or the Army itself, not both," Elen murmured, thinking hard as she stared at the map. "Wood is hard to come by for Muozinel, and even though they won the last naval campaign against Sachstein, their mercantile fleets were mauled beforehand. They probably don't have the ships to transport an army from their own ports further east."

Tigre nodded grimly. "And this map isn't to scale, I don't think. There's way more space between where the Charles Gap comes out and the Knightly Orders than is shown here. Attacking both places, forces Brune to split their forces in turn. And Muozinel can field far larger armies than a shattered Brune at war with itself."

"That is what my Lord Bedouin believes. Further..." the messenger scowled, shaking his head. "Further, Duke Thenardier is woefully out of position to face either threat. By the time he makes it back, this army coming out of the mountains could be sieging Nemetacum, pushed on to Nice while receiving supplies from South Port, or have reinforced their fellows at South Port itself. If that happens, even the Duke's doughty army could not reclaim it."

"Or, if they know about how we are already reacting to that, they take South Port, a strategic objective, forcing us to try to retake it. While this army comes in from behind and starts to rip out the country's guts, slaving, despoiling, destroying. I would lay odds that commander of that army will retreat if South Port is retaken, retreating with everything that isn't nailed down," Elen grumbled, staring back down at the map.

Tigre scowled as he, too, looked down at the map. "Do we have any reports on how fast that army is moving?"

"No, the last report we received from Earl Martinet stated he would hold out as long as he could. Beyond that, Do I look like a rural rube like you?" The messenger sneered. Tigre had recognized him as one of the noble brats who had followed Zion Thenardier around during the campaign against Zhcted that Regin had been forced to lead.

While Tigre didn't care about the opinions of such men, Ranma reached around across the table, grabbing the man's nostrils with two fingers and hoisting him up into the air, holding him like that, his arm fully outstretched over the table but not even twitching at his weight. "What you look like is a corpse in the making. Just answer the question."

He removed his fingers from the man's nose and made a point of wiping them off on the tablecloth under the map while Elen laughed and Tigre simply shook his head with a small smile. But he too looked at the man firmly. "Answer the question or I will ask Ranma to do that again."

The threat of Ranma and the pain he had already caused the effete noble brat worked, and the messenger shook his head rapidly, backing away from them and almost looking like he would bolt if not for two Zhcted guards on the tent flap. "I, I honestly don't know," he whined, one hand moving to his nose as he looked around for a way to escape from these madmen. "How am I supposed to know that kind of thing? I was chosen for this mission because I was the best horseman in the court, that's all!"

"The Prime Minister didn't send anyone to investigate what was going on personally? A group of cavalries to try and get to the fort and back to give us some idea of their numbers?" Elen asked incredulously.

"Of course we did! That's why I'm here dealing with you er, people," the man hastily changed whatever he was going say, and Ranma reflected that that was probably wise. Ranma wasn't loyal to Brune, of course, but being called a traitor to his face would probably annoy him anyway.

"So we actually don't have any real information about this army. It could just be a small reading force," the martial artist suggested. "A ghost, something that will make us chase them back into the mountains, while the enemy moves their main forces into the port, and then starts ravaging outward from there."

"They'll have a harder time with that than you might think," the man continued to stammer, pointing at a few points on the map. "While Duke Thenardier went with the majority of his army, he did leave small units of garrison troops behind, and those castles are in very good repair, paid for by Duke Thenardier's coffers, as befit a noble of Brune." Even as scared as he was, it was obvious the man was one of Thenardier's proponents even now.

"Okay, I didn't know that," Ranma answered, with Elen and Tigre adding their words to his. Ranma wanted to get angry at the guy. His attitude was just screaming for it right now. Here he came with a message from Bedouin basically begging them to do what Bedouin wanted them to, take on this new enemy army, and the brat still couldn't leave behind his own prejudices. Ranma really wanted to smack him around on general principle just for that, let alone his connection to the Prime Minister. Still, there, alas, were more important things to think about it.

"I, I can give you maps! I have a few more detailed maps, paid for by the king himself in recent times," he said proudly as if having such things was an honor rather than something that should be a matter of course. "And Lord Bedouin has prepared a letter of introduction to

several of the minor nobles you might meet along the route. They won't have much in the way of military forces led to they could have information at the very least and supplies."

Ranma's scowl deepened, but he sighed, looking over at Tigre. "I still think we should push on and reclaim South Port. I don't think that this army really exists, but I will bow to your greater standing of strategy and the whole geography thing," he waved his hand vaguely at the map, disgust plain on his face.

Tigre and Elen looked at one another, communicating with facial expressions and eyes in such a way that it made Ranma blink in surprise. *I knew they were close and had some of their own romantic moments over the winter but that close?*

In any other moment, Ranma would have been teasing them both without mercy right now, but this wasn't the time for it and he remained silent until Tigre said, "I don't think we can ignore this. If that army really exists, Brune cannot sustain the damages it could do to the country. Not with the areas which have already been damaged by war."

He looked up at the messenger, waving him towards the tent flaps. "My men will see to your horse and that you have enough food to get you back to Nice. Gerard will be waiting for you outside."

The messenger sneered and left, and Ranma instantly turned back to Tigre. "Fine, we're going, but how long will it take us to get there?" Ranma asked, scowling as he tried to picture the terrain and failing miserably. "Do we have to retrace our steps, or would it be better to march overland? Whatever we decide, we're well out of our way for a speedy move to the gap, so could we even get there in time? If Muozinel is fielding as large an army as you all fear, the moment they get out of the Gap, they could just swamp us, right?"

"I know. But I think we can do it if we use every resource available to us." Tigre looked at Ranma, and after a moment, "So did Elen."

Ranma's eyes narrowed. "Why the hell're you two looking at me like that?"

"Tell me, Ranma, how many tons of material do you think you could stuff into your ki space?" Tigre inquired.

The answer, as they found out several hours later, was quite a lot, although Ranma wasn't happy about this particular piece of knowledge. He felt bloated, heavy in a way that he had never felt before, even when Happy had used the Weakness Moxibustion Point on him.

Ranma had long since known the ki space equation, as it were. Pump enough ki into a specific small area, and it distorted space, widening the area affected. To organize it, you then added more structure in the form of an interior latticework of further ki.

What Ranma hadn't known was that, if you then filled that area, the weight of the items within had a slight, normally negligible impact on the weight of the container – sleeves, pockets, backpacks, whatever. Normally Ranma could carry all his gear and quite a lot of odds and ends besides and not even notice. Now, he was carrying what amounted to nearly two-thirds of the entire army's supplies, many tons of goods, blacksmith tools, weapons, everything.

“Oooh, this doesn't feel good. I'm like a freaking sumo wrestler,” Ranma growled as he experimentally moved around, the massive pack on his bag wobbling as he did so. He could still move, but very slowly like he was moving through water in comparison to even a normal man, which in turn was so below Ranma's normal abilities that it wasn't even funny. “I will get you for thinking this up, Tigre, I promise!”

“Mah, mah. Look at it this way, Ranma. Without the bags to hold them, our mules can now be used to shift the Infantry along even faster. And we cross straight through forests without the need of roads,” Tigre soothed, his lips twitching at how cumbersome and weighed down Ranma seemed, while Elen was guffawing next to him.

“That's supposed to make me feel better, is it?” Ranma snarked before scowling. “Fine, whatever, let's just get this show on the road before I put down roots.”

OOOOOO

Staring past the rear of the ship, Duke Ganelon smiled, the fires spreading throughout Lutetia, his former demesne glinting from his black eyes. "I imagine that right now, Duke Thenardier believes that he has won it all. I wonder when he will get the reports that he has lost South Port. Oh, to be a fly on that wall..."

Beside him, his general Greast nodded slowly, also staring out at the fires of Lutetia receding behind the ship, an almost beatific expression on his face. They were too far from Lutetia, alas, for the sounds of the screaming and dying to reach them. But even so, watching the city burn had been most fascinating.

The expression of vile joy on their faces made the nearby sailors shiver. Even the Imperial Agent could not bear to look at those faces. The idea of someone taking delight in the destruction of their enemies, he could understand. Someone taking an equal amount of delight in the destruction of their own property, the deaths of their own people? That was wrong. *Even if they had been slaves, that would have been wrong.*

Eventually, the last of the fires disappeared into the ocean behind them, and Duke Ganelon sighed, turning away from the horizon to stare at Muozinel agent. "So, how exactly are we going to get through Albioni waters? You never explained that."

"Muozinel has an alliance with one of the Princes currently fighting for Albion's throne; you do not need to know which one. It is a momentary marriage of convenience, but they will not harass our shipping, and they will protect us from the unaffiliated pirate bands. Beyond that, it is in the hands of Rish-torr," the agent replied, calling upon the name of Muozinel's Sea God. As they were not a naval power, seek God from the Muozinel pantheon was a minor god, but Duke Ganelon knew that it was also said the sea god had a soft spot for travelers.

"I suppose that will have to do." Duke Ganelon frowned, shaking his head slightly as he looked over his shoulder again back towards Brune. "I dislike the fact that we will be so out of touch with events, however. We will not know how the invasion of Brune has gone until we land in Muozinel after all, by which time it might all be over."

To that, the man had no answer, so he simply said, "The invasion will succeed. You play your part magnificently, and you will be rewarded for it."

"For your sake, I hope that proves to be the case," Duke Ganelon stated, giving the man an almost reptilian look, causing him to shiver again.

In any other circumstance, the threat might've made him laugh. The Muozinel agent was an experienced spy, provocateur and in charge of this ship. In comparison, Duke Ganelon was now an exile from his homeland, and for all the wealth that they had brought with them aboard the ship, the sailors were Muozinel men, under the agent's command, not Ganelon's.

But when the Duke looked at him like that, it made the man question the balance of power between them. Shuddering once more, the agent made his excuses and left, hoping that Rish-torr would be kind and this voyage over quick. The sooner he could hand this man off to the Emperor and his court, the better.

OOOOOOO

With the news of the invasion force coming out of Muozinel to the east, Tigre and Elen pushed the army even more quickly. To do so, Tigre, despite still needing a cushion himself, had come up with a concept called hot-saddling to go with the use of Ranma's ki space to lighten the load on the mules. Men, both infantry and cavalry, rested in the saddle for half the day while marching the rest of the day. The only groups not part of this rotation were the outriders,

light cavalry and horse archers that Elen occasionally commanded, moving around the army as it marched.

With Ranma and this new technique, they were moving far faster than an infantry force, no matter how well trained, could move along, although not as fast as a good purely cavalry force on its own. Even their baggage train, composed entirely of mules now, moved fast. The Silver Meteor Army marched the equivalent of a third of the way across the entire nation of Brune, and in the years to come, knowledge of this march, and the campaign after, would utterly overshadow Tigre's own ride to rejoin the army, becoming the stuff of legend, as would the entire campaign...

About two weeks after rejoining the army, Tigre had recovered enough to take command of the horse archers moving out ahead of the rest of the army. They were about an hour's ride ahead of the rest of the army, which put them several hours behind their outriders, or at least, they should have been. Tigre was just about to rein in and order his troops to start back when one of his outriders came over the horizon towards them.

He was coming down a smaller road to one side which, though small, looked well travel, pushing his horse hard, when he pulled up next to Tigre, his voice came out in long gasps. "Sir, w, we've spotted fires in the distance and fleeing peasants coming this way from one of the hamlets ahead of us. I, I rode back to report while my partner moved ahead to see what was going on."

Nodding, Tigre ordered the column to form up. He only had a single company of horse archers, but depending on the enemy, that might be enough. Soon, he and the rest of his men saw the fleeing peasants for themselves. They all to a man or woman stopped to stare at the riders but then sped past as none of the riders moved to halt or otherwise molest them.

A few minutes after that, the other outrider returned, bowing from the saddle. "Muozinel troops sire, on foot, armed wit' long clubs and short swords. No cavalry. They look to be raiders o' some kind."

"Numbers?"

"I didn't get close 'nough to see, milord," the man, a Brune native risen to the horse archers from the refugees, replied. "Given the fires an' the size o' the hamlet, mayhap a hunnert?"

Nodding firmly, Tigre turned to his two assigned messengers and the company bugler. "We will intercept them," he commanded. Send a runner to the main Army. Eleonora will want to know."

Moments later, Tigre started to see the hamlet, and in the fields surrounding it, he could spot the first of the enemy raiders. No horsemen were in sight, and he wondered if Muozinel

used only infantry as their forward scouts for some reason. *Perhaps horses are too expensive to be used as such?*

Regardless, he held up a hand, then gestured in a series of movements. This sent the horse archers behind him out to either side in teams of three, spreading out to attack the raiders from a much wider angle.

So busy were they with sacking the hamlet that even the infantry in the fields around it didn't realize the danger until the first arrows began to fly, the attack taking them completely by surprise. Men fell screaming as arrows punched through light armor or into throats or heads, and at least ten men died before someone thin in the slowly burning hamlet started to shout orders, a single warbling bugle call carrying over the wind. More foot soldiers came out of the hamlet into the fields around it, trying to form up, several fleeing back the way from the Brunish forces.

Tigre, however, didn't allow them to do so. He and a group of his men rode right into the hamlet, seeing the dead and the chained peasants among the burning buildings. His arms moved in a blur, his arrows unerringly finding throat or eye, as he killed anyone who looked to be trying to give orders or move to the chained peasants while his horse raced on.

Behind him, still more horse archers came, killing those Tigre didn't. Most of the time, this would've been an idiotic move, but against the disorganized skirmisher, one who had just been worked over by Tigre, it worked.

Many of the raiders were still able to force their way out of the town, though, only to find more of Tigre's horse archers waiting there. The teams of three worked together, coming in from every angle to tear into them. While within the hamlet, Tigre and the force with him continued to empty quivers and send bodies to the dirt.

Tigre fired an arrow from one quiver, noticing it was the last, and reached to his other side, clicking open the top of the next that hung from his saddle, the arrow he had just fired taking a raider in his open mouth. He was just about to pull out the first arrow from that quiver when a voice shouted for his attention. "My Lord!"

He turned and saw that there had been a response from that one warbling horn that the enemy had gotten off for their attacks started to truly decimate the Raiders. Coming towards them was a much larger infantry group, with their own archers in toe, while behind them, Tigre could make out a faint dust cloud of incoming cavalry.

Grimacing, he dropped the arrow back into the quiver and grabbed up his own horn, playing a recall order on it, as he rode away from the hamlet. He then turned to the nearest chained peasant. "Get your people out and on the road leading deeper into Brune! We can't help you just yet, but we will, on my honor as an Earl!"

With that, he twisted his horse around, leaving the peasant folk to try and put out the fires on their own.

Within a minute, his company was reformed, far faster than the enemy had thought they could. The light cavalry, which Tigre had seen first as a dust cloud in the distance, had rushed through the infantry, eager to get to grips with the horse archers and now found this out to their cost.

Tigre used his horn again, and the horse archers whirled, firing into the incoming light cavalry then twisting away, keeping their distance as they raced off over the hamlet's fields. They soon moved around the hamlet and away to the side, drawing the enemy saber-wielding riders after them, dumping more from the sadly as they went.

Light cavalry would perhaps have eventually been able to run them to the ground, if not for the fact that Tigre had already reported this incident to the rest of the Army. And Elen now came up with her household troops.

Heavy Cavalry to a man, with the Vanadis at their front, formed into a sharp wedge. So engrossed with trying to close with the horse archers were the enemy cavalry that they didn't even see their doom approach until Elen's shout of, "For the Silver Meteor army! Death to the slavers!" reached their ears right before the blast of, "Ley Adimos!"

The blast of magically created air crashed into the enemy horsemen, lifting them off their feet, twisting and twirling horse and man through the air to crash with bone-shattering force into the ground or fellow rider. Then her own forces were within lance range, and the enemy began to die.

There was a booming sound on the breeze, not a horn precisely, something deeper, and with the same staccato rhythm like a drum.

As it rang out, the incoming enemy infantry raced forwards, presenting heavy spears as they moved into a formation that looked almost blocky in shape deeper than Tigre had anticipated. Their spears facing forward as they moved towards the heavy cavalry under Eleonora.

Tigre hastily ordered his own horse archers in on the infantry, trying to ruin their formation, while Elen and her heavy infantry continued to slaughter the light cavalry. But the enemy had archers too, and Tigre lost men and horses to their arrows as they closed.

Then, behind the enemy infantry, another cloud appeared signified more enemy cavalry, and Tigre ordered his men to break away, moving to intercept the new formation. This proved to be Muozinel's heavy cavalry, the first among the enemy who wore the facemask and triangular helmet that Muozinel troopers were known for. They didn't look as if they had the same armor quality as Eleonora's troops, but the enemy cavalry carried the same heavy

weapons. They formed into their own wedge to take Elen's formation from the side, their hooves churning up the dried dirt and loam of the fields beneath them.

Quickly, Tigre shouted orders to one of his nearest horse archers, his voice barely discernible over the clamor of battle. "Reynold, take two men, circle around this lot, find out if there any more forces incoming. We need to know."

As Reynold broke off with his two companions, Elen shouted orders of her own, relaying them through the bugle system they had developed for the Army, both Zhcted and Brune using similar instruments to convey orders. The heavy cavalry slowly peeled away from the light cavalry that they had badly mauled, although there were still a few of them in sword range, hacking and slashing at their enemies. The infantry was thus able to close before their formation was shattered by Elen using Arifar.

With their formation broken, Elen's heavy cavalry turned, building up a bit of momentum and reaching into the spear-wielding infantry in turn. Meanwhile, Tigre led his own horse archers to interpose himself between the oncoming heavy cavalry and the battlefield.

They didn't stay in one place, of course, wheeling shooting, moving all around, trying to break up the heavy calvary's charge, and doing so in a few places, but Muozinel's soldiers seemed to be too disciplined to falter in the face of a few loses or to shift targets to the horse archers. Instead, they were locked on their counterparts as they tried to disengage.

Once more, Elen's Arifar roared out, "Ley Adimos!" once more. An instant later, the blast of hurricane-force air crashed into the front line of the enemy horses.

Crashing into the melee and attempting to turn the tide, while Tigre's forces continued to circle around them, creating a carousel of death. Each horse archer was an expert with his weapon, firing into the dusty chaos with deadly effect.

The battle might have turned against the Brunish forces at that point. The enemy had them outnumbered badly, although thanks to Tigre's horse archers and Elen's Vanadis skills, neither the spear-wielding infantry nor the heavy cavalry had the momentum to break Elen's men. Instead, they were all trapped in a melee, the speed of Elen's troops gone now, letting the enemy's numbers start to tell.

But as Tigre emptied his third quiver, the vanguard of the Silver Meteor army and Ranma arrived. Ranma had been out on the other side of the army with another group of outriders, making his slow way out to meet with a local lord. The man in question had requested to meet with 'the Maiden of Mercy' to heal his son from a riding accident in return for supplying more than two hundred pounds of grain and other supplies. Ranma had been doing that kind of thing and seeing to those wounded on the march ever since they had left the Resia behind. Ranma had barely started back toward the army when news of the attack reached the then-female martial artist.

When asked earlier in the march by a giggling Elen why he didn't try to fight the Maiden of Mercy rumor, Ranma had shrugged. "Because I don't care if people, I won't ever meet again, know I'm really a guy and frankly trying to explain my curse or where I'm really from is too much of a hassle. Far less of a hassle than this damn backpack is at the moment."

A still-wet Ranma raced in on foot, having left the rest of the army well behind. One man wasn't much of a threat, and even those few soldiers who spotted Ranma discounted him as some stupid berserk peasant. Until he was in among them, his fists and feet lashing out, hurling men in every direction. Then they were too busy dying to realize their error.

As he tossed men around like so many ninepins, Ranma examined the men he was so mistreating, grabbing one of them and holding him above his head for a second to look at him even as he doubted the man's friends. "Huh, I had thought the Muozinel might be some kind of Arabic equivalent, but that really isn't the case, is it? Those masks remind me of this really bad historical fantasy movie I once watched, some band called the Immortals or something. The rest... hmm..."

The man in the air looked at him in something approaching quizzical horror. Horror at the fact he was being held in the air so easily and quizzical thanks to the dry analytical tune Ranma had been speaking with, which had grabbed his attention even through the shouts and shrieks all around them of the battle.

The man's horror was magnified as Ranma tossed him negligently to the side. Yet for all the seeming lack of effort behind that throw, the man was going so fast that when he smashed into a heavy cavalryman nearby, both horse and rider went over on to their sides, bones breaking among all three of his victims.

While he continued to cause chaos and injury among the enemy, Ranma continued to look at them thoughtfully. The cavalry, the few remaining light cavalry and the heavy cavalry around Ranma reminded him of the concept of barbarian horsemen, although they didn't seem to have the horse archers that were so connected to the Mongols in modern minds. Their outfits were a mix of scale and brigandine armor, among the heavy infantry looking more like something he'd seen in the picture from a Hunnish soldier at one point.

The heavy cavalry wore scale mail, the scales made out of small rectangular pieces of metal, on an underlayer of armor. They also wore helmets, but not the simple half-face masks of the spear-wielding infantry. These were full masks, the lower face crafted to look like an evil mouth, protecting jaw and nose, leaving the eyes clear. The mask connected directly to the helmet, which in turn was shrouded by a kind of gray covering that went down to just below their shoulders.

Their weapons, both infantry and cavalry, were curved, sabers in the cavalry's hands, just slightly curved swords among the infantry along with their long spears. No shields were in evidence among the infantry bar a few on the dead raiders, who had small bucklers. They didn't

look quite like any weapon Ranma had seen in the past, almost like someone had taken the concept of a cavalry saber and made it into an infantry weapon while enlarging the width of the blade and shringing the guard.

However, as barbarically villainous as the enemy looked, they didn't seem to still retain some kind of organization, unlike how barbarians were portrayed in most movies Ranma had seen. Even now, when their force was heavily engaged, someone was still able to give orders, which Ranma noticed as a weird, almost tinny drum noise rolled out, and the heavy cavalry started to retreat, pulling out of the melee as best they could. This wasn't very good, considering that Tigre and his horse archers were still there, arrows hammering not just into men but also horses. And they had been joined by still more coming up from the main army.

Tigre too heard the noise, and he and Elen met up for a brief moment at the outskirts of the hamlet, the Vanadis having pulled out of the melee to gain a better perspective of the overall battle, and they saw an approaching force of what looks to be heavy infantry, with archers and light cavalry and support coming towards them.

However, from the other side, pushing up towards them along the road, came more of their own forces. Their own heavy infantry, composed of Brune levies and trainees. More horse archers appeared behind them, raced to join the fight, forming into columns moving around the battlefield.

Evidently, the enemy saw them too, ad drums rolled from this new force before they could come even close to arrow range and they started to pull back.

Elen was not going to have that. She started to issue orders via the horns, and the new horse archers raced towards this enemy instead of joining Tigre. Soon this new force was also under fire. Then the horse archers peeled away when the enemy archers started to fire back, pulling the heavy cavalry into trying to chase them down, a natural reaction that only the strictest of training could stop a cavalryman from performing.

And on came more of the Silver Meteor army, the infantry finally arriving at the field and charging in, commanders dressing their lines even as they charged. Only the two pike companies stayed back, too slow to join the rest of the army for this battle.

Meanwhile, Tigre had taken charge of one of the new companies of horse archers, ordering them not to engage directly. "Keep your column separate! Separate, I tell you!" Tigre shouted while his bugler passed on the orders so that even the furthest trooper understood. "Get behind them. This looks like an entirely independent command, which means they might keep their slaves with. If we can free them now, we must!"

In the center of the battle, Elen reformed her heavy cavalry with some difficulty, pulling it out of the melee to racing towards the retreating enemy. The enemy's heavy infantry set to

meet the charge, spears, not as long as the pikes, but still deadly, set. But once more, Arifar spoke as she launched a mass of rapidly twirling air towards the enemy formation, shattering it.

Elen charged on her attack heels and the heavy cavalry with her, further disorganizing the enemy. And on her heels, Ranma also hammered into the heavy infantry, tossing them this way and that. This seemed to signal something within the enemy, and they finally started to retreat, faster and faster, the heavy cavalry abandoning the rest of them, following the few surviving light cavalry away.

As they were abandoned, the infantry finally started to break in earnest, and after that, it was all over. Like with most medieval engagements, the battle was decided by who broke first. Once an enemy was broken, the casualties really started to mount, and Tigre and Elen continued their pursuit until they were certain that the enemy force wasn't going to be able to reform, with Tigre deliberately killing anyone with the strange, shoulder-mounted drums of the enemy or wearing better armor than the rest.

Still, Ranma was, against his will, somewhat impressed with how the slavers had fought. "They didn't break nearly as fast as they should have in the face of your and Arifar's magic," Ranma said, shaking his head as he surveyed the battlefield with Elen even as his hands continued to work. Tigre was nearby, helping to organize the hamlet's survivors as they left their burnt-out homes behind and elsewhere. Duncan and a few of the other blacksmiths had begun to work on the collars in chains peasants who had been captured by the slavers.

Tigre had been correct: this force seemed to have been split off and sent ahead of the main enemy army to ravage the land as well as scout it out, and they had taken some thousand or so prisoners in the doing. This area only somewhat well-populated, being one of the major areas for sheep herding, which was not a man-intensive undertaking. Still, the Silver Meteor Army had arrived just as they were pushing into the far more populated farmlands deeper within Brune.

Ranma, too was doing his part, tearing off chains and collars with their hands even as he conversed with Elen.

She shrugged as she lashed out with Arifar, cutting through a slave's chains as he held it up with a slight 'tink' of chopped metal. "Remember, Muozinel has fought Zhcted numerous times in the past and indeed conquered some of our lands at one point in the not-too-distant past. They know how to fight Vanadis, and they know what we are capable of. Numbers are always their advantage and that use them well."

Elen gestured with one hand towards the battlefield, smiling politely at the peasant's thanks, before gesturing the next man towards her. "Don't let the last few moments of this battle fool you. Up until the rest of the army arrived, we did not have a numbers advantage here. They did. Muozinel covers about twice as much territory as Brune and Zhcted combined and always field more men than either of our nations."

Turning away from the second slave she had just freed, Elen caught Ranma's eyes with her own as she shook her head seriously. "The only thing we have ever had going for us in a larger battle or war is morale, organization and leadership." She shrugged somewhat self-consciously. "And magic too. But this, this battle alone tells me that Muozinel might have learned from their past mistakes. That just leaves morale and magic."

Then a thought occurred to her, and she started to sweatdrop. "By the way, I notice you don't have your backpack with you."

"Ah, I left it back with the rest of the army when I heard what was going on up here..." Ranma paused, turning to look in that direction, a sweatdrop forming on his own face as he thought about it.

"...Any chance your ki space survived without being on your actual body?" Elen asked after a moment.

"Not even a little," Ranma answered, sighing as he thought about what that meant before his face firmed. "And if you think I am going to let you and Tigre talk me into loading my pack back up like that again now that we're this close to the enemy, you'll have to fight me to make me do it!"

The army camped near the burned-out hamlet for the rest of that day and the morning of the next. This served four purposes: it let Ranma heal all of their wounded, large and small. They helped the freed peasants move on their way. The army redistributed its supplies from the pile Ranma's pack had left behind. And they sent out larger groups of outriders with an entirely new mission. Now that the main force of enemies in the area seemed to have been smashed, these riders would clear up any other raiding bands.

Why this group had been sent out ahead of the rest of the invading army was a mystery to Ranma until Elen reminded him of the nature of the enemy that they were facing that evening.

"That unit was primarily a slaving force, Ranma," she said bluntly as Tigre turned away from where he had been cooking over the fire for her and Ranma, smiling appreciatively at the bowl of stew that Ranma held out to her, chomping down on a spoonful, not even caring that it seared her mouth. Somehow, Ranma and Tigre between them kept coming up with ways of making normal camp food taste great and she loved it. *Can't beat a man who can cook*, she thought, with the right twist of her lips before becoming serious again as she set her spoon back into the bowl, breathing a bit on her lips as the pain registered.

"Remember, the enemy isn't just here to conquer. They are also here to **enslave**. That force was sent ahead, probably with many other smaller raiding forces, light cavalry and skirmishes, scouting the land and taking slaves. The main army will come up and smash anything that that group couldn't get through and will then claim the land later, building forts

and so forth, but the main slaving will be done before the enemy's main force arriving in the area."

"Even peasants carrying everything they own can move faster than a large army, especially with the motivation knowing that you are fleeing for your freedom and the freedom your family can give," Tigre agreed, shaking his head. He took a clipboard from Gerard, looking over it for a moment, then nodding to the man. "Prioritize getting full quiver to the horse archers. We have the perfect weapon to deal with these raiding forces and I mean to do so," he intoned firmly, Eleonora and Ranma growling in agreement.

For the next four days, the Silver Meteor Army changed their marching formation. The horse archers to a man were sent out in twenty-man troops in every direction with orders to halt the slave-taking and raiding. With so many horses gone from the main march, the infantry now set the pace, hot-saddling being cut down to barely an hour a day. The scouts took up their positions as outriders around the army and ahead of it so that the main force didn't run into any ambushes, not that the enemy seemed to have enough forces in the area just yet to do so. Their forced march seemed to have allowed them to steal some initiative away from the invaders.

With Ranma joining the scouts, the Silver Meteor army pushed deeper into the desert-like mountains separating Muozinel from Brune proper, using the King's Road once more to gain still more speed. But as they entered the mountains, the road ended at the main gap through the mountains, and the army broke away, heading deeper into the mountains, shifting further away from the gap in such a way so that they could no longer be observed by enemy scouts using it going the other way.

Meanwhile, Tigre, Lord Augre, and several other nobles and the horse archers did what they could. Soon, more than four thousand people who had been captured were freed and moving further deeper into Brune while the horse archers mauled every raiding force they came upon.

Even so, the enemy had made a mistake. With Duke Thenardier busy with Duke Ganelon, they hadn't pushed the main army as hard as they should have after sacking the fort guarding the Charles Gap, and the distance between the raiding force and the rest of the Army was so large it allowed the Silver Meteor army to push them into the mountains for several days before the scouts started to run into enemy outriders. While the rest of the army slowly made its way through the mountains, Ranma and the scouts fought a series of small sharp engagements against enemy skirmishes before Tigre and the horse archers rejoined the rest of the Army. They had lost only about four people but had gone through their arrows at an exorbitant rate. Even picking up the arrows afterward, they were still going through them faster than Gerard would've liked.

The night after Tigre returned, he joined the scouts and Ranma, the two men clasping hands as they set out from the tent Tigre shared with Gerard and Ranma, with Ranma telling his

friend the nature of the enemy they were dealing with. "They're not very good at mountain-type combat," he confided, shrugging his shoulders. "They don't seem to have a lot of men out here in the mountains. Those they do move through the mountains pretty well, but not as stealthily as ours can. But there is a lot of the enemy. A whole lot."

"Yes, I'm getting that impression myself," Tigre replied dryly, and the two men chuckled before falling silent as they passed the guards around the camp, joining up with a band of the skirmishers. With Ranma taking the lead, they moved off, heading out into the mountains for the rest of the night, slowly looping back until they were near the main pass through the mountains, observing the enemy from on high.

In so doing, they had bypassed several of the enemy's own scouts, moving through the mountains in such a way that few people could have believed possible, let alone matched. But to Tigre, moving through any kind of mountain terrain was like coming home, and Ranma could move as stealthily as any ninja if he wished. And both of them had to pass on these abilities to their scouts. Still, there were a few close calls, and a few of the enemy's scouts wouldn't be reporting in ever again.

But now, they were above the enemy armies forward most troops, watching as it marched through the main pass through the mountains while the scouts waited nearby.

There, Tigre used his spyglass to stare down at the enemy army, shielding the end of the spyglass with one hand so that there was no telltale glint of glass in the sunlight. After several minutes Tigre concluded that he was not happy with what he saw and told Ranma that in no uncertain terms. "Elen was right last week when she mentioned that the enemy seems to have learned organization," he practically growled, handing over the spyglass to Ranma, cautioning him to remember to hide the glint of the end of it.

Ranma looked through the spyglass of the enemy army, scowling too. He couldn't understand all that he was seeing, but it looked like a very well-organized force to him despite that. "Okay, I get they're organized, but what exactly am I looking at?"

"Multiple columns, each of them moving almost like separate smaller armies. Every unit has its own supply train. Lots of archers, more than there would be in a Brune army, although less I think than you would see in a Zhcted force, mixed in with the infantry. Look at those flags too. Signal banners, I think. Them and the drums we've already seen will allow for a lot more control than I had hoped to see,"

Ranma frowned, thinking about it. "They'll be able to move a bit faster, but judging by the skill of their scouts, they are still vulnerable." He handed over the spyglass, gesturing to the other scouts around them. "We could still mess them up, I think."

"Agreed, but for now, we need to start slowing them up any way we can. And I am still not exactly enthused by the numbers coming at us." The vanguard of the enemy force below

was at least the same size as the entire Silver Meteor army. Behind them, there came still more troops, another series of marching columns, coming into view, keeping good order and discipline just like the forces that composed the vanguard.

There's just enough space between them that the first groups could hammer into an enemy, holding them in place for the second while it goes around or comes up, completely untouched, Tigre thought, as he turned his attention to them for a moment, then back to the vanguard, seeing that each unit seemed to have their own marker and their own signal flags, with the larger units having more colorful banners signifying where their commander was.

Then he turned his attention to the new force coming into sight through the pass, seeing that among them was a larger kind of banner than in the first group. It was red with gold highlights, completely unlike any of the other banners that Tigre could see through the spyglass. *I wonder if that means that the Army commander is in that group,* the Earl thought, frowning a little before he put that idea into words.

"Why, do you think you could shoot him from here?" Ranma joked. *Although I wouldn't put it past Tigre to be able to do that kind of thing. Or I could sneak in and maybe assassinate them. That's a thought too...*

Chuckling, Tigre shook his head. "Even I can't shoot that far. Although that could be a tactic to use in the future. For now," Tigre stood up, collapsing the spyglass, which had been an invention made over the winter, in the very expensive gift from Elen, placing it in his pouch almost lovingly. "Let's get going. It's time for you to let out your creative side again."

"Ooh, goody!" Ranma laughed, clapping him on the shoulder, then moved back. "What exactly are we talking about, though?"

"Slowing them down is best done by putting up a few walls..."

The next day, the Muozinel Army slowly ground to a halt, their way blocked by a large number of boulders, many of them larger than a man that now were stuck in the ground of the gap. Between them were large mounds of dirt and rock. While Tigre watched from one side of the gap, Ranma had led a smaller group of the scouts down, where they began to construct a series of barricades and stops. These were not meant as true defensive positions, simply areas where the enemy army had to slow down their march more than they would otherwise.

"Tigre was right," Ranma muttered, amused. "They have to assume each line of bulwarks as a possible defensive position."

Below, the front of that army ground to a halt. Men began to move forward to first reconnoiter then remove the debris. That would be an extremely slow process, but eventually, the army would realize that it would be faster to just go over them, despite their supplies being carried by wagons. Moving those wagons over the jagged, rocky walls Ranma and his troops

had created would be hard but doable. And to the enemy's surprise, those points were not currently being defended.

Indeed, instead of being defended, some of the mounds had little messages etched into the rock. Ranma had spent a large portion of the time spent marching into the mountains learning how to write out and curse in Muozinel, and while his ability to speak the language wasn't up to his habitual taunting just yet, his written form was, according to Elen and Gerard, decent enough for what he wanted.

This meant that at that moment, down below, men were reading out little messages that went 'fooled you' and 'oops, try again,' with the odd, 'look out behind you' mixed in. It probably wouldn't matter in the long run, but it certainly made Ranma feel better, and those messages on top of everything else that was going to happen today would hopefully damage the enemy's morale something fierce.

As those messages were being written, Ranma grabbed at a nearby boulder, tearing it out of the ground as he reflected that, *Those barriers might not be defended now, but in the future, when they start to think of those walls as mere distractions and start looking up at the cliffs for the real threat, that can change. For now, though...*

With that thought, Ranma heaved the boulder over his head and, with barely a grunt of effort, hurled it down onto the army below. As it fell, Ranma grabbed up smaller stones about the size of his torso from the sides of the small, barely-there overlook where he currently was hiding. Each of those he flung down even harder at specific knots of soldiers, those he could make out as standing below banners. "Feel the power of the Living Trebuchet, you slaving fucks!"

A shout went out from the Army down below before the first rock even impacted, not that the shout saved the group of soldiers unlucky enough to find themselves underneath it. That boulder had been as large as Ranma and many times heavier. It crushed several soldiers under it and then rolled, killing and wounding more. And then Ranma's next group of boulders smashed down, killing men in two or three if he was lucky.

The effect on the army below was immediate. Troops of light cavalry started to make their way up the sides of the past towards him, only to run into traps, other scouts having created them all over the sides of the gorge throughout the night. And thanks to Tigre's training, nearly every scout was also a competent archer. Bows twanged, and men fell from their saddles, across the charging group of cavalry, slowing the fellows behind them, while Ranma launched another stone and then another.

The army below continued to respond, drums rolling out in set cadences. A larger cavalry group, followed by a full regiment of skirmishers, tried to head up the hill. The infantry forces moved around the enemy's position, trying to get behind them. However, they found that they had to retrace their route quite a bit before finding a way up on that side of the gorge.

Coming straight up the nearly fifty-degree angle slope right below the ambush point was really the best way to get at Ranma, and it wasn't going to be fun doing it.

However, the Muozinel troops had determination and courage to spare. Their cavalry falling back, the infantry made their way up the slope now, moving faster despite occasionally having to go to all fours. They kept on running into traps, too: tripwires, a few scattered caltrops, hidden ditches that ate their legs, and dozens of transplanted nettle bushes, tearing at their clothing and skin. Meanwhile, the scouts continued to fire down into them too, targeting anyone who looked to be giving orders.

When they reached a specific stone that had been painted yellow on the side face up into the mountains, a scout well behind the others fired a special arrow into the air that Tigre had made. The same kind of arrow that Tigre had occasionally used to interrupt arguments between the various forces that composed the Silver Meteor Army, the arrow made a sound like a particularly loud whistle as it flew up into the air.

Despite that, it was only the fact that Tigre had been straining his ears for that noise that allowed him to hear it over the tumult of battle occurring on the other side of the gap. He did hear it, though and quickly pulled himself up into his saddle, looking around at his assembled troops. "Sound the charge!"

As the enemy army continued to shift forces up towards Ranma and his group and to try and remove the obstructions, from the other side of the gap the newly assembled might of the Silver Meteor Army's horse archers, all three-thousands of them, crested the rise from a gap in the mountain which few would have recognized as anything more than a crack in the sides of the gap. With Tigre in the lead, they launched themselves down into bow range of the enemy army's other side, peppering infantry and the scattered cavalry units on that side of the army, none of whom had been prepared to receive such an attack.

Hundreds of men fell to their arrows, including many of the enemy's archers, who had been assembled from their parent units on that side of the army, away from what they thought was Ranma's range. But to Tigre's chagrin, the enemy commander began to bark out further orders. The Earl watched as flags moved this way and that in different segments of the army, signaling something, while drums once more rolled out through the tumult of battle.

A cavalry regiment from further back along the gap instantly veered off, moving in at an angle to try and cut off the horse archers from retreating back deeper into the mountain passes. The enemy horse, even their heavier cavalry, were lighter than the knights of Brune or Zhcted, and their horses could commensurately move faster up the slope than those troops.

Tigre had been waiting for that, and at another sound from his bugler, the entire column of horse archers retreated quickly, seemingly in some disarray.

Meanwhile, the group attacking Ranma continued on towards them, and Ranma put Tigre's part of this battle out of his mind, continuing to hurl boulders down onto the main army. Behind him, the man with the bow, the same former farrier Ranma and Lim had met on their brief time together before she left, pulled another signal arrow out, firing it up into the air.

At that signal, the scouts slowly retreated from their small hideaways, not allowing the enemy cavalry to close with them, let alone the infantry moving up past them. Like their own horse archers, the enemy light cavalry could move through this area with relative quickness, pushing up faster than Ranma had anticipated, really, once the traps had been cleared by the infantry. But the scouts were ready and retreated in proper order, leaving Ranma alone to face the charging horses as they came closer and closer to Ranma's position, which was atop a rocky outcropping.

When the last of the scouts moved past him into the passage leading away from the gorge, Ranma crouched down as if he was trying to hide behind the edge of the outcropping. But before the light cavalry of the enemy could try to split up to go around the outcropping, he shouted out, "Bakusai Tenketsu!"

The outcropping's entire stone edifice came apart with a thunderous boom like someone had stuffed it full of TNT. Shrapnel raced into and through the incoming enemy forces, downing horses and men, killing many instantly, wounding others horribly and leaving the entire group in disarray.

With a final toss of a stone the size of his fists towards the largest banner he could see, Ranma turned, racing away up and higher into the mountains, following his scouts. "Later, losers!"

Meanwhile, Tigre led the enemy cavalry and an infantry force that had joined them through a series of ever-narrowing defiles on the other side of the pass. His troops stayed just at the edge of bow range, keeping them in sight. Occasionally, he ordered a few of his men to act as if their horses were coming up lame, shifting to other horses, making it seem as if they were now really on the run and in disarray.

It wouldn't have worked against a more cautious enemy. But the commander in charge of this unit had blood in his eye. His army had been assaulted and he wanted some payback.

After about forty minutes of riding through the mountains, Tigre spotted what he was waiting for: a sword held up above a cliff face nearby. Instantly he grabbed at his own horn, blowing into it three times, an order for his horse archers to turn.

Seemingly at bay now, they launched two rounds into the incoming enemy, then twisted around once more, heading up the steep passage in front of them. The defile there was extremely rocky and steep, letting the enemy infantry and cavalry close quickly. Horses couldn't move as fast up that hill as men could and the infantry and cavalry soon became muddled.

Then from both sides came a roar and the infantry of the Silver Meteor army crashed down from three sides. Ahead of Tigre, the two pike companies moved as one, their training showing as Captain Odell shouted out an order. An avenue appeared in their formation to allow the horse archers through before the pikes formed up into a single line. Then they thundered down into the infantry and cavalry of the enemy.

Faced with bristling pikes, the cavalry tried to pull away, tried to allow the infantry to move up to halt that inexorable advance. Yet they were too badly jumbled together. Then from on high, arrows began to pelt them, the Silver Meteor army's regular archers taking them under fire from above. And then from behind along an avenue the enemy hadn't even noticed in their pell-mell charge after Tigre came Elen and her own troops, crashing into the back of the enemy regiment.

Not a single enemy from that group returned to tell the tale of their destruction, while Ranma and the remaining scouts kept the main army jumping, ambushing the groups of men they had sent into the mountains from the gap on the other side with smaller skirmishes here and there. Occasionally as the army stayed in place, seemingly uncertain of what to do, rocks crashed down from on high.

However, the next day, Ranma's stone and debris piled in the main pass had been cleared, and the army moved on, pushing deeper into the gap. Further, their march had changed. The Muozinel forces pushed out more scouts along their route. More light infantry moved up into the mountains, too, trying to make certain an ambush like this couldn't happen again. Their advance had only been slowed, not stopped.

Observing this from a distance, Elen and Tigre exchanged a glance, then shook their heads and began to make plans prepare for their next ambush, while Ranma and the scouts moved ever deeper into the mountains.

OOOOOO

In his camp outside Lutetia, Duke Thenardier scowled as he stared at the message he had just been handed by a gasping, nearly dead courier. Then he began to bark out orders. "Prepare the army to march! We must be on the move within the day."

Steid had already anticipated that, and a brief glare to one side sent the army's own couriers scurrying as he moved to his Lord's side, wordlessly asking what their destination would be.

“East Port,” Duke Thenardier answered that unasked question before going into detail of what the Bedouin had told him in the message, finishing with his own analysis. “The army coming from the mountains is a danger to the peasants in its path. But without the enemy army retaining control of the port, they are not a danger to Brune as a whole. Brune can survive that army's ravages. It cannot survive if Muozinel retains control of East Port. Moreover, my house's honor will not stand an enemy to control any of our lands!”

“You're not even tempted to attack the Silver Meteor army from behind?” Asked Drekavac, looking at the Duke quizzically.

The Duke scowled at him shaking his head. “No. The Silver Meteor Army, feh, presumptuous name aside, is serving Brune's interests at the moment thanks to Bedouin's moves. But we must do our part. There are greater things at stake now than simply the civil war. I will not allow Brune to fall!”

The Princess had been correct months back when she had spoken of Thenardier and his general character. Whatever else Duke Thenardier was, and the list was **very** long, including attempted regicide, among other things, Thenardier was also a patriot. The confrontation between him and the Princess would come but they had an interloper in their game to deal with first.

OOOOOOO

That night, Ranma led his troops through the mountains, climbing through cliffs and taking routes, the enemy no doubt thought no one could pass. But with Ranma's strength, and the admittedly the number amount of climbing ropes and other equipment he could carry, the scouts were able to avoid the enemy patrols and once more gain access to the gap the enemy army was currently traversing. And this time, they actually came down to the floor of the gap between several enemy camps.

Ranma paused, staring towards the somewhat distant fires as the scouts organized themselves into squads. Duncan, his brother Klaus, the farrier Asher and other scout officers would be leading two squads forward into the nearest camps, while Ranma would deeper into the chasm, trying to get as far as he could between the various camps and patrols.

Despite all the training the scouts had been given, this made Ranma worried. Ranma knew he was a decent enough trainer, but Ranma didn't think of himself as a leader and didn't know how well he could trust the scouts to do their job without being found out and subsequently slaughtered.

Putting his misgivings to one side, Ranma looked at Duncan and the other squad leaders. Every face was marked with charcoal, making it easier to blend in with the night. Even their weapons had been covered with a kind of gunk that blackened the blades. "Remember," he hissed, "if you're seen, that means you've already lost. Do this quick, do this fast and get out."

"Do we have any specific targets?" Duncan questioned laconically.

Ranma frowned for a moment, then said slowly, "...We've seen how strong their organization is. Let's see if we can mess it up a bit on top of hitting their supplies. Destroy any banners you find, destroy any drums you find."

"And if we are seen?" asked one of the other scout commanders.

"Get out as fast as possible. If you think you can break contact, while within the camp, targets of opportunity," Ranma shrugged. "But your survival takes priority."

The men all nodded, and Ranma whispered out a final 'good luck,' before he turned and raced off, disappearing into the darkness around them even to the senses of the men and women he had trained. The fact he was also so silent unnerved more than a few, but after a moment, Duncan gestured around him, gathering his own team, pointing to one of them in particular. "Thomson, you're on point."

That man nodded. A small, wiry man, Thomson had the air of a poacher about him with a furtive air of someone always looking for the hangman. Still, he was loyal to Tigre and to Brune and that was all Duncan cared about.

He broke off from the team for a few moments, then came back, signaling silently for them all to follow. Moments later, they passed between two enemy patrol routes, moving into the camp, unseen by any while Duncan indicated one area that didn't have as many people awake or fires around it as a fallback point.

Once inside the camp, Duncan decided that the supplies would probably be near the center of the camp, and moved in that direction, still silent with Thompson leading them around the various areas with torches and campfires lighting the night around them. At least a hundred troopers were still awake, working on this or that bit of equipment around the fireplaces as they passed, the numbers rising as they moved deeper into the camp.

As they moved, they saw several tents which had guards outside the flaps along with campfires nearby. But Duncan was reminded of a point that Ranma had often mentioned. "A tent ain't a house. If the flaps are guarded, woopie. You've got knives for a reason."

He moved towards the back of one such tent, the largest in the camp's central area, and entered quickly, cutting through the tent with his dagger, slowly to make no noise.

Inside, Duncan found what looked like large barrels of food and other supplies, including quivers of arrows. Remembering the last tirade he had heard from Lord Gerard Augre, Duncan was tempted to steal those. But instead, he moved deeper in, finding several bundles of spare banners along with a few shoulder-mounted drums. And as they found them, Duncan and the men with him started to tear them into pieces.

I wonder, should we start thinking about poisoning their food and such? The blacksmith's son thought, then shuddered. No, he decided. *Or at least, I won't be the one to make a suggestion.* It made sense, but it was also well beyond the pale, dishonorable to the degree that even a peasant like him found it appalling. However, that didn't stop him from pouring the water supplies out onto the ground, as well as any wine he found.

All this destruction had to be done silently and took more than a few hours. Meanwhile, Duncan's men had moved through the other supplied tents, doing much the same.

One of them, however, ran into some trouble. Unlike the rest of the team, Tabane had neglected to cut a tiny hole to see through first. Moving around a stack of barrels, Tabane found himself in a supply tent with a man who had a torch and looked to be going over some kind of parchment list. The two men looked at one another in frank astonishment, then the Muozinel man, who unlike most of the infantry and cavalry they had seen didn't have a mask, opened his mouth to scream.

Instantly, the scout launched himself forward. One hand clamped around the man's mouth as they landed, muffling the noise, as his other hand pulled out his dagger, stabbing quickly up into the man's vitals from right below the ribs. The man shuddered and soon went limp, slumping against the got Tabane.

With a faint shiver of disgust, Tabane dumped the body in the corner of the tent, then very, very quickly went about his business before exiting the tent. As he did, Tabane made the cuckoo sound that meant that he had been spotted.

Exiting out of the supply tent he had been ravaging, Duncan heard that and cursed before deciding that he too should fall back for now.

The rest of his men followed in ones and twos, meeting up in a dark corner of the camp they had passed through that Duncan had indicated earlier. When he arrived, Tabane explained what had happened. Duncan frowned, looking around thoughtfully, listening for any hue and cry but hearing nothing.

"All right, we haven't been made yet, but we need to be aware that eventually, someone is going to miss that fellow. Teams of two, from now on, and let's just scout around a bit. I want to make certain that we know the layout of these camps before we leave. We didn't do nearly as good a job it finding banners and drums as I had hoped, but that doesn't mean we can't come back later and do a better job."

His men all nodded and moved off through the night.

Later that night, Duncan was able to extricate his men from the camp without any further incident, and most of the other bands moving through the gap hitting other camps would have similar success, with only two squads turning back without being able to enter the camps unseen. This kind of warfare wasn't usual, and very rarely were night guards chosen among the best and brightest of any army.

OOOOOOO

Meanwhile, Ranma had left the others behind, racing deeper into the gap, examining each campsite as he passed them. And after watching a few of the other camps, Ranma eventually decided to target a camp that housed a cavalry unit. Nobles seemed the same regardless of what nation they were a part of and all nobles in this world outside of Tigre seemed to be enamored of horsemen.

Idly, Ranma wondered what it was in the human mind that made people think they were automatically superior once they got up on a horse. But Ranma didn't dwell on it. Instead, he concentrated on finding a way into the camp without being spotted. Eventually, he found one, moving through the horse paddocks, where there were only a few guards. Better, those that Ranma could see were lounging around campfires, ruining their night vision, not patrolling. *Since this camp's smack dap between a dozen others, I'd guess they could be justified in not being as on their toes as normal but I'm still going to take advantage of it.*

As he landed within the paddocks, the nearest horses whickered a bit, but Ranma tossed a dozen carrots into the air, having pulled them from his ki space. With that, the horses quickly quieted down, pushing and nudging into one another to try and get at the treats. *Not exactly well-trained, Ranma reflected sardonically as he pushed deeper in. All the better for me, I guess.*

Out the other side of the paddock, he came upon a group of four more alert guards patrolling the area where the paddock met the rest of the camp. But despite the fact this group was actually doing their job, they were using torches as they patrolled around, and Ranma simply leaped over them so high that they didn't even feel his passing and unable to see him thanks to ruining their night vision.

A second later, Ranma landed in the darkness beyond without a sound.

From there, Ranma moved through the entire camp, doing first what Duncan had assigned as a secondary priority. But Ranma was far more certain of his ability to not only not get caught but also get out if need be than Duncan had been and much faster too.

Doing so, Ranma found the various officer's tents were marked out by small banners, the size of the banner and the colors of them indicating rank. And each commander beyond the level of company captain had their tents next to a special purple tent.

The color purple seemed to have some kind of significance to the Muozinel people, and Ranma wondered why that was. *Most of their troops wore maroon uniforms, and I saw them using green, blue, and yellow banners in the battle earlier.* In contrast, the banners marking out officer quarters were purple with silver tassels. The number of tassels seemed to demark the officer's rank in question. This meant that the purple-marked tents had to be important too.

At the direct center of the camp, though, silver tassels gave way to a gold outline, gleaming in the light of the campfire outside it. Around it was a group of fully awake men, staring out into the dark alertly, blades at the ready in their hands. *That has got to be the camp legate or whatever, the equivalent of a regimental commander or perhaps even a general?* Since he didn't know how many people were assigned a normal trooper's tent, Ranma only had a vague idea of the size of the force within. *Hmm... even I can't get through without being seen, darn it.*

Later, once he was done surveying, Ranma made his way back through the, targeting not the supplies but those purple tents. *They have to be important, right? Not officer's tents, but still really important.*

The first one he cut into showed a group of men, all asleep on their own cots. But there were large shoulder-drums set on the ground by each cot, as well as banners tucked into large canvas cases.

Regimental signal-callers then, Ranma thought, grinning evilly in the dark of the tent as he cut his way into it. *Excellent!*

Once fully inside the tent, Ranma stared at the man thoughtfully, then shook his head. *No, I'm not going to kill a man in cold blood like this. That would be... well, vile. At least in battle, they have a chance to run away, if not fight me. Like this, no. Still...taking them out of the equation is too good an idea not to follow up on.*

With that in mind, Ranma went to each man in turn and hit a series of pressure points on their necks and the back of their heads, having to turn two of them over to do so. The first one knocked them out. The second one paralyzed them. The four men would seem to still be alive and even sleeping, but they wouldn't be waking up anytime soon. *Hmm... should I leave a little message or something?*

Thinking about it, Ranma shook his head. The time to make fun of his enemy's weakness and inability to stop him would come later. *If I can get out of here without being seen, then they won't be any the wiser as to what happened at all. That will be even scarier than them knowing someone snuck in and felt confident enough to taunt them.*

Decision made, Ranma searched around, taking the signal flags sticking all he could find along with the drums into his ki space, ruefully reflecting that *I would have to stuff about a thousand times more banners and shit in there before I felt as heavy as I did on our march to the mountains.*

With that done, Ranma made his way from there onto the next group of purple tents. Each tent from then on was smaller than the first, without the gold chevron marked banner outside an equally gold-marked tent nearby. And in each purple tent, Ranma performed the same operation. Although in reverse. First, he paralyzed the men, then he stole the banners and the drums, then he went through and searched for any spares among the supply tents while ruining the camp's water and wine supplies. Without them, this entire regiment couldn't use signals to move their troops in tandem or report to a higher authority mid-combat.

Even Ranma couldn't do all this quickly. By the time he was done, the sun was starting to rise and men had begun to move around the camp. So Ranma decided to call it a day.

After meeting up with the other scouts at the rendezvous point and confirming that all of them had succeeded to a lesser or greater extent, Ranma helped the rest of the men back out of the gap to a high crevice well above ground level, hiding there from the groups of infantries who were trying, and failing to find them. From there, Ranma watched that particular regiment with the spyglass he had been given by Tigre.

As he watched the consternation and fury, and then a lot of fear going through the faces of those down below, Ranma murmured, "Now, how long do you think it'll take that get over this kind of thing?"

"They'll probably be able to replace the signal flags and the drums much more easily than the people paralyzed," Duncan answered, looking a little queasy at what Ranma had described. He couldn't imagine being, well, stuck in his own body, unable to move, and only hoped that Ranma was right. That to the men so struck, it would simply seem as if they had been asleep. Some things were too bizarre and disturbing to wish even on your enemies.

Ranma and the scouts were able to do much the same thing to several other camps the next night, remaining in place. They hid throughout that day as the groups they had attacked moved further down the gap, retaining their position in the attacking army's order of march. That was odd to Ranma. He would have pulled those units out of the march for a bit to let them recover. *But I suppose their commanders could have tried to keep what happened a secret. Stupid nobles and their weird concepts of honor.*

Snickering, Ranma wondered what Tigre and the rest would do to those units later today. He knew that the plan for the rest of the army was to see if they could take advantage of the losses of coordination and supplies.

But that was Tigre's part of the affair, and Ranma could let it to him. Now he looked over at Duncan, Claus and the others. "Well, you lot, what do you think? More of the same, or should we change our targets?"

The second night was almost as successful as the first, but the third night showed that, alas, this enemy had a brain. And that the nobles who led the units Ranma and the others had attacked had finally swallowed their pride and reported what was going on.

Regardless of why the guards on the third night's attacks were far more alert, and there were far more of them. Furthermore, many of the camps had begun to push fires out deeper beyond the camp's outer edges while keeping their guards further into the camp in their original positions. Those guards, though, were still not very good at their jobs and Ranma, as he passed a few of them, heard them cursing in their own language. And they still had their night vision, which made sneaking past them harder.

However, the camp Ranma had decided to sneak into was pretty much set up the same way as the others, and Ranma had again chosen a cavalry regiment or whatever to attack. After confirming that the camp was set up like the first, Ranma pushed deeper quickly. He quickly found the purple tent next to the gold-marbled tent and banner and cut a hole in the side of it quickly, looking inside.

One of the signalers was awake, scowling angrily from what Ranma could see, the remains of some kind of game of chance on the ground before him. Ranma thought it was a game anyway. *I'm guessing they played for who would have to stay up, and this fellow lost.*

Thankfully, he was looking away from the direction that Ranma's dagger had cut his viewing hole in the side of the tent, and Ranma frowned, pulling his dagger back and thinking. *Okay, let's hit the supplies first, give this guy some time to get tired.*

Here too, he found trouble. Two men were inside the first supply tent he found, sitting in the center of the tent, cleaning their gear as they stared around them, talking quietly in their own language. Of course, Ranma once more could only understand a word or two, but the fact that they were there at all was a bad sign.

Ranma frowned, thinking for a moment, then went back to the first tent he had investigated, looking around him thoughtfully. It was then that he noticed that two of the guards on the gold-marked tent had moved off on patrol, leaving only four men left, one to each corner of the tent. Moreover, the tent was so large that you could barely make out the corners away from your post, even with the nearby campfire. *A trap or a mistake in timing?*

The dimensional traveler hesitated a moment and then acted, grabbing up a stone and hurling it to one side. One of the guards looked in the direction the sound had made, and Ranma quickly leaped upwards and out, landing in a position by another guard, an arm wrapping around his throat, holding him still before striking two pressure points. One knocked

the man out, the other left him upright, locking his body in place as if he had been struck by rigor mortis. With that done, Ranma cut a hole in the side quickly, ducking inside before the guard who had been looking away could turn back.

Inside he found a single man sleeping on a bed of cushions and quickly did the same thing to him that he had done to the men in the purple tents before this, paralyzing him. *Well, that was anticlimactic. Really hoping this guy is the real commander now, but whatever. But hey, now that they know we're out here...*

With that, Ranma took out one of his most treasured possessions: a permanent magic marker. *And images, as they say, are universal. Especially dick joke images...*

Once he was finished with his masterpiece, Ranma left the tent, slowly, admittedly, but still without being discovered, although he exited the entire camp quickly afterward, knowing it was only a matter of time before the paralyzed guard was found. *Still, with the regimental leader, whatever his title, down, it'll be an interesting experiment to see how this group reacts. Regardless...* Ranma glanced up at the moon, deciding he had time to see if he could find another, less well-guarded camp.

The next camp Ranma found was even larger, and it was with a start, but Ranma realized this was an infantry regiment, not a cavalry one, and seemed to have more people awake as well. That didn't stop Ranma from getting in, but it made it much harder. He found one supply tent, although there thankfully, the guards had already fallen asleep. Ranma was in, knocking them out and dumping water and wine supplies onto the ground before an alarm could be raised. By the time he was finished with the supply tents, the camp was slowly rousing itself, and Ranma barely escaped.

Other scouts were not so lucky, and more than one of them had fight their way out. The scout squads lost four men that night, but none had been taken captive. The next day, though, Ranma decided to change tactics. "Okay, guys. It's obvious they know we're out here now and have developed ways to try and stop us. We need to change tactics too. Frankly, I think we're getting to the end of what we can do here without fighting our way in and out of these camps. We're not built for that."

"We're not, you are," a scout leader named Vande stated bluntly.

"Maybe," Ranma shrugged. "But that doesn't change what we're going to be doing tonight. We're going to make some of those guards disappear and then we're going to wreck as many other supplies as we can. Banners, communications, anything. We can't be perfect, but we can still do damage. I'll choose the target camp, find a way in and then call you all in."

The others rumbled in agreement, then one of them dared to ask, "So boss, what're you going to cook for us tonight? And would ya mind changing into your female body to do it? Only all this time spent around only guys is..."

As the others roar in laughter, Ranma proceeded to bounce the speaker like he was a hacky sack but did heal him up afterward. His joke had shown that the scouts still had high morale anyway.

That night Ranma spent an hour scouting between camps before finding one camp whose size and makeup caught his eye. Ranma would've thought that maybe this was the Army commander's personal camp, if not for the fact that it didn't have the solid gold and crimson banner that he and Tigre had seen that first day they had scouted the enemy army. That meant that the army commander was much further forward than this group. Regardless, Ranma decided it was a good target for the night.

After calling the other scouts forward, Ranma took out a guard patrol personally, while Duncan and Asher led the others on an ambush of another patrol, taking their clothing and dressing up like them, before heading into the camp as if returning from their patrol. This left a quarter of the camp without any guards beyond its outer edge. Ranma trailed them and then moved ahead, entering the camp from another angle before working back to a tent that had been thrown up right at the entrance, heading inside and taking out the guards there before gesturing the group onward.

"Hurry it up," he hissed. "The more people I silence, the more likely it is we're going to be discovered!"

Once inside the camp, the scouts broke up into fireteams of four, the smallest group Ranma was willing to trust at this point given the patrols within the camp they could see moving around. Despite that, though, Ranma was certain that he had chosen his target well. Not only was this the biggest camp they had seen yet, but it was also the only regiment or whatever that Ranma had seen that had a mixture of archers, infantry, and cavalry. Not light cavalry either, but heavy infantry and heavy cavalry. *I'd wager anything that this is either a separate force of some kind, an elite unit or... or maybe a siege unit?* Ranma could see several hundred more carts among this camp than the others had, and that number didn't match with the larger size of the encampment.

While the others scattered throughout the camp to destroy supplies wherever they could, Ranma worked his way up the ranks this time rather than down, taking out company and troop areas first, leaving men paralyzed unconscious or simply out of it behind him, destroying drums, stealing banners and so forth.

However, at the regimental commander's tent, Ranma ran into a problem that even he couldn't surmount. There was an entire **company** of infantry awake and moving around in teams of five. And every few moments, one of them would shout out something, waiting for the others to reply.

Dammit! Ranma sighed. *Still, all this means that whoever is here is really important too, despite the lack of gold and crimson banner. And if I can't sneak in, then...*

Before the guards could even think that anyone was there beyond the firelight, Ranma raced out of the darkness, leaping over their heads, his feet lashing out to either side, crushing skulls and hurling men backward. He grabbed their torches and tossed them forward past the guards, impacting the side of the tent, before hurling a bottle of cooking oil after them from his ki space. The cooking oil smashed into the side of the hurled torch, shattering and pouring the oil out directly onto the fire, causing the fire to spread across the tent's canvas quickly.

There was a shout of rage and fear from inside, and Ranma turned away, ducking under a blow from a sword, then jerking to the side as a spear went through where his chest had been previously, grabbing the spear and pulling it easily out of the man's grip. The butt end of his purloined spear took another spearman straight in the face, hurling him backward with a cry of agony from his shattered nose and jaw before Ranma ducked a sword thrust and stabbed directly behind him at the swordsman with the spear.

The swordsman gurgled in shock as the spear thrust took him right through his brigandine armor, then Ranma pulled the spear out and twirled it, smashing aside several more blows, howling like a madman as he charged towards the command tent. "Come get some! Come on, you bastards!" since he was shouting in Japanese, it made his words seem scarier.

Quickly the soldiers in front of Ranma formed up, creating a wall of spears. Then Ranma ducked aside, hurling the spear in front of him into the formation so hard that when it struck, it picked up the man it hit and carried him into several others. As that happened and the spear wall recoiled, Ranma ducked into the tent of the signalers. The men inside, six of them in this camp, had been rousing themselves but had yet to race outside of the tent.

Now he smashed two of them aside at the entrance before pummeling the other four into the ground.

He grabbed up their drums, shattering them in his grip to loud cries of dismay, before he picked up the bundle of signal flags and made them disappear, causing even more shouts. "Yeah, it's a bad night for you lot," he said almost conversationally. Then his knife was in his hand, and Ranma cut through the back of the tent, barreling through it, the tent collapsing behind him.

The guards that had formed the outer ring had remained in place, while the inner shell had condensed to stop Ranma. So they were still there, trying to attack him as he came out of the tent. Ranma hammered them aside and kept on going, shouting at the top of his lungs as if he was roaring a war cry, when in reality, what was saying was, "Cuckooo, cuckoo, fucking cuckoo!"

Elsewhere, Duncan and the rest of the scouts had already begun to exfiltrate, having done what they could to the supplies within the camp, which had proven to be a lot, perhaps the Muozinel army's reserves. This had not been easy, the supplies having been far more heavily guarded than ever before, forcing the scouts to use every trick in their book to deal with

the guards anyway they could. However, now, as the camp roused itself to the danger within, they raced away in every direction they could, keeping away from the torch-bearing patrolmen.

“It is time we left,” Duncan said to the fireteam with him as they left behind the last supply tent. Thankfully, and Duncan knew that Ranma had planned this somehow, all of the hullabaloo was centered on him, at the center of the camp. It would take a while for someone to figure out maybe that there had been other targets other than the commander, by which time they would all be gone.

Ranma met up with the rest of the scouts later. All of them were exhausted from the sprint out of the enemy camp and then the climb up the rope to their hideaway above the gap, but they were all there despite that. Ranma sighed, looking at the scout commanders for a moment. “What do you think? Do we keep going?”

The men all winced, then shook their heads one after another. “Not unless we want to start really losing people, Ranma. I think we pushed this as far as we can,” Duncan said regretfully, with his brother, Asher and the others echoing his words.

Ranma sighed, nodded and frowned in turn before shaking his head. “I could’ve wished we had done more damage, but this enemy reacted too damn quickly once news of what we were up to spread. We’ll stay here and observe for the day and then into the night before we get the hell out of here.”

As they observed one of the enemy camps that night, Ranma was proven correct. This was yet another formation that they hadn’t targeted yet, and the regiment below was taking their security even more seriously than the others had been the night before. They were throwing up an entire palisade around the camp, having stopped earlier in the day than they would normally have to do so. Moreover, it was large enough that another regiment coming up behind them could move into the area, joining the two commands together in one camp.

“That tears it,” Ranma announced with a sigh. “I’m the only one among us who could get over palisades like that, dirt mounds though they are, without being seen, and even I don’t think I could move through that rat’s nest without being spotted before I could find something vital.”

He looked around, frowning pensively, then grabbed up a chunk of the nearby rock, heaving it out and hefted above his head. He tossed it down towards the enemy camp, hurling it as hard as he could towards the center of it, then looked at his scouts. “Let’s go,” he said, as screams and horn calls began down below. “I think we’re done here. For the next bit, it’ll be up to Tigre and the rest of the army.”

End Chapter

So, this wasn't the chapter I had hoped to put out. I have about 14,000 more words written, sort of. It's all disjointed combat scenes, and I don't like the setting, the timing of certain events, and that throughs off the whole campaign. Ugh. I could put in two combat scenes, but I feel that would just end at a cliffhanger rather than a good segue point like the above. Regardless, I hope everyone enjoyed this.