

Sorry this is out so late guys, but RL can happen not just to authors, but to beta-readers too. This has been edited by Hiryō and myself using Grammarly to a certain extent - for some reason my Grammarly word app crashed and is refusing to appear any longer on this computer, and my other computer is in the shop for power outlet issues. No doubt there will be small mistakes, but hopefully not enough to take away from your enjoyment of the chapter.

## Chapter 7: Winter Annoyances, Summer Troubles

Ranma grumbled in annoyance, moving a hand through her hair in order thinking whether or not it was worth the trouble to stop and transform back into a man. As she passed under the laden bough some snow had dumped on her a moment ago. Mostly slush it'd been enough to trigger the change, which annoyed Ranma to no end. Deciding that it wasn't worth the trouble, Ranma raced on through the woods. *No, my form isn't my problem right now. My main problem right now is boredom*, the redhead thought ruefully.

Ranma had passed the Resia River, which marked the demarcation line of the Silver Meteor Army's territory early the morning before, not even slowing down. Instead Ranma had simply skated across the river with a whoop, before moving on easily, racing like a thoroughbred horse coupled with the constitution of a wolf.

At first, Ranma had been traveling through what was very obviously a depopulated zone, which would normally have a lot of people in it. There had been scattered farmsteads everywhere, the same basic size he was used to seeing back in Japan, fifteen acres of crops with fields fallow at present, and one large single house. But no one had been there, the inhabitants of the area heading North and East into the Silver Meteor Army's territory, or south and west on orders of their liege lords.

After that however, things had gotten annoying. There was a road heading towards Duke Thenardier's city of Nemetacum, but that wasn't quite the direction he wanted to go. So Ranma had split off from the road and made his way out into the fields and then into the forest beyond, heading on a more eastern angle than the road towards Artishem.

It had been four days since he had made that decision and Ranma felt he had traveled something like a hundred leagues through the forest. Even for Ranma traveling in wintertime was slower than traveling otherwise, and every night Ranma had to make himself a kind of igloo to sleep in at night, which slowed him down further.

Traveling was fun for Ranma... normally. If the scenery changed, if the weather was nice, or, as Ranma discovered recently, the company was good. In fact, that last one actually made traveling a lot more fun than Ranma had ever thought it would, having only traveled

occasionally with his rivals and before that with his father. In contrast, talking to Limalisha and Sofya had been a lot of fun. Shockingly enough, their conversations had been interesting even when they weren't talking about martial arts or fighting. Heck the most amusing topic at one point had been fashion of all things, with both girls shocked at how much Ranma knew about that topic, at least in relation to his old world. Their faces when he described some of the material used for clothing back home and the styles had been hilarious.

But neither of them was there at the moment. Worse yet, the weather was classic wintry gloom, with an added chance of snow. And unfortunately, since she had hit the forest, the views hadn't changed much either. Ranma had attempted to take to the trees, moving through the treetops instead of along the ground as a change of pace, but it had slowed Ranma down and hadn't really helped. Every tree was now starting to look the same, and the sky above was starting to annoy the martial artist with its drabness.

In other words, Ranma was bored out of her mind right now. *Winter travel sucks!*

"Let's see, what kind of training can I do while I travel," Ranma pondered aloud not for the first time in the past few days. Before this though, Ranma had concentrated on working katas into her running, thinking up ways to incorporate her pressure points skills into her style further. Now, looking down at her body, Ranma suddenly smirked, and began to meditate as she ran along, concentrating on a portion of her body, while allowing the rest to remain at the temperature it was now.

*The objective is to see if I'll ever be able to do Hiryou Shouten Ha on my own without needing to rely on the hot ki of my enemies,* she thought to herself as she leaped from one tree to another. She then resignedly dropped down into the snow beneath as she noticed the surrounding trees had become pine, all of which were full of snow and too many small branches to make easy headway.

When she landed on the forest floor, Ranma scowled in annoyance as it came up to her hips before she leaped up onto it, then away. *And do a better job of landing without sinking into the snow too.*

Later that day Ranma was perched on the tallest tree she could find and looking around, scowled as she realized she might have left the road a little too far too her left. *Crap, I thought that I was paralleling it, but I can't see any sign of it. Damn it, the map I looked at isn't worth shit! That road's the only freaking landmark I can use to find my way until I hit that one town, what was it, Lego, or something? This shortcut of mine might add to the time.*

Looking up at the sky and then around, Ranma's breath puffed in the wind as she considered. *Still, so long as I can keep from being notice by Hard Ass and his goons, I suppose I've got time to waste. We've got at least another two, maybe three months of winter. And then another month when most of the roads won't be worth crap due to the mud.*

Moving in the direction she had last seen the road early the previous morning, Ranma traveled for more than a few hours by her estimation before she saw it in the distance. With that done Ranma paralleled the road and kept to the trees just out of sight until she realized that even her abilities to move silently wasn't up to this task. Looking behind her, Ranma could see the trees still moving from her passage, and a lot of the snow on them displaced. *And I don't think they have anything like monkeys or anything like that in this area* she thought ruefully, dropping to the snow-covered floor of the forest once more. *Still, I can keep out of sight from the road easily enough on the floor too.*

A roar got Ranma's attention just then, and she turned to what the martial artist had initially discounted as a large snow mound which opened beady eyes and stood up as she watched. The creature was something like a polar bear, but it had a different hand structure from the bears back home, something Ranma had quite a lot of experience with thanks to his father. It also had a much bigger fangs, almost like a certain extinct species of furry devil.

But it was clearly more bear than furry devil and Ranma cocked her head quizzically at the bear, then grinned spreading her arms wide. "Finally! Come on then, let's have some fun."

The giant bear thing didn't take well to this seeming-challenge and charged forward, going on all fours for a few seconds before rearing back up and lashing out with a swipe from its front paw that would no doubt have snuffed the life out of any normal person had it connected. Ranma however simply reached up and grabbed it, then twisted around, and tossed the bear entirely over her shoulder in a classic judo throw, grinning as it smashed into a tree. It growled angrily but pushed himself out of the broken remains of the tree, roaring in challenge and racing towards Ranma again.

"Excellent! I like to have my playmates be durable."

What followed would have, if it had lived through it, been easily the most humiliating moment in the polar-tooth's life. It was continually tossed around, until finally, it began to dawn on the creature that it was in over his head. Then, when it tried to leave, Ranma smacked one fist into the palm the other hand, exclaiming "Oh, wait, furs. Forgot about that."

For some reason the noises the man-thing had just made terrified the bear, and it took off, trying to get enough distance to use its natural camouflage to disappear into the wintery woods. This alas failed, and the last thing the polar-tooth felt was something smacking into the back of its head.

Looking down at the paralyzed bear, Ranma smiled thinly, seeing that some pressure points worked on all mammals. Then he reached down and snapped its neck with a single, brutal twist of his hands. He then bowed his head slightly, clapping his hands in prayer. Normally he wouldn't have bothered with that for an animal, but Tigre had taught him to be thankful for every animal he killed while hunting.

After creating an igloo to one side of the corpse and gathering enough wood for a fire and a hanging rack, Ranma pulled out a small extremely sharp dagger from her weapons space, kneeling down next to the bear-thing. "Thank you, Tigre, for teaching me how to do this!"

Before meeting Tigre, Ranma had just followed his Pop's direction when it came to skinning animals, which was very much a brute force approach. It worked for them, because they had force to spare, but it wasn't tidy, and it wasn't quick. Tigre however had taught Ranma about a much better method, and then had given him a knife too. Within ten minutes, Ranma had the skin of the bear off and then in and out of his ki space, to kill off any lice or anything else. He then hung the bear up outside to bleed out, whistling as she began to make a fire for the evening.

The next day, with the meat of the bear stuffed into his ki space along with the coat, Ranma was on his way once more, having taken the time to transform back into a guy during the night. Ranma very much preferred to sleep as a man when he had any choice in the matter, remembering all too clearly some of the nightmares he'd had as a woman thanks to Kuno in his off sessions.

By midmorning the next day, Ranma had finally exited the forest out into more developed lands, marking where Ranma supposed, the lands looking to Hard Ass started. Here and there were farms of various types, sheep farms, cattle farms, crop farms. Most of the cattle was gone, probably taken into the city for the winter and the rest of the fields were fallow, but Ranma could see a few lights on in the various farmhouses ahead of him.

Unfortunately, as Ranma had kind of supposed would happen, Ranma found herself once more wet enough to have caused change, as another bough broke over her dumping snow onto her head faster than she could dodge. Shaking her head, Ranma muttered, "Well maybe they won't haggle as much with a poor innocent hunter girl rather than a guy?"

With her new fur coat covering her, in order to avoid any questions about what Ranma was doing out and about in short sleeve silk shirt and silk trousers, she made her way forward, knocking on the door. The noise inside halted instantly, and then Ranma could hear a furious jabbering for a moment from various people, at least seven distinct voices, all men, with a whimper of three women at least in the background, wondering. One of the women's voice rose over the tumult, asking, "Is it the Lord's men?"

At that, one of the male voices spoke up louder than the others. "Foolish wench, they don't knock! Still, get you and the others upstairs. Or into the kitchen. The rest of you, grab up some knives or anything else just in case."

Ranma called out a clear, controlled voice. "I can hear you, you know. I don't mean any harm! I just want to trade."

Hearing a female voice from outside seemed to cause the noise inside to pause as everyone within looked at one another in shock. However, a moment later, the door was opened and a face peered out at Ranma, staring down at her warily. The man on the other side wasn't all that large, but Ranma wasn't exactly tall either, especially as a woman.

The man was rough, unkempt, but wearing a decent looking peasant's outfit, somewhat well cleaned, or as much as it would be anywhere on this world. As Ranma had noticed, bathing regularly was not a thing here among the peasantry, alas, which was kind of sad. *I wonder if the people here have noticed any increase in their general health.* Ranma had hammered in the needs for basic cleanliness into their heads over the first winter he'd spent in this world.

Clearing her head of such thoughts, Ranma held up her hands peaceably, smirking slightly. "Look, no weapons. Does that put you at ease?"

"Where's the rest of your band then girl? No way a woman, particularly your age would be out and about in wintertime alone," the man growled, attempting to sound threatening.

Ranma shrugged completely at ease, the effort utterly useless on her. "I'm alone, believe me or not, I really don't care. Will you trade with me?" She reached behind her back, and as the man tensed, slowly removed a portion of her the meat from the bear-thing, holding it up.

At the sight of the pound of prime meat, the man's eyes widened, staring at it then to her. "Are you some kind of Huntress then?"

"You might say that," Ranma nodded. She then gestured over her shoulder to the woods. "I have more where that came from, so long as we agree on the price." No way did Ranma want to leave any memories of her passing if she could help it, and that lie kept her from having to figure out some way to carry the meat in a more visible fashion than her ki space.

"At least we can let you warm you up by our fire," the man answered now acting smarmy as he gestured Ranma inside.

Inside, Ranma found most of the men inside leering at her and she heard more than one man wondering if they should offer to put her up for the winter. "She could warm many a bed belike."

One of the other men slapped that one on the top of the head shaking his head. "And you think me wife or the others'd put up with that kinda dung!? More like we'd put you out than let you do that."

"You people really need to realize when you'll be overheard you know," Ranmagrowled, and suddenly she was holding the skinning dagger. There wasn't anything in here that didn't

look too breakable to prove her strength on, so she figured the dagger would work best. She twirled it around her fingers, then up in the air, catching it without looking, making to throw it at the man who had been making the most ribald comment about her. He twitched in fear, and she subsided, holding it lightly in her hand. "I'm no one's easy toss! I've come to trade. You don't want to trade with a woman, I'll go to one of your neighbors."

The man who answered the door chuckled. "Most of me neighbors are right here miss, but aye, I'll trade with you."

An older woman, obviously the man's wife came out then, carrying what looked like actually a very old-fashioned kind of scale. "What you be wanting for the meat then?" the woman asked, lisping quite badly.

Still, Ranma suppose that was to be expected from peasants in this world unfortunately. *Education, reading, writing, arithmetic. These things I took for granted*, she thought ruefully, as she sent the meat on one side of the scale. "Stuff for stew if you have any," she began without preamble. "Any dried jerky you have, bread and a map of the area if you have it, I kind of got lost out there in the woods," she added with a shrug.

"And where is home for you, then?" the woman inquired, staring at the scales. She then, with Ranma's permission, sliced off a bit of the side of the meat, staring at it before holding it up her nose, sniffing deeply.

"My family lives near a river way down east, on the near side of Duke Thenardier's land," Ranma replied mildly, smiling cheerfully as most of her face was hidden behind her polar-tooth cloak. It made lying quite a bit easier for Ranma than it would otherwise be. "And I'll give you a piece of meat half that weight for the map, straight trade."

The woman grinned cheerfully at that, nodding her head firmly. "We've still a bit of jerky, which we'll replace right quick with the meat you sell us, bread, a bit of cheese, and some preserved vegetables. How much meat are you looking to sell?"

"How much do you want?" Ranma shrugged nonchalantly. "Like I said, I've got most of the rest of the carcass out by the woods. Strung up from a tree."

After examining the meat for a while longer, the woman nodded at the man, then got down to haggling quickly, with her husband stepping in here and there. Ranma didn't try to drive a hard bargain, after all, if Ranma wanted fresh meat, she would just hunt up something else out there. But these folks, not a one of them apparently had the wherewithal to go hunting, and fresh meat was dear indeed this deep in winter.

Soon after, Ranma left, deliberately not noticing how relieved all of the peasants were as she did. People like these peasants, they lived in fear of those stronger or stranger than they. It was a sad way to be, but there was nothing that Ranma could do about it right now. If ever.

*Alsace was so different, and Leitmeritz and Legnica. I suppose I just got kind of spoiled. Have to remember all too often that peasants in this world don't have a good life normally, and what life they do have is totally dependent on the noble they look to.*

About five minutes later, Ranma was moving at a sedate pace for the martial artist, munching on a sandwich with delight, as she followed the road down to the nearest village. The farmer's wife had baked some kind of local herb into the bread which made it quite tasty, and Ranma felt he had put enough distance between the Silver Meteor Army's borders and here to not need to hide herself entirely any longer.

This proved to be a bad decision as, Ranma soon ran into a reason why peasants like those farmers were always afraid. This came in the form of a dozen soldiers, who trooped down the road, that Ranma had been taking since leaving the house, following a very limited set of directions that the farmer had given him to the nearest town.

For a moment, it looked almost as if the soldiers hadn't seen her, which if Ranma hadn't been eating a sandwich, Ranma would have thought was fair enough. The polar-tooth's pelt she had made into a coat blended into the white of the snow around her so well that even Ranma hadn't picked the beastly out until it moved. However, as the troopers came closer it became clear that was not actually part of the reason why they hadn't yet noticed her. At least six of them were riotously drunk.

The other two were more sober, but far more combative when they noticed Ranma at last as she reached shouting distance. "What's this then? Some little hunter girl out on her own? You should know that there is a toll to be paid for using the Duke's roads little miss!"

Ranma looked at them coldly, throwing back her hood, and letting her red hair be seen, crimson against the snow all around them. *Sort of a prophecy for what's to come* she thought coldly, cracking her knuckles. *Finally, something to cure my boredom. For at least a few minutes anyway.* "You lot aren't wearing Thenardier's colors. Hells, I've never seen colors like that before, what kind of purple is that? Looked like someone puked it up. On the other hand, given what I'm smelling from even all the way over here..."

"It's crimson! The color of dried blood, which you'll learn all too soon if you give us any more lip girl," one of the soldiers drawled, moving forward as his fellows spread out to either side in preparation for encircling Ranma, a few of their horses stumbling off the road into the deeper snow beside it. "This can go one of two ways. One, you pay the toll, if you got gold on you we'll take the gold." The spokesman then leered, "Or, you pay the toll another way..."

Ranma sighed theatrically shaking her head, but then reached into her coat, and pulled out a bag. It actually contained a few diced vegetables from the farmstead she'd just left, but before the guards could scowl or reach for it, Ranma tossed the bag at her feet before bringing her hands up in a fighting stance. She didn't really need to take a fighting stance with this crew

of course. But she figured they were dumb enough that they needed that incentive to actually attack her.

It worked too. The entire group spurred towards her with wordless shouts, all of them now leering openly at her. Eight men against one woman, the eight-men all on horseback, it was obvious how this was going to go.

Or it was until Ranma leaped from a standing start up and forward, her leg flashing out like an unstoppable battering ram. It crashed into the one horseman who had a chest plate rather than chainmail or a leather jerkin. The kick dented both the chest plate and the individual wearing it, hurling him out of the saddle and slightly downward into the head of the horse right behind him. The horse went skittering sideways with a whinny of anger and pain, while the man fell boneless to the ground, trampled under the hoofs of his fellows while Ranma landed on his former saddle. Hopping upwards Ranma lashing out in both directions with fist and foot, sending two more riders flying.

Tearing off the bridle or whatever it was that connected to the bit in the horse's mouth, Ranma twisted around, using it like a lasso on another man, who started to choke as it wrapped around his throat. At the same time, Ranma launched herself backward, slamming into another horse and rider, snapping the rider's leg with the impact and tossing both rider and horse into the snow along the edge of the path.

With five of their number down, sobriety gripped the last three members of the patrol. One of them turned quickly, spurring his horse back down the path the way they'd come as rapidly as possible. His horse could not travel anywhere near fast enough. His two fellows fell quickly, and Ranma raced him down, racing along beside him, then waiting up at him cheerfully. The man's terrified face amused Ranma greatly, and almost made her feel sorry for him. Almost being the operative word there, considering what they had all been hinting at wanting to do to her.

A quick jump, an even faster kick, and that man too was flung out of the saddle unconscious.

Ranma grabbed him and the bridle of his horse and then began dragging the man in one hand by the ankle back to the others, while also dragging the horse, who was unwilling to head back to his fellows. Once they were altogether, Ranma stripped them of their armor and weapons, knowing that such things were expensive in this time. That, and of course any money they'd had on them, which turned out to be a bit more than Ranma had expected. It was evident that they had been out shaking people down for a while and business had been good. Once that was done, Ranma dumped the bodies four at a time in the nearest woods, every two of them tied back to back. If they lived or died afterward, that was on them.

Afterward he looked over the horses, and though he wasn't the best when it came to animals, he was easily able to decide which of them was the finest. He stripped the others of



their saddles, then smacked each on the rear in turn, sending them back the way Ranma had come, while taking the best horse with her. Not, that she needed a horse, but Ranma figured she might eventually need a horse for part of her disguise, and better to have one than not.

As she went through their stuff, Ranma found what looked like written orders with an official looking seal of some kind on the bottom, possibly a writ of something or other. Ranma couldn't really read the local language well, but could at least make out the letters, and learned that currently he was on the lands of some kind of lord named Pucey. The name had Ranma guffawing aloud, but what she found next was much more useful: a map of the area. It was smaller in scale, but more details for it then the map he'd seen back in Territoire.

He opened the feed bag he had grabbed from the patrol's supplies and allowed the horse to gorge on what Ranma's nose had told him was oats liberally dipped in brandy before pulling back. Then she hopped into the saddle. "Well come on horsey, let's get going," she said as she pulled out the map she'd gotten from the farmers, something Ranma couldn't do while moving at her best pace.

"And hey, at least this way I'll be able to travel a bit more in style. Now where the hell am I going again?" she muttered, twisting around so as to rest her back against the neck of the horse, watching behind them as the snowy expanse slowly began to pass by, subconsciously warming the horse with her ki, to go along with the brandy infused oats.

After several minutes staring at the map, Ranma sighed, before rolling it up, twisting around in the saddle, and sitting sidesaddle pulling the polar bear cloak around her, as she sent more of her ki into the horse. "Man, this is the last time I volunteer for anything! And Regin better darn well be thankful. And invest, heh thanks for the word Nabs, some money into some of her cartographers, because if I have to travel across Brune again without a good map, I'm going to hurt someone!"

Judging from the map, and the directions that she'd gotten from the farmhand, she'd essentially passed two far east and south, coming down at an even sharper angle from her starting point to where she wanted to be than Ranma had thought, and to make that up now she had some hard lands to go through once this road gave way.

Sighing, Ranma contemplated, "I hope that that lot back in Territoire are having an easier time of it than I am." The irony of the fact that Ranma was actually having a much easier time of it than anyone else could have on this journey was completely lost on the redhead as she glared up at the wintry sky above.

OOOOOO

On the other hand, perhaps Tigre would have traded places with Ranma. No, in point of fact, anyone who knew the young Earl of Alsace would know he would have instantly traded places with Ranma, polar-tooth, would-be rapists and all. Because as Ranma had left, Eleonora, Tigre and Regin were going over all the various agreements that they had made, or rather that Regin had made with the nobles who had joined together with the silver meteor Army. At this point all the different agreements had been made, the originals witnessed by a churchman and what they were doing now was creating a single document for them all, while formalizing the language in conjunction with the law-brother.

Many of the agreements were very lopsided, at least in the immediate impact, but not entirely. Regin well knew that she had been treating not trade and from a position of power, and yet, thanks to her own inclinations, her own training, and Valentina's help, she had kept two things off the table from the get go. One was that she could not raise a noble in status, such as from going from an Earl to a Viscount. However, her reasoning for keeping that off the table was simple, and unequivocal. Only a sitting monarch, with the regalia of Brune in hand, the scepter of office and the crown, could raise the household of someone.

As Princess though, Regin could bestow knighthoods and had given those out liberally. But while a knighthood was the most minor of nobility it came with a caveat: it was also a military rank with some hard rules controlling the knight's actions and his duties to the nation. The knight had to either join a pre-existing holy order, swear fealty to an Earl or higher, or serve in the Royal Army for a period of two years before being given land commensurate with his rank.

Regin had known that many of the people coming forward were strong proponents of this or that lord within the country and had worked hard to winning those men over to her own side, convincing them to work **directly** with the Silver Meteor Army rather than through their lords for greater gains later, tying them to her service for two years. This weakened the lords in question, but they hadn't realized it at the time and now it was too late.

The second item she had managed to keep off the table was her hand in marriage, that had been much harder. As Valentina had continually reminded her, and which Regin knew all too well, there was no history of a Queen ruling in Brune. Indeed, there was no history of noblewomen wielding power in their own name at all.

Regardless, with a few hints in Tigre's direction, which alas went straight over his head but not over Elen's or Titta's, she had been able to keep that off the table, and Regin mentally thanked Valentina for her help once more on this score as she leaned back, rubbing her writing hand in bemused pain. The Vanadis of Osterode had helped Regin ready for who would push for her hand, those noblemen who no longer had wives or who had sons of marriageable age, only half of whom Regin had anticipated herself. Valentina had even coached Regin in how to respond, something that Regin herself had never been trained in.

All of her training up until she had left Nice with the Royal Army had been built on the prerequisite that she would continue to act like a man right up until she was sitting on the throne in her own right. At that point it would have been a done deal, and Regin could have married who she wished. Something Regin was still very determined to do.

Tigre looked up as the door opened, as did Elen, the silver haired girl scowling at the servant to adjust entered. As she did, he frowned, wondering why something was off about the man. The servant bowed, laying a tray of sweetmeats on the table. "My lady requested snacks?" he said obsequiously to Regin.

Regin nodded thanking him, and reaching for the table instantly as the man backed away. "Indeed I did. For some reason paperwork makes me hungry."

Tigre picked up a piece of the sweetmeats as well, but before he could put it in his mouth, he sniffed at it. Instantly his eyes went wide and he flung it down, twisting around quickly and knocking the piece out of Regin's hand. "Don't! It's poisoned!" But he was too late. Regin had already taken a bite.

As Tigre shouted the man had instantly turned around, bolting for the door. But he didn't even get a pace away from his starting position before Elen slammed into him, bringing them to the ground twisting his arms up behind his head while Regin gagged, staring at him in shock.

But then Tigre was behind her, grabbing Regin out of her chair, placing his hands underneath her chest and heaving, his hands pressed into a single fist. Regin gasped, then choked as the piece of meat she had just eaten flew out of her mouth, nearly hitting Elen and the still writhing prisoner.

After the meat left Regin's mouth, Tigre's hold on her shifted, holding her upright, not noticing that he was basically cupping one of her breasts with his hand as he turned her head in his direction, ordering her to open her mouth, staring intently inside before nodding.

Blushing brightly now, despite knowing this wasn't the time for such feelings, Regin took the wine that they had been drinking all day when he handed it to her and took a generous sip, before spitting to one side as Tigre had ordered.

"Are you feeling all right, any shakes or shivers?"

"No, well nothing that I can't attribute to nearly being poisoned, and the understandable fear that entails," Regin replied, leaning back against Tigre. "An attempt that failed only thanks to you, Tigre."

"What was that, and how did you notice it?" Elen asked, scowling as she absentmindedly dribbled the 'servant's' head against the stone floor.

"It's a kind of poison based from a mountain snake. I know it because we had an infestation of them in our lands at one point, the poison spread so quickly, that it will kill in seconds. Its smell is distinctive, but there isn't any cure for it as far as I know," Tigre replied.

"...That's nice and all, but how long do you intend to hold her breast like that," Elen grumbled, dragging the prisoner upright while now glaring at Tigre.

Tigre blinked, then noticed where his hand was, he flinched, his hand coming away like it had just been scalded as he bowed quickly. "I am **so** sorry your Majesty!"

"What have I told you about calling me Regin," Regin pouted, before shaking her head, biting her lip to keep from sending Elen a smug smirk. "Besides, considering that you saved your Majesty's life, your moment of lese majesty can be excused."

"By you maybe," Elen grumped. "Me, I think I'm going to have to sliced in half later Tigre. How dare you touch some other girl's chest!"

"The way you say that makes it plain that you would much rather that Tigre touched only yours," Regin shot back. "For now, however, I think you need to set aside your petty jealousy so we can discover if this man was working alone. He's obviously guilty considering how he reacted when Tigre spotted the poison, but he could be one of several."

"And get a taster, I think. If I someone has access to a more slow acting poison without any distinctive spell, then we wouldn't have even noticed this," Tigre added quickly.

Regin sighed. "I had gotten used in the past month to not needing to check my food, a lifetime of training thrown out the mirror window thanks to your warm welcome Tigre. I suppose though, that believing that would last was too good to be true. But what should we do now?"

"Now we make certain this guy was either acting alone, or we catch his accomplices before they can get away. And that means finding Lim," Elen answered authoritatively.

**OOOOOO**

Elsewhere in the castle Limalisha frowned as she worked through a few of the sword techniques that Ranma had told her about from his own world. They didn't feel natural to her yet, and Ranma had warned that they may never do so, simply because the sword Lim used was a longsword, what he called a European-style sword, and most of the sword techniques he knew were for what he called a katana, the heft of which as well as the size of the blade was

very different. But she was determined to keep at it, and she moved through them doggedly, her blade flicking up and down, then around, before thrusting, each revolution moving just a bit faster than the last.

Lim wished she could say that the reasons she was so determined were because she wanted to simply better herself, getting stronger for its own sake. But the truth was, even though she had given Ranma the okay to start up a courtship with Valentina and Sofy, she wasn't quite as sanguine about her position as that decision made her out to be. Not so much Ranma's feelings for her, or the fact that Ranma and she would certainly have more time, if only for a little while, to get to know one another better, thereby deepening their relationship more than either of the Vanadis could do. No, it was Lim herself that she felt was lacking.

Lim was honest enough to know she was what most men thought of as beautiful. But Lim also knew that she wasn't up to either Valentina or Sofy in the physical department. Nor was she as, well, important as either of them, as worldly. And just like the Vanadis, Lim also had duties to see to. Lim couldn't do anything about that, regardless of her relationship with Ranma, she was Elen's aide, that wasn't about to change. Nor was Lim willing to change her attitude to match the other two women in terms of clothing or style.

But there was one aspect which she knew Ranma prized above everything else, even if he had never outright stated it: physical and mental strength. Ranma liked women who could stand up to him in a spar, she had seen it in his eyes when they had sparred, when sparring had become flirting, and when he had in turn dueled with Valentina the same thing had occurred, though she doubted that Ranma knew it. Even with Elen to a certain extent, although there the two of them had fallen into a kind of teasing, family-like camaraderie rather than attraction. And in that area, Lim knew she lagged behind both women, badly. Both Vanadis could beat on her like a drum without even trying.

It was illogical, Lim knew. Ranma wasn't the type to favor one of them over the other, or care overmuch about one aspect of the women in question. But Lim had grown up next to Elen, and while being her friend's aide was fulfilling in a major way, it had also given her a bit of a complex about herself in relation to other women. Lim knew this and wanted to work to overcome it. Hence Lim pushing herself with her present exercises.

She looked up as the door opened at a knock, blinking as Tiger and then Elen entered, followed by Regin and Lord Augre, quickly bowing to her lady. "Lady Eleonora, what can I do for you?"

"Sorry to interrupt your practice Lim, but we need your organizational help," Elen said brusquely, before going on to describe what happened. "So, do you have..."

"A list of any newcomers in the town and castle or the Silver Meteor Army units barracked within its walls? Yes, milady. There are six men who arrived from a nearby hamlet looking for work, according to a verbal interview they had to have before being given leave to

enter the town. Three of them signed up the Silver Meteor Army. One of them went to work as a butler for a time when one of Lord Augre's people slipped on a staircase. The other three are also still out in the town at the Peachtree Inn. As for the other two with the army, they are in barracks number four with the other new inductees under Sergeant Nantes, one of Valentina's men who volunteered to see to their general conditioning due to a leg wound acting up in the winter keeping him from practicing with the rest of the pikemen."

Everyone there, bar Elen, looked at Lim in astonishment as Lim rattled this off without even looking through her notes, while Elen just looked smug. Lim smiled, the first time Lim had allowed herself to do so since her insecurity in regards to her relation with Ranma had begun to invade her mind and she sighed, shaking her head. "I have been handling my lady's organizational needs for a decade now, long before we actually became war maiden. Keeping track of tiny details is bread-and-butter to me."

"You see, she's amazing!" Elen grinned, throwing a hand over her friend's shoulders. "She's helped me organize my army for so long I don't know how I'd do it without her."

"That's not something to be proud of you know," Tigre teased before becoming serious as he looked at Lim. "So, do you think those two men might be involved or were they used as smokescreen."

"There's only one way to find out, really." With that, Lim led the way out of her room, down a few stairs, then out to one of the barracks.

The moment they entered the longhouse that served as barrack four, two of the men inside bolted for the other door, leading out of the log house. Elen twisted around, racing back out herself, then leaping up onto the rooftop, while Tigre and Limalisha towards them from the direction they had initially come in, shouting out, "Grab those two men!"

The two men had moved quickly, however, getting away from their fellows around the fire and grabbing up swords, not their own, just the ones nearest at hand and racing outside. But they weren't prepared to meet Elen leaping down on top of them like a hawk.

One man caught a face full of foot, and went sprawling, his nose broken, his red blood staining the snow all around them. The other dodged around her, but didn't get far before the air behind solidified, glowing slightly as Arifar activated on a whispered command, reaching out to him with a fist of wind. The air punch, which Elen had devised for sparring with Ranma, smashed into the back of the man, sending him sprawling. "Yes! I am so going to make Ranma eat snow with that when he gets back!

By that point, the rest of the men from the barracks Tigre and Limalisha had joined Elen outside, and she walked over coldly to the man who had almost gotten away, laying Arifar on his shoulder lightly. "We're going to have a chat, you and I."

The questioning of the three prisoners proved that they had been sent by Duke Ganelon. They had initially targeted Tigre, ordered to kill him as soon as the campaign season began. But their orders had changed three days back to trying to assassinate the princess. Five-hundred gold for each of them had been offered for her head, or proof of death. They also knew of at least two other teams sent to infiltrate the refugees that could be ordered to target her, though they didn't know what any of the would-be assassins looked like.

Hearing all this Regina shivered, and Titta laid a comforting hand on the princess's shoulder in an automatic show of sympathy. Her eyes widened when she realized what she had done, and she was about to pull her hand away, but Regina caught it tittered in one of her own, looking over at the other young girl and squeezing her hand gently in thanks.

"So, this is but the first attempt that's going to be made on your life your highness," Lord Augre predicted with a sigh. "As news of your possible identity spreads, Duke Ganelon and Duke Thenardier will be forced to try to do something about it, even if you don't currently have enough proof of your origins to stand up in the court of public opinion. As the head of the Silver Meteor Army you are already a threat to them."

Tigre nodded in agreement. "We need to place a guard on you twenty-four-seven milady, just like you would have in the palace or even when you were with the Royal Army. I think that a taste tester plus moving a lady in waiting into your room will also be a necessity."

"Switching Regin's room with mine would also be a good idea," Elen added. Elen had taken the room she had because it had a nice view over the outer wall of the keep, but it was the furthest away from the stairwell, and thus the most secure from the inside. And if you locked the window, it was too heavy to be silently moved from the outside.

"I will volunteer to become your lady-in-waiting Princess. And I can even cook your meals for you, your highness," Titta volunteered with a curtsy.

"That would be lovely Titta. Thank you," Regin replied with a smile

This talk went on for a while, but soon enough the talk turned to other things. As it did though, Titta turned to her lord, looking at him through suddenly narrowed eyes and a dangerously disapproving pout on her lips. "By the way what is this I hear about you grabbing at her Majesty?" she questioned harshly as she pinched Tigre's hand.

Tigre winced, trying to get away, but Elen grabbed at his other hand quickly. "That's right, we haven't talked about that yet, have we?"

Later that night, after settling into her new room, Elen sighed theatrically, looking outside at the setting sun. The days were so short in the winter that you really couldn't do as much as you could want. Furthermore, she had missed training time today thanks to having to

question the three prisoners and going over the security of the town and castle. She blinked however as she heard a rap on her door to her new room.

When she turned to look, she was surprised to see Lim poking her head in. "Lady Eleonora, can I ask you for a favor?"

OOOOOO

"Ough, that one was the worst yet! I actually feel sorry for that silly animal, even if my rear doesn't agree with the rest of me," Sofy complained, as she glared up at where Valentina still sat on her horse, breathing in deeply and looking somewhat ill, but not nearly as worse-for-wear as Sofy was currently feeling. Sofy's horse, a loan from Leitmeritz's stables, raced away down the road and over the snow mounds on either side of it. Once more, Sofy missed her own horse, which had long been trained to put up with her abilities. "Are you sure you're not somehow making these transports worse every time out of spite?"

"Out of spite of what, exactly? From what I recall, you and I had an equal number of kisses from Ranma, since we left him. Surely you're not implying I would be so petty as to humiliate you in turn for your own teleportation powers humiliating me at every turn?" Valentina shot back, scowling.

The two Vanadis were still not pleased with one another's company even if they had somewhat buried the hatchet on the way to Leitmeritz and had continued to snipe at one another even after they left so hastily two days ago. Sofy often implied Valentina was an arrogant little so and so, while also hinting at the fact that she found Valentina far too mysterious to truly trust. In turn, Valentina hinted that Sofy used her body just a little too well for her own tastes, a blow that never ceased to hit home and was at the same time too naïve despite her work as a special envoy.

However, jabs like this did not make up the majority of their conversation as they rode hard and used their powers as often as they could to head to the capital of Silesia. That honor went to Ranma, the information that he had shared with Valentina, and the information coming out of Muozinel.

"No, I suppose not," Sofy conceded, having been the one to start this latest session, watching as Valentina slowly slid out of the saddle, moving over and laying out in the snow nearby. For anyone but a Vanadis, it would be too cold out to do something like that comfortably, but, like Sofy, Valentina was practically immune to the cold.



The two women were silent for a time as they recovered from the reaction each of them had to the other's teleportation powers. Both of them knew it was stupid to use them one after another without some time between them, but it had become almost a contest between them to see which would give in and admit weakness first. Sofy knew it was stupid competition, much like Ludmila and Elen's issues with one another, but that didn't mean she was going to relent.

Sofy began to speak again, saying something that had been working at the back of her mind since leaving Ranma behind. "I, I am still uncertain how far to take my attraction to Ranma. Due to my duties, it is unlikely that the two of us will ever have large blocks of time together after all, and that would be necessary for any real relationship. Even with my powers of teleportation, I can't just go and visit him whenever I wish, and he isn't a citizen of Zhcted either. You have to admit the same thing, Valentina. Don't you?" Whether Sofy was looking for reassurance, commiseration, or to simply point this out to an opponent for Ranma's affections, even Sofy didn't know.

Valentina shrugged serenely. "I am willing. Indeed, I am extremely happy to take what I can get from Ranma in terms of romance. I was upfront with him, as you were, about our duties to Zhcted being of more importance to us than anything else. A man like Ranma, with his abilities, physical skills, who sees us as women and friends first instead of Vanadis or noblewomen? One who has no ambition, no ties to anyone save those of friendship? Oh yes, I am going to pursue my interest in him whenever I get the chance. To say nothing of the information he shared, how interested I am in the world he came from."

Of course, that was only half the reason why Valentina had gone from interested in Ranma to seeing him as a possible romantic partner. The other half was the fact that when Ranma had forced Valentina to share her ambitions, Ranma had accepted them, had even told Tina that he would support her if it came to open conflict. That was immensely important to her, though Valentina would never share that secret with Sofy or anyone else.

"Yes, his information..." Sofy had been looking through Valentina's notes, or rather the notes Valentina had decided it was safe to share with her, and one thing had been made clear. "Why are you so interested in this, what do you call it, technology? I have to admit that I think his medical information is far more important than this steam stuff or this plow thing."

"Perhaps on the surface. But I believe you haven't studied industry enough if you think that. Answer me this, how many people does it take to run a farm ten acres in size?" Valentina asked seriously. "That is the basis of our economy and our tax system as well when you come down to it."

Furrowing her brows, Sofy thought for a moment. "Ten acres? Four men and their wives, perhaps with children included, I would assume, why?"

“Try a single family of six, with fifteen or more paid aides at different intervals during the farming season, not full time. Children older than eight are put to various tasks, and of course, boys are more valued than girls given how much more work they can do supposedly due to their own gender.” Even as she lectured, Valentina allowed a disparaging note to creep into her voice. She was well aware of how most women were viewed in this world and the lot in life of most women born into the peasant class. “Much of the work needed to keep a farm operating or to clear land is immensely strength intensive and that means people.”

Sofy nodded understanding, then, as she stood up and moved toward Valentina’s horse, indicated the woman should go on. She took a wine-skin out, shivering slightly as a gust of wind got under her skirt, then led the horse closer to where Valentina had flopped out onto the hard-packed snow by the edge of the road and sat down next to her, watching the woman as she began to speak.

“But what if you could remove the need for half that number? What could the workers freed of such onerous duties put their minds and hands to? We both know that it is the cities, the merchant class where real money and power reside. And one thing every city needs occasionally is more manpower. More power on the docks of Legnica, more manpower in the Royal Army, more men under arms in general, and more apprentices in the various crafts. One thing can lead to another.”

“I understand your point, and that this plow is but the tip of the iceberg. I feel though you are reading too far into it. Especially given your own notes and the number of little annoyed marks you made within,” Sofy answered, giggling at the last bit. “Those were very cute, by the way.”

Valentina pouted but couldn’t argue the point. She had indeed made a lot of little cutesy versions of herself with asterisks and exclamation marks in place of her face in her notes. “Yes, well, I could wish that Ranma had been a better student, perhaps, certainly more interested in science and technology. But we were able to build that plow and create a steam-powered saw. That alone would save time, effort and manpower for Territoire. Think about such things spreading. They could be but the start of a, a kind of Industrial Revolution.”

Sofy looked closely at Valentina, that last label sounding as if it was a quote, making the blonde Vanadis wonder if she had learned it from Ranma. But as open as Valentina had been about the information Ranma had shared, she had been close-mouthed about Ranma’s past, or about their own discussion above and beyond the notes. Sofy wondered once again what else the two of them had talked about. Sofy knew Ranma had shared more than just the information Valentina had shared with her in turn.

But she wasn’t about to ask and give Valentina the opportunity to turn her down. After all, they were both Vanadis, and as this discussion had nothing to do with Sofy’s duties as a special envoy, she had no real power over Valentina, whatever her position as the mediator between Vanadis might have indicated to others. Instead, she probed, “And you have no

trouble with me spreading Ranma's medical knowledge? You could gain great renown if you did so instead."

"Only by taking credit for it and that I will not do. And you can spread that information far faster than I, although not as fast as the royal court will spread it, once we share it with them. Medical knowledge like that could save a lot of lives and to be spread quickly. The fact that leeches do nothing, for example, the knowledge of how the human body works that Ranma told me about, to say nothing about how Ranma had organized some of the medical aspects of the various refugee camps, his knowledge of healing bones and so forth." Valentina shook her head. "Besides, I will be too busy pushing the steam and the plow and the rest forward in my lands to really devote time to spreading the medical knowledge. I need to free up more people and get them trained as soon as possible."

"You seem overly concerned about that for someone whose lands are so far from the border with any civilized nation. Are you so worried about the Horse Lord's?" Sofy questioned, staring at the other Vanadis. "I've never had dealings with them, but I know that the Vanadis of Brest comes from one of those clans. Surely..."

"Surely, nothing!" Valentina interrupted with a laugh, a sharp crack, a sound that held absolutely no humor rather than her normal alluring giggle. "The Horse Lords pour over our borders once every three or four years, without fail. Most of the time, it's just one clan, or perhaps two united under a local warlord and they can be seen off after a bit of raiding by any competent lord of a Viscount or larger strength. But sometimes, their depredations are much worse. You have to have been taught about the last full-scale invasion about a hundred and twenty years ago, weren't you?"

Sofy winced. She could indeed remember learning about the invasion of the last true Warlord of the North, who had united eleven clans behind him and invaded Zhcted. All of the Vanadis at the time had been called together to deal with the threat and two of them had died in the doing. At the same time, it had opened up Zhcted's other borders to invasions from Brune and to Muozinel. It'd taken fifteen years of war to reclaim those lands, and Muozinel had almost depopulated them via their slave-taking before they were forced to give up their gains.

For a time, they talk about tactics and strategies against the Horse Lords, then resumed their travel, using their teleportation powers to transfer forward to an inn they both knew. A royally mandated town, this place was a crossroads of several different roads, but otherwise not important enough to become a city. Sofy was able to buy another horse there, but this alas didn't do her any good. The nag, which the horse trader had told Sofy was the most docile, easygoing animal he owned, threw her the first time Sofy used her powers, once more leaving Sofy on her rear, as it reared up breaking Valentina's grip as the black-haired Vanadis swayed, dealing with her own reaction to Sofy's teleportation power.

"Drat!" Sofy groaned, rubbing at her rear.

Valentina looked down at her fellow Vanadis, holding her stomach and narrowing her eyes. Continued exposure to it had not acclimatized her to Sofy's power. The fact the reverse was true was scant comfort. "Drat?" she drawled. "Is that really the only word you can use to describe what just happened?"

Sofy looked up at her, then raised her nose mock-arrogantly into the air. "Well, excuse me for assuming that you are polite company."

The two women looked at one another, then shared a rueful laugh, before Valentina reached down and pulled the other woman up onto the saddle once again, while above them, snow began to fall once more. It didn't look as if it would amount to much, but even that little bit might become annoying, piling up on the road, which had been kept clear of snow up to this point. During the winter keeping the roads clear was one of the many minor tasks that the Royal Army saw to stay in shape.

Valentina twitched a little as she felt Sofy's breasts pressed press into her back, and she shook her head in exasperation as she felt how far back on the saddle Sofy had to sit because of them. "How big are those things? Honestly, it's obscene."

"Pot, this is Miss kettle, I would like to inform you, my dear, that we are both made of iron," Sofy retorted tartly, reaching one hand around Valentina's body. Not to place it around her waist, but to grab a handful of breast for a moment.

Valentina rolled her eyes and smacked the hand away before asking seriously, "So, what do you think about the missive from the king?"

"Are you asking about the language of it and his personal demands to both of us, or are you talking about the information therein?" The two of them had each received their own royal letter, but Sofy had easily discerned that the wording was probably almost the same in both cases.

"The information. I can make my own determination about the King's attitude from his words thank you so much. He's annoyed with me, but that isn't outside the realm of possibility. But I don't know the names of the individuals he mentioned, Duke Calla and Viscount Laram whom he mentioned as being the source of information on Muozinel's movements."

Sofy nodded. "I do know them both in point of fact. Calla and Laram are... good people, I suppose. Or as good as you will find in Muozinel. Both know that the slave-based economy of Muozinel is not good for the country in the long term and makes them anathema to the other nations of this world. They won't rise in rebellion against the rest of Muozinel, but they will do what they can to hamper Muozinel's military ambitions. If they say that Muozinel is moving, then I think we can assume it is true."

“And the powers that be in Muozinel don’t know that they pass on that information?” When Sofy answered that she had no idea, Valentina hummed thoughtfully, tapping one hand on the pommel of her saddle, thinking.

Sofy prompted, “What do you think about it?”

“Muozinel has people to spare,” Valentina began to explain promptly. “They are always producing more people than any other country, which is rather silly when you think about how much trouble they have feeding their population along with their slaves. Indeed, I often think that the reason why slavery began was so they had a workforce they didn’t need to feed as much. Regardless, Muozinel they could have a few units, indeed a small army, making noises around these counts where their lands border Zhcted, while preparing their main army for an all-out invasion of Brune.”

“I don’t think so,” Sofy argued back. “First of all, what Muozinel needs, as you just pointed out, is farmland. If they can push past Ludmila, they will be in an excellent defensible position that includes several thousand acres of good farmland. And if they can keep it, that will be enough for them to feed their own people. Whereas the invasion for Brune isn’t through farmland, but mountain and forest county. They would also be faced with a running battle against prepared defenses and the majority of Brune’s Knightly orders.”

“No, they won’t do that. Anyone could see that route would be horrible for an invading army,” Valentina shook her head. “They’ll come in via the ocean and the passages to the south.”

“Which would bring them right into contention with Duke Thenardier, who I had don’t have to remind you was the one who smashed their last attempt at invasion seven years ago. And the land there is extremely hostile, they wouldn’t be able to feed their forces.”

“Thenardier will be busy with Duke Ganelon out of position, both him and the dragons you mentioned, which, frankly, I doubt they know about. They will be able to get through the worst of that territory before anyone can react, and then will be able to take much of Duke Thenardier’s own territory, including the city of Southport, with which to supply their troops.”

“They don’t have a powerful enough of a navy to take that city,” Sofy protested.

Valentina countered. “It’s not large certainly, but it is well-led and organized. Red Beard has seen to that, or do you forget the battle of Baram Straits?”

Sofy grimaced, shaking her head. She did remember that battle when an outnumbered force of Muozinel ships had devastated an armada from Sachstein five times its size. “But the Knightly Orders would still be in a position to attack their flanks if they expand from that point, as would Roland. And just because he is out of position doesn’t mean that Thenardier’s dragons would not be able to return and deal with them.”

“True. But if Muozinel can keep control of the sea, they’ll simply keep on bringing in more troops, and there’s only so much that even someone like Roland can do against an army that could easily number seven or eight times the entire military strength that Brune as a united nation could put in into the field even in their own land. The dragons... they are a wild card. I don’t know how Muozinel would deal with them. But that route just makes more sense, I think. Especially if Muozinel is not just grabbing land but looking to conquer Brune outright.”

*And Valentina thought, it would make more sense for me too, which is why I cut orders for my spies to hint about how Brune was a ripe target for conquest the moment Elen shattered their army on the plains of Dinant.* Valentina had hoped that, in so doing, she would then be able to convince the King to move some of the Royal Army groups on the borders with Muozinel to help against the Horse Lords. All of her sources within the Horse Lords told her that there was going to be trouble there in the next few years. Maybe even this summer, and it was going to be invading Brest’s territory.

And there wasn’t much that Valentina could do about it at the moment. She’d already shaved off all of the lands of Brest that she could really. Valentina just didn’t have the men needed to even protect her own borders. She could patrol and then move troops to stop any incursions in her own lands, including the lands she had taken from Brest, which was what she had done the last time the tribes had tested Osterode. But that left the rest of Brest and the area to the west of it to their own devices.

Scowling in annoyance and knowing that she had lost the argument, Sofy turned her attention to other matters, asking about Ranma once more. “So, what do you really think about sharing Ranma with Lim and me?”

Triumphant in her victory, Valentina answered that she didn’t really care so much about being Ranma’s one and only. “After all, it’s not like any of us really have the time for that given our various duties. And speaking of which, I think it’s my turn to transport us, isn’t it?”

With that, Valentina used her power once more, speeding them towards the capital. This was followed by another later that day and a teleportation from Sofy, which put them on the outskirts of Silesia at well past midnight. From there, they sent word of their arrival in the city to the King, hoping that they would be able to stay the night in the inn, both of them hungry and weary from the pace they had set, traveling from Leitmeritz to Silesia in barely a day, and not spending more than a few hours resting there.

However, this hope was in vain. The King sent a royal carriage to the inn that they had been staying at, accompanied by court orders to report in person to him in his courtroom that instant.

Valentina sighed, looking down at her meal then across at Sofy, seeing a similar look of chagrin on the other Vanadis’ face. They sighed in unison, thanked the proprietor for his attempt to see to their needs despite being roused from his bed, and then paid for their stay

despite not getting to use the beds he had provided. The meal, though, they took with them to eat in the carriage.

To their intense surprise and chagrin, the King, Victor, and his three most trusted advisors were all awake, waiting for the two Vanadis in a fully lit courtroom. And the glare Victor gave them as they entered, bowing onto their knees in front of him, was not welcome either, although both women had already known he was annoyed with them, given the tenor of the notes that he had sent to Leitmeritz.

As they knelt, Sofy and Valentina both let their eyes flick to the three advisors. Ilda Kurtis, Victor's nephew and one of his best generals and Miron were both important figures. Miron was also the majordomo, so his being in the palace available for this late-night meeting was not a surprise. Ilda, with the news about Muozinel, was. The last man only Valentina recognized as a noble who had dabbled in mercantilism, and who was a major proponent of increasing the number of royal roads in the nation, to facilitate trade. Why he was part of this meeting, she had no idea.

Before either Vanadis could speak, Victor's voice thundered out censoriously. "You arrived together? Good, then We will be able to chastise you both at the same time!" so saying, he slammed one hand down on the side of his throne. Though elderly, Victor was still a powerful-built man, and the blow shook the throne for a second. "We are most displeased with both of you! It is bad enough that Vanadis Viltaria hairs off into Brune on her own recognizance for such flimsy reasons, but for you two to join her?! This is beyond the pale! It smacks of treason against the crown!"

"We did not join Eleonora and the Silver Meteor Army your Majesty," Sofy replied, keeping her own voice level while Valentina remained silent, looking at the King searchingly. "Instead, we were both in Brune for our own reasons. My own reasons for being there you well know as it was by your order I was sent to speak to King Faron."

"Yes, it was our orders. But such a thing should not have taken you so long, Vanadis Obertas! What possible reason could you have for taking so long on a simpler reconnaissance mission as our accredited ambassador!?" the King growled. "We had assumed you might have trouble on your mission, but to this extent? Have you become incompetent, or simply too arrogant that you believe you can ignore the need to check in with us once your mission is complete?"

Before Sofy could reply, the King turned his attention to Valentina. "And you Vanadis Estes, why in the name of the Dragon King were you in Brune!? Osterode has nothing to do with Brune, and you have long posed as being sickly, so your absence from not only Osterode but also Zhcted is inexplicable!" He paused then glared at the black-haired Vanadis, seemingly trying to stare her into submission, his habitual wariness of the Vanadis in clear view. "Well, do you have anything to say for yourself?"

“Your Majesty, I had traveled to Legnica, intending to offer my aid to Lady Alshavin in speaking with Lady Fomina, who has been plaguing her borders. When I arrived in the port, however, I learned that Sasha’s illness had been miraculously cured. Surely you received Lady Obertas’ reports on that before she left for her mission into Brune?” Valentina answered, showing no sign of being cowed beyond a faint tightening of her mouth and the overall tenseness of her body.

The King growled but nodded, conceding the point, and Valentina continued on. “The result was so miraculous that I felt they had to look into the young man who healed her to see if he could help with for my own health issues. You know how sickly I have been in the past and my reaction to Ezendeis’ powers. Lady Alshavin told me I had just missed the young man, and where to find him, having headed back to join the Silver Meteor Army as a friend of Earl Vorn.”

Beside her, Sofy wondered idly if Valentina really ever had been as weak as she had acted since becoming a Vanadis. It was true she acted as if she did, but Sofy had to wonder. Until Sofy saw Valentina with Ranma, Sofy had been certain Valentina was hiding something, some secret ambition or goal. Now she was almost certain of it, but also had a better handle on Valentina’s personality.

*I should inform the King of my suspicions, but I don’t know. I don’t have any proof of my supposition in that area, and the last thing Zhcted needs is for the King to become even warier of his Vanadis. And he did send me into a literal bee’s nest and has cut Elen off at the knees when it comes to her activities in Brune. I, I think I will keep my concerns to myself. Call it a very tiny bit of rebellion on my part,* Sofy decided.

“And I was right to do so,” Valentina had continued to speak as Sofy finished thinking. “Ranma, the healer who helped Lady Alshavin at the behest of Lady Viltaria, was able to show me a series of changes of exercises, ordered a changed in my diet, as well as performed an operation of a sort on my stomach. The powers of Ezendeis still drains my body’s energy and thus are still of limited utility, but I can actually use them now, at least three times a day in fact, without nearly killing myself.”

This was a series of lies of course, all except the series of exercises. Ranma had indeed given her some of those, but only she, and possibly Ranma, knew they had nothing to do with making her able to better withstand Ezendeis’ power. Rather they were simply physical exercises.

The King glared down at her, breathing in deeply as he took all this in. And was that a look of anger or unhappiness that had just flitted across his face? Valentina didn’t know and didn’t have time to ponder as the King spoke. “While the idea of a Vanadis bettering her strength is one that can only be welcome to us, your presence on enemy soil was not as welcome! Do you at least have this so-called medical knowledge, so that it can be shared? Or were you selfish in that as well as your initial goal?”



"I did keep notes, your highness." Valentina didn't even try to defend her initial decision seeing no point in doing so. "I even inveigled Ranma to share quite a lot of his medical knowledge with me in a series of discussions over the weeks I spent with the Silver Meteor Army. You may have a copy of it as soon as I can get it to a scribe here in the palace."

"We will keep the original," King replied coldly. "You will take the copy. Furthermore, your absence from Osterode has been noted, and your lands need your guidance, perhaps now more than ever. The court will miss you for the next year but your duties to your people come first."

Valentina grimaced at that. In other words, she was being banished from court for a year. While that worked well with the plans she had begun to make when speaking with Ranma, Valentina's own personal ambitions would not be served from being away for so long from the seat of royal power. *And any chance to possibly follow up on the idea that Sasha was poisoned has now gone out the window!*

That wasn't something she could ever let in someone else's hands. But even a chance sighting of Valentina in the city would no doubt bring further censure down on her, and suspicion with it. *Dammit! An entire year!? I knew I would be reprimanded, but that long? Still, there is nothing I can do about it now. Perhaps the King will relent in a few months. And look at it this way, I will indeed be able to devote myself entirely to pushing the use of steam and the creation of guns this way.*

"Good. We are done with you. Now for our special envoy." Tso saying the King waved one hand, and Valentina retreated slightly.

Sofy stepped forward in turn as she had been addressed, still kneeling on the floor. Before she could speak, however, the King began to lay into her as well. "Well, what to do you have to say for yourself? You are Our special envoy, but that does not mean that you can go haring off on your own adventures! Especially if they reinforce another Vanadis' mad desire to embroil this nation in the troubles of another!"

"...My King, if you recall, we had reports from Lady Viltaria that a Dragon was involved in the battle for Alsace. When I heard rumors of Duke Thenardier somehow training up more dragons, I felt it serious enough to look into. Doing so took me some time, and cost me my horse, a loss that I have been paying for ever since," she added wryly, looking over her shoulder at Valentina as she tried to inject a tiny bit of humor into the proceeding.

This failed as the King sobered at that information, leaning back in his throne and staring at her bowed head in silence. "We will get to that in order," he said at last, his voice sounding far calmer now, if still cored with anger. "First, tell us about your mission to the King of Brune."

Wincing, Sofy did so. She held nothing back, the conversations she'd had with Bedouin pressuring him into letting her at least speak once to the King. How she had withheld the

message until Bedouin had been, apparently, forced into allowing her to do so. And how then instead, she had been assaulted within the palace of Brune, locked in a special room created to get rid of individuals such as herself and others with beyond average physical abilities. “Luckily, they didn’t know about my teleportation ability and I was able to escape.”

“Hmm... so the King of Brune is indeed on his deathbed. Bedouin wouldn’t move against you, an official messenger from one king to another, unless he had to in order to cover up such. Still, in so doing he shows that the Brune’s royal line is most probably defunct.” the King mused. “And in the future, we can use this attack on you to demand diplomatic reparations at the very least. Perhaps even as an excuse to cut all diplomatic ties with Brune during this civil war. That is something to think about in the next few days.”

“Yes, and, your Majesty, there is more that you must know on that score. Not only is the King ill, but the prince, Regnas, was not killed. Nor was he, in fact, a prince...” From there, Sofy explained about the rest of what had been going on in Brune, in particular about Regin and her survival and alliance with the Silver Meteor Army. Here she looked to Valentina, and the black-haired Vanadis reluctantly spoke about the agreements she had made with Regin for her aid in creating binding contracts with the various nobles of the Silver Meteor Army.

For a moment, Victor stared down at them, his face reddening so much Valentina idly wondered if the man would have a heart attack right in front of them. When he spoke, his voice was a vicious hiss. “How, how dare you?! Three Vanadis conspiring together to embroil Zhcted in a succession crisis!? Have you no shame!?”

Even though she had anticipated that accusation, Sofy flinched while Valentina took it stoically. It was, after all, something she had anticipated, despite how annoying she anticipated this was going to be.

“First, you, Vanadis Estes! Not only were you absent from your duchy for your own purposes, but then you personally aid this, this possible princess to bolster her position! Showing approval for her as a Vanadis, a representative of Zhcted!” Victor roared.

“Your majesty, every agreement I made with Regin was between herself and me, as the Vanadis of Osterode. At no point did I make any move that would make it seem as if I was an official envoy,” Valentina murmured, her voice low and coolly controlled in the face of the Victor’s wrath.

“Semantics!” he snarled in reply, shaking his head like a bull. “Regardless of your reasons, you aided and abetted her position in this civil war. You involved yourself further by agreeing to send another company of your pikemen to serve the Silver Meteor Army! Without you Vanadis Estes, Vanadis Viltaria would not have such strength.”

Valentina shrugged very lightly. “Take that to the logical conclusion your majesty. Who would you rather have on our borders? A queen on a shaky throne who owes Eleonora and

myself much for helping her get there, Ganelon, whose machinations are already legendary, or Thenardier, the greatest living general Brune can boast, with dragons at his command?”

To her side Sofy winced. She had thought of that herself on the way to Leitmeritz, but to hear Valentina lay it out made it sound so cold and calculating. Yet it did seem to work to cool the anger of the king.

“HAH!” Victor barked a laugh. “Ganelon? He is no war leader. A politician and traitor, yes, always spinning his webs, always preying on those around him. But we have no doubt that while he could claim the throne, he would never be able to keep it. The Knightly Orders would eventually be forced to oust him, and the civil war would continue. Thenardier too. Without an heir, and with his ‘rule of iron’ he would face homegrown threats like the Silver Meteor Army sans Viltaria’s participation for many years, again possibly with the aid of Brune’s Knightly Orders. Issues that would weaken Brune internally and abroad for years. Now? This Regin wench, if she is able to prove her lineage, could cut both Duke’s support off at the knees. While at the moment she is the weakest player in the game despite your machinations, she has the possibility to become the strongest. Indeed, the only one who can end Brune’s civil war cleanly and relatively quickly.”

Valentina could not argue with the king’s analysis, but she still felt she had been correct to aid Regin. Regin’s personality was simply too weak for a reigning monarch, and she felt that the king badly underestimated the Silver Meteor Army, Ranma, Tigre in particular. They were not nearly as weak as he had supposed, even against dragons. *Then again, I met Tigre and Ranma and personally took their measure. The king has not.*

“You and Vanadis Viltaria will be punished for this. As will you Vanadis Obertas.” Victor went on grimly, switching his glare to Sofya.

“Your Highness I barely...”

Sofy’s protest stopped as Victor raised his hand halting her words. “Not for your part in this Regin farce. No, you failed utterly in your secondary purpose in Brune. Testing the waters to see if Brune as a nation was in danger of collapsing. Admittedly we are in no position right now to launch a war of conquest, not with Muozinel poised as they are. But even so, you should have been able to convince this Vorn fellow and his allies to reach out to us in turn for more aid the instant the majority of Elen’s troops were sent home, to further muddy the waters.”

It was with a start that Sofy realized that the king was right. She hadn’t pushed that aspect at all and admitted as much. “Lord Tigre’s patriotism is such my lord that when I hinted at the idea of this, his and his allies becoming independent states simply allied to Zhcted, it became clear he would have nothing to do with the idea.”

“Hmmpf, as I suspected. Still, if you, Vanadis Estes hadn’t propped this Regin girl up so much, we would have at the very least known Brune would be embroiled in this civil war for

many years. That was my real goal in limiting Elen's forces. One that you, Vanadis Estes, have undercut immensely!" Victor growled angrily.

Valentina simply nodded her head. *Let that be a lesson. Victor has played the game of thrones for decades now and knows all the tricks. I had missed that aspect entirely. Still, I think my own plan to place Regin on the throne as a puppet is more stream-lined, and has a better chance of working.*

To her side, however, Sofy grimaced at that, realizing that her initial thoughts about Victor's designs on Brune had been wrong. He had attempted to create a situation that, whatever happened, Brune would be weakened, and Zhcted would remain strong. It was an incredibly shrewd series of moves, but also immensely self-serving. *Drat it all, but I hate politics!*

"Still my king, this is still an opportunity we should seize!" Ilda interjected leaning down to whisper the words, in the King's ear, but Valentina and Sofy could hear him well enough. The acoustics of this room was excellent, and thankfully there weren't that many people within it the moment. Having more witnesses to this dressing down would've been humiliating. "Aiding Silver Meteor Army, we could..."

"Did you not hear Vanadis Obertas saying that Vorn has refused to become such!? No, this is not good!" Victor retorted before the man could continue, glaring him into silence, and gesturing him around to stand to one side of the two Vanadis in front of the throne, angrily gesturing Lord Kshal to stand by Ilda's side, leaving only Miron standing on the dais with him. "All of you, you lords, you Vanadis, you knights, you think of land and honor! Or land, money and raising your status," he said, sending a semi-good-natured sneer Lord Kshal's way. "I must think of the nation's well-being as a whole and of the future."

Victor leaned back once more, visibly grabbing hold of his temper. "Let me speak plainly, so that all of you might understand. I know that when I die whoever choose to be my successor will face a crisis, will face internal strife and perhaps even open warfare given the lack of a direct heir. I had hoped that when that crisis hit, we would have secure borders. But with Muozinel amassing its armies, and with the chaos in Asvarre and Brune, there cannot be a weak person on this throne, nor a simple regent for Valery. This news from Brune and the rest of the news reaching us from elsewhere might have ruined my hopes!"

"Your Majesty, if you had thought that you could have simply ordered Lady Viltaria to..." Sofy began.

"And have of a Vanadis in open revolt?" Victor interrupted with a scoff. "All of you Vanadis are too independent for that," he finished, darting a knife-like look towards the two present Vanadis.

“We could instead look to enforce our new borders thanks to lady Eleonora’s deal with Earl Vorn,” Valentina started to suggest only to be interrupted brusquely in turn.

“No.” For a moment Sofy and Valentina both felt as if the King had rejected that suggestion so out of hand because Valentina, a Vanadis, was the one who had made the proposal, but the King went on, thumping his hand on the side of his throne with each word to further emphasize them. “Secure borders! That border is already far too parlous, as I told you to mention to Vanadis Viltaria, Vanadis Obertas. We will do nothing, and we will continue to have as little as possible to do with the civil war in Brune. Hopefully it will continue to rage, to keep Brune broken as a threat for a good many years to come, as I had hoped it might. So if and when they lose, this nation is not nearly as damaged as would otherwise be the case.”

“And what if Elen and Lord Vorn win, your majesty?” Sofy inquired. “I do not see them losing easily, not with Regin to possibly rally heretofore neutral parties throughout Brune. That includes Lord Roland and his Knightly Order.”

“Which was another mistake, letting such as him live,” Victor scowled, shaking his head. “But if this ridiculous Silver Meteor Army wins through, then Zhcted will demand reparations for what we have already allowed to have occur.”

That was scant little, a ten percent yearly tax rate for the next few years for the Dinant Plains and Alsace. But it would be enough to enrich the royal house somewhat while keeping Zhcted out of the civil war, and it was clear that the King didn’t care overmuch about anything else.

“But what if Muozinel interferes in Brune?” Valentina suggested innocently.

The King looked at her, stroking his beard, his anger having abated for now. “You think they will attack there? That the movement along our border with them is a feint?”

Valentina nodded her head and then gave some, but not all of her reasoning about that.

Even without all of her reasonings, Victor put it together quickly, thinking hard. Then he nodded. “The force that would be first to feel the sting of an invasion from Muozinel would be Vanadis Lourie and her troops. We will send them extra wagons and mules over the winter, just in case so they can move all the faster when Summer comes. If we have word that Muozinel has instead invaded Brune, then I will give you, Vanadis Obertas, orders for you to join Vanadis Lourie and take her forces to aid these... allies... in Brune. And for Vanadis Viltaria’s troops that we ordered home to take the field once more with her. But **not** before. We must conserve our military power as much as possible.”

Sofy nodded her head in supplication. She felt the King was acting little too close-minded to the idea of placing a strong ally on the throne of Brune now that his plan to create a

puppet within Brune was no longer viable, but she also didn't want to see Zhcted launch a war of invasion of Brune either. So this was probably the best they were going to get.

Done with the matters about Brune, Victor looked over at Valentina. "...There is indeed a point to my sending you back to your lands Valentina and insisting that you stay there," he went on, acknowledging the fact that he had essentially exiled her from court far more openly than was really polite. But the King was obviously not in the mood to be polite, and he went on unhurriedly. "We have sources within the Horse Lords, and at least three of their clans have combined recently, and their new chieftain is looking to add two more to his horde. This man, Illigut Khasar, is looking to invade the land of either Brest next year or late in the campaign season of this year, apparently.

"Of course they are," Valentina retorted, showing a bit more spirit than Sofy thought appropriate after the drubbing they'd been taking. "They can't go towards the oceans, there is no way down the escarpment in that area beyond the Trail of Sorrow, and say what you will about her personal animosity towards the rest of us, Fomina is a strong leader. I have made my own lands strong as possible and wiped out the last clan that attempted to raid my lands. That only leaves Brest!"

She now looked up at the King directly, a pout on her face, but her eyes deadly serious. "I have been saying for months now that having that girl away, unwilling to take up her position, has severely weakened our borders! Your Majesty has so much as stated such, allowing my conquest of some of Brest's lands that bordered Osterode before this. But I do not have the manpower to defend her territory and mine, and what little forces still remain under arms there are not up to the task!"

The holdings of the various Vanadis did not have nearly as many lesser nobles within them as was normal in the rest of the country, and most of those nobles were if the knightly rank rather than earls or other such which could be expected to bring more than a handful of fighting men together. Leitmeritz had twelve knights. Olmutz fourteen and Legnica twenty, the largest holdings in terms of land and people among the Vanadis-run counties. Osterode had seven, and two of those were landless knights, holding a purely military rank in Valentina's army. This normally wasn't a problem, since the Vanadis were always capable of seeing to both the legal and military aspects of their lands and most had cities to call upon as well for more manpower of all sorts.

Osterode had a city named after the county, but that was due to Valentina's work since she had taken the county over. Brest had nothing of the sort. Worse, without a sitting Vanadis, Brest had splintered quickly, forcing the nine knights it normally had to step up. But none of them were very competent in Valentina's opinion. The power vacuum had been filled by local bully boys, people concerned with lining their own pockets instead of the good of Brest or the nation. This had led to her carving bits of Brest off, but she lacked the manpower to do more.

“This argument coming from you so soon after you left your lands and haired off on a personal quest does not persuade. Rather, it sings of self-aggrandizement!” the King shot back sharply. “Are you saying that you are unable to defend the borders of your nation Vanadis Estes?”

Valentina's lips clenched over hot words, but after only a second, she shook her head stoically. “Your Majesty. My pikemen, the units I have created since becoming Vanadis of Osterode are powerful units. They are not fast. They are primarily a defensive formation. If my enemies come to me, I can bleed of them white,” she said without any hint of humility or pride, a simple statement of fact. “But I can barely protect my own lands. Protecting the lands of Brest as well would stretch my men far, far too thinly. And I refuse to allow them to be destroyed in copper packets instead of the company-sized formations they have been drilled in.”

The King grimaced, shaking his head. “You know how young the owner of Muma is.”

“Youth is one thing, and allowing her a year or so to get a handle on her new powers would be fine. Her going into seclusion on her own lands for two years be fine, or to apprentice under another Vanadis. But to simply take off, to not even be within the environs of Zhcted, to be completely unreachable? How is that serving the purpose Muma exists for, defending Zhcted?” Valentina shot back, coolly, but also with more than a hint of dislike in her voice. “I realize there was nothing you could have done given how quickly she left, and indeed how astonishingly good she has proven in hiding her trail, but even so...”

“What do you think of this matter, Vanadis Obertas?” the King inquired, looking at the other Vanadis.

Sofy cursed Valentina liberally as she was suddenly on the spot, not having anticipated this at all. But after a moment spent gathering her thoughts, she answered gamely. “Your Majesty, I have never met the young wielder of Muma, I only met her predecessor twice, I believe, before she passed on, in the last invasion from Muozinel seven years ago. And while I know the whole nation rejoiced that Muma reacted to someone after five years of sitting idle, I have to admit to some... concerns about how well she has handled being given such power at so young an age.”

Licking her lips, she gestured to one of the banners above them, the one that showed Levias on a field of mountains, with a few hammer symbols in the air above, the banner of Olmutz. “Ludmila Lourie might have also been given her weapon when she was that young, but she also had the structure of her family, and more importantly, her mother at the time, who had trained her entire life with her aunt, the previous wielder. Whereas this young woman was not only not from our nation originally, but, beyond reporting here with Muma, did not reach out to anyone for help in getting to know her duties or abilities. At least that is what I believe occurred. Is that correct?”

“You are correct,” the King said, resting one hand lightly on the other in his lap, turning to one of his other advisers, Miron.

That worthy nodded, holding out a message with the seal of Leitmeritz on it. “I asked Lady Alshavin this very point when we first discovered that the Horse Lords might be gathering under this new Warlord. She affirms that not only did Olga Tamm not come to her for help, but she rejected Lady Alshavin’s offer of aid. And without her, as you have so cogently argued, the land of Brest is no longer being administered as it should be. The court has been aware of a problem growing there, but only recently has the severity of it come to light.”

When the spymaster finished speaking, the King looked between the two Vanadis. “And what do you think I should do about this?”

“Appoint someone else in her place,” Valentina responded promptly, knowing that was what the King wanted to hear. He had long looked for ways to limit the powers of the Vanadis, and here was a perfect way to strip one of their position as the equivalent of a Duke. “There are several good, capable war leaders among your nobility sire, even if you do not wish to use a Vanadis. One of whom is standing here among us. Besides, after so many years of having no lord or lady above them, surely her own people will see the reason for setting aside the normal precedent of a Vanadis in favor of someone strong to protect them and see to their prosperity?”

“And yet, that does not suffice answer to the actual Vanadis in question,” the King mused leadingly, and suddenly Valentina wondered what else the man wanted from this part of the meeting.

“What can we do, Your Majesty?” Sofy questioned.

“We can recall her,” the King announced, smirking dryly at Sofy’s look of confusion. “And enforce that rule.” He then sat up sharply, staring down at them both. “Very well. Do you, Vanadis Valentina Glinka Estes of Osterode, and Vanadis Sofya Obertas of Polesia, agree with Lady Vanadis Alshavin of Legnica that Vanadis Olga Tamm has not fulfilled her duties to this land?”

Valentina’s eyes widened, then slowly narrowed as she saw the King’s crown begin to glow slightly. It was a piece of the Royal raiment, the oldest piece in point of fact, hailing from the Dragon King himself, something that she had never been able to examine closely. There were stories about it, but none had seemed real to her. Or at least, they hadn’t until right now.

Sofy hadn’t caught it, and she simply frowned deeply then slowly nodded her head. “Olga Tamm has been gone for two and a half years, almost since the day she submitted herself to your rule, Your Majesty. Without communication. Without taking thought for the land of Brest. I am forced to agree that Olga Tamm has not performed her duties as a Vanadis.”



“As am I,” Valentina added sharply, seeing no need to go into all her own reasons.

“So be it. By the word of the King and a quorum of her Vanadis sisters, Olga Tamm of the Horse Lord tribes is deemed unfit to wield the Viralt, Muma! She must return within two seasons, or have it stripped from her.” The light from the crown faded on those words, and the King slowly stood up from his throne, suddenly looking older than he had a moment ago, leaning on the side of it slightly before heading to the Royal entrance to the throne room. “Now, begone. Both of you have duties to attend to tomorrow and my bed is calling me.”

Moments later, the two of them were walking through quiet castle hallways, the way lit by a few scattered torches and the moonlight beyond, thinking about what had just happened. Then Sofy broke the silence, chuckling a little. “So, I’m going to have trouble sitting down for a bit after that tanning, what about you?”

Valentina giggled and yet internally was still somewhat pleased. Exile to her own holdings was not good in the long run, but for the short term, it served the plans she wished to set in motion there. Then she looked over at Sophie quizzically. “Do you think the king can actually summon Muma back if Olga doesn’t return in time?”

“He can.” Sofy nodded firmly. “Do you recall that a new wielder has only a month to appear before the king or the Viralt in question will leave her?”

Valentina nodded, though she added that she had never seen such a thing occur.

“Of course not. What woman in their right mind would give up such power, even if it tied them to the power structure of another nation? But the King can declare a Vanadis unfit so long as he has the agreement of half the other Vanadis at the time.”

“So that story is true! I had heard rumors of something of the sort, but that is far more powerful than I expected,” Valentina’s eyes narrowed as she remembered the gleaming on the crown. *Interesting, and explains much about why Vanadis have only rarely married into the royal house.*

Sofy shrugged. “The King must have kept some secrets from you, I suppose.”

Valentina smiled at that but didn’t reply. The two of them stood there for a moment, staring at one another in the darkened corner outside the rooms that the Vanadis were given when they stayed in the palace. In another life, they would’ve been evidently enemies. In this one... They were still enemies of a sort, just not in a competition they could honestly use of violence to win.

“And you possibly heading back into Brune with Ludmila come summer. Lucky,” Valentina said, clear jealousy in her voice.

"I am, aren't I?" Sofy chuckled lightly. "And you stuck on your lands, I wonder how you will spend your time?"

Sofy watched that hit go home, one eyebrow rising as she acknowledged the fact that she knew that Valentina would be doing a lot with this technology thing and that Sofy suspected Valentina had held back on quite a bit of what she had learned from Ranma. And then she dug the blade deeper. "All alone out there."

Valentina growled, breaking her normal habit of not allowing anger to show, and Sofy smiled at her glad to have gotten in the last dig. "Have a nice night Valentina."

"The same to you, Sofya," Valentina replied, her voice a brittle mockery of normal politeness. "Alone just like me, for many a day to come."

With that, Valentina turned away and entered her room, smirking over her shoulder at Sofy, who was scowling at her back as she closed the door.

Staring at her bed, Valentina sighed. "Darn it." That last comment had been all too accurate, even if it was more about companionship rather than actually sleeping with someone. As interested in Ranma as she was, even if he had been with them, Ranma wouldn't be spending the night with Tina. Still, it irked Valentina to acknowledge how much she had already begun to miss him. *Get a hold of yourself, Valentina. You only knew him for a less than a month! You can't be that besotted with him. Think of your ambitions, not your would-be paramour.*

With that thought and the memory of her vow, Valentina's back stiffened, and she turned away from the bed to the small desk set against the inner wall. If the King or Sofy thought she was going to bed right away, they were sadly mistaken. Valentina had messages to send, things to purchase. Plans to cancel. Plans to put in place. No matter how lonely she suddenly felt, the future waited for no one.

OOOOOO

Fire was a routine part of warfare. It had always been used, either to destroy other people's properties, as a weapon in and of itself, and, of course, the most plebian of uses, to light the night for guards on duty.

Never before had fire been spread so widely in Lutetia as it was now being spread by the advance of Thenardier's army and its three accompanying dragons. Although only one of them

actually was a fire-breather, a Prani, the soldiers accompanying the others more than made up for it.

*And yet, there are even more fires around than my army would account for.* Dragging his gaze from another smashed fort, Thenardier used a spyglass to take in the lay of the land, as the two-headed dragon twisted around under his direction, coming back the way that they had come, moving through the column of his army as if the cavalry raced forward to engage the retreating members of Duke Ganelon's men that had retreated before his destruction of their fort.

His eyes narrowed as he watched the action, a thing of swirling blades, charging horses and away, snow tossed up here and there and everywhere by all of the participants. As he saw that his men were winning, he nodded and pulled the dragon to a halt next to where Steid and Drekavac were standing. There he kicked the rope ladder off the back of the large saddle, climbing down the side of the beast.

On the ground, he jerked his head to indicate the ongoing battle in the distance. "They are fighting tenaciously. I would've thought Ganelon would cut and run, being a personal coward."

"That is true, Sire. But still, they cannot win. This is the third nobleman allied with Ganelon, whose land we have ravaged. There is only one more, Earl Ochredos, between our current position and Lutetia's main city. The way into his heartland is clear. Our swift assault out of the mountains and our preparation has borne fruit even if we decided to leave half the army behind in Nemetacum."

"You are thinking too much like a soldier, not a general," Duke Thenardier admonished. "There are many ways that they can hold up our army instead of offering us direct combat. The dragon's after all, need to eat."

"Sire? We had agreed to feed them on the land..." Drekavac began quizzically.

Thenardier held up a hand, gesturing to another man nearby. He was dressed for more coarsely than the Duke or his general, wearing a heavy winter cloak of homespun tweed over light leather armor, with twin daggers at his side, and a bow on his back, which was extremely well maintained and clean in comparison to the rest of his outfit. "Tell him."

"There ain't no people around," the man said bluntly. "Duke Ganelon's men, they're herding all of his people away. Burning the crops, gutting the cows an' the rest, destroying bridges too." He spat to one side, "Even poisoning wells."

Thenardier could see Steid's eyes flicking one side to the other as he thought about the ramifications of this. "...That is perhaps the only way they could fight us, my Lord," he admitted. "A full scorched earth campaign, forcing us to rely on our own resources throughout our

advance. But his lands are not nearly large for us to feel the bite them are much. And with our sleighs and the way we were able to come down into his land from the side...”

“True,” Thenardier nodded, “but he doesn’t know about those sleighs. They were a last-minute addition to our plans, after all, so his spies might not have had time to report them.”

Thenardier owned the only oldest iron mine within the borders of Brune of any appreciable size. It had been the source of his family’s wealth for many generations as well as a basis for their leadership style. It had started to die out when he was young, hence why his father had made overtures of friendship and alliance towards the Vanadis of Olmutz, who was in a similar position in Silesia. Yet even with the mines dying out, his lands had a surplus of iron, and he had put it to good use, creating sleighs that could go over snow and ice easily for this winter campaign.

Thenardier narrowed his eyes, looking over at his general. “How long do you think this will slow us down?”

The general winced but took a moment to answer. “My Lord, I do not think we will be done before mid-summer if this kind of action is going to continue along with further harassment attacks.”

“Drekavac if we have to halt feeding them for a time, you do not think that the dragons will go wild?”

“It’s possible, my lord. Lack of food is the only thing I can think of that would break my control over them.”

“So be it,” Thenardier intoned grimly. “Duke Ganelon’s lands will be shattered by his own hand or mine I care not. These men and these women of these lands sided with him, let them feel the sting of defeat. We will keep control of our dragons, even if we have to do so by letting them get a taste for the flesh of our enemies.”

**OOOOOO**

Ranma had traveled throughout the rest of the day after she had been attacked on horseback, then, after changing gender once again, had gently knocked the horse out, and carried it in turn off the road into the forest, through the forest, cutting off a bit more of territory to enter Thenardier’s lands from the direct east. Early morning, he found another road, woke the horse up, piled it with the saddlebags of the morons who had attacked him, and

moved on. Those bags, like the horse itself, might come in handy as a mask for his ability to use ki space.

They were added to around midmorning that day when another group of men accosted him. These men were wearing tabards with Thenardier's colors on them, a darkish kind of gold circular dragon mark on a crimson background. Despite that, they hadn't been very well trained even for regular soldiers, and all of them were young, new conscripts tossed out on a shit patrol.

Because of their youth, most looking almost as young as Ranma, and one or two looking even younger, he didn't beat them up as badly as the first group. Nor did he leave them tied up for the wilds. He did, however, leave them tied to their horses backwards.

"After all, they weren't any threat, so killing them outright or leaving them to the wolves wasn't really in the cards. They also didn't seem as if they were thugs-in-training like your owner and his friends were," he spoke aloud to the horse as he looped along beside it at a canter. "They attacked me because they didn't like the look of me and because I gave them lip, not because they wanted to shake me down."

The horse neighed, shaking its mane out as the two of them pounded down the road, kicking up light tufts of snow from the inch or so on the ground. The roads here in Thenardier-owned territory were mostly made of paved stone, with wide areas to either side for horses, where the horse currently was. A lot of the road looked to be a bit in disrepair, but this one at least was in good repair and had been kept clear of snow. Considering that it was piled up two-and-a-half feet and maybe more elsewhere, that wasn't a small consideration. The walls of snow piled onto the sides of the road were actually quite high, so high that Ranma would've had to be in the saddle to look over them.

Two crossroads later, Ranma came to a sign that pointed out his destination, the town of Artishem, beneath which lay the Holy Grotto of Saint-Groel. Breathing a sigh of relief at finally seeing a visible sign that he was actually in the right area, Ranma headed down that road. Soon he had to stop and step aside to let a group of soldiers passed by. These were much like the last group, only a little more disciplined, and older, trained soldiers rather than raw recruits.

One of them rained in in front of Ranma, staring down at him, as Ranma nodded his head to them respectfully. "What do you do, traveling in winter like this alone?" the man asked harshly.

"Huntin'," Ranma gestured to the number of skins on the horse. They covered the saddlebags and several swords Ranma looked to sell as part of his cover and the fact he really did need supplies. Ranma had been attacked three times more by remarkably stupid polar-tooths and an emaciated wolfpack at one point. "Business has been good this winter."

The man looked at them closely, then looked back at Ranma. "How long have you been in the woods?"

"... I like me solitude," Ranma affected a woodsman's brogue as he spoke, grateful once more for the cloak covering most of his mouth and face. It made lying so much easier when all he had to do was keep his eyes on the other man. "Been out there two winters. Wouldn't have come in, but been running out o' aught but meat to eat. And me clothes need patching."

The man nodded, staring hard at the woodsman, then over at the pelts avariciously. "When you get to Artishem, you'll have to check-in with the town watch. Everyone who enters a village or even a hamlet must check-in and receive a token from the local guard. Normally you would have to have someone vouch for you as well, Ganelon's spies are everywhere after all. But drop off those three polar-tooth pelts at the guardhouse and tell them that Trebek ordered they give you a pass, and you'll be fine. Keep the pass on you at all times, or else you will be tossed out and all your goods confiscated."

Internally rolling his eyes at the man's obvious greed, Ranma affected being cowed, the normal peasant reaction to someone on horseback with weapons. *I'm just grateful that he isn't asking me how I hunt them, considering I don't have a bow on me or even a spear.* "Yes, my Lord."

The man nodded, then kicked his horse back into motion, catching up with his fellows quickly.

This worked out pretty well for Ranma. He dropped off the three polar-tooth pelts, got the pass, and even got directions around the town to some of the stores that were still open in winter. Of course, he also knew that he was being followed, but the tale was obvious to him, even through the normal bustle of the decent-sized town. Unlike farms or smaller villages, towns of this size and larger did not shut down during wintertime.

He first made a show of selling his other skins and buying yeast and other things so that he could make his own bread and so forth. Then he headed to the blacksmith, where he sold the weapons that Ranma had taken from the two groups of guards that he had run into.

"Where did you get all this?" the blacksmith questioned as he watched the apparent huntsman pull several swords out from under a polar-tooth pelt.

"Stupid bunch o' bandits. They tried to follow me into the woods, wit'out a woodsman among them," Ranma guffawed, still using his affected accent. "Bunch o' fools, dey blundered right into some of my traps, and never even looked up into the trees. Heck, one fool knocked himself out racing away too quick."

The blacksmith, who seemed to be the typical large burly sort that such men always seemed to be, chuckled at that, slapping Ranma on the shoulder, noting that Ranma didn't even

twitch at it and for all his own wiry frame was dense with muscle. "Well, far be it for me to not profit from the actions of idiots. And you wanted to trade instead of taking coin? With coin being scarce, I quite like the idea of a trade."

Ranma nodded, pointing to arrowheads, a new dagger, more like a short stabbing sword really, a whetstone, and various other metal sundries, while also asking for lots of nails. "Need to do a lot of work around the hut," he half explained both for the blacksmith's ears and the ears of his watcher. "All that and directions to the inn. Might not like company, but I be thinking at least three days of not cooking for myself be a right treat."

The deal done, Ranma headed in that direction, wandering through the town as if he was just taking in the sights, recalling what Regin had told him of where to find the Grotto. The Grotto itself was a kind of religious site, but a private one for the royal family. However, it was kept that way by an order of monks who lived in the Moshu Temple here in town.

Ranma made a note of it, as well as the rest of the town wondering where the main entrance was. Regin had mentioned one entrance in the center of town, one entrance in a cemetery and one in the temple. But Regin hadn't been able to give good enough directions to it, which meant Ranma would probably have to travel through the temple itself.

Not good, but not bad either, Ranma thought, staring at the temple for a moment, wondering aloud, "Why people always think you need big buildings to honor the gods. They built the world, didn't they? Can't be grander'n that."

Deciding he had acted the rube enough, Ranma headed to the inn that the blacksmith had told him about, getting a good meal, although smaller than he would normally order. Again, Ranma didn't want to bring too much attention to himself. After that, it pushing evening already thanks to how quickly the sunset during winter, Ranma retired to his room and waited for the deep night.

Leaving his cloak behind, Ranma pushed open one of the slanted windows - not glass, glass was far too expensive - making certain that he could move it without too much noise, before opening it just enough for him to slip out, leaving behind the pelt and a few other things underneath the blankets to make it look as if he was still sleeping there.

Ranma climbed up to the roof, hanging there for a moment to close the blinds behind him, making a note of which room was his. After all, Ranma had no idea how long it might take him to find the Grotto, let alone the actual books he needed within it.

Getting into the temple was ridiculously easy. Even though Ranma couldn't really muffle the sound he made when he jumped from one group to another very much in snow, no one looked up, and there were only a few guards on patrol. There were a few watchers around the temple of might, a sign that maybe Thenardier might have discovered Regin's continued existence, and her possible need for evidence of her legitimacy.

Regardless, Ranma was able to sneak past them, moving to the back temple, then leaping high, grabbing onto the edge of the roof there, flipping himself up further, and entering the small belfry there. Getting down into the rest of the temple was much more difficult, as the monks were still mostly awake. Ranma nearly ran into one of them as he exited the belfry onto the upper story of the main temple, ducking back into darkness just in time to avoid being spotted. Down below, several other monks were moving around the temple and deeper into the back where they actually lived too.

Sneaking past them was almost impossible, and more than once, Ranma had to duck under or into the shadows, or more often leap up to cling to the ceiling directly above where he had previously been standing. Indeed, Ranma made most of his progress by clinging to the ceiling, using his Way of the Gecko technique, his hands and feet sticking to the top of the ceiling.

This was a technique Ranma created after competing in a Martial Arts Tea Ceremony duel. Say what you would about training a monkey to do your fighting for you, but those people had figured out some interesting ways to move over strange terrain without seeming to. Ranma had taken that ability and honed it to the point where he could cling to the ceiling through just his fingers or even his toes. In this manner he moved through the temple to the back area of the temple.

This area, where the monks actually lived, was quite large, just as large as the main temple area, the name of which Ranma didn't know and didn't care about. And it was even larger than it first looked because it had a basement, where the kitchens and other things were, along with a long staircase leading even further down.

Entering that staircase, Ranma was lucky to not see anyone passing upwards and moved down it as silently as he could. The staircase became a tunnel its sides becoming roughhewn, looking almost but not quite like a natural tunnel rather than something man-made. Certainly this area was much older than the preceding staircase.

This theme continued until Ranma found himself exiting the tunnel out into a cavern, a Grotto in point of fact, just like he had been told he would find. It was huge frankly, the largest underground thing he'd ever seen, the edges disappearing in the distance in either direction, a small walkway up here where Ranma had come out on what Ranma estimated to be three stories up from the actual floor below. Above, he could see stalactites dripping downwards, each of them a slightly different color in the flare of the torches which lined this place from below in different areas.

Below, Ranma could see what looked like a series of bookcases just resting there on the floor of the Grotto, looking extremely out with among the more natural grandeur of the Grotto itself. But they were the only thing that seemed out of place. Because as Ranma moved, slowly circling the Grotto to make certain that there was no one here, he noticed on the far wall,



something that looked like a giant painting of some kind. He couldn't make out any of the details at first, but when he came closer, he gasped aloud.

Lit by two torches to either side, the painting was obviously ancient, almost looking like it was from prehistoric time or at least the equivalent. It showed an archer and several companions fighting, a few dragons, and the archer firing something that looked quite a bit like Tigre's black bow and one of the dragons. Or it could be a single many-headed dragon with several tails, Ranma wasn't sure. *Now, isn't that interesting. I wonder if that is connected to why that thing always gives me an odd vibe whenever I'm near it.*

Setting that minor mystery aside, Ranma found the darkest corner of the Grotto, somewhat bemused by how many braziers there were here, before leaping down to the floor of the Grotto. Once on the floor, he moved into the bookcases, frowning. There were a lot more of them than he had expected., A lot more. Turns out that Lim was right, I should have started to learn the local language. Dammit.

So busy was Ranma with trying to figure out what he was going to do, that he neglected his situational awareness.

Right up until someone unseen nearby spoke up. "did you hear that?"

"Did one of the other brothers come down? I didn't see a light coming down the passage."

Both voices were young, male and currently confused. They also pinpointed where they were coming from and Ranma slipped around behind where he had thought they would be looking.

In this, he was wrong. One of them had already turned back and let loose a gasp as he saw Ranma coming around the edge of one of the bookcases. That gasp was the last noise he made for some time, as Ranma leaped forward, slamming two fingers into his chest, freezing his entire body still like a statue.

He swept around that monk, grabbing the other one from behind, hand over his mouth. Lifting him up by that simple grip and pulling him backward, Ranma then jabbed him with two more pressure points on him, one in the neck and one in the chest. The first jab knocked him unconscious, the second paralyzed him, like the first monk. He then returns to the first month, doing the same to him.

The pressure point on the chest had paralyzed both, making them go as stiff as stones, and Ranma now moved them this way and that, until it looked as if they were huddling over a section of books, with one book open and set against the shelf as if they were reading it there. With that, Ranma moved into the center of the Grotto, staring up towards the walls, noting where another tunnel intersected the one he had come down. But it looked as if it had caved in

at one point, and Ranma wasn't certain it led anywhere, let alone out. Still, it was good to know where it was just in case.

With that done and no sign that any other monk was coming down the stairs, Ranma sighed and turned back to the job at hand. He estimated the sheer number of books for a moment, then thought about how much space they would take up, even if he took away the bookshelves then sighed. *This is going to suck!*

Ranma went from one bookshelf to another, emptying them into his ki-space, enlarging it gradually as he did so, which was why Ranma knew this was going to suck. Despite the show he had put on for Lim and the two guards his first night in Leitmeritz, Ranma's ki-space was actually kind of small, only about three times his own body size. This library was at least fifteen times that size.

Three bookshelves in, Ranma scowled as he began to notice a significant dip in his ki reserves. He still had quite a lot, but still, he was only a third of the way through. By the time the last book was pushed into his ki space, Ranma estimated that he had used about two-thirds of his ki reserves. That wasn't good, but unless Ranma ran into a dragon or another fighter like Roland, that would be enough.

The last book he took was the one the two monks were posed over, and he patted them both on the chest, causing their bodies stiffness to fade instantly, catching them both he laid them down the ground, patting their heads as he dropped the letter Regin had given him for the Mosha Order. Ranma had decided that using it to try and gain entry was too dangerous, the monks might have been suborned after all. But if it kept the oldsters among the monks from having heart attacks at their sacred charge going missing, it was still parchment well-spent. "Sorry, guys, nothing against you or your order. You're just in the way. You'll wake up tomorrow with a splitting headache, a but it'll fade quickly enough."

Ranma leaped up onto the passageway on the second story, moving quickly to the entrance. This he knew would be the most dangerous part of escaping the temple. There was no way to hide within the tunnel. Even if he clung to the ceiling, he would be very visible since the ceiling was only about a foot above a normal man's height.

Alas, Ranma's luck truly left him now. Ranma was not halfway up the hidden staircase when he saw two more monks coming down, carrying torches. Ranma tried to sprint forward, faster than they could react, but one of them shouted out a loud almost hysteric, "What in the-!" while the other one stepped forward and, thinking very quickly, hurled the torch down into Ranma's face.

Knocking it out of the way caused Ranma to pause in his headlong charge for just second, by which time the other one had turned and raced back up the way they'd come, shouting out, "Intruder, thief!"

Cursing, Ranma knocked the other monk out quickly, gently tapping the side of his head against the wall, or gently for him anyway, before racing up after the other one. The door at the top of the downward spiraling stairwell shattered as Ranma surged through it, tossing several monks to the ground. He then crouched, his leg flashing out in a roundhouse kick, which caught two more, dumping them to the ground by their fellows. Leaping upwards, he bounced off the roof down on the other side of three other gathered monks, racing away as he heard more monks rousing themselves from their beds above.

Knowing there was no way to stop the hue and cry getting out from the temple, Ranma didn't even bother fighting the monks. Instead, he simply skirted around them, smashing open the main door to the temple, after which he leaped upwards, alighting on the nearest rooftop.

From there, Ranma made his way out of the town easily, even as the shout of "thief" and "intruder in the temple!" began to make their way around. When he reached the edge of the walled town, Ranma leaped upwards, easily clearing the top of the outer wall, landing on the other side. There he had to dodge a few arrows from guards, who had been on duty on the wall. But within seconds, Ranma was racing away.

But near the town, a column of soldiers had stopped as they had seen the lighting of more torches on the wall, and heard in the distance the cry of outrage. Loud noises traveled quite a ways during winter, and this was no exception.

They instantly began to move in the direction of Ranma, their horses racing up to a charged straight towards him. Ranma leaped upwards over the piled-up snow on the side of the road and out into the fields, but the horses moved after him, climbing up the solid mound of snow on long the side of the road, then into the more powdery snow beyond. And with their long legs, they were making better time than Ranma, who had sunk to his knees in the snow before leaping upwards onto it, using an Anything Goes Aerial Style skill to distribute his weight enough so that he couldn't sink into it. But he still couldn't travel fast enough over the snow as fast as horses could.

They caught up with him within a few moments, and the man in lead shouted, "Halt thief, or I will cut you down where you stand!"

Ranma turned, grinning evilly. "I gotta wonder, does Brune have a similar story to the boy who caught a tiger by the tail?" he called out in a loud voice, loud enough for all of the cavalymen to hear them over the sounds of their horses moving through the snow and the clank of weaponry.

The man in the lead was huge, with bigger arms than anyone Ranma had ever seen before. They almost looked like someone had taken the arms of a hairless guerrilla and sort of stuck them on a human being, they were that large. While the rest of him looked to be equally large, the arms were the bit that grabbed Ranma's attention, considering in the moonlight he

could see that they were also not being covered by any cloak, the better to show off those massive muscles.

*Oh crud, am I really going to run into someone like Roland here?* Ranma groaned aloud, then dodged backward as the man's sword slammed into the ground where they'd been standing, kicking up a plume of snow as the man reigned in his horse.

Ranma charged forward, grabbing at the horse's front legs and twisting to the side, tossing rider and horse into the snow. He then turned, leaping upwards, one leg flashing out in a kick that caught a second rider in the face, smashing his nose and hurling him out of the saddle into one of his fellows.

Both men went down, and Ranma twisted around a lance strike, using one hand to smack the lance downwards as he pushed off it, landing behind the man who had used it. A quick elbow blow to the armored back of his head dented helmet and head, and Ranma leaped forward, slamming a fist into the next man's chest, while two sword slashes went through the area he had previously occupied.

At the front of the column, the massive man pushed his horse off his leg, grimacing in pain, but thanks to having landed in soft snow, the leg hadn't been broken. A quick thrust of his sword into his horse's neck ended its life before it could do him any damage with its thrashing, and he pushed the dead weight off him just in time to see his last man go down, literally hurled from the saddle by an almost negligent grab of the man's outstretched arm, tossed several hundred feet through the air to land face first in the snow towards the town.

Bellowing a cry of pure anger, the man raced forward. "I am Duke Thenardier's lieutenant Armand de la Royce, and you will regret this day!"

"Somehow, I doubt it," Ranma taunted, jumping clear of his last victim's horse, watching Armand's overhead strike land where he had previously been standing, cutting through the horse's entire body from the side. *Okay, so he strong. But he's nowhere near as fast as Roland, now let's see about his durability.*

While the garrison of the town began to rouse itself, Ranma launched himself forward towards the man, noticing that the man's footwork was horrible thanks to the snow. He could move in one direction well enough, pushing his way forward, but not quickly. And his ability to turn was horrible, possibly due to a mix of the snow and his own personal style.

Ranma danced around him in contrast, his ability to stay on top of the snow paying dividends here.

The man's strikes were insanely strong, smashing into the ground underneath the snow, passing through the snow itself as if it didn't exist. These strikes kicked up massive plumes of frozen dirt and debris, reminding Ranma almost of fighting Ryoga after he learned the Breaking

Point Technique. He also seems to be entirely in control of the massive sword he was wielding, slicing this way and that expertly, no sign of its weight apparent in his movements.

He just wasn't fast enough to catch Ranma, and Ranma sensed that the man had little to no ability to use the ki within him. He did have large internal reserves, almost like Elen or Roland but he couldn't consciously access it.

Deciding he had played with the man long enough, Ranma ducked under one blow instead of simply racing around behind the man again, thumping a fist into Armand's chest. It had been a full force blow, but to Ranma's astonishment, Armand didn't even grimace. "Useless! I have taken blows from Roland and before him King Faron and even my Lord Duke Thenardier himself! Your puny blows will do nothing and your speed will eventually fail!"

"That just means I need to be sneaky," Ranma quipped, even as he rolled backward and away from another blow.

Luckily he was moving so quickly that the snow, which was quickly turning into mush underneath them, didn't have time to stick to him, initiating the change. If at all possible, Ranma wanted to finish this fight in his male body so that he could then use his female form to throw anyone trying to follow him off the trail if need be. Ranma didn't like killing people, especially not soldiers who were just following orders. Armand, on the other hand, could prove a real danger to his friends, and he was going to go down.

Ranma danced backward, now almost giving ground, moving this way and that, but letting his opponent track his movements as he thought about what to do. The next moment, the swordsman's next strike came down, blasting into a snowdrift deeper than most of the snow covering the field they had been fighting in. The snow blasted up, blinding Armand for just a second. When it cleared, Ranma was standing on the side of his sword.

A kick to the chin lifted Armand upwards and sent him hurling backward. For all his muscles, there was a limit to how heavy a person could be. And after his first strikes had gone so wrong, Ranma had used his ki to enhance the strength of that kick.

The man was hurled backward, but he rolled in the snow, coming up even as he spat out into, raising a hand to touch his jaw. "That was a good..."

Ranma didn't let him finish speaking. He had followed Armand and two powerful jabs to either thigh, and the man's legs no longer obeyed him.

He collapsed, face-first into the snow, where he desperately tried to roll, pushing himself up out of the snow. Even the most powerful man could still suffocate, after all. "What, what did you do!"

“That’s for me to know and for you to never figure out.” Ranma taunted, giving the man of a victory sign. Not that he figured the man would understand the actual gesture, but the meaning would probably get through.

He was thankful that the guy didn’t seem to understand the importance of where Ranma had struck. Unlike Roland, who had figured it out almost instantly. *Then again, that guy is a freak anyway*, Ranma thought somewhat respectfully of his friend/rival. *I wonder what he’s up to?*

Actually at that moment, Roland was dealing with a series of nasty winter raids from Sachstein, designed to discover whether or not rumors which had reached their ears of his demise were accurate. Alas for that country’s ambitions, they were not.

Staring down at Armand, Ranma debated for a moment whether or not to kill the man. With his legs no longer working, and his sword having been abandoned in his attempt to push out of the snow, Armand was pretty much helpless.

And Ranma wasn’t a killer. If he had had to kill the man in mid-battle to put them down, that was one thing. Now that he had won though?

*But that doesn’t mean I’m going to let him continue to be a threat.* With a wide smirk on his face, Ranma crouched down, sticking out two fingers as they began to glow, almost steaming as Ranma used his ki to heat them up a bit. Just as quickly, he was holding a pair of metal spoons which began to glow. For this next technique he needed something a bit wider and more circular in shape than his fingers. Moreover it wasn’t so much penetrating through to a pressure point, as transfer enough heat into a moxibustion point..

Armand snarled and thrust out a massive punch in a pretty well-coordinated strike even if he couldn’t use anything from the waist down. But Ranma smacked his arm just slightly to the side and closed in quickly.

The man’s breastplate was soon sliced off at the joints, falling into the snow even as Armand bellowed and tried to fight back. Then Ranma was in again, getting behind the man, his heated needles thrusting forward in a series of strikes designed to cover the one real one. Armand screamed as the heated needles went home in various places of his body, but it sounded more like rage than pain, not surprising Ranma at all given the man’s durability. But Ranma still felt the strike, the Weakness Moxibustion Point hit home, and then he was bounding away, flipping upwards and backward several times to land several hundred feet away from Armand.

“Well, I think I’ve done enough here,” Ranma announced seeing the towns watchmen and guards coming out towards him on horseback. “You should get feeling back in your legs and about a few hours. The rest of what I’ve done to you... that you’ll discover on your own. Have fun trying to figure out what all to do with your life now.”

“... Wait, what?” Armand blinked, Ranma’s last few words and the strangeness of them cutting through his anger as he felt the heat of the strikes that the strange youth had done to him begin to fade. “What, what did you do to me?!”

Without replying, Ranma turned away, racing across the winter landscape once more. Behind him, he could hear the horses on the road, trying to use the roads to get ahead of him. But a straight line even in wintertime was going to take him far less time than the roads would take horses. *Still, I don’t want to have to be dodging patrols all the way back to the Silver Meteor Army’s lands.*

With that in mind, Ranma put more ki into his legs, grimacing at the amount of energy it took, not having realized that using the aerial style technique on snow as he had been had slowly drained his reserves by tiny increments. Normally such a small amount wouldn’t have mattered, but with his reserves a third of their normal size, the strain had built up quickly.

Still, he pressed on and swiftly began to leave the area of around Artishem behind.

**OOOOOO**

“What do you mean, you don’t want to report a theft?!” shouted a very harried looking guard captain. “Your monks, all of them reported you had an intruder, we saw the intruder escape, you have evidence of smashed doorways and apparently unconscious monks! And, and, nothing was taken!?”

The priest smiled beatifically at the shouting man, waiting for his diatribe and before smiling faintly. “While you are correct we do have unconscious members of our brotherhood, none of them were overly injured, they were merely brushed aside. That is what happens when normal humans get in the way of God’s chosen.”

“... What? What are you talking about?” The man asked.

The monk merely smiled, shaking his head. “I am afraid I can’t tell you. It has to do with temple secrets, I’m afraid. Secrets I am bound by oath to keep. And since there was indeed, no theft, I cannot in good conscience report such.”

The guardsman spluttered at that, but no one, not even a nobleman, wanted to get on the bad side of the temples. It wasn’t so much that individually priests had much in the way of power, but combined, the temples had a tremendous amount of power if they wished to exert it. It was only the most powerful nobles, like the two Dukes, who could ignore the temples and

their power base among the people. And even they trod lightly around actual holy sites and temples themselves. Certainly no lowly guard captain was going to try.

The man left without a response, and the head priest pushed himself to his feet, following two of his most senior brothers down into the Grotto, where they looked over the now empty bookshelves. "It must be a sign of the gods," said one of them. "How else could someone enter the Grotto so easily, and then, without seeming to be carrying anything, abscond with every record within?"

"Truly," agreed the head priest, shaking his head in thought as he stared from the empty bookcases to the side of the Grotto, where the mosaic stood. "Now, if only of the angel had been so kind as to tell us what his being here meant."

"Do we truly have to wonder? Most of those records were royal records, from the start of the line of House Charles to now, including lineages. And we have all heard rumors from our wandering brethren of rumors of the Prince surviving..."

"True. And if the heavens themselves are on **her** side..." The priest paused, thinking deeply as he touched the note from Princess Regin, thinking about the proof of her identity it contained and what had happened here.

Unlike his brethren, he was also a bit of a political animal. Not as much as the chief priests of the various deities who resided permanently in Nice, the capital, but he was still a veteran of temple politics and knew the lay of the land politically speaking in Brune, as well as socially. The idea of a queen was going to be a very hard pill to swallow, but perhaps, with this kind of divine intervention to possibly prove her lineage, Regin could make it stick.

"I believe that we should talk to the brothers who came face to face with the angel, and then, perhaps yes, send a message to Nice and the Highest. We will need his word to declare this a true miracle of the temple, and this pigtailed person as perhaps a messenger of the gods."

OOOOOO

Ranma had reached the nearest woodland by this point and had slowed down, realizing with a groan that in his haste to get away from all pursuit, he had not retraced his steps. Instead, he had cut even further east, and possibly even a little south. "Crap! It's going to take me forever to figure out where I am and how to get to where I want to go!"



Creating a simple torch, he looked down at the map, wondering where the hell he was, then stuffing it back in his pouch - not his ki-space, which would be temporarily out of order given all the books in it - shaking his head at how useless the map was. It showed the roads and the towns, and nothing else.

Suddenly a shiver went down Ranma's spine, and he looked around wildly, staring into the predawn darkness taking a combat stance as he looked around for trouble. Not finding any and feeling another shiver going down his spine, Ranma groaned. "Why the Fuck do I think I just made a lot more trouble for myself somehow? That wasn't even a shiver I'm familiar with either."

It hadn't been the New Rival shiver, which would've made sense after Ranma's pasting of Armand nor the crazy love interest, which he was damn happy for. It wasn't even the dreaded new fiancée shiver! Nor was it any derivation of any of the three main categories of shiver that Ranma had felt often enough to categorize.

No, this was an entirely new kind of shiver. That did not bode well. "Crap!"

It took several minutes for Ranma to calm down, but when he did, he sighed. There was nothing he could do about it now, and so he looked at the map, looked down at the compass that he had been given for by Tigre and then, picked out the northeast direction, sighed, and began to follow it.

A moment later, a branch cracked, giving out under the weight of the snow that had piled upon it, followed by a feminine cry of anger ringing out through the woods. "Oh, come on!"

Having initially gotten himself so badly lost, it took Ranma more than two weeks to get back to Territoire. First, ten days to figure out how to discover the right direction, and then another seven days to get back. Ranma had become so lost in getting rid of any pursuers, that he had been heading deeper into Thenardier territory for much of that time.

By the time Ranma saw the town in the distance, to his surprise, Ranma also saw signs of spring, or at least the snow was melting in places. Ranma felt it wasn't going to be a real's spring, more a temporary defrosting, but regardless, he was grateful for it. Ranma felt he'd had enough of winter travel to last a lifetime. And the constant drain on his ki reserves from needing to continue to use a tiny trickle of ki to remain on top of the snow rather than sink into it had been good training, but also really annoying.

Arriving back at Lord Augre's castle, Ranma was ushered in without delay, finding Regin, Tigre, Elen, and Lim, all waiting for him along with Augre in his dining hall. Tigre smiled at him, exchanging a nod with Ranma, while Lim smirked slightly, secretly, before looking away. Despite their being together, she wasn't a very effusive sort, and certainly wasn't going to be more welcoming in front of Elen. The teasing would be truly terrible.

Ranma grinned back at her even so, then twitched his eyes to Regin, nodding his head to the younger girl. "I got it. All of it. But this is the last damn time I volunteer for things that aren't related to finding a fight somehow."

Looking at her boyfriend, Lim suddenly realized that Ranma was about to play a joke. In response, she quickly stood up from the table, moving away several steps.

Before anyone else could turn toward Lim and wonder why she had done so, Ranma began to pull out books from his ki space. Or rather to dump them out. Swiftly shrinking a ki-space sort of expelled things like water out of a cannon. Books upon books upon books began to tumble out from Ranma's sleeves, piling up onto the table, which started to creak alarmingly under their weight, before finally giving way. The books continued to pile up, and Elen, Tigre, and the others were caught so completely by surprise that it took them a few seconds before Tigre grabbed Regin and pulled her away.

By the time Ranma was done, the table was nowhere to be seen, completely buried under the pile of books and squashed scrolls. He moved around it, smiling cheerfully at the group on the other side who stared back at him agog. "There you go," he announced mock-cheerfully, "all the records from the Grotto. Every single book. So, unless one of the priests had the latest record of your family's line out somewhere, it'll be in there. Have fun trying to find it. I'm off to bed."

With that, Ranma left, the others staring after him. Then Lim began to laugh, shaking her head, joined by Elen moment later. "Well, he did say he'll just bring the entire records back with him, didn't he! And he surely did!" Elen shouted between bouts of laughter as all three of the Brunemen stared at the two laughing ladies in silence for a time, before finally understanding the humor of the moment and joining in, while the history of ages continued to settle in front of them.

## **End Chapter**

Wintertime in medieval settings suck, unless, like in Wild Wolf, whole armies are used to moving in such conditions or simply have no choice. I really couldn't think of any other scene that wouldn't seem redundant for Tigre and the others with him, not even Lim. I Hope to show her as an interesting character in her own right in the future, but again, it's winter. Blargh. Still, next chapter will show more about Lim, about Tigre, and the plot will start moving forward again as war spreads across Brune as crows gather, thinking the country a corpse right for the plucking. And maybe, if we get that far, a certain blue-haired Vanadis will make an appearance too.

