

Hey all, here is the next chapter of Sword, Bow and Horse. FILFy is almost done (I need to find a scene I seem to have... misplaced somehow, here's hoping it's on my bro's computer...) and has been Grammarlied and will be sent off to my editors tomorrow early. Horse is halfway done and should be finished by Tuesday (small chapter for the win) and after that I will be closing the HP only poll! If you haven't gotten over there to vote, do so now, please. I will also post the September Patron Only poll at that point and decide on the future of the fics which didn't win the Update Me Poll.

This has been edited by myself via Grammarly and Hiryo. No doubt we missed small mistakes throughout, but hopefully not enough to wreck your enjoyment of it.

Chapter 10: A Big Enough Hammer

While the campaign against Muozinel was dragging on in the Agnes Mountains, Lim arrived in the capital of Zhcted, looking around in interest. She had been there before, although not often, since Eleonora had always entrusted Lim to look after her lands when Elen had to make an appearance here. And when she had been here, Lim had never really had the time to take in the sights.

Silesia was built mostly of white and blue marble, with gold painted wood decorating the larger buildings. It was built near a stream, and a dike had been created to divert some of the river so that it wound around the central castle, part stream and part defensive work, although since it didn't hug the castle walls, it wasn't as good at that last aspect as it could have been.

To one side of the city, which was by far the largest in Zhcted with over a million people, the side towards the stream, the walls had long since been taken down. It had been replaced by long bridges going over the water there to a new set of suburbs on the far side. But a wall still existed, separating the rich district from a few of the other quarters of the city.

The center section was composed of the palace, a towering edifice that could be seen even from the city's edge, built on top of a manmade hill whose sides were stone walls almost equal to the tallest manor house elsewhere in the city. Around it, the various churches and noble houses sprawled, scattered among the various noble's houses.

There weren't many of those. The vast majority of nobles had their own lands and preferred to stay there. Their representatives in court had decently large estates, but nothing in comparison to the few nobles who resided full-time in Silesia. Instead, much of the area round the bottom of the castle's walls were taken up by wealthy merchant houses and a few artisans.

Surrounding that area and pressing up against the portion of wall remaining was the suburbs, where the poorer folk lived.

The suburbs at least are not nearly as organized as even the meanest segment of Leitmeritz, Lim thought with some pride. No squalor here, as I know there is in the capitals of other nations.

But after a second, Lim consoled herself that there were outlying forts, set several miles away from the city in a star pattern, to protect the city. All of whom were under the control of the King's Army, and Lim had seen that very morning that those men took their training seriously. Lim had seen them at training, when she had stopped at one of those forts for breakfast.

Entering the city, Lim rode her horse through its cobbled streets towards the palace, winding this way and that to avoid traffic as much as she could. *But, seeing as I have no idea how I will be received at the palace, or how much time that will take, or indeed if the King will immediately turn me around and send me to Brest, I will take the time now to stop over at one of the temples.*

At her side, Muma seemed to mutter in her mind, pulling her toward the palace. But Lim let one hand fall to Muma's head, rubbing it as if it were the head of a young boy. "I know, but if I am going to be in front of my King, I need to fortify myself mentally, Muma," she murmured, and Muma's mutter subsided, although the urging was still there, as it had been for several weeks now. It never got distracting, but it was always at the back of Lim's mind.

The temple in question could've fooled an observer into believing that it wasn't a temple at all, rather a small park set in the center of the city. But this illusion would not last after the individual noticed pillars here and there, covered with ivory and what looked like roses. There was also a small, almost humble, long building made of bricks and stone set to one side of the park, where men and women in robes stood talking to various people.

Lim did not join that crowd. Leaving her horse at the edge of the park with its reins tied to an iron post set there, Lim instead walked deeper into the garden. At the center of the garden, Lim bowed her head in prayer to the statue set there.

It was an incredibly intricate statue of a woman, standing with a pair of animals, a young calf and two sheep at her feet. In one hand, she held a pitchfork. Every aspect of her face and clothing was the work of a master craftsman, but there were no jewels set into her eyes or gold inlaid into the statue as there would've been in other temples. Instead, like the temple nearby, there was a certain understated humility to the statue.

This was Mosha, Mother Goddess of the Earth. Goddess of farming, mining, and beloved of the peasantry. She was not in any way a war goddess, only called upon by farmers and other people who worked with the earth, although perhaps a few shepherds had on occasion called

to her when defending their flocks against wolves. But considering the powers Muma bestows upon its user, Lim felt it was appropriate to take a moment to compose herself before heading on to the castle.

She was trying desperately not to let her lady's thoughts on the King's recent actions bother her. But Lim had realized rather belatedly that Elen had acted as a buffer between her and politics even as Elen used Lim as a sounding board and second-in-command. Now bereft of that and having seen how cagily the King played the game of politics and influence, Lim felt quite a bit of trepidation for this meeting. So, she needed a moment of tranquility.

Lim stood there, her head bowed as she thought about the goddess in front of her, the weapon at her side, what she had already learned from past conversations with Valentina about Brest. While they had never talked directly about Brest, sifting through half-remembered comments and offhand remarks was enough for Lim to have an inkling as to what she was about to walk into. In doing this, Lim set aside the issue of the King entirely for a moment. This worked to calm her down, and Lim straightened her shoulders and turned back to her horse with a clear head. *Whatever occurs, this meeting is just something I must get through before going on to duties I am actually good at. So let others play politics and make foreign policy. I will do what I do best, organize and lead.*

Unfortunately for Lim, her trepidation was well-founded. When she approached the castle, the guardsmen all stiffened, staring at the weapon hanging from her saddle, all of them recognizing it as one of the Viralts. And whereas Lim would have been allowed into the castle after only a brief questioning by the guards as Elen's representative, now the guards at the gate barred her entrance, one of them saying formally, "Who comes before the palace?"

Having remembered this part from when she accompanied Eleonora when her friend became a Vanadis, Lim answered in the same way Eleonora had been coached to. *Although she had a few days under Lord Shevarin before announcing herself*, Lim grumbled internally. *But, with how Muma was complaining, I didn't have that luxury.* "I, the Holder of Muma, come to give obeisance to the Dragon Blood to give of my duty and receive my worth."

The two guards glanced at one another, and then the one who had spoken raised his halberd and the large doors behind him opened on unheard command. "Then enter, Holder of Muma."

With that, Lim found herself facing one of the castle stewards. Wordlessly, he gestured for Lim to follow him, although his eyes did widen in recognition before he did so. It was evident that the man recognized her from having seen Lim here with her lady. But there was also relief on his expression, and that caused Lim's inner paranoiac to sit up and take notice. *Now, I wonder what that could be about?* Lim thought sarcastically.

Soon, Lim was standing in front of another set of doors leading into the King's throne room, where at this time of day, he would no doubt be holding court. But, of course, this was

an extremely broad description of what could be going on in there. It covered anything from a small meeting of advisors about a specific law to a full-court meeting deciding grave matters of the nation. Or even a small soiree, where dozens of discussions would be occurring all over the place, the noises drowning one another out along with the tinkle of glassware as the King sat in the center like the ringmaster of a circus.

Unfortunately for Lim's nerves, that last description was a little closer than she would've liked to reality as the doors opened and her presence was declared by the court's herald. "A Vanadis has fallen. The new Holder of Muma has arrived and wishes to pledge to the Dragon Blood. Will the King see her?"

There were at least two dozen men and women in the court, with several separate conversations going on around the hall's main floor and along the balcony overlooking it. Although at least no food was in sight. The King was in deep discussion with six men around his throne room, each of them having scrolls in her hands as they took notes. But as the herald announced Lim, all this stopped and almost every eye in the place turned towards her.

Oh my. Just, just remember Lim, this is just another battlefield. Just compose yourself as you would before a battle, Lim reminded herself as she moved forward. This helped, and Lim's stoic expression kept any hint of fear from her expression

The crowd between the throne and the entrance parted almost instantly, and Lim moved forward several steps so that the King could see her before pausing at a hissed instruction from behind, the herald having followed her forward. There, Lim placed Muma before her, the end of the shaft set on the ground, her hands on the top of the short axe's head.

As she bowed her head, Lim once more recited from memory the words Eleonora had been coached in when she became a Vanadis. "Compelled by the spirit of Muma, I have come before thee, O' King. Will you take me into your service and exalt me into the station of a Vanadis as my possession of Muma warrants?"

In ancient times, there was quite a bit more to that exaltation, Lim knew. Indeed, at first, the Vanadis had not just been war maidens but concubines to the Black Dragon King and his direct descendent. That aspect had stopped within two generations, thankfully, as the physical and magical power of the Black Dragon - and Lim had no idea if the Black Dragon originally was someone like Ranma, or indeed if an individual dragon had somehow been able to transform himself into a human - faded. But there was still a bit of magic within the blood of the ruling family of Zhcted, all of it tied into control of the Vanadis, as shown recently with Muma's recall by the King.

King Viktor stared at the blonde kneeling in the center of the hall, recognizing her and, in so doing, becoming somewhat angry. Not only did he recognize her as someone who followed Eleonora around, a woman Viktor was not exactly most pleased with at the moment,

for various reasons. But seeing Lim there holding Muma meant that Viktor couldn't control the selection of the next Vanadis of Brest. He had hoped to do so for various reasons, and seeing someone like Lim there upset those plans, replacing them with concerns instead.

But may the gods strike her and her bitch of a friend down, I have no choice!! Never, not once in the history of Zhcted, had a person who had been found by a Viralt been successfully rejected by the King. One of Viktor's most stubborn ancestors had attempted to reject a Viralt's selection several times, but the weapons themselves would never bond to anyone else. That had nearly spelled disaster for Zhcted when their enemies took advantage of three of the seven Viralts not being in use to attack them. And whatever his annoyance with Eleonora, and his other issues with the war maidens, Viktor would not allow the weapon of his nation to go unused.

And perhaps removing her will weaken Viltaria's position? It's well known that this woman is her best logistician and organizer.

Shaking those thoughts off, Viktor replied as the moment demanded. "I, King Viktor Arthur Volk Estes Tur Zhcted, demand that you come forward, Holder of Muma and give your oath to my Dragon Blood."

Lim did so, frowning a little as those words had not matched what she had heard King Viktor say to Eleonora at this moment in the ceremony. Instead, they sounded more abrupt, more annoyed. *But then again, Eleonora had been taken under Lord Shevarin and he had soothed the way forward for a foreigner to be raised to the position of Vanadis of Leitmeritz. And again, thanks to Muma's insistence and given how far I had to get here, I couldn't allow him much time to get used to the idea. Although it is odd that the King didn't learn of my arrival in the city first.*

Setting aside those thoughts, Lim strode forward, and at another discrete gesture from a second steward who had somehow materialized out of the crowd of the court, stopped a few feet away from the base of the dais that the throne sat on. There she knelt, placing Muma lengthwise on the floor in front of her, one hand resting on the shaft of the weapon as she stared up at the King.

"Recite the oath of the war maiden, Holder of Muma," Viktor demanded, his voice still cold and aloof.

"I, Limalisha do vow to serve the blood of the Black Dragon King. To defend the territories of Zhcted and those conquered by her hands to the utmost about my abilities. To slay all enemies of the nation of Zhcted and be ready to answer the call of the King. To be firm of purpose and strength, and to let no secondary loyalty sway me away from my duty to the blood of the dragon and the country the Dragon Blood controls," Lim said, hesitantly at first, but then more firmly as the same steward who had gestured her to stop whispered the words from behind her.

As she spoke that last sentence, though, Lim winced internally. *That line is meant to imply I will set my duty to the King above any personal feelings for family or love. Considering my relationship with Ranma, that statement is a bit too pointed.* Still, the two of them had talked about that previously, and Ranma knew that Lim's duty to her nation would always come first. And he had seemed fine with that at the time too. *And Ranma isn't the kind of person to become the enemy of an entire nation... well, except for Muozinel. Those slaving bastards have no idea what is in store for them.*

That brought a smile to Lim's face, one she hid by looking at Muma as if the weapon had caused her smile somehow.

For a moment, King Viktor stared down at her, then nodded sharply. "I, King Viktor Arthur Volk Estes Tur Zhcted, take your oath upon me, and upon the weapon of Muma as truly spoken. I will hold you to those lest your weapon be confiscated and your life forfeit within reach of the Dragon Blood. Rise as Vanadis of Brest, Limalisha Du Brest."

There was no vow of reciprocity there. There was no sign that the King had any duty to the war maidens. Perhaps, when the Black Dragon King himself sat on this throne, that had not been the case. But no one could remember a time when any thought of loyalty going two ways rather than one way that ever been a consideration. The King ruled, the Vandis followed. That was all.

As Lim stood up, taking Muma and placing it on her waist, Viktor looked around at his courtiers. "The court is adjourned for now. I will spend several hours getting to know my new war maiden before she must depart to see to the lands of Brest in the parlous times that have befallen it."

The King went on to name several people, whose names Lim had not heard of before bar two, the King's chief advisor and the man who ran the daily comings and goings of the castle and Lord Kurtis. The men Viktor named moved to the dais, ranging themselves around Lim and the King in a half-circle.

As soon as the last of the court had left the room and the doors closed behind them, the King leaned forward in his throne, growling, "And is there a reason why you decided to spring yourself upon us like this, Vanadis Limalisha?"

"There is, your Majesty. I regret to say that I was at Eagle's Tower in Brune when Muma came to me. From there, traveling as best I could to the capital took nearly three weeks, and every day since I hit Zhcted's border, I have felt Muma's insistence that I go faster, that I appear before you as soon as possible. Even when I reached Leitmeritz, I decided that I could make the journey just as fast as any messenger could, and so simply pushed myself on," Lim replied instantly before she voiced the question that had occurred to her earlier. "Although I would've thought that someone would have reported my presence in the city before I got to the castle."

“Indeed, someone should have,” Viktor grumbled, leaning back in his chair now, some of his hostility fading. “Very well, it isn’t all that unusual, and it has long been custom for a Holder to present herself at the earliest opportunity. It has only been that in the past that we have had time to make it a more formal affair.”

Internally Lim blanched at that, as well as hearing the king use the Royal ‘We.’ All of this had seemed more than formal enough to her. But she said nothing as the King went on. “Very well, before we get to more important matters specifically regarding your new duties, tell me about what is going on in Brune. First-hand information is always best.”

“My first-hand information will be three weeks out of date, your Majesty,” Lim protested.

“That is fine. What I really wanted was your impression of this Regin, the girl who would be Queen as well as the military capabilities of the Silver Meteor Army that Eleonora and this Tigre fellow have developed.”

Lim did so, first speaking about Regin and Lim’s opinion of the younger woman. That impression wasn’t entirely positive, Lim didn’t think Regin really had the stomach to lead, at least not militarily, but she tried to show Regin in at least a competent light.

From there, Lim moved on to the organization of the Silver Meteor army. She left nothing out, emphasizing the use of Tigre’s scouts, of indirect warfare, and of the horse archers. The first idea caused many a sneer among King Viktor’s advisors, seeing that kind of warfare as dishonorable and beneath any real army’s dignity. But the idea of horse archers had Lord Kurtis nodding at the utility and muttering, “Thank the gods the Horse Lords have never gone into archery, only javelin throwing and sabers.”

“So, sending Lourie to back up Eleonora against the Muozinel invaders was the right thing to do,” Zhcted mused.

Lim winced. *Oh dear, I hope that Elen and Lady Lourie can work together... and that Ranma doesn’t make things harder for the sheer joy of chaos.*

Not noticing her reaction, Lord Kurtis nodded firmly. “It’s always better to fight an enemy on another nation’s lands, Your Majesty. And those mountains, from what little I remember of my geography lessons on that area of Brune, can be deadly. This two-pronged assault from Muozinel, however...” The older man shook his head. “That is a mad gamble on their part, but one that could have won them the game in Brune. I can only hope that Ludmila’s additions to their fighting force will be able to stymie the Muozinel Army until they are forced to retreat.”

“Indeed. And if this Silver Meteor Army succeeds and then goes on to defeat Thenardier, this Regin chit will know that she owes her kingdom and crown to our largess in

sending our war maidens to aid them. And not just against the forces of Muozinel, either. After all, who could she send against dragons?" Viktor posed rhetorically, smiling thinly behind his beard. "And killing someone able to tame dragons is not a minor consideration either."

Lim felt a little chilled inside at hearing King Viktor speak so coldly about his reasoning behind the recent turnaround of his policy towards Brune. *And yet, this is international politics. Isn't it better to look at them with a cold, analytical gaze rather than a hot and covetous one? Still, a little bit of empathy wouldn't go amiss either,* she reflected.

Shaking his head, the King turned his attention to other matters. Brune was too distant for him to do more than he already had in sending Lourie there. That left other issues for his attention. "Still, that is enough on Brune. You are now the Vanadis of Brest. Brest is not one of the original lands of Zhcted. Rather, it is a portion of the Horse Lords' land he conquered a few generations ago. The war maiden of Muma was assigned to Brest to help defend against the Horse Lords."

"Before that, your predecessors were much like the Vanadis of Zaht. The land assigned to Muma's wielder was small and internal, and your duties were dependent more on specific orders from the King," Miron added. Whereas the wielders of Zaht have almost always been our diplomatic troubleshooters, in the past, the wielders of Muma were more internal security. That aspect has not changed. You may be called upon to remove nobles or other powerful individuals at the King's command.

"Specifically, since Ganelon's defeat, many connections to the fallen Duke have become known among certain members of our merchant class. Perversions and other things..." The King shook his head. "That will be brought to a halt. While monetary connections to foreign nobles are not illegal, evidence is slowly being compiled by my spies that point to... Sinister undertakings. Vile things, things that, while perhaps not explicitly against the laws of the land, certainly fly in the face of the laws of the various temples."

"Your Majesty, I am not an assassin, nor do I think that Muma is a weapon for subtlety like that," Lim protested.

"Bah, do I look like a fool? Yes, for those among the merchant class, assassination is definitely a card that could be played. But for the nobles thus implicated? They have men-at-arms willing to follow them into depravity. If I send you after them, you will wipe them out as a warlord, as an example to others," the King said, his tone even icier now, causing Lim to shiver a bit.

"However, there are more important things for you to concern yourself with." With that, the King gestured to Lord Kurtis and one of his other advisors, a small, almost mousy man who hadn't spoken yet.

The two of them took over, talking about Brest and how the Horse Lords had recently crossed the border again and were ravaging across the county. Valentina and her small army had already moved to defend them. Normally this wouldn't be needed. A war maiden's lands were normally a position of military might. But Brest had suffered due to a lack of management.

First, Muma hadn't discovered anyone worthy of it for more than 10 years. And then, the young girl who had been found worthy had, after taking her oaths, simply walked off.

In turn, Brest had shrunk. Many of the knights, the lowest level of nobility, on the borders with Osterode had shifted allegiance to Osterode and Valentina. Others, particularly the mayor of the main town, Cindwar, had gone their own way, paying what taxes they had to the crown but otherwise not really caring about the nation or anything beyond their borders. The rest of Brest had gone to ruin in various ways even before the Horse Lords arrived.

"Several of the other Lords are now no better than robber barons. A few will no doubt resent the idea of a Vanadis finally appearing and lording it over them. They probably won't make trouble for you now, with the Horse Lords across the border, but you will need to be aware that they will probably move against you in some fashion afterward."

"I have served as lady Eleonora's second in command for years in Leitmeritz," Lim answered, smiling as she looked over the book the mousy man had just handed her. "Once Lady Estes and I secure the borders, I believe I will be able to turn around Brest, given enough time and so long as you are not expecting miracles, Your Majesty. I cannot get water from a stone."

King Viktor scowled a little at that bit of straight talk but nodded anyway. "A miracle, no. Certainty, yes. Brest's dysfunction leaves a weakness that the Horse Lords are utilizing for the second time in my memory. I want that weakness repaired. Therefore, you will have a stay on taxes for a full year for the entire district. But after that, barring wartime damages, I expect you to turn it around. Is that understood?"

Lim looked over the book, staring at the map that constituted the first pages and then stared up at the ceiling in calculation. What she was really contemplating, though, was the war to come and what she knew of what Valentina had wanted to do when she returned to Osterode those months ago. *If she has been able to replicate even a tiny portion of the weapons and other things that Ranma mentioned to us, then beating back the Horse Lords will be much easier than otherwise. As to the rest, I wonder...* Opening her eyes, Lim looked at the clerk who had handed her the book, then asked if she could ask the man some questions before promising anything to the King.

Impressed and pleased that she hadn't leaped on the opportunity to give him an empty promise, the King nodded, listening as she asked the clerk questions about the various rivers, the soil, and other information like that. Much of that information the clerk didn't know. There was a reason, after all, why Ranma's mapmaking ability had so thoroughly taken Eleonora and the others who had seen his maps by surprise.

But the clerk did know about the various minerals found in Brest and whether or not this or that area was good for farming in a general sense. They didn't have any idea if the rivers in Brest were usable, unfortunately. And those rivers were few and far between. It turned out that even Cindwar was not built on the river, although it did have an aquafer-fed pond in the center of it.

"Your Majesty, could I request that the year of tax opinions start only after the invasion of the Horse Lords is beaten off?" Lim requested. "I might also need the use of a few of the royal messengers to bring in various resources and people from Leitmeritz."

"Those are simple enough boons to grant. So yes, we can do so," Viktor stated. "Although remember that the crown will require its normal 20% of all booty gained from the defeat of the Horse Lords."

Lim hid a grimace at that. That was typical in times of war, but given that the Horse Lords would have taken their booty from the civilians of Brest, it left a bad taste in her mouth. *That isn't going to make it any easier to rebuild. Blast it.*

Yet Lim knew she had no choice but to agree and simply nodded her head. "In that case, your Majesty, I believe I can turn Brest around. Of course, we won't be paying much in terms of taxes for a while, but I think it is possible to make Brest once more at least a marginally profitable territory. But I will only turn my attention to that after the Horse Lords are defeated."

The King nodded at that, understanding her point. However, he then broached another subject. "In that case, you will set out within the hour. Shatter the power of the Horse Lords, return sovereign authority to Brest. And... report anything unusual that you discover. Both when fighting the Horse Lords, in traveling Brest and working with Estes."

Viktor frowned then. "Do you have any problem working with her? We understand that Vanadis routinely have issues with one another, but since you were just elevated within the last few hours, we doubt you have had any time to build up rivalries that are truly your own."

Those rivalries were actually something Viktor and his predecessor had encouraged, a part of the system of checks and balances to keep the power of the Vanadis in check, similar to what he did with the various nobles. But with the Horse Lords invading and threatening to push through Brest and into more important territories, Viktor didn't want to deal with that. Rather, having someone like Lim reporting to him about Valentina was much more important.

"Your Majesty?" Lim frowned, cocking her head to one side. "I am willing to work with lady Estes well enough. We talked a few times when she was investigating the doctor who healed lady Sasha, and I respect her military acumen. Lady Estes also knows the Horse Lords far better than I do, so I have no issue with working with her."

Or even following her lead, Lim very carefully did not say, somehow sensing that doing so would be a mistake. Moreover, she had something else she needed clarification on. "But what do you mean I should be looking for anything unusual? Is there something mysterious or inexplicable about this invasion? Are the Horse Lords not acting in their normal manner?"

"Their warlord seems to be far more intelligent than others of the breed. But no, that is not what we are talking about. There have been rumors of odd alchemical experiments, new weapons and other strangeness coming out of Osterode. Unfortunately, we don't know enough about it to tell you any more than that, which is why we are telling you to do this," Viktor answered, still using the Royal 'We.' "You will decipher the truth, and whether or not lady Estes is building up her power base in a way that we as King should object to."

Viktor was deliberately obfuscating here. For one thing, he really didn't have any concrete information on what Valentina was doing. There were a few rumors here and there of explosions and strange purchases and of entirely new units being added to her pike companies. But Valentina frustrated Viktor to no end because none of his spies had been able to last more than a day or two in her territory before being discovered, killed or forced to flee. She rooted them out just as ruthlessly as she did any foreign agents.

May Perkunas sear her soul to ash, Estes is too good at that kind of thing. Too good at moving the shadows. She is not the blunt weapon that the other war maidens are. Even Elizaveta, for all that the wielder of Valitsaif is a subtle creature whose various business dealings and web of contacts have helped her land grow far stronger than ever before. Valentina Glinka Estes concerned Viktor more than any of the other war maidens, even Sasha and her massive personal powerbase in Legnica.

Viktor was determined to make certain that Estes' power base did not grow too large. *One powerful nigh-on untouchable Vanadis is more than enough, thank you.*

Opening her mouth, Lim made to protest before thinking better of it and closing her mouth simply nodding instead. After all, she had been part of the discussions with Valentina and knew about some of the things she was trying to recreate. While, yes, such things would serve to bolster Valentina's position, they were no direct threat to the King. *The status quo, perhaps, but not the King himself. After all, I rather doubt there are specific laws against the alchemical experiments Valentina's running.* "I will try, Your Majesty. But given the vagueness of what you're asking, I am uncertain how good an observer I can be, and getting any observations to you during wartime might also prove difficult."

"So long as you are on the lookout and remember to report to us regularly, of that will be good enough. Miron will supply you with a set of ciphers and the means with which to send us your reports. Beyond that, we are finished here. My clerk will give you some money to use in the campaign or afterward as a startup fund. But I expect results," the King ordered, waving Lim off.

“I will join you in a moment. Go with Samuel first,” Miron added.

Lim bowed and then departed the throne room, waiting outside for the now-named clerk to join her before following him. Less than an hour later, she was leaving the castle with three more horses to help speed her journey along, each of them carrying small bags of gold. As she started to travel towards the northernmost borders of Zhcted, a road Lim had never traveled before, she paused, looking back not towards the capital but past it to distant Brune, her thoughts on the equally distant Ranma. *I wonder how long it will be before we can see one another again?*

After a moment, Lim shook off that maudlin thought and turned her head forward, staring down the road before her, feeling Muma vibrating with eagerness for battle at her side. A second later, Lim urged her horse into a slow canter, still wondering about her secondary mission.

But by the time Lim was a few leagues away from the capital, all thought about her secondary mission of reporting what Valentina was doing to the King had left her mind, and she was instead looking forward to the challenges to come, eager to put her martial and logistical skills to the test in reclaiming Brest for Zhcted. “Although, I do wonder what Valentina will think when she sees me as her new neighbor and fellow Vanadis?” she said aloud to the road around her, a sudden smirk appearing on her face. “That could be interesting.”

OOOOOO

While Ranma had been having fun with the enemy army, Tigre and his forces fought a slightly more conventional war. With the difference in numbers being so vast, they couldn’t fight the enemy in a standing engagement. Even at the narrowest points of the Charles Gap, the enemy could simply have overwhelmed them. And in the mountains, not every unit of the Silver Meteor Army could move freely.

To combat that problem, Tigre and Eleonora split off the two pike companies and a large portion of their baggage train when they first entered the mountains. Under Captain Marsh’s and Gerard’s joint command, those men would build small fortresses several leagues into the gap. These would be simple affairs by necessity, but any defensive point where the pikes could stand and defend would let them take a bloody toll on the enemy.

Meanwhile, Tigre and Elen led the rest of the army into the mountains. Leading even a single heavy cavalry unit into such terrain would have been crazy for any other army. But the Silver Meteor Army could do it, with the horse archers moving around the mountains with ease. The light infantry forces, Brunemen to a man trained over the winter, could also easily make

their way through the mountains, adding their fellows along and providing more troops at need.

Tigre and Elen attacked targets of opportunity, usually assaulting units that seemed disorganized already or were just a bit too far away from their fellows. That wasn't always that far, unfortunately, but thanks to their speed and knowing the trails through the mountains, they were able to get away before the enemy could bring up enough troops to pin the Silver Meteor Army in place within the Charles Gap.

However, these attacks were not safe affairs even at the best of times. And unfortunately, the enemy also continued to learn, adapting their own defense against these attacks as they did against Ranma's activities. To combat Elen and Tigre, this meant shifting more cavalry to the sides of their marching order and sending more infantry and archer units into the mountains in company-sized groups.

Elen and Tigre quickly learned about this but knew that the enemy's main army was their real target, so simply avoided these units when they could or swept them away if the enemy could be caught unawares. But about three days before Ranma called it quits, despite their best efforts, this game of cat and mouse came to a head...

As his last victim fell, Tigre pulled his horse around with one hand, grabbing at his bugle with the other, bringing it to his lips. A long blast followed by a short one signaled the withdrawal. He then dropped it back to his chest, pulling up the Black Bow almost offhand. An arrow flashed out, taking another cavalryman in the chest.

That unit moved faster than I expected. Still, that's all right, we can deal with this.

All around Tigre, his fellow horse archers disengaged quickly, shooting what on earth would have been called a Parthian shot: turning in the saddle to fire over the backs of their horses as they raced away. Their lighter accouterments and speed allowed them to break off the attack on the enemy infantry column, which had been their original target, retreating in the face of the heavy cavalry coming up at them. A moment later, a second horn call caused them to whirl at the top of the crest, shooting back down into the heavy cavalry.

At that range, many of the arrows couldn't penetrate the armor of the heavy cavalry below them, but the horse archers were so well-trained that they didn't even bother to try, they were shooting at the horses instead. Unlike the heavy cavalry of Zhcted or Brune, the barding on Muozinel's horse wasn't as heavy as that worn by the men who rode them.

Horses tumbled, men fell, crushed under the hooves of their fellows or just rolling down the steep slope. Meanwhile, Tigre's own shots took men who were riding alongside men holding banners off their horses, then the man with the banner, each of them having died from an arrow straight to the throat or eye.

With that and a third blow of his horn, the horse archers broke off entirely, disappearing into the hills. Or rather, that was the plan.

A warning shout of, "Beware, cavalry coming in from our east!" told Tigre that the plan was perhaps not going to go as well as he could have hoped today. From that direction came not cavalry but mounted infantry, two men to each horse. From where Tigre was perched at the top of a pass moving higher into the mountains, he could see that the horses looked as if they were badly flagging. But now the men leaped off the horses, and while half of the enemy raced forward, the others showed themselves to be archers, taking the horse archers themselves under fire from range.

Tigre and his men shot back, but Tigre could see men falling from their saddles, men he could ill afford to lose. Pulling the horn from where he'd hung it on his saddle, Tigre tossed it to his signalman, a specially trained trooper who always followed him close. "Sound the retreat! And then sound from up on the south. We'll pull back that way!" That pass was narrower but less steep and would let them gain some distance from the enemy.

With that, Tigre targeted the infantry racing forward to try and get in between his archers. If they did that, they could have taken a horrible toll on his men. Arrows leaped from the Black Bow, faster and more accurate than any other archer alive, with his men following suit, not dueling with the enemy archers but keeping the enemy from closing as they wheeled to the south, retreating through the pass there in groups of four.

Six more men were lost before the horse archers speed allowed them to pull away from the mounted infantry, who were slow to get back into the saddle to pursue them, having seen more than half their sword-wielding brethren going down to arrow fire. But they didn't have to. From the same direction as the mounted infantry came another few companies of light cavalry, who raced past their archers.

At the back of his column now, Tigre shot down one horse after another. The horses collapsed, getting in the way of their fellows behind, blocking the pass for enough time to let his men keep their lead. Even so, the light cavalry continued to chase them, losing people as they came to Tigre and a few of his fellows but keeping in contact.

And, unbeknownst to Tigre, they also sent back reports to their commanding officers, who sent more infantry up into the mountains. They would move slower but along paths that even the light horse archers could not follow.

The running battle against the enemy light cavalry continued for several hours, a thing of retreat, rest, and then being found, before retreating again as the horse archers moved through the mountains, taking any path they could to try and make some distance between them. Twice Tigre turned the tables on the enemy, ambushing their pursuers only to be forced to retreat when more light cavalry joined the battle.

They are sending at least three regiments after us by this point, Tigre thought in a frame of mind somewhere between pride and fear. *There were just so many of the enemy! Of course, only a portion of them are discovering us at any point, but each time there are other units within hearing range that move to attack us.*

However, the deeper they went into the mountain, the more hesitant the enemy seemed to become, the more time it took for aid to arrive. Sensing that, Tigre smiled and sent a runner ahead of them through the mountain passes, hoping Elen and her troops were nearby so they could ambush this large force of enemy cavalry. *After all, every group we destroy means our enemies don't have them to call on.*

Moments later, it seemed as if, once again, the enemy had followed Tigre too far.

More than two dozen miles of heavy, mountainous passes away from their fellows in the hard going, Elen struck. "Ley Adimos!" came her shout from on high, and a tornado-shaped ball of air crashed into the enemy column tossing horsemen and men in every direction, cutting a few of them in half at the center of the strike.

All around her, Elen's cavalry charge down, lances couched to crash into their lighter fellows. Her infantry also appeared from the other side of the small path Tigre's troops had been slogging along, coming out from under an overpass that had blocked them from sight from the path above. They raced forward, getting in among the light infantry, dumping men out of the saddle, spooking the horses enough for them to start getting in one another's way in the narrow path.

The other side of the pass was so steep that the horses could barely stumble upward on it, let alone make any headway. Upwards, anyway. Going down was a different story.

"Remember to spare the horses! We can collect them afterward!" Elen shouted as she darted forward, following her cavalry down the slope.

Her horse nearly skidded out from under her, so steep was slope here, but it kept its footing, as did the other horses with her trained to move in the Voyes Mountains near Alsace. They crashed into the enemy horses, and Elen's stallion personally smashed two enemy horses onto their sides as Elen laid out around her with her sword, cutting through armor and men with equal ease.

However, to her surprise, the enemy light cavalry didn't break as they should have when stuck between infantry and heavy cavalry. Even Tigre's arrows falling among them didn't seem to do the job, and Elen began to wonder if there was something else going on here.

A moment later, this question was answered. Another force of mounted infantry had come close enough to hear the battle going on once more. This force had actually been

following after the cavalry units, waiting for an opportunity to attack when the Silver Meteor army could not disengage and so they could attack from as many angles as they could.

As Elen attacked, nearly a battalion's worth of infantry moved forward through the mountains along a route that took them to the side of the ongoing battle above where Elen's infantry had hidden. Now they came around the mountainside over the overpass, crashing down and into the back of her infantry force before they could turn and prepare to receive.

Caught off balance and being attacked from behind, Elen's infantry began to falter almost instantly, recoiling from the point of impact, more than a dozen men dying in the first moments of contact. Their teamwork and organization, already frayed thanks to the fighting in and among the enemy cavalry and began to break down further. Tigre saw this and ordered his horse archers back into the fight, although few of them had any arrows remaining by this point.

However, it wasn't going to be enough, and Elen snarled, leaping up off of her horse, who wheeled, moving and away from the battle as Elen used her mastery of air to cross the intervening distance between where she had previously been to where she could attack this new enemy column, hammering down into the enemy infantry who had yet to reach the battle from above another Ley Adimos leading the way.

"For the Silver Meteor Army!" Landing lightly in the center of the area her attack had cleared, Elen charged forward, sword slicing out to end one man's life, then cut through a banner being held in the hand of another man, the banner falling, the man's hand falling with it, cut off at the wrist.

The rest of the man followed as Elen stabbed him in the chest, then flicked Arifar back out and around to block an incoming blow, ducking under another, before dancing around a third. "Not fast enough, boys!" she growled, Arifar flashing out, to end the life of the second man who had attacked her, before parrying another attack as the Muozinel troops attempted to encircle her. A slash of air magic cutting nine men in half with a single swipe of Arifar, the whole blade covered with rapidly moving air.

Elsewhere, Elen's attack on the enemy infantry allowed her own to rally, the rest of the ambushers concentrating entirely on the Vanadis in their midst now. Muozinel knew precisely how dangerous the Vanadis were and knew to overwhelm them with numbers quickly.

At barked commands from their junior officers, the allied infantry pulled back and away from the light cavalry. That force was now in complete disarray and did nothing to impede the infantry moving back and forming into a rectangle, one long line facing back against the Muozinel infantry who had attacked over the overpass.

But another force of mounted infantry came up along the same route, who quickly dismounted and raced forward to engage Elen's heavy cavalry, the melee growing dangerously now. Without room to charge or otherwise maneuver, heavy cavalry only had a reach

advantage on the infantry, and there were far too many Muozinel troops for that matter. The only saving grace was that they hadn't stopped to reorganize themselves before charging forward.

Tigre stared around, trying to figure out a way to disengage, break off this attack, regroup, or win outright. Not that the last option stayed in his mind for long. There were just too many of the enemy, and in the distance, down past the incoming infantry, he could see still more cavalry arriving.

Then his eyes widened in shock as one of the banners being carried by this new unit whipped out in the wind, allowing him to see the symbol on it. It was not the face of the Mouzinel war god. Rather it was the symbol of Zhcted coupled with the upthrust spear of House Lourie.

Even as Tigre watched, this new group crashed into the back of the battle, forcing the newest units to turn and engage them as well. Spikes of ice began erupting throughout the enemy forces there, shattering their limited unit cohesion and killing several dozens of them at a time, instantly turning the battle in their favor again. Behind that initial cavalry rush came a smaller unit of infantry, who knelt and began to fire into the melee with arrows.

Thinking quickly, Elen fell back to her infantry, shouting out orders and sending them up against the infantry she had previously been fighting, attacking uphill and using Arifar to break their lines. "Up and at them, men of Brune, men of Leitmeritz!" The enemy, their fronts shattered by her magic, found themselves hard-pressed, the men on their flanks now being bumped off the steep overpass to fall to their deaths below.

Yet even now, the enemy didn't break quickly. Stuck between a rock and a hard place, their ambush turned on them, the Muozinel troops continued to fight hard, forcing the defenders to kill them until the last banner carrier died, he and the group around him dying to another blast of air from Elen. That finally seemed to break their will, and the enemy began to try to retreat, filtering out past Ludmila's blocking forces. Few of them succeeded in doing so, Ludmila urging her men to kill every enemy they could.

As the battle ended, Elen and Tigre began to both order the recall, getting their men into position to fall back. "Make sure you search the dead for arrows we can use!" Tigre ordered Rurick, before looking around at a few of his men specifically. "And don't bother trying to loot the bodies. By this point, you all should know they don't have anything of worth on them."

From where she was helping one of her men to his feet, Ludmila frowned, wondering why they were preparing to retreat so quickly instead of simply burning the bodies, until Tigre raced over to her, shouting out, "Get your people moving, grab up every horse you can and let's move! The enemy always leaves a few observers behind the battle to call up reinforcements."

Understanding, Ludmila also nodded to her bugler, who quickly went to work organizing her people. As that was going on, she hopped into the saddle and then trotted over to where Lord Vorn was.

Now that her men too were preparing to move on, Tigre smiled at her happily, grinning almost boyishly. Far too boyishly in Ludmila's opinion for a noble, even an earl. "Thank you for your help, although how you got here from your own territory in Zhcted is something I have no idea about. Still, I'm not going to look a gift horse in the mouth."

Ludmila's eyes narrowed, and she shook her head. "Minus five points."

Tigre blinked, and she rolled her eyes again, holding up one hand, flashing her fingers twice. "You started out with ten points. This was a decent enough ambush, and from what your people back at the entrance to the gap said, you all have been fighting this war for quite a few weeks now. But you lost five points just now for several reasons. For one thing, never compare a woman to a horse. That's minus three points. Second, you should always wonder why a noble, especially a foreign one, is helping you. I understand you've gotten used to Elen being extremely open with her interest in you, but I certainly do not share that interest, and you should not assume I do."

Tigre's mouth dropped open, and he looked at her, gaping like a fish, as a blush suffusing his features. "I didn't, that is, I, I'm..."

"Minus one more point for your look of utter confusion. A noble should never allow anyone to see him or her in such a manner. Although I am pleased to note that you are not assuming such." Ludmila's expression shifted, smiling in good humor with that last sentence. Her people hadn't lost anyone coming in from behind as they had and that made her extremely pleased.

At that point, Elen joined her, and the first words out of the other Vanadis' mouth caused Ludmila's smile to disappear as if it had never been. "Ugh, it's the Potato. What the hell are you doing here?"

"You mean beyond pulling you and your army out of the fire?" Ludmila shot back tartly before growling, "And who are you calling a Potato anyway!"

"Because I can see that you haven't exactly 'budded' since the last time I saw you," Elen said, thrusting out her chest. "How sad for you. To be eternally stuck in the body of a young girl no matter how old you get."

"I didn't see those things helping you in battle here or at any time when we've sparred in the past. How amusing that a Vanadis can take such vanity in something that doesn't matter at all!" Ludmila's words would have been extremely cutting if not for the faint flush of anger on her face and the twitch of her eyes down to glare at Elen's chest. She seemed to compose

herself quickly, however, shaking her head with a dry laugh. "Of course, what can one expect from someone as uncouth as yourself. Why it would be the same as assuming a wolf could be taught manners."

"Now, Elen, you know we were in dire straits before Ludmila showed up. Even though Ludmila still hasn't told me why she's here, we need the help." Tigre moved between the two women like the smallest peace-keeping force imaginable, his hands outstretched to either side.

The two women continued to glare at one another before Elen huffed and nodded once. "I suppose you were able to take advantage of the enemy's fixation on us well enough."

"Indeed, it is a smart opponent who takes advantage of one's weaknesses," Ludmila said, smiling tightly.

"And besides," Tigre went on, desperately ignoring the undercurrents of their words, gesturing around them. "We really do need to get moving. Deeper and further away from the Gap."

Ludmila frowned, but Elen nodded agreement, smiling as her horse walked up to her, rubbing its nose affectionately against her before she leaped into the saddle. There she pulled out a sliced portion of an apple, leaned forward, and fed her beast before leaning back to the other direction and giving Tigre a peck on the cheek. "You're right," she said in a conciliatory tone. "We can deal with the interloper when we're away from here."

At this, Ludmila flushed crimson, backing away as she pointed a shaky finger at Elen. "What, what was that?! You just, you just kissed him, in public, no less! You, you harlot!"

Tigre blinked at that, the blush suffusing his features fading as he looked at Ludmila. "It was just a kiss on the cheek," he mumbled.

For her part, Elen laughed wildly, throwing her head back and actually making a 'hohoho' sound as she looked down her nose at the younger girl. "I am debating whether or not to think that was a cute sign of your innocence or your naïveté. Tigre is mine, so of course, I'm going to show him affection! If I was a harlot, as you say, I would've jumped on his horse and had Tigre rut with me right here."

Her own horse whinnied in protest at the very idea, although how much of that he understood, Elen didn't know. Even so, as she continued her verbal assault, Elen promised she would give him several apples and even some sugar after this campaign was over. "As it is, that was simply a mark of my affection For Tigre. Is a little affection so foreign to your being, Lourie?"

Ludmila growled, reaching for Lavias, but an outrider shouted at them from further away back down the main trail that Tigre had been following before Elen springing ambush.

Although calling it a trail was generous since the men could only move down it in single file. “We have incoming! Light infantry and archers, and behind them, another infantry force, unknown type.”

“Good work,” Tigre replied instantly, before beginning to take command once more, blowing a tune on his bugle and then pointing further away down the trail. “Time we left,” he said aloud, drop everything else, and let’s get moving.”

Soon, a few twists of the trail between them and the ambush sight gave them enough distance to feel safe. Although the fact that to one side was a drop that would kill anyone if they put a foot wrong definitely argued against that.

At that point, Ludmila made to speak, but Tigre held up a hand, gesturing to Rurick, who was following behind Tigre in the line. “What were our casualties?”

Hearing the sober, sad but collected tone, Ludmila’s estimation of Tigre went up, causing her to mentally add three more points back into his tally as Rurick replied. “We lost forty-one men among the horse archers. We also have three crippled and more than a hundred wounded too much to shoot but able to keep up for now.”

In front of Elen, her remaining sub-commander, a man named Bandor, spoke up next. “We lost seventy-five dead or wounded among the infantry, sirs,” he reported woodenly. “Six of the heavy Calvary were also lost in the engagement as well, and five more horses than men. Injured across our forces, milady, are more than a hundred.”

Both Elen and Tigre winced at that. That had been an extremely costly win. One they couldn’t afford even if they had wiped out more than their own surviving number of enemies. Ludmila too frowned, shaking her head, and when she spoke, there was no sense of taunting in her tone. “It seems as if I arrived just in time.”

The now-reinforced Silver Meteor Army kept moving, putting still more distance in them and any chance of pursuit. Near evening, the army found a supply cache that the army had set up earlier that day. Faster than Ludmila would have thought possible, Elen and Tigre’s troop had set up camp, settling down easily despite the haphazard nature of the terrain and the fact few could put up actual tents, so rocky was the mountains around them.

Her own people took a bit longer to get settled, and by the time they were done, a messenger was waiting to show Ludmila through the sprawling camp to where Elen and Tigre were sharing a tent set on a shelf where a lone tree grew out of a bit of scraggly graze no larger than a bed. That comparison and the sight of the small tent brought a blush to Ludmila’s face, but she’d had time to get over her shock and analyze what she had seen of their interactions throughout the day.

Doing so, Ludmila determined that, while they were close, Elen and Tigre weren't betrothed yet. If they were, Tigre would not have responded with a blush to the kiss that Elen had given him, and there would probably have been more, possibly even more provocative displays of affection. *They might even have held hands at some point! But no, it seems as if Tigre wants to respond to Elen, but either he has no idea how, or something is holding him back.*

Although I still question why Elen is so interested in a foreign nobleman. Although, is technically foreign at this point, given that his county now belongs to Eleonora? Shaking her head, Ludmila went back to her previous thought. Why does Elen think Vorn is worth so much? Especially, considering I know King Viktor has not approved of this entire Brunish adventure. Ugh, please don't tell me all of this is because of soft, romantic notions.

Entering the tent, she found Tigre and Elen sitting on both sides of a map spread out on a tiny camp table. A map, furthermore, whose level of detail caused her to gasp, the sound alerting the two to her presence. The map was incomplete, but still, the areas that were colored in were amazingly comprehensive.

Hearing Ludmila enter, Elen looked up at the other Vanadis, her eyes narrowing and her arms moving to remove the map. But then she stopped, sighed and gestured Ludmila to join them. Take a seat, and tell me why the King has ordered you to help us. I wager I already know but I want it out in the open."

Ludmila nodded, crouching on the ground beside the two of them. "It is rather obvious." She looked over at Tigre, who looked confused, which made her wince slightly internally. *This is rather like kicking a young puppy, isn't it?*

Still, Ludmila had her orders written out to her and marked by King Viktor Tur Zhcted's own symbol. "Personal feelings of animosity to Muozinel aside, I'm not here just to help a fellow Vanadis or help Brune against our mutual enemy. I am here to fight Muozinel because doing so in an enemy's land is simply good strategy. I have been ordered to fight them here and to bleed their army as much as possible. But the moment that the war is turning against us, in my opinion, I am to cut my losses."

To her surprise, Tigre just nodded his head, his eyes flickering down to the map and then back up to her. "That makes sense. I can't say I like it, but it makes sense. And if we're losing, why would I want more men to die if they didn't have to?"

"So long as we are clear where my loyalties lie," Ludmila sighed, looking away, somewhat embarrassed, thrown off by his easy understanding and the smile on his face, which she could tell was genuine. *Good grief is he pure!*

Shaking her head to rid her mind of the impact of that smile, Ludmila then gestured down the map. "With that out of the way, why don't you fill me in on how you have been fighting this campaign so far. Your man, Gerard, was able to give me a few guides to link up

with you, but other than bemoaning how many arrows you were going through, Gerard didn't know much about the campaign."

Ludmila frowned then, looking around. "And where is that Ranma fellow and Limalisha? Are they leading another force somewhere else?"

"Heh, well, that is a tale all of its own. First of all, Lim's not in my retinue anymore," Elen answered, a sad but also proud expression on her face. "Lord Gerard is a good enough substitute on the logistical side, but I still miss Lim's presence out in the field. But she was called to be a Vanadis, and there was no way we could have kept her around after that."

Ludmila blinked in shock, and Elen described how the Viralt, Muma, had come spinning out of the sky and how it had reacted to Lim. Elen didn't mention how Lim had taken a few days to get used to it, going bandit hunting with Ranma, thinking that would probably not be a good idea with how uptight Ludmila and her entire family were occasionally about the duties of a Vanadis.

"Hmm... I can't say I ever thought Limalisha would prove worthy of a Vanadis, but each Viralt has different things they look for in their wielders. And from what I was hearing when I left Olmutz, Brest needs a Vanadis to lead it more than ever now."

Ludmila then frowned, looking at the two of them sharply. "But I also haven't seen that Ranma fellow." A horrible thought occurred to her then, and Ludmila's eyes widened. "Oh please, please, by all the gods, don't tell me that Ranma went with Limalisha to Silesia! That is a disaster just waiting to happen!"

Eleonora laughed, although there was a sharper tone to it than Ludmila had anticipated from her little joke. "You don't know the half of it. But no, Ranma's not with Lim, much as he might like to be."

"Ranma has stated he's going to stay here with us in Brune until we defeat Muozinel and Thenardier," Tigre answered, coughing delicately to hide his own laugh at that idea. "Although he put it in a more colorful manner, of course. At the moment, he is out with the scouts."

"Scouting ahead of your army?" Ludmila questioned, confused at the odd emphasis Tigre gave the word. "Or is he the reason behind this wondrous map?" She still couldn't get over that detail it showed, the use of different symbols for different heights, steepness and so forth.

"He's the one that began the process, but no, we have dedicated cartographers now who see to that. Our scouts are a bit different," Tigre answered with one-hundred percent understatement. "They are both scouts, infiltrators, saboteurs and so forth."

Ludmila frowned at that, but her frown slowly disappeared as Tigre explained how much of an impact it had on the course of this campaign, and even before during the campaign against Ganelon, Thenardier and their puppets, the Knights of Asvarre. "This actually sounds like a fascinating idea. An extremely difficult type of warfare to prepare for, and I imagine their training is also incredibly difficult. But even so..." she trailed off thoughtfully, humming as she tapped her chin thoughtfully.

"Hey! They are our idea, darn it! And I am the one that's begun training some of my troops in similar tactics. Don't you dare steal it," Elen grumbled.

"Oh no, I wouldn't steal it," Ludmila began, pausing and letting Eleonora seemingly breathe a sigh of relief before going on. "Using them offensively would be incredibly difficult to train people for, as I said. But, a kind of fifth column, saboteurs and scouts hiding among the peasant populace? Yes, that could work quite well."

At that, Elen's annoyance faded, and she too began to hum thoughtfully, bouncing in place on her seat as she thought, set her boobs to wagging a bit.

Tigre resolutely looked away from Eleonora, looking over at Ludmila, whose brows had begun to twitch at Elen's movement. "Well, in any event, welcome to our little army. We're happy to have you."

At that, Elen came back to the here and now and poked Tigre in the cheek. "What is up with that lukewarm welcome, huh? Come on, welcome her to the army properly."

Tigre rolled his eyes but did as she commanded, dutifully holding out his hand to Ludmila once more, as he intoned, "Welcome to the Silver Meteor Army," his voice a dull drone of someone who was being put upon.

Ludmila paused, looking between them, then specifically stared at Elen's hair before rolling her eyes. "Really? Silver? Could you be any more obvious? Although I will grant the meteor analogy is quite nice."

"Oh, what would you name it, then?" Eleonora challenged.

"Azure or Cobalt Meteor Army. Or perhaps I would get rid of that analogy and use something like armor or steel," Ludmila answered promptly.

The two of them began to argue over naming sense and what kind of analogy worked best as Tigre leaned back from the table, shaking his head. *I wonder, do they dislike each other because deep down, they might actually be alike? Ludmila didn't even blink an eye at the name, and I still cringe every time I hear it!*

“Hey!” Tigre suddenly found his ear being pulled by Eleonora, which seemed to be her preferred method of controlling him at times. “You were just thinking something rude, weren’t you?”

“Yes, that smile on your face was that of someone who just thought of something funny at someone else’s expense, and you were looking directly at the two of us,” Ludmila drawled, scowling at Tigre. “Would you like to share with the room?”

Desperately scrambling, Tigre quickly came up with an excuse. Telling the truth that he had just thought about how alike the two of them were didn’t enter Tigre’s thinking at all. He didn’t want to die, thank you very much. “I was just wondering how Ranma is doing, and the thought of how he is hurting the enemy so much made me smile, that’s all.”

Elen stared at him for a moment, but unlike his friend, Tigre actually had a decent poker face. Or rather, he had a very good blank, guileless expression normally, so looking innocent on purpose wasn’t all that hard.

Evidently believing him, Elen turned her attention back to the map, frowning as she looked at it, then over at Ludmila. “They are getting closer to the end of the gap every day. Even with the damages Ranma and our engineers did to the gap in places, they’re still pushing ahead. All the while enlarging the forces they send after us every time we cause trouble. So we’ll need to set up another ambush for tomorrow. In fact, we should probably step up the number of ambushes we do per day.”

With that, the conversation turned to actual military matters, the two commanders of the Silver Meteor Army describing the campaign from the time when they had attacked the skirmishers sent way ahead of the invading army to now. Ludmila quickly became impressed and annoyed in equal measure at how well the redheaded earl was leading the campaign. His ideas on using her troops - fifty archers, four hundred mounted infantry and a hundred and twenty heavy cavalry - were insightful, and Ludmila found herself interested in working with him in the days to come. *Darn it, Elen does seem to have found a diamond in the rough with Lord Vorn. Some girls have all the luck!*

The Silver Meteor Army waited a day as the horse archers moved out to meet with the supply teams, who had dropped off arrows and other supplies. This occurred at a specific place in the mountain, with both forces being led by some of the locals who knew these mountains, hunters and trappers for the most part, who knew the little patches of the mountains better than anyone. Tigre went with them and moved with a company of his horse archers to meet up with Ludmila while Elen, grumbling all the while, rested her troops and took up a position that would allow her to come to their help if need be.

When she saw him, Ludmila looked a little askance at Tigre. “Why so many quivers?”

“One can never have too many,” Tigre replied with a laugh. His horse was practically buried under the number of quivers. All told, he had eight quivers, three to a side and two behind his saddle. “I’ll probably go through at least two of these per battle.”

“I don’t know if you’re joking, bragging, or just being arrogant, but I suspect finding out will be interesting,” Ludmila murmured, then climbed into the saddle and moved to the head of the column.

By mid-day, their trailblazers had reached a position where they could once more see down into the gap. The enemy army was still moving forward, the frontmost regiment doing what it could to remove the obstacles in their path to make it easier for the battalions coming up behind them. That was slow going, given the number of ditches and downed tree trunks and other things in their way at different points. Since they weren’t relying on Ranma for that kind of thing, it was much slower going. And judging by the map, this was the second to last group of obstacles that Tigre knew about. But he prayed there were more beyond that point. *We, we can’t have been forced that far back, can we?*

But because the enemy had been learning and had begun to mix in their cavalry regiments with their infantry, this ambush was a little different.

Ludmila led her heavy cavalry down out of the mountains on a steep slope towards the lead enemy regiment, couching lances as they went. The enemy reacted with speed, their own heavy cavalry moving up and charging forward to defend the infantry working to clear the obstacles.

But right before Ludmila’s troops would’ve hammered into their opposite number, they instead broke off. However, they were not going back to where they began but to the left of the gorge. There they raced up a small cleft that was actually not nearly as steep as it first appeared.

While they had anticipated the defenders to break off before battle was joined, the change in direction threw off the Muozinel troops, who were nearly startled out of their stirrups.

Now, heavy cavalry units were often derided as being useless for anything beyond the charge. Of course, this was simply wrong for any well-trained heavy cavalry, or, as Eleonora once put it, “There is a lot of subtlety and a lot of different types of charging that you think about it.”

But when they saw an enemy fleeing, heavy cavalry was trained to do one thing: ride them down. Especially when that fleeing made sense. After all, there was only five hundred heavy cavalry charging what amounted to a full regiment of Muozinel troops. Even with a woman who could only be a war maiden in the lead, that was impossible odds.

Yet, for all their speed, they had to slow down when they started to head up the steeper incline into the mountains and spaced themselves out so that falling rocks or any other such trick couldn't kill more than a handful at once. And having to go double-file slowed them down even further. Something that made the Muozinel troops very leery when they reached that point in the trail.

But that was all right. That unit of heavy cavalry wasn't the real target.

Tigre led the horse archers forward from the same slope that Ludmila had used originally, not across the gap to attack the heavy cavalry but once more at the infantry working to clear the obstacles from the gap. Unfortunately for the Muozinel troops, they had set aside weapons and even armor in some cases. As a result, hundreds of them died within a minute of the assault, and more died as horse archers simply stood their horses there, attacking from a range that the infantry didn't have any weapons to match.

The enemy's own archers came up quickly, but Tigre took them under fire personally. His Black Bow gave him a range they couldn't match, slowing their progress.

The enemy infantry slowly started to reform despite the hail of arrows, and a recall order to the heavy cavalry went out. However, turning around in that narrow defile was an incredibly difficult proposition. Letting Tigre and the horse archers continue to massacre the enemy's infantry until an enemy light cavalry force came up to chase them away. They retreated in the same direction it come from, and that light cavalry taste them, but only half way, turning back much quicker than Tigre at hoped for.

Ludmila had a devil of a time regrouping with the others, and was only able to do so because they gave her one of their chief cartographers, let her back across the gorge further down then back eastward to link up with them once more. "Well, that was ridiculously easy. I almost feel as if we should have made better use of that defile," Ludmila confessed as she entered the command tent after having made sure there for people were setting up camp appropriately.

"We thought about it, but the sides of that Defile are too dangerous to set up any surprises in the cliffs above it, and even too dangerous for us to post people up there. The rock there just isn't very strong, and wherever we set up there, we'd probably have to sacrifice, which is not something I'm willing to do," Tigre said firmly.

"True. And the going was also treacherous for my horses. I lost three of them to leg injuries, one of my men was even tossed out of it saddle and broke his neck," Ludmila said with a sigh. "It was just the sight of all those heavy cavalry troopers having trouble trying to head up the pass after my that made me want to do something more to them."

"We did a lot today already," Eleonora said frowning thoughtfully. "But what I don't like, is how quickly their light cavalry broke off the chase. That isn't like them at all. Worse, they

didn't retreat directly back down the way they'd come. Instead, they started to spread back down one of the other ravines, further to our east."

"Do you think they're getting tricky then?"

"I have to think that they're up to something, yes," Eleonora announced.

Looking at the map, all three of them fell silent, and Tigre said slowly, "Well, that is on this side of the Charles Gap. Perhaps we should switch to the other side? Retreat a bit, crossover as Ludmila did, at attacking that side now?"

"I think we need to do that every day. In fact, I think we should take a meal, and get a move on, the days wasting, and no one wants to move through these mountains at night save crazy people like Ranma," Eleonora announced.

Tigre chuckled, agreed, and left the tent to give the orders. Ludmila scowled a bit, knowing that her own people had just started to set up camp, but didn't disagree. The next day, another ambush went off, although this one, was much more difficult. A group of light cavalry were able to respond faster, and Ludmila's troops was forced to fight it out with them almost in the gorge itself, with the enemy infantry racing forward. It was only because her people's armor was simply better than most enemies, and because of Ludmila's own Vanadis powers that allowed them to break off before the enemy infantry could develop them.

They took losses though, and are treated quickly, neither Ludmila nor Tigre thinking of leaving behind scouts to watch the enemy. Because, a group of light infantry followed them up into the mountains, before breaking back eastward.

The next day, Tigre decided that they could range further down the enemy column. They attacked almost at dawn, with the column, first sitting with his horse archers, and then, as the enemy replied with light cavalry backed up by heavy led them into an ambush, high up in the mountains directly above the main gorge. They only held back the enemy for a short amount of time, dealing out damage, and expending still more arrows, pushing down folders on top of them, and so forth before retreating again as more of the enemy came up to join their fellows.

These new units attempted to circle original ambush point by going through another series of passages through the mountains, those units came under fire as well from Elen's infantry and what fuel archers Ludmila had brought along.

Thanks to their greater knowledge of the territory, Tigre and his forces were able to break off momentarily, regroup, and then attack the enemy reinforcements to one side of the original ambush point, getting above them and charging down on them once more with heavy cavalry.

This kind of retreat turn and attack tactic continued throughout the day, thanks to the fact that this area of the mountains was one that they had found a neat guide for, and Tigre wanted to use his native knowledge to the best of fact. Several thousand of the enemy soldiers died in these sharp, quick engagements, pulled this way and that until finally their numbers were just too much, and the Silver Meteor Army was in danger of running out of space to maneuver. When that happened, they pulled back one more time, not back towards Brune or to the south, but deeper towards Muozinel. This allowed them to break contact quickly, and then circle around and back through the mountains, although at that point, even the Silver Meteor Army began to have trouble with the trails, being both steeper and thinner than most horses could manage. Everyone had to dismount for a time and walk on foot, until it was well packed in the evening, and they were able to find a flatter portion of trail.

Ludmila was shaking her head, staring all around them at the mountains, then over at their native guide, an elderly man who could perhaps be the very definition of wiry. He was bald as an egg, wrinkles, but moved like a goat through this area of the mountain range. "I honestly believe you when you said that that little that little..."

"Devils' Elbow we call it!" the man cackled. "Or we would. But we'd run out of Devils we've got so many damn elbows! But yeah, it becomes nice and even from here for another few miles. After that, it gets back again."

Frowning, Tigre looked up at the sun, then shook his head. "We'll rest here. And I think I am declaring the Army is not going to be attacking anyone tomorrow either. Today's been a hard day, we're entirely out of arrows, we lost eighty men, and more than a hundred and forty horses. We need to rest a bit before we attack again."

"Do you think we have the time?" Eleonora asked not disagreeing, just frowning, while Ludmila looked as if she would argue, but looking around at the Brunemen around her, she could tell that all of them were exhausted.

"I think we do. Their main army just isn't moving fast enough, thanks to each regiment pulling their own wagon train. Their rotating their forward most regiments is allowing them to absorb more damage and keep going, but it's slowing them down."

Tigre frowned, staring off in the distance as he tried to think of the map of the whole mountain range, most particularly, the width of it, and where they were in comparison. "I think we got another four more days before the first of the enemy army really comes into contact with the forts Captain Marsh and the others are supposed to be building while we're all out here."

The next day, the Army continued to march through the small, almost impassable passages, their movements slowed tremendously, but with no battle that day, none of the commanders pushed hard. As the least exhausted, Ludmila's troops both supplied the scouts moving forward from the column, and moved up and down the column, lending aid where they

needed to, their horses taking on more loads in order to lighten the burden of the other animals.

That night, they were within striking distance once more of the gorge, when they made camp, setting up that night in a series of caves and scattered passages through the mountains. Since they had been on extra duty all day, Ludmila's troops got a bit of a break from being on watch, with several of the locals taking that job along with some of Elen's troopers as night fell.

Sharing a small cave, Elen and Tigre spent some time talking about what to do the next day, then another turn of the candle simply cuddling. As much as he didn't like being public about it, Tigre knew that his heart had been captured by the silver-haired Vanadis just as much as his body had once been.

But Tigre lay awake that night, thinking about that very thing, because although after his time with Regin speaking to the Knightly Orders, Tigre could no longer say that she was the only one who had done so. The princess gentle, demure flirtations, the way she looked at him, touched his hand and Regin's simple kindness appealed to him, if in a very different way than Elen's fiery, forthright, and above all funny personality. They hadn't done anything during that trip, but Tigre couldn't lie to himself and say that he hadn't been tempted.

Tigre stayed up that night, trying to figure out what to do about that when all hell broke loose outside.

OOOOOO

Having pulled his people back, Ranma had decided that instead of meeting up with the pikes and the slower moving portions of the Army, he wanted to figure out where in this mountain as hell the rest of the Army was operating. Since they preferred to move at night, and could move for longer than the regular troops. Ranma had no qualms about pushing them, fading back into the mountains further than he normally would and then going searching for signs of their fellows. They found several battlefields, and lots of dead Muozinel soldiers occasionally, something that filled them all with a grim pride.

But because they were moving at night, Scott and one of the others heard the jangle of other troopers moving around in the same area. Pausing quickly both men quickly ducked back and around the small crevices they had been about to come out of onto a slowly rising slope, which then leveled off into a ledge, and moved away into the distance.

The troopers who had been making noise cursed roundly in some foreign language that neither man could speak, which they had heard numerous times over the course of this campaign. With barely a whisper between them, Scott and pulled back and away, retracing his steps to where Ranma and the others waiting for him.

Ranma tugged at his pigtail thoughtfully, then shrugged. "Could you give me an estimate of how many?"

"No idea. But they were heading back to the gorge quickly, almost as if they'd found something and reporting it in."

"You think we could intercept them?"

"Chancy, it would depend on if there heading straight back to the gorge, or somewhere else."

They all got their answer when Chong that came back their way, gesturing them to follow him. "It wasn't just a band of scouts! There are at least several companies worth of people moving around out here, all of them heading in the same direction. Infantry, all of them, you have to be in this area of the mountains but they all seem to be heading for something specific.

"Well, let's see what they are up to then," Ranma quipped, shrugging his shoulders.

The scouts moved silently through the mountains, using ropes hooks and grapples to completely ignore the need for normal trails or passageways through the mountains that most troops would need.

So it was that they came upon the enemy troopers as they started to move through the night, having killed several of the men on guard of the Army's camp. "Now that is just not on," Ranma growled, as he leaped down from on high, crashing into one of the attackers, grabbing one of the others by the back of the head, and hurling him against a nearby rock, causing a clamor that could have woken the dead.

Unfortunately, Ranma and his scouts were just a bit too late to stop the attackers from taking the camp completely by surprise. Arrows shot out of the darkness, impacting the few guards moving around the scattered camp, and then there was a roar as the Muozinel infantry charged forward, the need for silence gone now. Only the fact that they were coming from a single direction gave the sleeping Silver Meteor Army a chance, and even that wasn't much.

The moment the attacks truly started, the commanders were on their feet, out of their tents, and shouting out, "Rally, rally to me!" But there were hundreds of the enemy, all of them armed and armored, in and among the tents, slashing and killing.

Tigre slept with the Black Bow close to hand and was first out of the cage he and Elen, to his increasingly feeble protests, had shared the night before. He had an arrow to his string and was shooting before Tigre could even consciously realize what he was doing. Out in the darkness, a gleam had revealed the presence of an enemy, who fell back without even a cry, the arrow sticking in his chest, having penetrated his brigandine armor.

The second arrow was on Tigre's string before Ellen leaped up above him and raced forward into the darkness, the gleam of Arifar's gem alighting her way. For just a moment, Tigre stared, unable to shift his attention back to the battle as he saw her racing into the dark of the camp wearing a long silk shift over a pair of panties that left very little to the imagination. *Guh, w, well, that is at least going to give the Muozinel troopers pause*, he thought ruefully as he shifted his attention to another enemy trooper, this one carrying a torch towards a pile of supplies.

For her part, Elen didn't even realize what she was dressed like at the moment, too furious at being taken unawares. Four men who had just hacked down several of their troopers found themselves within range of her rage and flew away, nearly hacked apart with quick, economical strokes, Arifar's edge covered once more with wind-assisted cutting force.

At the same time, Ludmila also roused herself, but she had taken the time to at least wrap her bedroll around herself. Despite her somewhat calm attitude months ago when Elen played her little practical joke on Ludmila and Ranma, the owner of Laviyas did get embarrassed at being seen naked by unknown men, and to Ludmila's mind, the bra and silk shorts she wore to bed constituted much the same level of nakedness.

Seeing shadows moving at the back of her tent holding weapons, Ludmila charged out that way. Laviyas shot out one of her attacks, splitting and pinning the man, tearing open her tent, as she leaped out, bouncing off of the bloodstained ice and then up into the air, where she brought her spear down into the center of another group of enemies. "Rally to me!" she shouted, and nearby, her troops obeyed, moving towards her with alacrity as the enemy boiled out of the initial portion of the sprawling camp they had attacked. Within seconds, Ludmila was fighting for her life in the light of the nearby fires.

For the first few moments, it was a nearly one-sided slaughter. Most of the Silver Meteor Army had taken off their armor, although they all at least had their weapons close to hand thanks to Elen's orders. Yet against armored opponents, even light infantry, simply having a weapon wasn't enough under these circumstances to give most of them a fighting chance.

Disaster loomed, and then from beyond the attackers, arrows began to fall in among them, and Ranma's shout of "Nighttime attacks are our thing, show them how it's done!" With that, Ranma crashed into the saddle from on high, having leaped up into the air where he saw the largest group of enemy soldiers moving through a portion of the camp where most of the defenders had found small caves to spend the night in.

Those men, who had just slaughtered more than a dozen Brunemen, barely had time to realize there was something in the air above them before Ranma was in and among them. Punches crashed out, hurling people off of their feet, a spear was caught, and its owner used as a flail against two of his fellows before the spear was upended and stabbed straight through the man who had wielded it before his corpse was kicked into two other men, putting them all on the ground where one of the few survivors in this area of the camp hastily finished them off.

Many of the attackers had seen this and Ludmila's earlier use of Lavia's powers through the fire-lit darkness. Elen's silver hair was also distinctive, and like the other two, served as targets for the attackers, giving some rest fight to their closest opponents. This served all three of them just fine, while arrows from Tigre continue to streak through the night, killing with impunity and unerring accuracy as he moved forward into the camp.

Yet even as she stabbed one man through the neck, Ludmila forgot to take into account she wasn't wearing one of her normal outfits. This cost her. An enterprising attacker stabbed his spear into the trailing edge of her makeshift cover, pinning it to the ground. The tug this caused pulled Ludmila off balance, and another man's crashing overhead blow sent the short Vanadis backward onto her rear. The butt of a third man's spear caught her in the side of the head, casing Ludmila to see stars, and she stared up at another man raising his own sword high, screaming at her body to move.

But before that sword strike could fall, there was a series of thumping noises, then the end of Tigre's Black Bow slammed into the side of the Muozinel trooper's neck, blood bursting out from the point of impact. Staring, Ludmila could only gape as Tigre practically straddled her downed form, another arrow on his quiver, her attackers all dead around them. *Good grief, if you changed the weapon, this would be exactly like that one scene in the Vanadis and the Lord Commander...* Ludmila's admittedly muzzy mind observed.

As he readied his last arrow on his now blood-streaked bow, for just a moment, Tigre heard a female voice saying, *"My, but you do know how to show a girl a good time, don't you?"* The thoughts gave him pause but faded as he shot his last arrow. "Damn it. I really need to learn Ranma's ki space trick."

Ludmila recovered her wits and dignity at that point, pushing herself to her feet and using her Cielo Zam Kafa attack again. "If you're out of arrows, I suggest you switch to guarding my back this time, Tigre. Besides, this will let me pay off my debt to you all the faster."

Nodding, Tigre shifted his position to Ludmila's back as they moved forward towards the ongoing battle, unaware that had been the first time Ludmila had used his first name.

While Ranma acted like a one-man juggernaut, the rest of the scouts didn't bother closing for the most part. Most of them were also trained archers, and they hadn't used most of their arrows yet on their nighttime activities. Instead, they stood at the edge of the battle, taking potshots at whatever attacker they could see in the light of the scattered fires, making certain to take out anyone in Muozinel colors – distinctive thanks to their use of masks and hoods – carrying a torch.

Klaus led the few exceptions into the chaos throughout the camp. They moved forward grimly, silently, moving through the chaos, attacking enemies from behind, double-teaming anyone they could find.

There weren't many scouts but being attacked from behind and by yet another person with the powers of a war maiden, had an impact, even as the Muozinel troopers automatically concentrated on him, Elen and Ludmila, as their training dictated. Normally that training helped the Muozinel army against Vanadis, slowly wearing them down, but now control of the battlefield began to shift as more and more of the Silver Meteor Army began to organize and join the battle.

Battering one man to the ground and grabbing another sword with his bare hand, Ranma twisted, coming around a tent and hurling the man up onto an ice spike, only to blink in surprise, not having noticed them before. Then he saw a familiar, blue-colored hair in the light of the moon above and smirked at the shorter girl. "Hey, Mila, nice to see you."

Although the wording was genuine, and the two of them had actually parted on a somewhat positive note, Ludmila still stumbled, her face flushing rosily as she turned to them, almost absentmindedly back-handing an attacker away from her with her offhand. "D, don't just shorten someone's name like that, barbarian!"

"Is that supposed to be an insult?" Ranma asked, hopping up onto an enemy's sword as he thrust for Ranma's heart, amused at the way the man's eyes widened in shock seeing Ranma balanced on the edge of his sword like it was nothing, before a roundhouse kick took the man's head off of his shoulders, sending the head into the back of another enemy who was about to finish off a Bruneman. "Because, I mean, that just makes me feel good."

Ludmila sputtered, even as she twisted her spear in a circle to block incoming sword thrusts, smashing those swords out of their owners' hands, then returning with punishing blows from the butt of Laviyas before once more using her ice power clearing the area around her. Tigre was not there to be caught in the attack, having left Ludmila in search of arrows, moving through the chaos like the best of Ranma's scouts. He had then linked up with Elen, the two of them leading the final countercharge that crashed into the last large group of attackers.

"I don't think I am ever going to understand you, and I'm not certain I even want to try!" Ludmila took the time to push her hair, disheveled from activity and sleep, out of her eyes, smiling wryly at Ranma. "Still, I suppose you **did** manage to heal Sasha, so I can make some allowances for your abhorrent behavior."

"Aww, aren't you cute, with your tsundere act," Ranma quipped as the battle around them started to die down. Before Ludmila could ask what he meant, Ranma was in her personal space, ruffling her hair and then bouncing away. "Still, it's nice to know that you care about Sasha."

Behind him, Ludmila stood for a moment in affronted shock, then chased after him, swinging Laviyas at Ranma's retreating back as she shouted, "Come back here you, you ruffian! How dare you touch a young maiden's head!"

Even as the battle ended and the Silver Meteor Army began to move through the wreckage of their camp, many a man snorted or chuckled in bemused amusement, hearing Ranma begin to taunt Ludmila. "Aw, why so cold, Ludmila? I'm certain that Sasha would, at the very least, accept your happiness for her. Or are your feelings a little more than respectful towards yer fellow war maiden? If that's the case, I'm not so certain on that score."

"You, you perverted heathen! I'm going to spear you through your stomach and leave your carcass for the crows!"

"Is that really your idea of a good time? Eesh, you need to get out more," Ranma joked back. He was almost tempted to taunt Lim about the fact she had fought in her night dress, but really, that was low hanging fruit to him. And he remembered how blasé she had been about his seeing her body back at the hot springs they had gone to back in Elen's territory.

Regardless, his taunting of her would have continued for a while. Ranma had missed the ability to taunt his opponents and have them actually understand his words, and Ludmila was just so easy a target it would have physically hurt him not to tease her. Moreover, Lim wasn't there to try and rein him in.

But Tigre was, and he interrupted the proceedings, a wry smile twisting his lips. "Ranma, you can have fun with Ludmila later. Then, as both Eleanor and Ranma dissolved into laughter at how that could be interpreted and Ludmila slowly turned into a blue-haired tomato, Tigre continued obliviously, pointing to Rurick. The man had taken a cut to his face that had partially blinded him for much of the fight and was heavily bandaged but had still stepped up to help them get organized. "We're gathering the wounded up now. If you could do your thing, please?"

Ranma instantly became serious, stepping backward and around a spear thrust from Ludmila, grabbing Lavi's shaft in one hand and pushing at her forehead the palm of his other hand. Ludmila found herself on her rear for the second time that night, overbalanced by that almost gentle tap. "Play times over, I guess."

Ranma was quickly at work once more, as the wounded were brought to him, and he started to shout out orders for boiled water, needle and thread. The worst wounded he used his own ki healing on, the least wounded were stitched back together the normal way. From one side, Ludmila, now fully dressed, watched this as Tigre and Eleonora, also fully dressed, waited nearby to question Ranma on what he had his scouts had been up to and continued to take a tally of the men they had lost in this debacle.

While he worked, Ranma joked and cajoled the wounded along, which served as his version of a bedside manner. Most of the troopers with the Army knew Ranma and were either veterans of his training or veterans in truth from the various other campaigns that the Silver Meteor Army had fought with Ranma. So they took his good-natured joking in stride, even

shooting back sometimes. But, of course, when they did, they targeted the greatest weakness they knew of, that of Ranma's curse. And despite himself, Ranma found himself replying.

"Oh Holy Maiden, thank you for your healing," said one man whose stomach Ranma was evil to knit together through healing and extremely tiny stitching, his voice weak but good-natured. "I will leave a large donation at the nearest temple when I get a chance."

"Hush up, you! Or next time, I'll forget to deaden your nerve centers before I go to work on you," Ranma said, holding up a needle in front of the man's eyes warningly.

"No, he's got a point," another wounded man said. He had nearly lost his entire arm to a cut to the shoulder, but his bleeding had been brought under control by a tourniquet, and with his own pain now no longer an issue, he even had the energy to smile. "If I have to wait for being healed, can I at least get a bit more eye candy?"

Suddenly, the man's face paled even more than his blood loss would allow for as he looked over at Ludmila. But thankfully, the comment had gone straight over her head, and Eleonora wasn't within hearing range, speaking with a few of her sub-officers as they reported on their dead and wounded, causing the man to breathe a sigh of relief. Neither of the war maidens would probably have reacted well to that comment.

Knowing this just as well as the trooper, Ranma chortled evilly. "For your sake, I will forget you ever said that."

Despite that one man's near-disastrous foot-in-mouth moment, the teasing continued as the work on the wounded went on, and later, one of the men put his complaint most eloquently. "I mean, you continued that farce about the Holy Maiden and you being two separate people for the nobles who requested your help on our way here. And now we're not getting the same treatment? I didn't think you were an elitist, Ranma."

Ranma chuckled, moving over to the last of the worst injured, a man who had been following everything that was said with a smirk on his face. The first thing that Ranma had done obviously had been to go through all of the wounded and use pressure points to deaden their pain. Unfortunately, two men had died during that time, both having taken hits to the brain and throat. Even Ranma couldn't have healed that, but it had made their passing comfortable, at least. "How about this, you assholes. If we win this war, I'll put on a freaking concert for you all, but only if you never mentioned the idea of the Holy Maiden or that ship again, all right. The last thing I want to do is to get involved with your religion. That's just asking for trouble in a way even I think is too much."

This elicited a resounding cheer from those men who had heard Ranma occasionally singing over the winter. It wasn't something Ranma often did, but it was one of the few things Ranma actually liked about his female body. In his male body, Ranma could hold a tune, but his voice really wasn't anything special. In his female form, however, it was a different story.

Ludmila had watched all this with interest, and any comment she might have made being silenced after watching Ranma deal with his first horribly wounded patient. The man had been slashed across the chest, a deep wound and one that had been bleeding freely and had nearly lost his leg from another wound. But Ranma had first eased his pain and that of the other wounded and then healed the horrible wound to the leg in such a way that it almost looked good as new. Of course, the man was still unconscious, something she had questioned at the time, discovering that much of the energy of the healing came from the wounded themselves.

But even so, the magic that Ranma was using was well above anything she'd ever seen before.

On top of that were the other things that Ranma had been doing at the same time. Boiling water was a known trick, but not tools. Using alcohol as he needed to clean the wounds, using various concoctions to accelerate the creation of blood and pressure points, whatever they were? All of that and Ranma's knowledge of the human body were just incredible.

"Now that it's over, I feel as if I should've been taking notes," she quipped, moving to walk beside Ranma, although she kept Lavias between them, the better to ward off any sudden bout of hair ruffling.

"Don't worry about it. I already put together a whole book of medical knowledge. Valentina took it to your king, I think, so when you get back, you can ask him for a copy."

Ludmila blinked at that, her eyes showing surprise. "You that, wait, Lady Glinka Estes was here in Brune?" That startled Ludmila on several levels. For one thing, Valentina was, like Sofy and Sasha, not only a war maiden but a noblewoman. For another, it was well known among the war maidens that she had a weak constitution. So, while the idea of her out and about in wintertime wasn't so surprising, because all war maidens could ignore the weather to a tremendous degree, Valentina traveling at all save to Silesia was.

"Yeah. Valentina had been going to meet Sasha when she learned about my healing Sasha, so she searched for me to see if I could help with her weaknesses. Turns out I could a bit," Ranma said, only hesitating for a moment before he used that line. Valentina had asked him not to tell anyone else about her interest in his world, and Ranma had agreed to use that line with strangers, although not his friends Tigre, Lim and Elen. All of them knew about her interest in his world and all of the questions Valentina had asked over the winter.

"I see that makes sense. I know that Lady Glinka Estes is interested in making Osterode a haven for artisans and alchemists," Ludmila mumbled, shaking her head as the two of them joined Tigre and Ellen, who had been going through the damages done to the camp. They'd already made the decision to not just move camp but pull back entirely, having run out of arrows during these last few battles, to say nothing of their other resources, which made it even more imperative that they link up with their supply chain once more.

The mood was somber as the four of them discussed events. Even with Ranma saving the lives of nearly every soldier who had lived through the battle regardless of injury, the Silver Meteor Army had taken a beating. They had lost more than four hundred troopers of all kinds in this assault, with another hundred and seven crippled.

While Ranma could probably grow back his own limbs, he couldn't do the same for other people, and if someone lost a hand or an arm, the best he could do would be to make sure that they didn't die of blood loss and the healing was accelerated as much as possible. And even those eighty men Ranma had healed would not be worth it in a battle for several days as he recuperated from the cost to their bodies' accumulated reserves.

Even so, none of the troopers or leaders were willing to remain in the same place with the dead, both their own and that of their enemies, nor was there any way to bury them on such rocky terrain. But while the rest of the camp started to get moving, the four commanders met up with one another, discussing what had happened now the immediate aftermath had been dealt with and what Ranma had done since breaking off his nightly attacks.

"After I decided to pull my troops back, I gave Duncan command over about half the scouts. I wanted them to push on toward Muozinel, work around the enemy's rear searching for any supply convoys coming out. That's a long shot though, given how much supplies the enemy is carrying with them and how nasty the terrain is even in the gap in places."

Tigre shook his head, punching his friend lightly on the shoulder. "Heh, you of all people admitting you couldn't do something, I am going to have to mark down the date. Dozens of years from now, we will call it humility day."

"Oh shut up. And I never said I couldn't break in. I said we couldn't break in without being discovered. If my scouts were all as good I was, or I went in alone we could still do damage. But even I have limits," Ranma grumbled.

"Still breaking off when you did was probably a good idea," Ellen nodded, frowning angrily. "I gotta say, I am not happy with how well-organized and how quick to react and adapt the Muozinel army is this time. Usually, they have decent lower-level commanders and good strategic goals, but their overall organization, outside of logistics, is somewhat poor. And in all of the campaigns I've studied against them, their generals more often have to act like someone attempting to herd cats rather than someone who instills a sense of order."

"Why did you flinch just now?" Tigre asked his friend, cocking his head to one side quizzically as he caught Ranma's twitch at the reminder of the vile word.

"Never you mind," Ranma replied instantly.

“He flinched when you said the word cats,” Ludmila answered, watching Ranma closely and seeing the same flinch again. “And there it is again.” She suddenly smirked vindictively. “Is there something you want to tell us, barbarian?”

“Heh, is that supposed to be your nickname for me now, Mila?” Ranma deflected, which worked quite well.

After Ludmila had stopped trying to skewer Ranma, the martial artist went on, explaining his own experiences. His story showed how the enemy adapted against the scouts and saboteurs. Ranma then left the group, coming back with one of the attackers held by the back of his belt. “And look at this one. Blackened weapons, with no chain mail, only a well-made brigandine, his boots lined with leather, a small pack for water, no food. Someone meant to move fast through rough terrain, silently. Whoever over there is adapting to our kind of warfare.”

Ludmila nodded, frowning in anger and worry. “I was afraid of this. In Zhcted, I received word from the king that his spies had discovered that Lord Kureys, the winner of the last naval campaign against Sachstein had been transferred to their army. At first, we feared that he might lead an army across the borders into Zhcted, but now, I think he’s here. That man is very, very dangerous.”

She told the others about Red Beard’s background as well as what was known about his appearance, primarily the big, red beard that gave Kureys his nickname after which Ranma frowned, tugging at his pigtail. “I haven’t seen anyone like that. Then again, I haven’t been able to work all my way back down the gap yet. Maybe I should try?”

He made the statement into a question looking to Tigre and Eleonora. While Ranma knew that he was a more dangerous combatant than either of them, he also knew they had him beat when it came to strategy.

“No, I think we need you here,” Tigre decided after a moment of deliberation. “Let Duncan and the others you sent on that mission report back before we do anything like that. Besides, could you fight your way through whatever regiment or division is protecting him to get to the Red Beard?”

“Heh, well, eventually, maybe. Although making Beard Red or whatever stick around that long would probably be impossible,” Ranma answered easily, smiling as he said it as if to make it a joke, while internally, he was wondering if he should do that exact thing. There were a few tricks he’d yet used in this campaign, or indeed at all on this world.

But once more, he shied away from doing so. There was a difference between killing someone with his bare hands or even by a thrown rock and consigning several thousand men to being battered or crushed to death through a ki attack.

The others chuckled, but Ludmila shook her head, pointing out that, "Even if they were able to kill Red Beard, while that will no doubt remove a lot of their strategic flexibility, it might not cause Muozinel to retreat if he has competent subordinates."

"Heh, at this point, he might not have many of those left. At least not at the regiment level. Still, what should we do then? I mean, if we get back to the Charles Gap, I can build more obstacles," Ranma volunteered. "But with how fast the enemy's learning, even trying to take advantage of that kind of thing might be a mistake."

"Considering how they can move their troops around most of those things if they don't mind leaving their supplies behind, that would be a yes. Regardless, we need to meet up with our supply train for now. We can think of how to hold the enemy up more at that point," Elen reminded everyone, particularly Ranma. "Unlike you, Ranma, most of our people need weapons, and particularly arrows, to be worth anything."

Tigre clicked his fingers. "Right! I need to learn how to use your ki space, Ranma. You have no idea how many quivers I've gone through since this campaign started."

Ranma chuckled at that but didn't reply. While Tigre had taken to his training regimen pretty well overall, he was still a while away from having enough ki to consciously work with. *Maybe another year or so. Or... well, there was that thing with his Black Bow and shooting down Lord Pimplemore when he tried to fly away on the dragon. But that bow still weirds me out.*

"Remember, this entire campaign is basically a holding action. There's no way that they can move enough supplies through the mountains for that Army. That's why all of the Muozinel regiments have their own baggage train. But those supplies can only last them so long. So if Thenardier can reclaim Southport, this army will have to retreat, and we win," Ludmila reminded everyone.

While Tigre just nodded, Ranma scowled, as Eleonora, with Elen speaking for them both. "I didn't like that assumption before we arrived here in the gap, and I don't like it anymore now. You're putting a lot of faith in someone who wants to grind your bones to powder, Tigre."

"That might be true but remember what Regin said." Although Tigre didn't notice, the Princess's name brought an even deeper scowl to Eleonora's face. "Whatever else he is, Thenardier is a patriot."

The next second he winced in pain as Eleonora's fist thumped into his shoulder with punishing force. "Ow! Was that for!?"

"Don't you know you should never mention another woman who's after you in front of a woman who is already courting you?" Eleonora barked.

Tigre blushed at that, eyes roving to Ranma and Ludmila, who, without even looking at one another, started to move a little faster than Eleonora and Tigre's forces. Ludmila was a little more reluctant to leave, but right now, she had no energy to follow this conversation down the rabbit hole.

"You're on your own, dude," Ranma shouted over his shoulder, cackling internally all the while.

OOOOOO

Having left a majority of his army behind, Duke Thenardier had returned to his lands far more quickly than most would've ever thought possible. Dragons, after all, could carry quite a bit and still move at their top speed. Slow that top speed might be, especially for the Suro, who he had left behind, but they could sustain it forever. So long, that is, as they had food.

This was an issue that Thenardier had to deal with for a while, deep as he was into Ganelon's territory. Ganelon had torched most of the crops on his land, poisoned the wells, killed all the animals and driven his own people out before Thenardier had attacked.

However, stripping the rest of the Army of all of its supplies of meat and water had allowed him to do so. This no doubt meant that many of his troopers would die for lack of water, but that was a necessary sacrifice, and Steid would keep the army moving.

Beyond the dragons, Thenardier only brought fifty men beyond himself. More, it had to be said to feed them to the dragons if need be. But thankfully, that hadn't proved necessary, and his party arrived in his lands barely five weeks after having received word of Southport's fall.

There, he sent out orders to gather supplies that would be sent to the Army under heavy escort. Normally, he would've given this job to Armand, but when the man met Thenardier on the march to Southport along with a force of militia from his lands, Armand was not himself.

The man stood taller than even Thenardier, his armor and muscles bulging as normal. And yet, his face showed that he had been drinking heavily of late. There was also a certain weakness, almost fear to Armand's face and body language that Thenardier immediately noticed.

"Are you sick?" he asked, scowling angrily at the man. "Or have you discovered the weakness of the bottle? I will not tolerate that in someone in my employ, Armand."

"I, none of that, my Lord. Drinking, that is. the drink is a means of coping," the man stammered, looking anywhere but at his Lord. "I have been coping with my failure, with my weakness!"

Growling angrily, Thenardier strode forward, grabbing the man by the throat and lifting him up off his feet. "What in Triglav's name are you talking about! I already know that the Princess has somehow been able to find enough proof to legitimize herself, something that should never have happened on your watch, but..." Thenardier frowned as the man's arms weakly grabbed at his forearms, but with no hint of their normal strength.

Thenardier slowly retracted his hands from around the man's neck, pulling away easily from his grip. "What is wrong with you?"

"The, the black-haired warrior, the pigtailed one. He did something to me. When we fought. Ever since... I am, I am too weak to put on my armor! I'm too weak to lift a sword! I can't, that is..."

"Some kind of spell?" Thenardier mused, a wholly unknown feeling rising within him as he thought about it. *Is this perhaps fear? I haven't felt this since I was sixteen and outgrew my father and brothers*

But the idea of having someone take away his strength like that, that was horrifying to a warrior. And especially so in Felix Thenardier's case, who, like all of the Thenardier Dukes before him, embodied the idea of the 'Rule of Strength.'

"I, I do not know my Lord. The warrior first buried me in the snow, and it was so deep that I had trouble moving. Then he struck me in several places with some kind of heated poker or something similar. I couldn't tell you where, but regardless, ever since, my strength is not... What am I without my abilities as a warrior!" Armand wailed.

Without another word, Thenardier turned away, grabbing up his sword and turning, swinging it once. The look on his former subordinate's face as he saw the sword coming was one of relief even as the blade passed cleanly through Armand's neck, removing his head from his shoulders.

With that dealt with, Thenardier chose another nobleman who had answered his summons to lead the relief convoy carrying supplies to his army. He sent all his regular troopers with him and half of the assembled four-thousand and eighty-three-men strong militia force. This left him with a little over two thousand barely trained troopers, but even so, everyone knew it would be the two dragons, the double-headed Gara Dova and the fire-breathing Prani, which would win them the day.

So, it was a confused wizard who came to Duke Thenardier as they waited just out of sight of the port. The army was hidden beyond a few hills, with the men following orders to remain out of sight or be fed to the dragons. The dragons muscled so they could make no sound. "My Lord, why do we wait?"

“Supplies,” Thenardier announced simply. At his wizard’s confused look, Thenardier smirked, nodding his head toward where the city was. “I have passed word to my surviving agents within the city, telling them that we are here and to inform me of when the enemy’s supplies have arrived in. I will wait until the Muozinel navy offloads their ships, and then I will attack. Losing those supplies will harm Muozinel’s ability to project military power for years, and they will help Brune as we deal with the damage our Civil War has caused. Thus, we will both cripple Muozinel’s abilities to supply its army in the field for a time and enrich ourselves.”

“You are not concerned about the enemy army breaking out from Charles Gap?” the wizard questioned, frowning thoughtfully.

“I received word that the Silver Meteor Army had arrived and intercepted the enemy army and that many of the Knightly orders had moved to engage them as well. Yet, even so, they are too small, and even with this... Pigtailed warrior, I doubt they will be able to hold for too much longer. In so doing, they will be ground under, weakening my last opponent in this war and leaving the Muozinel army tired and easy pickings for our dragons.”

Thenardier’s tone was cold, although he smiled with something approaching admiration. “It is a pity. I won’t be saddened by the traitor Vorn or the war maiden who suborned him dying, let alone the troops from Zhcted. But the rest, for all their misguided choice of causes, are patriots too. It is a pity to see such die. But in the war for thrones, you either win, or you die.”

At that, the wizard’s questioning look disappeared, and he bowed from the waist with a happy smile. “Let it be so, my Lord.” *And let the cursed Black Bow be destroyed! Or at least forgotten once more to history. The Viralts are more than enough to worry about it you!*

Thenardier’s small force stayed there for six more days before word finally came that the offloading of the supplies that Thenardier wanted to seize had finished. Then, he ordered his army to advance, the two dragons moving forward from different angles as he led the militia forces along the shoreline, attacking Southport from along that edge, moving up and over the walls with surprising ease thanks to the dragons grabbing everyone’s attention. Within half a day, Southport was Thenardier’s once more, along with the needed supplies.

Though no one among the mountains knew it yet, Muozinel’s great gamble had failed. And with it, any hope of conquering Brune.

OOOOOO

Unfortunately, news of that disaster would not reach either army moving within the Agnes Mountains for some time. Which was why the Silver Meteor Army had once more retreated to meet up with a supply convoy once more before planning out their next move.

To the surprise of Tigre and the others, Gerard, Lord Hughes' son, led this group. He had led the first such convoy, but none of them had seen him since. Tigre shook his hand, noticing the other young man looked exhausted. While he was in decent enough shape, the high altitude of the mountains did not agree with Gerald at all. Still, he had led a large group of donkeys through the mountains to the meeting point had drained him. The way had been so hard that the donkeys had been carrying only about a third of the weight they could have, and Gerard reported they had lost two of them to precipitous drops. But they still had carried enough arrows to replenish Tigre's horse archers and enough food to keep the Silver Meteor Army in the field for another few days.

"How are the bulwarks going?"

"Slowly," the man replied tartly, shaking his head and downing half of his wineskin before continuing. "With the number of horses you're all using, we've been forced to split our donkey, on gathering arrows from the local lords and getting them up to you." Those lords hadn't been able to supply much in the way of people but they were at least making enough arrows to keep the army going. "That lack of animal power limits the amount of work we've been doing. Hells, we've only got three oxen to help!"

"What's this?" Ranma asked, as he helped unload the mules.

"Kind of like what we were doing first," Elen replied, "only bigger. Instead of a line across the gap, we ordered Gerald and Captain Marsh to throw up a series of forts. Simple things, but easy to defend, with which we can interdict the gap."

At Ranma's confused look, Elen explained further. "Remember, that army, is getting further and further from its own supplies the more we hold them up, the more that army has to eat through its own supplies. Supplies, which have already been badly hit by you and yours. This whole campaign has been about buying time. If the enemy gets past us, we wanted something in place to stop them as a last, heh, gap, measure."

"Indeed, but I have to warn you, that's why I am up here. We are also coming to the end of our supplies," Gerard interjected, having finished his wineskin. "We aren't still getting food from the locals, but it's coming in more gradually, more miserly now. And we are running out of arrows as well. Arrowheads specifically. The locals don't have access to enough steel or even iron to keep making them as fast as we have. And don't get me started on leather, material for the forts or the rest of what we need. It isn't pretty."

Elen and Tigre both scowled at that, while Ludmila frowned pensively. "So we need to change our tactics, use more rocks and other such instead of arrows. We can't be careful with the rest of the material of war, but we can do that at least."

"Yeah, but... I don't think we're going to get the chance," Ranma answered. When everyone looked at him, Ranma shrugged. "The enemy's been changing tactics and defenses on

us all along, like pushing light infantry up into the mountains around the gap. We can still move through the mountains, but at this point, your attacks take too long to set up. Can we even get into position to attack them without fighting a few pitched battles, that in turn warns the main army we're coming?"

"Ugh," Tigre muttered, shaking his head. "That is what I was afraid of. I don't think we're there yet, but we might..."

At that point, a sentry raced toward them, his shout interrupting Tigre. Reaching the officers, he went down on one knee in front of Elen and Tigre. "My Lord, my Lady, reports are coming in from our pickets. There is a light infantry regiment coming towards us, with more units visible behind them, coming from different directions."

"See what I mean about how quick they are to change tactics? They're learning," Ranma growled, shaking his head. "They must have sent these guys after the fuckers we fought last night and trailed us somehow without our outriders catching 'em."

Soon enough, the army was moving once more, pushed further away from the pass by this heavily reinforced regiment. They were able to ambush its front ranks the next day, but the damage had been done, as Ranma had warned. By the time they had broken contact with that group, the main enemy army in the gap had pushed forward, **hard**. Covering more than sixty leagues in a day, which, given the terrain was incredible.

Thanks to Ranma and a few other scouts they were able to keep track of the Muozinel forces while the Silver Meteor Army scrambled to try and get ahead of them. There, they found a small pass leading down to the gap where Gerard and Marsh had built their forts. And unfortunately, the Muozinel Army had also pushed several of its regiments ahead of its main force once more, and those regiments were already attacking the new forts.

Despite Gerard's words, the forts, two of them, were actually pretty decent fortifications. The central keep was a simple affair, three stories tall palisade with stone around its base. the outer wall was also wooden, lined with dirt and marked here and there with stones, not nearly as strong as the main keep, but decent enough.

Both were being besieged by two regiments of Muozinel infantry. These were further backed up by archers, more archer units than Ranma had seen in one place before. Another few cavalry companies moved around them, protecting them from any assault out of the mountains.

Or they would have if they were facing normal troops.

Ranma, Elen, and Ludmila raced ahead of the rest of the army, with Tigre following with the horse archers behind him. "Spread out!" Elen ordered. "Do as much damage as we can, break the enemy cavalry to let Tigre and his men do their thing!"

“Teach your father to suck eggs, Elen!” Ludmila retorted, twisting to aim her horse’s charge towards one portion of the enemy formation which had in turn begun racing their way.

For his part Ranma simply smirked, crossing the intervening distance faster than the others, causing Ludmila’s eyes to widen. “I knew he had speed to spare but that much?”

“Meh, I’m certain he’s got some horse somewhere in his ancestry. Although I’m waiting for him and Lim to go all the way to confirm that, obviously,” Eleanora chuckled as she too twisted to the other side of Ranma’s charge.

Like the tips of a trident, the three of them slammed into the enemy’s formation, if in very different ways. Elen’s Ley Adimos hit first, hurling men and horses, slaying many before she crashed into the same part of the ruined formation, her horse moving faster than any on the field, Arifar’s air magic around both raider and horse as she slashed and hacked her way into the enemy.

Ranma was next crashing into and through the center of the enemy’s line, leaping up and kicking out so hard he sent the men on either side his charge off their horses and into several others on either side. Only his first two victims died, but men and horses all stumbled, getting in one another’s way, causing even more chaos than Elen’s assault.

To his right, Ludmila struck in turn. Laviar’s attack created a field of ice spikes that slew a dozen men, through which she road, Laviar a lance with a large tip of ice that skewered men and horse alike.

The Muozinel troopers rallied quickly encircling the super-powered combatants, but there weren’t enough of them to stop Tigre and the horse archers from moving around the melee to both sides, coming together before attacking the flanks of the forces who had been attacking the forts.

Archers turned, dueling with their horse-using fellows, and men fell on both sides while the rest of the Silver Meteor Army came down out of the pass and into the Gap. Those units though soon found themselves fighting another two light cavalry regiments which had come up the gap to reinforce the attack. The battle became general in front of the forts, infantry fighting cavalry in one place, another infantry regiment continuing its assault on the southernmost fort, matched by the pike company in residence and the heavy infantry that Tigre and Elen had left behind, along with the single company of archers within the fort.

Elsewhere the attackers of the northern fort had turned entirely away, and were now reforming their lines, moving to attacks Tigre’s horse archers. Tigre fell back and away from them, only to be attacked by the remnants of the group that were still swirling around Ranma, Elen and Tigre. Most of those men died, but the infantry closes the range, and their archers, more numerous than Tigre’s horse archers, began to empty saddles.

Ranma hopped from one horse to another, lashing out with a punch that caved in a man's helmet and snapped his neck hurling him off his horse into the horse of the man beside him, that horse fell to the ground ribs broken and Ranma leaped forward once more batting aside a saber before his return blow shattered the man's scale male-clad chest.

As that man tumbled back out of his saddle, Ranma stood there for a moment, ignoring the bucking horse under him as he stared around. The battle was extremely chaotic at this point, and both sides were taking casualties. *Which favors the Muozinel forces, damn it.*

But beyond the current battle, Ranma could see a long line of dust coming towards them from the Brunish side of the gap. "Huh..." Ranma leaped through the battle towards his friend, but before he could reach Tigre with the news, there was a frantic sound of drums, and waving flags. Evidently the enemy had seen something too.

Tigre barely looked away from his work of sending arrows out into the enemy ranks as Ranma landed lightly behind him on his horse's rear. "We might have some reinforcements coming. I can't make them out yet but...never mind. Heh, it looks as if Regin's finally decided to join the party.

In the distance, the creators of the dust appeared, a solid line of heavy cavalry. From their ranks the red horse on the blue background of Brune flew, along with four other banners, each of them representing a different Knightly Order. Ranma had no idea what each signified, but he was damn glad to see them.

The enemy was unable to disengage in time to meet this new defending force, and as Ranma rejoined the battle, the combined might of four Orders crashed into the battle, crushing and continuing to roll through them, causing chaos and death swords and lances running red with blood.

The charge of the Knightly Orders broke the center of the attacking enemy army. That, coupled with the attack from the Silver Meteor Army and its superpowered leaders caused the enemy to sound a desperate retreat. The last of the enemy units to pull away from the forts did so now, still under control, but unwilling to stand and take the enemy assault.

As they did, Captain Marsh and the pike companies were up and over the ditches, crashing into the enemy in front of them, then pushing on, while the rest of that heavy infantry of the Silver Meteor Army moved forward, joining the assault. And now, finally, the enemy's control and command finally shattered, and men began to just flee.

As a few companies of knights moved further down the gap to make certain they had routed their enemies, the rest of the Silver Meteor Army retired past the forts.

Ludmila's troops, still the most rested and least battered of them all, broke off to help continue work on the palisade between the two forts, which almost looked complete from Ranma's perspective.

Beyond that, a camp was laid out, complete with its own defenses, larger than average tents, and men moving around in places, preparing the camp further. Swiftly, the four of them were led by their new allies to the largest of the tents. Outside of which, Tigre was astonished to find a familiar face waiting.

"Tigre-sama!" Titta shouted, rushing forward and embracing her Lord and not-so-secret beloved the moment his feet touched down.

Tigre had been staring at her so much he hadn't anticipated her near-Amazonian hug and nearly stumbled but caught himself with one hand against his saddle. The other hand had automatically gone around Titta's waist, a fact that caused Elen's eyes to narrow dangerously. "Whoa, now! Titta, what are you doing here? This close to a battlefield is no place for you."

"You left me with the Princess, and I certainly wasn't going to be left behind again!" Titta said tartly, pulling back just enough so that she could pinch his side. "Besides, I've been this close to fights before or have you forgotten Alsace. And... and I didn't want to go any longer without seeing you."

Elated at seeing Tigre after more than a month apart, Titta dared a kiss on the cheek as she finished speaking. Then she pulled away just enough to send a glare at Eleonora as she hopped off her horse before taking possession of Tigre's arm, pulling him towards the tent. "But I would be remiss in my duties if I didn't tell you that the Princess and her advisors wait for you inside. But promise me, Tigre-sama, to come and see me when you can?"

"I promise, I'll make time to have a picnic with you or something similar once this campaign is over," Tigre promised, causing Titta to smile in delight.

That smile disappeared as Elen grabbed at Tigre's other arm. "What the heck do you think you are doing?" Eleonora growled, stalking forward.

"Greeting **my** Lord after a long absence," Titta retorted, putting a very subtle emphasis on the word 'my' while hugging Tigre's arm to her tighter, pressing her modest chest against his arm. "Whatever is it to you, Lady Elen?"

"Why you..."

"Enough. You three can have your, your tawdry romantic comedy some other time," Ludmila ordered, shaking her head as she moved towards the tent flap. "We are still on a campaign, Eleonora, or have you forgotten?"

With one final glare towards Titta, Eleonora huffed and pulled an admittedly unresisting Tigre out of the younger girl's grip, moving him towards the tent. While he would never say it aloud, Tigre was never really at ease with Titta flirting with him. He saw her too much as a sister for that.

Ranma chuckled, following behind the others. *That is never going to get old, is it? Being on this side of the romantic comedy, I mean.*

In the tent they were ushered into, the Princess waited on a camp chair that had been decked out with several expensive-looking furs. Dressed in a white dress with a burnished chest plate over it, Regin looked regal and commanding, a far cry from the timid, scared thing Ranma and the others had met months ago. Her eyes lit up with delight at seeing Tigre, her royal mask of calm assurance falling away as she smiled happily at him and gestured him to a seat by her right hand. "Tigre, please, have a seat. We have a lot to talk about and you all have been the ones at the sharp end of this war so far."

On top of using the shortened version of his first name this was a bit of symbolism that even Ranma couldn't miss, and glancing at Eleonora and at the fuming Titta, who had the look of someone who just realized that they had just lost whatever progress they'd made, Ranma had to look away to bit his lip to keep from laughing. Ludmila also snorted, looking away, as she wondered what Tigre was doing to attract all of this attention. *That is not to say he wasn't, dare I think it, quite impressive when he rescued me in the attack on our camp. And his skills are equally impressive. But even so, to have both a Vanadis and Princess after his affections...*

Elen huffed, plopping herself in a chair on Tigre's other side, holding his hand very deliberately for a moment before looking around at the others already sitting there. "Introductions are in order, I think."

Her face losing some of its delight at seeing Tigre, Regin nodded. "This is Lord Auguste. He is the leader of the Calvados Knights and was the first of the Knightly Commanders to join our cause."

Auguste was a large man (not that this was saying much, all of the Knights Commanders were large men) with dark brown hair, brown eyes, and a short, wild-looking beard coupled with a well-kept mustache. His laugh was just as grandiose as the rest of him appeared, as he guffawed at that. "Hahaha, more like I only needed to be convinced of Her highness's legitimacy, as you well know, Tigre."

Tigre smiled at the other man, nodded as if he was a friend. Later, Tigre told Ranma that this was indeed the case. Auguste had served as a man-at-arms to Tigre's fathers, Urs, before Urs had sponsored him to the Calvados Knights, where he rose rapidly through the ranks.

“Beside him is Emil, commander of the Perche Knightly Order.” This man was a morose looking fellow with dirty blonde hair, a very short goatee and mustache. He simply nodded as he was introduced, staring hard at Ranma.

“Knight Commander Scheie isn’t here at present, having volunteered to command the ongoing efforts to route the enemy we found here. He leads the Lutece Knights. And across from you, Tigre, is Edmund, Leader of the Red Blade.”

“So, you are the one called the Servant of the Gods?” asked Edmund, his tone serious, while two of his fellows both rolled their eyes. “The one whose actions showed the faithful that Princess Regin has been blessed by those on high?”

This man was dressed almost like a Templar would in earth, a white surcoat with a red-bladed sword in the center, and the image of the multi-rayed sun on one shoulder. This was the symbol of Perkunas, the chief god in both Zhcted and Brune. Edmund was also noticeably younger than the others. his armor, although of good quality, lacked the weight the others wore, although he was just as tall and powerfully built as the other commanders. He also lacked any kind of mustache, although his hair was long, and almost luxurious, falling to his shoulder in ringlets.

In her makeshift throne, Regin winced. Edmund wasn’t quite a fanatical believer in Perkunas and Triglav, but he was close. He had been the one to have the hardest time accepting her as princess, knowing that meant she would be queen and believing that such was frowned upon by the gods. He also still disdained Tigre for being an archer. Archery in warfare had long been sneered at by noble and churchman alike in Brune.

Ranma groaned shaking his head. “Please, no! First, I ain’t affiliated with any gods, the churches that serve them, or anything religious whatso-fucking-ever. Heck, where I come from, we don't even have religions like yours. I'm just a martial artist with a lot of tricks under my sleeves.”

“Sometimes literally,” Tigre interjected, unwilling to let that go.

“Was it you or was it not you who I saw tossing people around like they were pebbles out there just now?” asked Emil dryly, his lips twitching, almost destroying the morose air the man held. When Ranma didn't answer, the man went on with a small snort. “If you can do that, there is no ‘just’ anything about you.”

“I'm sorry it took us so long to get here Tigre, but Knightly Orders were not as organized for a long march as I would've liked,” Regin interrupted before Edmund could interject once more, trying to get the conversation back onto a more serious footing, even as she very gently teased the older men all around her. “They are a little too used to fighting in their own backyards.” Her eyes turned serious as she reached out to take one of Tigre’s calloused hands in her own smaller and far softer ones. “You were not hurt, were you?”

“No, although the Silver Meteor Army has taken a tremendous thrashing these past few days. I haven’t yet had a tally of this last fight, but we started out with three thousand horse archers. I think we have lost more than a third of my men since entering the Agnes Mountains.”

Edmund sneered at the idea of horse archers and would have said something pithy in response, but Elen cut in before he could, her voice as pained as her lover, causing him to squeeze her hand. “I have numbers at least for my own Leitmeritz troops. We’ve lost at least half of the troops we started this campaign with.”

At that point Ludmila interjected her own points. “My own troops took a pounding in this last battle. I know I lost at least a hundred of my cavalry, and more among my infantry. However, Tigre, you lose yet another point for not introducing me. Princess, I am Ludmila Lourie, Vanadis of Lavia and Olmutz,” she said bowing fluidly to the young woman before moving to take up a chair to one side of Eleonora. “I was sent by King Viktor Arthur Volk Estes Tur Zhcted to aid Vanadis Viltaria in beating off this invasion of your lands. Muozinel is an enemy of both our nations, and at present it behooves us all to stand together against them.”

The Knightly Order leaders all glared at the young, blue-haired woman. Although they hadn’t met her in battle, Olmutz was one of the areas where Brune, Muozinel and Zhcted had fought over for decades.

The fact that Ludmila had actually bypassed their territory so swiftly that they hadn’t even realized what she was doing until she was well past them also rather galled all of the Knight commandants, although Ludmila wasn’t so coarse as to bring it up. No, she would remain silent on that, let it fester within them. That would be all the more satisfying.

“And that has nothing to do with wanting to fight Muozinel on our soil instead of your own?” Edmund asked with a sneer.

Ludmila was about to retort that in fact, was the reason why she was here, but before she could, Tigre interrupted, his voice firm and commanding despite his exhaustion and his normal self-effacing manner. “Enough. The regiments we faced today numbered barely a twelfth of the enemy’s remaining forces. We need to make plans to further harass and halt their progress. We cannot afford to snipe at one another, my lords.”

Frowning, Ludmila nodded, actually smiling at Tigre. “You just earned that point back, Lord Vorn. My lords, I will admit you are correct. But I am still here, and willing to help. Whatever payment my king demands will come from him, not from me. Personally, I am more than willing to fight the slaving scum of Muozinel anywhere I can.”

The commanders of the Knightly Orders all looked at one another, but Regin spoke now, her own voice soft but still somewhat authoritative. “Lady Lourie is correct. At the moment, when Brune faces its worst crisis since its creation, we cannot turn aside aid no matter how unlooked for.”

“The Princess and Lord Vorn are correct. And for myself, I have to admit to some shock at what the Silver Meteor Army has achieved here. We assumed the worst when we started to march, only to learn when we neared the entrance to the gap that you were already here and still holding the enemy off, despite being outnumbered astronomically. You all have performed a miracle here,” Emil admitted, making Auguste nod his head.

“Thank you, but I think we are running out of tricks at this point, which makes me doubly glad to see you all,” Tigre admitted with a tired shake of his head. “And the portions of our army we’ve been using up to this point on offensive actions are exhausted.”

“In that case, we should move on. I have Gerard making a tally of the dead and gathering the wounded to get them to Ranma. Ranma, once he’s ready for you, I’d like to ask you to take over the medical side of things. No offense meant, but I think you can do more on that score than in consultation.”

“We can certainly take over fighting the Muozinel army for a time,” Auguste boomed out with a laugh. “We brought with us five thousand knights and seven thousand mixed infantry and archers.”

Tigre’s eyes widened, and he thanked Auguste and the others profusely. That almost equaled the full force of the Silver Meteor Army including Ludmila’s forces.

“Indeed. Gathering such numbers was why we took so long to get here. But now that we are, I believe that your army has fought more than well enough to earn a rest. You especially Tigre,” Princess added with a smile.

“Is there any news on the port?” Ranma asked, leaning against the tent post, having let Ludmila take the seat originally meant for him, while Tigre just looked on, nodding his head to the princess’s comment. Indeed, he looked as if he was about to fall out of the saddle now that the adrenaline of the battle was leaving his system.

The princess shook her head, a faint frown on her face. “I’m afraid not. Although from his former position in Duke Ganelon’s lands and with the muds of springtime on him, I doubt that the Duke Thenardier will be making good time to say the least.”

“We did,” Elen Ranma and Tigre replied as one, causing the others to snort in laughter while the others all chuckled. It was true after all. the march of the Silver Meteor Army, and Tigre’s Ride, were already the stuff of legends among the peasants.

“More to the point my lords, while you might have brought archers and infantry who can continue our work in attacking from the mountains and our hit and run raids, the majority of your troops are your heavy cavalry, whereas only a small portion of our army is,” Elen went on, becoming sober as a thought occurred to her.

The Knightly commanders leaned forward in interest. "What are you thinking of?" Tigre asked.

Instead of answering, she turned to Ranma. "You're the one that's been sneaking in and out of their camps. Tell us what you can about their command structure. How do you differentiate from the different types of officers?" she ordered, all of her normal friendly playfulness when she talked to Ranma or Tigre in abeyance.

Nodding, Ranma did so, explaining how officers were marked out by different kinds of flags outside their tents, the tent color and so forth. Then, when he was finished, Elen asked, "If you went forward tonight on your own, how many camps could you sneak into?"

"I'm sorry, camps?" Regin asked. "What are you talking about?"

"The enemy army doesn't camp in one large camp, your highness. Instead, it has split its marching order into different regiments. At first, those were broken up by type of trooper. But the enemy was quick to mix in their archers with the rest of their commands even though they are still keeping them separate to avoid getting bogged down as they march. If a unit is slow to start moving, its position in the line of march is taken up by another. If a regiment has taken damage, they fall back through the line of march and so forth," Tigre explained, shaking his head in admiration. "It really is a very good organization."

"And one that has made them extremely flexible in responding to our own attacks. When we attack one regiment, the next in line is quick to move up, and support now tries to outmaneuver us by moving into the mountains in some fashion. It's only their lack of ability in such areas and the fact that for the most part, they seem to not be willing to move in smaller units than companies that have kept them from pinning us in place and overwhelming us with numbers," Eleonora added.

There was some consternation at that from the Knightly commanders, and for a moment, the conversation derailed as they asked question after question about how the Muozinel army fought.

The Knights, above nearly every noble house, had fought Muozinel the most times, and to hear how they had changed in such a fundamental manner – greater organization, greater communication, and a more professional officer corps - disturbed them with its long-term implications.

It took a while to get the back to point, but when Elen asked if he had ever seen a symbol of a red and gold banner, Ranma shook his head, lips pursed in thought. "I... don't think I did. Why?"

“Because that is the symbol for the highest military commander in the field,” Ludmila said looking at her fellow Vanadis thoughtfully. “It always has been. Even with all the other changes they’ve made, that wouldn’t have changed. What are you thinking?”

“We just got a major shot in the arm in terms of heavy cavalry, a unit we haven’t really been playing with all that much except in small hit-and-run type attacks. How well do you think your people would be able to move through the mountains?” Elen directed her question to the Knights Commanders.

“Honestly? Not very well. Our barding and armor are heavier than even your own lady Vanadis,” Auguste answered, looking over at Ludmila, whose lands, as the only major source for iron, specialized in heavy armor.

Yet despite that, Auguste’s words were simply the truth. Indeed, the armor of the Knightly Orders was among the heaviest on the continent, something that Elen had seen when she had battled Roland. Their horses were also heavier, bigger and stronger than most of the horses of the Silver Meteor Army. Elen’s white stallion and Ludmila’s own horse were exceptions, of even higher quality than the horses of the Knights having the same endurance as the regular Leitmeritz horses, but the strength and size of the larger chargers along with a degree of intelligence highly unusual in any horse.

They were also commensurately expensive. Easily five times as expensive, or more once you added in the cost it took to train them. Horses like that were insanely hard to come by, and few other breeds were as hearty or smart.

“More to the point, our horses aren’t bred for that kind of environment. We wouldn’t be able to use the same kind of slopes your troops could. We... might be able to if we removed all our armor and the barding, but even then, it would be hard for our horses. Although recall we don’t just field heavy cavalry,” opined Emil. “I would wager our archers and infantry could make that kind of a trek easily.”

Again, this was only the truth. Every member of a Knightly order, their mounted Knights, the archers and infantry, were among the best trained and experienced troops that you could find on the whole of the continent.

“That helps, but to really push the enemy off balance I wanted us able to take advantage of your cavalry,” Elen scowled, leaning back and almost seeming to slump in her chair, an annoyed expression on her face. “There goes that idea.”

“Not necessarily,” Ranma hummed thoughtfully, tapping his chin. “You were thinking about getting Tigre in range to take this Red Beard guy out, right?”

“Red Beard or whoever is commanding this force,” Emil cautioned, although he looked a little confused as to why Ranma and Elen were talking about Tigre as if he would be the one to take the shot alone.

Still, he didn’t look down on Tigre for the bow at the side of his chair, so Regin, watching the discussion but not participating now that it had turned entirely to military matters, would take what she could get as the man went on. “If I was Red Beard, I would probably have stayed at the fortress that the old King put up and concentrated on fortifying this side of it. If they hold that fortress, they have another route into Brune despite the difficulty of the terrain.”

Tigre grimaced. “Oh damn it, that wouldn’t be fun at all. Just imagine the ongoing grind of mountain warfare we’d be faced with. For years, probably.”

“Yeah...” For a moment, they all looked at one another, not liking that idea at all, but Regin spoke up now, shaking her head. “No. Muozinel won’t do that. I won’t deny that Red Beard could be in that fortress, but the enemy has taken Southport. They don’t want just a toe in the door, they want to take control of large swathes of Brune territory. Nothing less will satisfy, not after an invasion on this scale, with this much prior planning having gone into it.”

While the others thought about that, Elen frowned. “I wonder how they were going to deal with the dragons... It isn’t impossible without Viralts... or Roland’s Durandal, I suppose. But any direct conflict sure as heck is. Send an army against a dragon in open combat, you only get a bunch of dead soldiers.”

“Poison, pit traps, or simply marching around them,” Ludmila agreed, counting points off on her fingers. Ranma scoffed, muttering about Elen being a ‘kill-stealer’ and Tigre sat calmly, not wanting to mention the Black Bow. “Although the very idea of training dragons is just insane.”

Regin looked uncomfortable at that, and unfortunately. “Yes well, thankfully Thenardier’s family has never shown the ability to do that before. So it’s possible Muozinel doesn’t think that he will have been able to do so after Tigre killed one in the campaign last summer.”

All of the Order Commanders and even Ludmila, looked at Tigre in shock while Elen beamed proudly beside him, and Tigre just looked a little sheepish. “Er, I, um, I had help from Elen and her Arifar, and um, this heirloom of my family. It did most of the work.”

Deciding to save his friend from trying to explain the mysterious, and in Ranma’s opinion still creepy, Black Bow, Ranma tapped the table gently. “We’re burning daylight people, and I know Tigre at least needs to get some rest. So, let’s get back on topic. Anyway, something my scouts and I noticed in the days leading up to our retreating was that the enemy units were starting to bunch up bigtime. We were taking too many of their commanders out, so they

needed to combine their regiments. Now, I ain't saying Red Beard's out there, but if we can keep taking out their officers and signalers, that trend'll continue."

Tigre nodded. "Ranma's right. We saw a lot of their units were like that and have taken advantage of it numerous times. The troops they sent up into the mountains weren't, but that was mostly just a sign of how many more men they have than us."

"And that one night attack was a planned aberration, troops specialized for that kind of environment," Ludmila opined. "The impact is already being felt throughout the enemy army."

"Right," Ranma nodded emphatically. "We use the knights as fast as we can. Hammer them from the front, force them to push more units forward, then have Tigre come down from the mountains somewhere and snipe this Red Beard guy."

"What does 'snipe' mean?" Edmund wondered aloud.

Ignoring her own interest in the answer to that, Elen asked, "How much longer can you sneak into their camps?"

"The scouts can't. I can, but even then, getting past the guards on the various tents without being seen is impossible." Ranma shrugged. "But that doesn't mean I can't bull my way through and back out. I can do a lot of damage."

Elen grinned then, pointing at Ranma excitedly. "Actually that isn't all. With your ability to carry rocks and stuff around, I wager you could trick them into thinking a passage or crevice is less passable than it really is. We can use that as a way to get Tigre in place."

"If you can do that, we could actually add another dimension to the attack. Use our troops to attack from either side. No matter how large an army is, if they are being attacked from three sides, they won't be able to bring their numbers to bear and will also feel a sense of panic. It will take iron control to get the enemy out of that trap, regardless of numbers!" Auguste enthused.

"Hmm... I can't say that keeping our mounted companies in reserve sits well with me, but you're right. We need to fight here on the floor of gap for us to get the most out of our tactics and abilities," Emil muttered.

"I'll volunteer to lead the rest of our forces in taking over these hit and run attacks and the attack with our infantry forces. If that is agreeable to you, brothers," Edmund inquired, looking over at Tigre and Ranma respectfully. "Scheie can lead the cavalry from the other side."

The other Knights Commanders all nodded in agreement, with Auguste speaking for the missing Scheie, while Ludmila suggested they not attack down into the gap. "Instead, stick to

hitting the units already up in the mountains to ward us off with your lighter unites. Those units still might have their command structure in place.”

“I think I’ll go with you, Ranma. I’m just as good as you are at moving around unseen, and even if I’m not,” Tigre shrugged, patting the Black Bow with some affection. His feelings toward the weapon had changed since it had saved his life and that of his horse archers. “Flame arrows don’t harm my effective range all that much. And there’s nothing for causing chaos like a few good fires.”

Ludmila frowned pensively thinking about their overall plan while Elen pouted for real this time, annoyed that her silver hair made it impossible for her to go with her boys.

And yes, that was how Elen thought of the two of them. Tigre was her man, period, full stop. Anyone who thought otherwise was just wrong, and if she had to kiss him into unconsciousness in public to prove it after this campaign she would do so. In turn, Ranma was her quasi-brother, who she wanted to look after as much as she had to beat other bitches off Tigre because of his ability to make trouble. *I know they can handle themselves in a fight, heh, if not in social situations. But being left behind like this is annoying!*

Ludmila’s thoughts on the other hand was actually about the campaign as a whole. “That’s well and good, but the army’s engineers need to finish the palisade and the forts, so won’t have time to prepare any more surprises for the enemy. Do you think you can both sneak into the camps at night and set up some more traps and obstacles?”

“I think I could, yeah. But you and Lavi-chan could probably put up a few obstacles yourself. Same with Elen and Arifar too.”

The two Vanadis looked at one another, somewhat chagrined. They certainly could use their magical abilities to dig ditches, create random, extremely hard ice walls and so forth. Especially near the palisade, where the gap narrowed a bit in comparison to the rest of its length. Then Ludmila registered the grumbling growl in her mind, and turned, glaring at Ranma. “What is it with you and shortening names, and what is a -chan?”

Ranma tried to compose himself into as innocent an expression as he could, something that really wasn’t easy for him. Keeping any tells from his face in a fight was easy, but in a conversation it was much harder. “Not at all, if anything it’s a term of endearment.” He then smirked. “Toward young children. Now, I know with her normal attitude Lavi-as ain’t as young as the other Viralts, but I figure, she just needs some fun in her life you know, and no longer act like an old, stuck-up biddy.”

As Elen burst into laughter, Ludmila glared at Ranma, Lavi-as’ power appearing around her spear like a penumbra of intense cold, causing those sitting on either side of her to shy away. “It is only my good manners that keep myself from skewering you where you sit.”

“Think ya meant ya’d try to skewer me. And there ya go with the nickname thing, Mila,” Ranma teased. He’d had quite enough of the serious conversation for now.

“Ahem!” Regin interrupted, trying to avoid looking at the bemused, somewhat shocked faces of the Knights Commanders around her and the fact that Regin also found what Ranma had said quite funny. “If we can get back on topic for just a second. Lady Lourie, you can skewer Ranma in a moment. For now, I think that we have a plan going forward. Does anyone else have anything they want to talk about?”

It turned out they didn’t, and the meeting quickly broke up at that point, with Regin and Elen beginning a verbal war for Tigre’s attention that Ranma cheerfully skipped out on, with Mila hot on his heels. She almost passed him when Titta looked to be trying to join in.

For the next few days, the infantry forces of the Knightly orders took over the battle to the forces in the mountains. They didn’t move as fast as the Silver Meteor Army, and they lacked the magic of Elen and Ludmila. But they had better armor and gear than the Silver Meteor Army did, and the locals who had helped Tigre and his men learn how to find their way were just as willing to help the knights. These fights were often extremely sharp affairs, but it worked in curtailing what ability the Muozinel army had built up to working in the mountains.

Meanwhile, Ranma, accompanied by Tigre and backed by the scouts who were still with him, raided the enemy camps each night, striking one and moving on as fast as possible. Thanks to the amount of security the Muozinel regiments now employed at night, these attacks were very much smash and burn rather than sneak and withdraw types, but one thing hadn’t changed: nighttime operations like this, **especially** now with the moon at its lowest ebb, was incredibly tough for most soldiers.

For the men trained by Tigre and Ranma, it was simple enough. Every time Muozinel troopers tried to follow them out into the dark or laid an ambush, it was turned on them, and the scouts left their corpses behind.

Meanwhile, the enemy army continued to bunch up, but also continued on. Without any further attacks coming down out of the mountains, the majority of the army could move freely, although slowly thanks to the profusion of pits, ice walls, ditches and so forth they had to deal with. Yet, move they did, irresistibly moving forward. Until Elen and the Knightly commanders, the most experienced leaders among the combined army, decided that the time had come.

The Muozinel forces in the mountains had been ground down and diverted. The enemy now couldn’t move its regiments as freely as they once had, and the enemy’s higher echelons had been forced to take direct command. Tigre had even spotted the gold and red banner of a Muozinel general, although at the time the shot would have been impossible, even for him.

The mounted Knights of the Perche, Calvados and the Lutece Orders marched out. Pennants whipped in the wind from the tips of many a lance as they moved. Armor gleamed on man and horse in the midday sun, and here and there in their ranks the banners of their orders flew.

Since the Muozinel forces had their own outriders, the enemy of course saw them coming. As quickly as it could, the Muozinel army started to form up. The enemy infantry forces took the center, spreading to either side, each regiment linking up to one another, two regiments across, and four deep. The Muozinel cavalry were behind them, with little room to move around the infantry, which had been pushed forward in such a way as to cover the gap from one wall to another. More infantry units were behind the cavalry, but these units were understrength in comparison to the forces at the front of the invading army.

An army which, even now, numbered somewhere between thirty-eight to forty-six thousand men. But for all the enemy's regiments were still mostly there, few of them had signalers, bannermen, or officers beyond the company level. While it was still massive, the Muozinel army had lost a lot in terms of flexibility and organization. And, thanks to how long the Silver Meteor Army had held them up, the enemy had also started to show signs of not having enough supplies to go around. In other words, it was getting desperate to break through the Brunish defenders.

Within sight of the enemy, the Knightly Orders formed up into wedges, each Order forming a different wedge of more than one thousand, three hundred heavy cavalry, each man in the formation perfectly in place. But staring at it from nearby, Ranma could tell it was different than any cavalry formation he had seen before. *The depth is way more, the width less, and there's a lot more space between each line of cavalry.* "What the heck is that formation?"

"It's one of the Knightly Order's specialties. Instead of a direct charge that hits the entire enemy line, that is a pulse charge," Elen explained from beside him. She would have preferred to be with Tigre for this, but her abilities leant themselves to this part of the battle more than the part Tigre was going to play. "Each line of heavy cavalry is going to hit the enemy formation, then split apart, shifting backwards and around their attack. The next pulse hits the same place, and so on."

Ranma whistled at her description. "That has to take one hell of a lot of coordination. And it's assuming that the first hit buckles the enemy line."

"Just watch," Elen replied grimly. "There is a reason the Knightly Orders protect a portion of the border that both Zhcted and Muozinel border."

As the cavalry formation charged forwards, Ranma watched, impressed as the first line, the line that held lances forward, slowed slightly, spreading even as they started to take arrow fire from the Muozinel forces. This allowed their second line forward, the two lines becoming one for a brief moment until the two lines of cavalry had switched positions entirely.

Meanwhile, the Muozinel archers behind their lines couldn't drive their arrows through the heavy armor and barding of the knights.

Worse for the Muozinel troopers in front of the Knightly Orders, that second line wasn't armed with lances alone. Instead, they had crossbows, small and short-ranged, but able to be used from horseback.

As Ranma watched, each of those men fired their weapons into the enemy line at near point-blank range before breaking off like Elen had described. The second line, which was now the line which had been first, lowered lances, and charged into the Muozinel army's damaged battleline.

The Brunish chargers surged forward, crashing into the infantry troopers knocking them over while the knights stabbed with their lances, then as those lances either broke or became too embedded to pull out, abandoned them, twisting around, at the sound of a horn. It was higher and almost more of a staccato noise than strident sound of the Silver Meteor Army.

At that sound, each and every man in those formations, all four of them, obeyed with alacrity breaking off to follow their fellows. And behind them, came another pulse, and then a fourth, a fifth like a staccato killing machine.

"That's impressive as hell, but I think the enemies already reacting," Ranma observed, pointing.

Indeed, the frontline formations were breaking up, becoming more disjointed, allowing more archers forward. Meanwhile the flanks of the companies holding the flanks of the larger Muozinel Army formation moved inward, creating space. Space which the heavy cavalry started moving through. Neither of these moves were clean, and a lot of the troopers got in one another's way, but it was still accomplished quickly.

From Ranma's other side, Ludmila shook her head. "Don't worry. The Knightly commanders are no fools. Else my family would have shattered their power long since."

As Ranma watched the last pulse went in, and the strange horn blasted out once more. this time there wasn't any hint of a staccato sound, instead there were three blasts, one after another. The last two pulses of the attacks halted in place, twisting around and following one branch of their fellows, reforming quickly.

The knights formed into a more traditional wedge shape now and moments later met the charge of the enemy cavalry just as they were about to break inwards from the flanks.

Behind them, the entire front of the enemy army was in disarray now. And once more, the lack of a mid-tier officer cadre was visible. Shattered companies didn't work together, the regiments each tried to reform on their own, and the regiments barely communicated.

“Our turn,” Elen announced with a grin, pointing to the other side of the formation.

Ranma nodded and raced forward. He still disdained horses, and now showed why, sprinting as fast as the horses around him could gallop. Then as Elen roared out, “Ley Adimos!” he leaped on high. The front of the enemy cavalry force exploded, horses and men thrown or broken by the magical assault.

Capitalizing on this as the pulses of the Knightly Orders had previously, Ludmila shouted, “Into them, now!” Leading her own heavy cavalry into the enemy formation, which was still moving forward, despite losing a dozen men in their front line.

A second before the two forces of cavalry crashed together, Ranma landed in among the horsemen, kicking out, punching, kicking, hurling men out of their saddles, adding a little cackle all the while, for the fear factor of course. It wasn’t as if he was enough of a sadist to enjoy seeing grown men in pretty decently heavy scale mail go flying from a light punch from him after all.

Really, it wasn’t.

Disorder and chaos reigned at the front of the enemy formation, the infantry formations that had previously been the targets of the Knightly orders slow to recover. The chaos was aided by the horse archers, who moved forward, and begun to target the infantry. But the Muozinel army had overwhelming numbers, and those numbers started to tell now. More undamaged units moved forward, pushing through their shattered fellows, losing some cohesion, but coming closer to the enemy. Soon they would start to move forward once more to try and close with the knights or the Vanadis troops.

But that was all according to plan. Because those units marching forward, were the units at the side of the enemy’s main formations. Seeing the horse archers engaged at their front, the enemy was caught by surprise as Elen’s infantry, the pike companies and the Knightly Orders’ infantry, both archers and regular infantry, came out of the mountains coming down a crevice that the Muozinel scouts would have sworn was closed off due to a landslide.

Courtesy of Ranma, of course. As had cleaning it up enough to get these men into position a bare hour before the battle started.

The pikes took a bit to form up, carrying those things through the mountains had not been fun or quick – it had taken them all of the day before to get into position – but then they started to move forward, pikes forward, with the archers behind, and the infantry spreading out to either side.

Several hundred meters well, well beyond the battle, Red Beard’s second-in-command scowled, barking out orders. This sudden attack from his army’s flanks had thrown off what

little momentum he had gained. "How in the name of Vahram were they able to get that many archers forward? I thought they were still warring with our troops in the mountains!"

Until last night, that had indeed been the case. Now, however, thanks to Ranma, the Vanadis and the scouts the Muozinel troops within the mountains had been pushed back east.

Kashim frowned, his thoughts cutting off as he saw the hated redhead that had been leading the Brunish defenders since the beginning. He was sitting his horse on the entirely other side of the attack which had struck Kashim's army. And he was...

That was the last observation that the man made before Tigre fired. The Black Bow gave Tigre a range that even any of his previous bows couldn't match. Indeed, while Tigre had gotten stronger thanks to Ranma's training, the pull on the bow shifted to match. Now from the saddle, Tigre shot an arrow so far that even someone with ballista or even an early rifle would've had trouble matching the range, let alone the pinpoint accuracy.

The enemy commander collapsed out of his saddle, an arrow straight between the eyes. Before the men around him could even register his death, two of them fell, hit by a similar arrows one in the chest, the other in the throat.

That one was a little off target, admittedly. Tigre had been aiming for his head again, but the arrow had fallen slightly more than anticipated.

Four more arrows in quick succession followed, as the man around the former general's position realized that they were the within range.

A second later, he raised his bow, firing a single arrow high into the air as he twisted around, racing back the way he had come.

Seeing the signal, from out of the mountains behind him came the last Knightly Order, the Order of the Red Blade, with a thousand heavy cavalry. They quickly spread out in a flat out charge, no pulse charges, simply crashing into the other side of the formation from where the infantry under Captain Marsh had attacked. The side of the formation that still had no idea that they were in danger this far back from the front, up until the knights crashed into them.

The flank of the enemy collapsed instantly. While a prepared infantry line with spears could turn aside heavy cavalry, an unprepared infantry formation had no chance to do the same, especially when the cavalry had momentum on their side. The Knightly Order ran roughshod over entire infantry regiment, then crashed into the next, who were still extremely disorganized from having their command group just summarily butchered. the survivors fled, further disorganizing the units around them, many of whom were already engaged in battle.

If the enemy had been able to contract, been able to reorganize themselves, they might've had a chance to survive this attack. They still vastly outnumbered the Brunish forces,

after all. But this enemy had taken too many losses to their command structure, and the loss of a general was something no army could quickly get over, no matter how well organized. And they were being attacked from three sides, something no one, no matter how well trained could not but feel panic over.

The enemy instantly began to retreat, in drips and drabs. Some formations were still intact, mostly cavalry, and they began to retreat in good order back down the gap. But many broke as the Knightly orders to the front broke through with help from Ranma and Elen.

They left the intact units alone. Instead, they trampled every broken unit they could under their horse's feet, adding to the rout.

Still, there were a lot of enemy units retreating in good order, more than Ranma, once more perched on a horse, wanted to see. Although this time it was a friendly one, with Ludmila glaring up at him angrily. "Where the hell did you come from anyway?"

Ranma shrugged. "A battlefield isn't all that difficult to navigate, especially if you can take to the air like me. more importantly, there are still a lot of enemy formations staying together, and a few more still coming up from behind, damn, I didn't think they had a reserve. And... they have a lot of banners and drums. I can hear them from here."

"Dammit! We need to link up with Tigre. That has to be Red Beard!" Ludmila growled.

Ranma looked down at her, one eyebrow rising. "So he's Tigre now, is he?" he teased. "Are you going to throw in your hat into the ring for his hand, then?"

"D' don't be ridiculous!" Ludmila barked back, flushing. "Why ever would I go after someone who is already being I a fellow Vanadis, a princess and a maid?"

As if speaking about him summoned the redhead into being, Tigre pulled up beside them, with Elen making her way over to them quickly. "We need to sound the withdrawal," Tigre said without preamble. "That general was not Red Beard, and the enemy is bringing up more troops."

Ranma growled but nodded and pulled out a bugle, which he practically ruptured in the next instant as he blew three long blasts. It was the same signal that the Knightly orders had used when they reformed after their initial pulse charge.

Slowly the allied forces consolidated. This was hard because the enemy was once more pressing forward hard. Losses across the battlefield were slowly beginning to rise.

Ranma and Tigre were the last ones to pull back, along with Elen who took the abrupt turnaround more philosophically than either man. "Well, at least we shattered something like

nine regiments today. That's something at least. It will take them a while to reform those units."

"Agreed, although not happy at how quickly they were able to get through the caltrops me and the other scouts laid out last night. Still..." Ranma shrugged I guess you call this a win although, I don't know for how long.

Tigre didn't answer. In the distance, too far even for him to shoot he could see another gold and red banner, appearing, rising from among a new unit of cavalry at the far back of the Muozinel army.

"I would agree with you my large friend, if not for the fact that this group is led by Red Beard, as Lady Lourie told us," said one of the others, an elderly gentleman, older than the others, of Lord Augre's age or slightly more with the eyes of a hard-drinking hard-charging man, but with the hands and body of a someone who certainly looked after himself. "That one's a demon in human form, and will keep command of his army like no other Muozinel officer ever would. No, they'll make straight for Southport, burning and destroying everything in their path. And once combined with their supply line, we will never be able to get rid of them."

Later that night, the meeting was not a happy one. The combined defenders of Brune had just used a magnificent trick, but one that could only work once. Now their true enemy had revealed himself, bringing even more troopers to the party than they had ever seen before.

"Damn it, no wonder we haven't heard from Duncan if this lot were also pushing into the mountains with this kind of numbers," Ranma grouched, a feeling of guilt going through him. *I hope I didn't send Duncan and his men out there to die.* Shaking his head, Ranma concentrated on the here and now as Elen asked, "Is there still no report from Southport?"

Regin nodded, looking a little pale at the news that a brand-new host almost equal to the first in size. "Yes, we have reports that Duke Thenardier is now back in his lands, making a forced march along with three Dragon, to the port in order to retake it."

"If I knew how far away he was, I might have rethought trying to hold here," Tigre said softly, shaking his head. "With all the damage Ranma and the scouts did to their supplies, that army must be in danger of running out of water and wine, if not food."

"A scorched earth campaign then?" Rurick asked from where he and Gerard stood to one side of the ongoing meeting, causing all the Bruneman (and woman) to scowl.

"No. That is not something I will ever condone, let alone as wounded as our nation is already by civil war. Gentlemen, do you think that Duke Thenardier can take Eastport quickly, before this army can break out and make for the port?" Regin questioned looking at the others.

“No, your highness. While I don’t see how the enemy will be able to stop Thenardier’s dragons, he is still too far away to attack it quickly enough to help us. By the time he does take it, this army will be out and into Brune proper. Even should we, our forces that is, survive, the damage they could do would be tremendous, and then, they could simply retreat in the face of the dragons, using their purloined gains as supplies back through the mountains.

“That, plus the ravages of our civil war? Even with the planting season ahead of us, I don’t see how our nation would be able to survive,” Gerard added, his voice strained. He of all of them knew the most about the surrounding area, and how important it was to the rest of the nation given how much farmland had been ravaged during the civil war. While most of it hadn’t been ruined, dealing with that damage, even moving people back into the war-torn zones, would take a lot of time.”

“Furthermore, who knows, Red Beard might not even retreat. He might simply try to march around Thenardier, making for our own territories, where he’ll find supplies aplenty,” added the commander who had been worried about Red Beard before. “Few of our castles have enough men within to create a credible defense. They could live off the land until they get there, invest our castles, and then bring in supplies from their own lands if need be. We would have a devil of a time winking them back out.”

“So, we still need to smash this army if we can’t hold it,” Ranma said, a hard knot having grown in his stomach as this conversation went on. “Or else hundreds of thousands of peasants are going to find themselves enslaved and sent off to die. “

At Ranma’s blunt tone, everyone looked at him, then looked at one another. More words were exchanged, shouts, ideas, concepts, the names of a few castles bruited about before they were shut down by Regin or Gerard, who said that most of those had been demolished as Duke Thenardier’s family grew to prominence. Other names of places, where maybe they could create defenses for a time were also mentioned, but everything amounted to the same idea.

Once this army broke out into Brune proper, they could tie the Silver Meteor Army and its allies down with a portion of their forces and move on to resupply at the port or ravage the countryside. There was literally nothing that they could do to stop the Muozinel army given its size advantage at that point.

But there was something Ranma could do now, and after a few moments of contemplation he took upon that burden. “Can we get all of our people into the forts?”

Tigre and Eleanora looked at Gerard, who shrugged. “I believe we can, why though? Even if we fort up in here, it doesn’t really change matters. The enemy can still just pin us in place with but a fraction of their numbers and push past us into Brune territory with the rest of their army. It will serve no purpose.”

“No, that’s not what I’m talking about. I’m not talking about manning the forts, I mean getting all the troops underneath in the keeps in the center, not on the walls,” Ranma explained, a morose look in his eyes.

“That would be tough, but given our losses, I believe it’s still possible, so long as we send our heavy cavalry back down the gap behind our lines,” Tigre murmured, looking at his friend worriedly. “Why, Ranma?”

There was a look on that face that he had never seen before, a kind of resigned sadness as well as a grim determination. Next to Tigre, Elen too was watching Ranma closely. She had seen that face on people who were determined to do something they thought personally horrifying, but they also thought needed to be done.

“I have some tricks I haven’t used yet. One of them is a bit... destructive. It’s kind of hard to set up too, but with Ludmila’s help, I think we can do it. The problem is it isn’t very easy to aim.”

Everyone kept staring at him, and Ranma sighed, “I’m going to destroy that army. I’m going to personally kill a large portion of mass of humanity. And you’re going to help me, Ludmila, Elen. After all. the bigger this attack is, the better, right?”

OOOOOO

Staring ahead of his current position, Kureys cursed to himself, shaking his head slightly. Then he chuckled, setting aside the death of his second command, praising the War God that he had been able to convince the Emperor and the Council to add so much supply to his army. At first, they’d wanted to put literally all of their eggs - and bread, mead, and water - in one basket i.e. the fleet and the Marines that had taken Southport. But he had convinced them that his army needed at least two weeks more worth of food.

And then, had come along the losses against the Silver Meteor Army they had, a rather pretentious name in his opinion, but an army that fought like lions. *Mountain lions to be exact.*

Those supplies have forced us to move slower in comparison to what the original plan called for, but if we didn’t have them, all of my units would have been without food or water for more than five days now. As it is, we’re nearly out of food despite redistributing the supplies we can from the shattered units. Even considering today’s disaster. And thank my innate paranoia I thought to hide my banner and let Kashim take command of the army.

Red Beard frowned in thought as he entered his tent, finding his advisors waiting for him. *The army’s morale is near the breaking point, and not just because of the food situation. Whoever that pigtailed warrior is, he has destroyed my command and communication*

organization to a degree I would never have thought possible, and that plus the fact we haven't scored a single real victory against the Brune is having an effect, to say nothing of today! I am going to lash the back of Spy Master Hashan to ribbons for not telling us about that man!

But for now, I have to decide whether to pull back or try to break through. Red Beard let the words of his advisors wash over him for a time, staring down at the map in front of him, stroking his luxuriant beard thoughtfully. After only a minute's contemplation, he decided. "We've come too far to retreat now. We need to break through this force, regardless of what happened to Kashim."

Around him, Red Beard's advisors and few remaining regiment commanders nodded. There was no sycophancy in that reaction, Red Beard had removed any such yes-men from his army long since. No, what he had built, almost from scratch at that was a thoroughgoing, professional, extremely self-reliant officer corps. *Most of whom have died in the past few weeks* he thought once more, a flash of real anger crossing his face. Who would've thought that someone from Brune would be able to come up with such underhanded tactics. "How many more days do we have?"

"Barely three. And that's with redistributing the supplies of the units who have simply disintegrated today. So don't even ask," his supply officer answered instantly. "I've already begun redistributing those supplies, what weren't ruined or destroyed in the rout before we started to restore order anyway."

"Is that enough time to get us out of the Charles Gap?" Red Beard questioned.

"A day to reform the army after its losses so far?" Another man guessed, peering over the amount the map of the gap that they had been making since breaking through the fortress. It wasn't complete by any stretch of the imagination, but it was the best they had.

"Yes. That'll be a necessity I'm afraid," Red Beard nodded resignedly.

His own portion of the Army still had twelve thousand un-blooded men, their morale iron hard, and the rest of the army which had fought under Kashim earlier that day had something like double that number still intact and responding to orders. But judging by the shattered remains of the rest Red Beard had seen being corralled and re-organized a moment ago, he would be able to gain another ten thousand or more men if he took the time to do it. "Besides the process has already begun. Best to finish it."

"In that case, we can make it, barely. From where we are right now it's a day to reach the entrance to the gap on the Brune side. Say a day and a half to break whatever defenses are they are. But we can't slow down any further."

The man who was speaking looked over at the man who had spoken about logistics, who nodded firmly in reply. "By the time we break out, we won't have **any** water left. We'll still have food for one, maybe two meals for the entire army at that point, but no water or wine."

He gazed at Red Beard speculatively, leaving unsaid the fact that would also include the officers. Red Beard had made certain that they didn't eat any more than common troopers. They might have a few dainties, after all, despite his best efforts most of the officers were nobles, and they could bring along a servant and a single mules worth of luxury items. But that was all.

Most, had, smartly in his opinion brought food. Red Beard had also done so, and then had promptly started to share his food with his security cadre.

Red Beard simply nodded back, and the man straightened, saying, "With your permission sir, I'll get to making certain the food and everything else is organized. Broken troops sometimes loot even after being brought back into line."

"See to your own commands," Red Beard ordered. "We will march in the morning, and we are not going to stop for anything. We have come too far to fail now," Red Beard reiterated.

Many of the other officers left, leaving the man who had been marking out distances on the map and Red Beard alone in the tent. "You have concerns," Red Beard stated, leaning back on his cushions, tugging at his beard as he looked at his oldest and perhaps greatest asset for this campaign: an exiled Brunish nobleman, who had been accused of selling his own peasants into slavery.

"Yes," the man ground out harshly, "I do. If we can't break through, we won't have enough supplies to retreat with."

"True. But I have taken the measure of this enemy army now. It is small, extremely well led and organized, and it's what is that old Brunish word for an army's spirit?" Red Beard interrupted himself, smiling almost whimsically.

"I don't remember the exact words but I know what you mean. And I agree, they have great spirit. But does that matter?"

"They are very cognizant of their losses," Red Beard said softly. "If we are quick about it, they will not be able to recover from this last battle, and we will be able to push them into the kind of fight that favors us. Straight on, numbers against determination. And you forget the logistical side of things. No army has an unlimited supply of arrows, food, supplies. They have fought the same kind of costly mountain warfare as he has and must be on their last legs."

"You sound almost as if you almost respect them," the former Brunish noble stated, scowling.

Red Beard chuckled dryly, turning away slightly as he picked up a wine glass. He had ordered a single cask brought for this meeting, but his officers, being no fools, had not overindulged. That left to him to finish after-the-fact, a most fortuitous state of affairs.

He took his time answering the question, before nodding slightly. "I do. I do indeed respect them, I'll kill them the instant I get the chance, but I realize that if the Silver Meteor Army had been even a quarter of our own numbers, we would never have gotten this far. And we would've lost far far more men. Now, go get some sleep. You're going to need it."

The man nodded, then said hesitantly, "There won't be any way around them through the mountains beyond today's battlefield. Hells, I'm surprised they found trails that let them pull off that pincer assault even today!"

"I'm counting on it," Red Beard chuckled. "I still have the manpower to pay that price. They never did."

Red Beard watched the man go, taking another sip of his wine, then setting it down resolutely, before pulling out another map. This was a map of Brune and Zhcted, showing where Muozinel armies had invaded in the past. The map wasn't all that good, showing scant details but even so it showed the most important cities and natural landmarks.

He then held his hand out, first over a portion of Brune then reminding himself "Ah yes, the debacle today was caused by the Knightly Orders." Red Beard then moved his fingers slightly to cover the territory where the Knightly Orders held land. Seeing this, Red Beard smiled. "Yes, that will do nicely."

Red Beard had plans. Oh, yes. While he was loyal to the Emperor, and to the system of nobility that stated that slavery was a fact of life and that put nobles him on top, he still understood that Muozinel had to change. The slave business needed to be pared back, needed to change somehow. It was holding Muozinel back on the international side of things. If they could make but one ally among the other nations, things would be very different. But they couldn't, because every other nation knew that their people were but slaves waiting to be chained to Muozinel, noble and peasant alike. That had to change.

And as conqueror of at least half a Brune, if not the entire thing, there were those reports on dragons that worried him quite a bit, Red Beard would be in a good position to make suggestions. To offer new ways forward, and to expand his influence further. "Oh yes, I have plans. But first, I need to destroy you, redheaded archer. Vanadis of Laviar and Arifar. And you, mysterious one. I will forgo the mystery of you, for the good that your death can do me."

OOOOOO

The next day, the enemy army began to move quickly, coming towards them in an organized assault, banners flying, regiments formed up in attack formations. They had not

attacked during the night outside of a few skirmishes with light infantry moving forward. Instead, they concentrated on gathering up their smashed forces, perhaps adding a further seven thousand men to their line of battle.

The speed with which the previously broken army had come together both impressed and scared the more experienced officers among the defenders. All of them knew that even if there had been an existing chain of command, turning around a broken army that quickly was something almost magical.

Ranma sat on a stone set in the center of the gap, about a mile away from the makeshift palisade across the gap, the forts behind him on either side. Behind the rock hidden from the invading army, Ludmila waited, scowling. "Are you sure this is going to work?" Ranma had told her, Elen and Tigre what he was going to do and how, and while all of them were skeptical, had agreed to see if it worked.

"Heh, you just be ready with that cold shoulder of yours," Ranma quipped, pushing aside his worry about and dread about what he was about to do.

For several minutes he watched as the enemy came on, then leaped down, cracked his neck this way and that, and smirked. It was the most arrogant, most infuriating smirk he could put on his face, and he raced forward with that grin still his face, as he crossed the intervening distance, shouting over his shoulder, "I'll be right back for you blue gal!"

As he came, the enemy, having no doubt understood what Ranma was by this point, paused, the archers letting fly. Several hundred arrows came at Ranma, but he didn't dodge. Instead, he caught each one that would have otherwise hit him, then slid to a stop, several meters into the archers to range, holding up several bushels of arrows, then wagging them this way and that as if the enemy army was a bug he could wave away.

Then he hurled them into the air on a parabola that would instead bring them back down among the enemy archers.

Even Ranma couldn't do that and assume that those arrows would still be traveling with enough force to penetrate armor, not even the light leather the enemy archers used. But they certainly caused consternation, and the arrow swarm coming towards Ranma stopped, as the men dodged and danced around, protecting their heads as best they could. Among Muozinel's army, the archers didn't have much covering their head but a simple hood and leather mask instead of a helmet.

By the time the archers had their wits about them once more, Ranma had crashed into the front of the enemy forces ahead of him

That front was composed of the enemy's heavy infantry, spear wielders with heavy shields, but that didn't matter to Ranma, he simply dodged the spears like he was made of

rubber, commenting as he did, "Oh so close, not bad, you almost had me!" As he ducked underneath and through the spears, before he smashed bodily into the shields behind, crashing through them and causing further disorder.

Ranma was only one man, attacking an enemy army numbered in the thousands. The rest of the army continued on for a time, but then Ranma pulled out from his ki space several stones, hurling them through the army, in both directions, shouting out, "Now that's just not kosher, here I am, almost begging you lot to kill me and you're going to ignore me? I call that rude!"

As the front of the Muozinel army tried to get itself organized, Ranma began to bounce through the leading regiments, hopping from one head to another, kicking out occasionally, but more often than not using his words to get a rise out of the enemy. This was why he had been up all night with Regin, and though his accent was horrible it actually lent his words even more emphasis, and making terms come out a little earthier. His comment of "You couldn't hit dirt with an arrow," became, "Your own shit with an arrow," and so forth.

He did do one other thing during this time, however. He targeted and killed every officer and signaler he spotted.

Soon, nearly the entire front of the Muozinel army was responding to Ranma's taunts. Yet he continued to bounce around, shouting and laughing at them, kicking a man high into the air to land among the spears and his fellows, riding a horse behind one man, patting him on the head like a child, before leaping off, taking the man with him, and using him as a flail on several others.

At the back of the army, Red Beard frowned angrily. The time he'd spent over the past day to reform his army had been a hindrance. But he had needed to take that time to fully reform his army, or else he would've lost large portions of his command permanently as they retreated every which way from the debacle that had just occurred. But now, this man with the powers of a Vanadis and far more durable than any he had heard of was holding up his entire advance.

And with him was another Vanadis. Red Beard saw the young Vanadis of Lavia somewhere in the center of the swirling mass of chaos. *But she's too far forward, and too alone. Could she have tried to come out and help her friend? If so, I am not going to ignore this opportunity!*

"Push forward more archers," he ordered. "Spread out our commands further and push forward two more companies of cavalry along the flanks. Eventually this man will retreat, he isn't immortal, whatever magic he is using to remain uninjured will eventually fade, and I want us able to cut him off from retreat." Yet even as he ordered this, Red Beard was frowning, wondering what the hell the enemy fighter was up to.

Ranma continued to drag men into his chaotic sphere of influence for a few more minutes before slowly falling into a spiral. Moving across a battlefield like this was only possible thanks to his mastery of the Aerial Style of Anything Goes, but even he had a hard time moving over such a huge area quickly enough so that the various people within his target zone didn't become bored or lose their angry battle aura. That would have been annoying.

But he did it. Ranma wove an entire spiral, keeping his own ki nearly ice cold, as cold as he could make it, so cold that more than one Muozinel trooper wondered why the heck their speedy, infuriating and chaotic opponent was so cold as to breath out a cloud of mist.

And then, Ranma's spiral finished right next to where Ludmila had been fighting. A very good defensive fighter, she had stayed put, using the stone which had initially hidden her from the enemy to guard her back. More than a dozen bodies lay all around her, testament to her skills. But not once had she used her powers, that would have disrupted the hot-cold air current that Ranma had wanted to create.

"NOW!" Ranma ordered the moment he landed.

In response, Ludmila raised Laviyas straight up into the air and unleashed the power gathered within. Laviyas had been on edge for days ever since Ranma's Lavi-chan comment, eager to use her powers on the brat.

For a moment, the people around them Ranma stared in shock as the very weather above their heads shifted, the wind picking up slowly, but then, drastically shifting, becoming a tornado, tearing people up and off of their feet, hurling them through the air, grabbing horses, weapons and more. Large or small, it didn't matter. The wind pulled them all into its embrace, up and off the ground, flinging them around. And as Ludmila continued to produce the cold energy needed at the center, the tornado kept growing, spreading throughout the portion of the army that had been engaged with Ranma.

Thanks to his jumping around, taunting the common soldiers and killing every officer or signaler he found, that was a lot of the army, several of Muozinel's oversized regiments with more nearby. And the tornado did not stay put in the area that Ranma had been fighting. Instead, it spread, stopped only by the sides of the gap.

At its edges, it was actually survivable. But, for the forces of Muozinel, that hope was an illusion. Even the best riders among their cavalry lost control of their animals. Many were thrown from their horses and stared up in abject shock and horror at the tornado above them, while many were slain, trampled by their own panicking horses, who raced in either direction along the gap, desperate to flee from the natural disaster that had just sprung into existence above them. This caused even more damage to the Muozinel army as several hundred men outside the radius of the tornado found themselves in the way of the maddened horses. Orders came too late to just shoot them down, and the horses crashed into their fellows along the flanks of the Muozinel army or into the infantry, causing more damage.

The foremost regiments closest to the epicenter of the tornado were just gone now. A few screams still resounded from within the tornado made of those unlucky enough to have survived the first few seconds, but they quickly fell silent, pummeled to death or sliced into ribbons by the weapons that were in there with them. Only those at the edges survived, unhorsed.

Well behind the main regiments of his army, Red Beard stared at the distant tornado rising in the distance. The implication of that sight struck him within seconds, and he whirled, hopping off his cushions and racing to the end of his raised dais, bellowing, "Sound the retreat! Sound the retreat! We need to get out of that thing's range and prepare for an enemy counterattack. Given its size, the Vanadis should only be able to use that attack once, but if we are careful, we can crush their attempt to take advantage of it and then move on to crush their forts."

His small company of signalers needed no second urging, and a staccato beat flew out from his command platform, first pulling the regiments behind those who had attacked first back and away from that disaster, which continued to grow, fed now not by the weak, heated ki of the regular Muozinel soldiers, but by the magical winds of Arifar nearby. As Ranma had predicted, Elen didn't need to be at the center of the thing, only close enough for her attacks to feed into the outer edge of the tornado, not with enough force to overwhelm the spiral, but enough to add to the tornado's growing strength.

Meanwhile, at Red Beard's command, the army responded. Past the edge of the tornado, the army, which had been formed into assault columns, now spread out further to encompass the entire breadth of the gorge as the first regiments had. The intervals between the regiments closed up, and the front of the army firmed as more archers moved forward. Although even as they obeyed, many a Muozinel man stared out through his mask's eye slits in fear at the size of the magical attack.

After more than an hour, the tornado began to dissipate despite Ludmila and Elen's attempts to keep it going, and Ranma stared down the gap from his place on the stone, his teeth bared in a snarl. The enemy army had retreated quickly, causing Ranma to once more feel a moment of respect for the enemy commander. Nor were those regiments turning back to the attack now that the tornado had begun to dissipate. Instead, still more men had come up. The front of the army was once more spread across the gap, not charging, not retreating, simply waiting. Behind them, the army's remaining horsemen waited to charge from the flanks, and the infantry too had been mostly moved to the sides.

Ranma knew that if he and the others retreated now, that army would attack again, only this time, the enemy over there wouldn't be tricked by his taunting assault. Instead, they would pin him in place with some of their army, the center portion where it was thinnest, while the flanks would just go around him. *That's what I would do.*

Ranma couldn't allow that. The enemy army still outnumbered them more than seven to one. Any renewed assault would be a disaster. *I have to keep the momentum, keep hammering them back! Damn it!*

With a grimace composed of both resolution and growing guilt, Ranma raced forward, leaving a shouting Ludmila behind and began to experiment once more with his life energy, as he had done on the trip down to Artishem. *The old way might have been slightly more destructive, and this way takes it out of me more, demanding I use my own ki to power it, but it will have to do for an encore.*

The enemy saw him coming, of course, and their archers, now fully integrated to all their forward infantry units, began to fire arrows in his direction. Where before the arrows had flown like hail, they came down now in a torrent, almost blackening the sky above Ranma.

Yet to Ranma, they felt like a torrent made of dull needles, useless unless they struck his eyes. And as he closed, one hand began to glow, a haze of heat rising from it, while Ranma's other hand seemed to turn blue from the cold.

Ranma continued to race forward, and now the enemy started to react, pulling the lines of troops ahead of him backward while those companies to either side made to envelop him. This was a classic tactic that Muozinel had used for decades to good effect in past wars.

But that was only if the Vanadis continued her charge. Ranma didn't, pulling up and leaping to the side, so far that he was once more in front of an infantry company just to the interior side of the right flank. Their men had barely a second to realize he'd shifted position to be in front of them in turn before Ranma attacked.

"Daichi no Kuikorosu Ryuuzo (Ground Devouring Dragon)!" he shouted, bringing his cold ki-infused fist into the center of the spiral he had just created with his other fist. Although not as massive as the Hiryou Shouten Ha had been, this attack tore into the front of the enemy army, shattering its cohesion once more.

Once more, a tornado appeared, but a vertical one this time. It tore into and through the horde of Muozinel troops in front of him, expanding to snatch up men and horses alike in a widening avenue of destruction.

Unbeknownst to Ranma, Elen and Tigre had raced forward behind him. The last of the light cavalry who had been sent around the main melee Ludmila and Ranma had been at the center of had fared only a little better than their fellows closer in, dumped off horses or forced to flee towards Brune and their defenses. They were now being hunted down by the vengeful Knights, those of them who were not staring at the first tornado or the one Ranma had just flung forward.

As she ran, Elen hurled her own attack forward once more, "Ley Adimos!"

The large ball of magic crashed into Ranma's tornado, enlarging it as it had done before. Then the two of them broke off, racing to the other side of the gap and that flank of the enemy. There, men had hunkered down behind shields, tossed their weapons away and just clung to the ground like limpets, staring, while those behind them had already turned and begun to retreat, the vertical tornado not having spread to cover as much space as Ranma's first attempt to become an air djinn. "Now to turn that retreat into a rout. Ready, Tigre?"

"Ready!" Tigre skidded to a stop beside her, raising his Black Bow as he breathed in, then out, reaching inside for that strange power that Ranma called ki. Tigre wasn't certain on that score. He still felt that the Black Bow did something, had its own power perhaps, which drew from his body and that of Arifar equally, magnifying both. Already he could feel the same exhaustion that Ludmila was dealing with and he hadn't even shot yet.

But Tigre persevered, and as the tornado started to dissipate, leaving a ravaged right flank of the enemy army, but one that had the depth to reform, His arrow gleamed black and dark blue. Pulling the Black Bow's string back to his ear, he held it there, and Elen raised Arifar putting the blade right next to the Black Bow. The jewel at Arifar's cross-guard began to glow, funneling air and magic into the glowing vortex around Tigre's arrow.

Just as the enemy was recovering from Ranma's second attack, Tigre fired. The arrow from the Black Bow flew forward, over the heads of the first groups of soldiers carrying a swirling, slashing mass of black and blue magical energy through the army at an angle. The arrow had been aimed from the leftmost portion of the gorge toward the center, where Tigre could see some kind of stand had been erected at the back of the enemy army.

And while Ranma's tornado had picked up and tossed people around, this attack tore them to pieces instantly throughout the area of effect. While that area was thinner than Ranma's second assault had been, just directly below the trajectory of the arrow, the devastation was almost as great, spreading not halfway through the army as Ranma's assault had, but all the way, cutting through every unit on that side of the gap all the way to the back of the army.

Seeing the energy attack coming, Red Beard bellowed, "OFF!" and dove off the raised platform which had been Tigre's target. He was followed by a few of his faster-thinking signalers, though many couldn't move fast enough to save themselves thanks to the signal drums they were carrying.

By the time the energy wave struck, it had shrunk dramatically from its beginning width, which let Red Beard roll clear, although his leg broke as he landed, and as he rolled, Red Beard felt something in his shoulder snap as well. But more than half his signalers had still been on the platform when the attack struck and were torn asunder, their blood and viscera spreading over the men of the logistics corps on the ground around them, most of whom had also tossed themselves to the ground in desperation to get away from the magical attack, one no one in Muozinel had ever seen or heard of before.

A nearby soldier slowly pushed himself to his feet, then, seeing his general scrabbling at the dirt and biting his lip to keep in a scream of pain, the man raced over, helping the noble to his feet. "M, my lord, what should we do?"

"Grab the reserve signalers! Get out a signal, reform the army, we, we need to... to.... no..." Red Beard trailed off, staring ahead of him to the end of the army in horror as, for once, all plans fled his mind. From here, he couldn't see through the men between him and right flank, but he could see that men there were already pulling back, already turning away entirely from the enemy. "No, by the war god's fiery anus, **no!**"

Facing the right flank of the Muozinel army, Ranma was once more gathering his ki, charging forward into the holocaust he had created, roaring out, "And third times the charm!"

The Muozinel Army had faced Vanadis for centuries. They understood the limits of the Viralt weapons, the number of times their magic could be used in succession, how large their attacks could be. Indeed, there were even treatises on each Viralt within the Emperor's library. As a result, they knew how to combat them: with numbers, time and enough men. Gain distance spread out, exhaust them, kill. Simple plan, hard to execute, but a plan built on hard-earned knowledge gave the Muozinel Army the ability to face magic without having any of their own.

The size of the first attack had appalled the Muozinel troops, but they could have gotten past it, knowing that such an attack would have taken all the energy of the Vanadis in question. However, the sight of Ranma unleashing a similar attack on his own without the Vanadis of Laviyas, an instant later shattered that theory.

And when Elen and Tigre attacked, the Muozinel Army discovered to their horror that there was another Vanadis on the field. Worse, it was one whose power they had no idea of. A power that had just slaughtered several of their heretofore intact regiments on the left flank, units which had been moving forward to take the place of the regiments shattered in Ranma's first attack, unlike the ones which had been hit by Ranma's second attack.

Now here was Ranma once more charging forward, apparently willing to launch a third attack. Even if they couldn't understand his words, any trooper who saw him racing forward could tell his intentions.

The officers might have thought this a bluff. They might have ordered a controlled, organized retreat. The common soldiers, the men at the tip, the men who had been suffering these magical assaults, seen their friends and comrades slaughtered, seen more than half their army disappearing in less than an hour after days on end of fighting through the Agnes Mountains, of being beaten again and again? Those men could no longer sustain their courage in the face of such magic.

As Ranma charged forward, all discipline fled the remaining enemy units. Men scrambled away from his charge, pushing at their fellows, some even taking up weapons to desperately cut their way to safety, screaming in their own language, "The Air Djinn, he is unkillable, flee, flee!"

That spread fear like wildfire throughout the army, aided by Tigre's attack not having left much of the army's left flank. Gone was the well-oiled, well-organized military force that the Silver Meteor Army had been fighting for several weeks. Now it was every man for himself, scrabbling at one another, trying to get away.

From his position at the army's rear, Red Beard and his shattered command group tried their best. But Ranma's depredations over the past few weeks had cost the army a lot of the mid-to-high ranking officers. Moreover, Tigre's assault had removed still more of the upper echelon, particularly among the signalers and Red Beard's advisors, including the Brunish expatriot. This left a gap that could not be filled now as fear spread like a plague.

Red Beard's magnificent army broke. Weapons, armor, anything that could slow a man from fleeing was dropped by the wayside as men desperately attempted to get away from the tornado, which, a moment later, sprang into being for the third time.

Less than an hour later, the enemy was in full flight. Muozinel's finest army had been smashed, and it was Ranma who had done it. What remained was a fleeing horde of former soldiers, thousands strong, but whose will was utterly broken. There just weren't enough commanders left, enough will left to bring them together again.

Ranma stared at it all as the various Knightly Orders raced past him in their vaunted companies, pennants whipping in the wind, a roar of, "For Brune and Princess Regin!" following them on the wind. The most rested of the Brune forces, despite their efforts over the last few days, it would fall on them to harry the enemy all the way back to the fort originally designed to protect the Charles Gap.

Other units, pulled from the Knightly Orders and led by the scouts Ranma and Tigre had trained, would move through the mountains. They would be ready to help the Knightly Orders should they need it to reclaim that fortress and secure the Charles Gap once more.

But Ranma didn't even see them. Didn't have any care for the future or the plans. He didn't even notice Elen and Ludmila moving towards him or how Tigre made to follow, only to be intercepted by a pale-faced Regin, who had followed the rest of the army out from within the keeps.

All Ranma could see were the droves of bodies, the windrows of corpses, men and horse and unidentified bits dumped here and there for miles down the gap from where he stood. All of them dead by his hand. The ground of the gap was stained so red it looked like rust for miles.

Even the mountainsides around it, be it cliff or slope, were splashed with blood and gore. *At, at least Tigre's attack didn't leave much behind. I, my attack... it...*

Ranma knew that he had killed a lot of people before this. Even in the short campaign against Ganelon's creature, Greast, he had killed several hundred people. And in this campaign, he had doubled or even tripled that number. But that was pocket change in comparison to this. And killing so many at once, in such a manner, that was worse. *They, they didn't even have a chance to fight back!*

He had known that this would happen when he used his Hiryyu-based attacks, and he had hoped to avoid doing so, to avoid getting so much more blood on his hands. But it had been this or letting this army crush their final defenses and go on to ravage Brune's countryside, to kill innocent men and women enslave them, which Ranma thought was rather worse than death.

Yet standing in the middle of literal miles of slaughter, that thought was scant comfort. Ranma had just personally massacred, not fought, not killed, **butchered** tens of thousands of men. Men who hadn't even had a chance to fight back, men who, for the most part, hadn't even the chance to flee. So many sheep to the slaughter.

Suddenly, Ranma found his gorge rising, and he keeled over, throwing up on the ground in front of him. The stench, the smell, the whinnying cries of wounded horses. Everything got to him all at once, in a way that battle never had before as something small and almost innocent within Ranma died.

Elen rushed towards him, but Ludmila got to Ranma first, pulling the pigtailed warrior into a tight hug, soothing as he wept. "There, there, Ranma. It, it should never be easy, never be something you relish. Let it out."

She looked up at Elen, who, with a nod, joined the hug, adding her own voice to Ludmila's, soothing him almost as if he were a child afraid of the dark. If Ranma had had this reaction to anything else, including his ridiculous fear of cats, Elen would have made fun of him, would have teased him incessantly. But this? No. Now Elen only felt sympathy. Soon Tigre joined them, reaching into the hug to add his support in the form of a grip on Ranma's shoulder.

As Ranma began to collapse into unconsciousness, the emotional drain of the moment proving too much, Ludmila slowly turned him over to his friends, blinking and looking away as Tigre looked at her in gratitude. *Now isn't the time to wonder about that feeling of butterflies in your stomach, Ludmila.*

Instead, she turned her attention to her second-in-command, the young Lord Gerard, and Rurick. All three looked at Ranma, their faces both awed and sympathetic, before concentrating on Ludmila. Gerard acting as their spokesperson. "Um, Milady, should we join the

pursuit? The Knightly Orders might need some help to really harry that army into the ground. Some reports have already made it back to us that some of their men are reforming.”

Ludmila turned to look down the gap, frowning, then she shook her head, feeling queasy herself at the amount of dead and blood everywhere she looked. *I am used to causing death, but not on this scale. And Tigre, he struck that platform where the enemy commander was. So he must be dead, although sending someone over to make certain is a good idea.*

Turning back to the three men, Ludmila stiffened her spine, her voice firm, showing none of her own horror at what she had helped to do. “No, let them go. They’re beaten. Let the survivors run back to Muozinel with tales of the giant tornadoes and the arrows of the Archer that tore their army apart. Instead, send a group of soldiers to see what they can make out of the wreckage of that large platform the Muozinel troops erected at the start of their attack. I’ll want a report on what they find... tomorrow. Not today.”

Hearing a noise from where Ranma and the others were, Ludmila turned, watching as Tigre pulled Ranma into his arms, standing up with his friend as Elen hovered beside him, supporting Ranma’s head and upper body. “Let them go,” Ludmila repeated as she watched the three of them. “There’s been more than enough death today.”

Nodding, the three men moved off to their various commands, and Ludmila turned, joining the others as they returned to the fortress. The War of The Gap was over, and the Silver Meteor Army had one. And in the end, all it had taken to win was the loss of Ranma’s innocence.

OOOOOO

While this decision by Ludmila was the right one in terms of humanitarianism and the emotion of the moment, it was also the wrong one. Because contrary to Ludmila’s prediction, Red Beard had survived. He now sat astride a horse, with a group of light cavalry around him as they raced back to Muozinel territory, hoping to reach and maybe retain control of the fortress, although Red Beard had scant hope of that.

As he rode, Red Beard seethed, his mind awash in fury and grief. Gone were all thoughts about the future and his long-term ambitions. His army, his magnificent weapon of conquest, had been slaughtered. And he would have revenge!

I will have my vengeance pigtailed one. Whatever it takes, whatever I must do, It will see you slain for this day’s work! I swear it on the Emperor’s name!

End Chapter

Hmm, this is my first attempt to show a army fighting a whole campaign in the mountains, and I don't know if I did well enough showing that setting. Still, I hope you all enjoyed this especially after what I know has been a rather long wait for something, anything new from me LOL.