Some of these scenes might be more disjointed than my usual. This was not written in one go, though the last scene was, it was written whenever this particular concept wouldn’t stay silent in my head LOL. Still, hope you like it. I might post it over on fanfic in December as part of my present to my fans there, since I think the Vanadis section needs some serious love. It’s a great series and I just don’t understand why it isn’t more popular.

**Sword, Bow, and Horse**

**Chapter 1: A Horse thinks = A Butterfly’s Wings**

Ranma lay back on the rooftop of the Tendo dojo, scowling as he stared out into the darkening sky, remembering what had occurred yesterday. He was not Happosai, no, he was **furious** at what had occurred and not just because of what Happosai had done to him or that he had come so close to being weakened for the rest of his life thanks to the Weakness Moxibustion Point.

No, what enraged Ranma was something else. *This is the second time I've been caught out by something like this! Pressure points, moxibustion, they're the same thing, and I obviously need to learn some about them. They're a subtle and dangerous Art. Why the hell hasn't my Oyaji thought about adding some of that stuff to our style? I think adding pressure points into our aerial mastery would make taking on multiple enemies easier.*

As if summoned by Ranma's thoughts about him, Genma hopped up onto the roof a scowl on his for-once human face. “Boy! You need to head downstairs and thank your fiancée for the help she gave you this afternoon against the dreaded master. If not for Akane, you’d still be a weak good for nothing!”

“Why should I?” Ranma muttered, looking away in embarrassment, though a part of him wondered where his Oyaji got off, demanding he thank someone else.  *As if Oyaji ever thanked anyone for anything.* “Like I asked her to get in the way, besides I'm busy thinking about the Art up here Oyaji, and that's way more important. You taught me that, remember!”

“Oh what an ungrateful **girl** I've raised!” his father shouted, grabbing at Ranma’s shoulder and lifting him up off the roof. “Now you get down there, and you thank Akane properly!”

Ranma broke his grip, then blocked a few other blows, looking at his father seriously. “Oyaji, why have you never told me about pressure points and other stuff like that?”

“Bah, they are a distraction from the true Art boy, anyone can poke a finger into someone else after all.” Genma said sententiously.

That line made Ranma pause, staring at his father before shaking his head and not going there very purposefully. “But we just saw how strong they can be. Think about it Oyaji, if you could shut down your opponents by making them weak or paralyze them or unable to feel their arms, that would be huge in a fight, wouldn't it?”

That was why Ranma had memorized the little chart showing the Weakness Moxibustion point even as it was being torn apart in front of him by the wind of the Hiryu Shouten Ha. “And don't you remember what trouble I ran into before with the Old Ghoul and her using that pressure point on me that made me so susceptible to heat I couldn't transform!? There could be others too, right?”

“Bah, there aren't,” Genma said definitively, though he looked a little shifty as he did so. “You've already run into the worst of the lot, and thanks to your fiancé,” he said pushing Ranma towards the edge of the rooftop. ‘You were able to survive it. Now go thank her proper boy!”

“Come on Oyaji, you expect me to take your word for that?” Ranma said, pushing back against his father’s grip before breaking it easily. “You didn't even let me know about the moxibustion point before Happi used it on me, and you'd never heard of the Phoenix one or how to counter it either! That means there's more out there to learn.”

“I'm you're martial arts teacher! And I say there isn't,” Genma said, getting into Ranma's face belligerently. “Don't you believe you’re your old man!”

“Are you even listening to yourself!?” Ranma said with a laugh. “Believe you? The only way I’d believe anything from you is if it serves that fat stomach of yours!”

Genma growled at that, and threw a punch at Ranma’s head. “Respect your elder boy!” But Ranma ducked under the attack, and then the two were off, dancing around the rooftops and exchanging blows and insults in equal measure.

They were interrupted after a few minutes by both people shouting at them from below and a cackle from nearby accompanied by a splash of cold water. The first was ignorable, given it was coming from Akane and Soun, but the second, thanks to the water, wasn’t and girl and panda turned to stare at the Grand Master of Anything Goes sitting on the nearby chimney, smirking at them around his pipe.

Worse for Ranma’s ego, the diminutive garden gnome looked none the worse for wear after their clash earlier that day. *Damn, I thought my accelerated healing was good, just goes to show I’ve got more to learn there too.*

“The boy’s right,” Happosai said puffing on his pipe. “There's a lot more to pressure points than you know Genma. If the boy want’s to learn, why stop him? Our school is all about taking from others and working them into a greater whole after all.”

Happosai cackled again, holding up a frilly red bra. “Heck, I’d even be willing to offer you some help, all you have to do is model this for…”

With an incandescent roar of rage, the redhead grabbed her father by the arm and hurled him towards the ancient pervert then, ignoring the shouts from down below from Akane, Ranma bounded off over the rooftops, thinking hard about who she could go to learn more about pressure points and such. This didn't let take very long, since it was a very short list, and only one name among it was one that she trusted. After changing back into his male body, Ranma went over to Doctor Tofu's clinic

But when he arrived, he saw the man exiting the building, with a heavy bag over his shoulder. Looking closer, Ranma could see a serious look on his face, and he was somewhat surprised at the speed the older man showed as he ran off. “Hey doc, got a minute?” Ranma asked hopping down to run beside the older man easily. “I was looking to talk to ya about something.”

“Ranma, I can't deal with you right now,” Doctor Tofu said sharply. “There's been a car accident at the edge of Nerima, and I've been called in to help stabilize the wounded.”

Shrugging, Ranma continued on beside him for two more steps then grabbed Tofu by the back of his shirt and hopped up into the onto one of the nearby rooftops. “Then why are you pussyfooting around like a normal pedestrian, man? Let’s go!”

Doctor Tofu blinked then looked around a little sheepishly. “It's been a while since I've roof-hopped for very long, actually.”

“Then you should get back into the swing of things quick Doc,” Ranma replied with a smirk, pushing him hard in the back. “Now come on which way do we go?”

When they arrived in record time, they found a scene of destruction. Several cars had been crushed by a truck, which had turned badly onto the road they were on, smashing into several other cars, and buildings, its driver three sheets to the wind.

Taking a quick glance around, Doctor Tofu immediately took charge of the scene, impressing Ranma somewhat. He moved those injured that had already escaped the car crash out and away, treating them as best he could. None of the ones who had been able to move on their own were very wounded, save for two men who had been cut rather badly by flying debris. Worse still, were three other people, one woman, and two young children, trapped in the back of a car whose roof had been crushed, trapping them within.

Some of the policemen on the scene explained this to Ranma as Tofu did what he could for the others. …So we just have to wait until the Jaws of Life to get them out.”

“You're new to the area aren’t ya?” Ranma said with a grim smile, moving over to the car quickly, having actually been examining it for weaknesses while the cops were jabbering on. He had to straighten up a single strut first in order to get a clear grip on the rest, but once that was done Ranma pulled and with a shriek of tortured steel, the piece of roof came away. He tossed it to one side, doing the same to the other side, before lifting out the first of the kids, setting her down their feet, then their mother, moving over to Doctor Tofu quickly with her, seeing a nasty bruise covering half her head.

Once there, Ranma waved off the police officers, who were staring at him in shock, evidently not one of them coming from within the Nerima district. Instead, he watched Doctor Tofu go about his business with the wounded. The doctor seemed to have eyes in the back of his head, the ability to concentrate on multiple things at once, turning from one patient to help another when they started to groan or shift and soon he had even the worst injured slowly recovering under his ministrations.

*I've never actually sat back and watched Tofu work like this, or any doctor really.* Ranma admitted to himself. *I mean I knew he was a decent martial artist and knew about pressure points, but I suppose his doctoring skills are even more impressive.*

Then he frowned, staring at Tofu’s hands, which were around the forearm of a young boy, one of the three Ranma had rescued. The boy had been whimpering a second ago, and there had been a noticeable bulge in his forearm, but now not only had he calmed down, but the bulge was gone. *What the heck, that’s not just setting the bone, what did he do there?*

Something had just happened, just on the edge of Ranma’s senses, not seen but sensed. Ranma was no stranger to using the body's ki to heal, in fact, that was the only way he could use his own ki at this point, but he knew of its existence. He had been healing faster and in many ways better than most people could for years now and also had run into a few other ways it could be used consciously since coming here to Nerima. But the ability to take his own ki and use it to heal someone else? That was not what anything he had ever seen before.

Soon though, Doctor Tofu had all of the patients stabilized enough to be moved to a hospital and those walking wounded had been seen to. AN ambulance had also finally arrived through the snarled up traffic, and Doctor Tofu spent several minutes talking to the EMTs, getting respectful nods in return, before Ranma help lift the worst of the patients into the ambulance.

With his job done, Doctor Tofu exchanged bows with the police and gathered up his remaining equipment, and gestured Ranma to follow him, making his way back down a side street. “Why exactly were you looking for me in the first place, Ranma?” he asked politely. “Not that I'm ungrateful for the help, but you said you were looking for me when you first showed up.”

Ranma fell into step beside him again, and the two of them walked back into Nerima, soon leaving the majority of the larger streets behind and entering into the almost quixotic and somewhat backward area of Tokyo as Ranma explained his troubles. During this, Tofu looked at him thoughtfully, but remained silent until the younger man had finished speaking. “So you want me to teach you about pressure points.”

Thinking about all he knew about Ranma, Tofu frowned thoughtfully. Ranma had only been in the area for a little over a year now, but he had certainly made an impression on everyone, especially of late given his issues with the ancient Grand Master of Anything Goes.  *The battles he seems to attract are getting larger all the time, but he has yet to involve innocent bystanders in any of them*.

And that was just it: for the most part Tofu felt that Ranma acted more like a trouble magnet, attracting those fights, rather than seeking them out. Yes, his general attitude certainly didn't help, but despite being the equivalent of gas on a fire, it also wasn't all that horrible on its own. Yet there was a great difference between believing that the young boy had good character and a decent idea of what honor meant and giving him an entirely new way to hurt his enemies.

“What you want out of life Ranma?” Tofu asked obliquely. “I've always heard about how you're going to be the new master for Anything Goes, and take over the Tendo dojo, but I've never actually heard you say that was what you wanted.”

“To be fair Doc it's not like you and I hang out or anything,” Ranma said with a chuckle before sheepishly pulling at his pigtail. “Still, you got a point I guess. It's just, everyone else is making these choices, but for me, it don’t make sense. I'm not even 17 yet, why do I need to think about what I want out of life now?”

“What better time to do it?” Tofu answered promptly. “If you're serious about something, then you need to start early. Don't you know that already, from your martial arts training?”

Ranma slowly nodded, then sighed. “I don't know what I want,” he said honestly. “I mean I like Nerima, I like the idea of having a home I guess, it’s the first time that's ever been an idea I could get into, but do I want to be a teacher? I don't know. I know I want to help people, that's part of the code, but how is up in the air. Maybe I could be a policeman or something. There have to be supernatural and superstrong martial artist-type criminals, right?”

“Like your friend Ryoga and his penchant for self-destruction?” Tofu asked with a dry, almost sharp smile. The pig-boy had smashed through his offices at one point in an effort to find Ranma, and Tofu had not taken kindly to it, or the fact that when he attempted to remonstrate with the younger man, his blows had done absolutely nothing until he, ironically, used the very techniques that had now brought Ranma to him for training.

After a second spent staring at Ranma, Tofu nodded. “Realize, that I am unwilling to teach you, if all you're going to do with my knowledge is turn it around and use it to hurt other people. And I'm not going to teach you just pressure points. If you want to learn them, you're going to have to learn my Art Ranma.”

“You mean like that stuff you did with that kid, the one with the black hair and the school uniform?” Tofu looked at him in surprise, and Ranma shrugged. “I saw something there, like you had used your own ki to heal him almost.”

“That… was exactly what I did yes,” Tofu said with a smile. “I set the bone physically then accelerated the healing to get rid of the bruising up to a point. You were able to see that?”

“More like sensed something was going on rather than seen,” Ranma said, scratching at his pigtail again sheepishly. “I know about ki reinforcement, that damn stick of the old ghoul and the gnome’s pipe, weapons space, like Mousse uses, and healing of course, I’ve been healing myself for years. But to consciously control it, to add your own to someone else’s? That I can’t do.”

“Then we have our first objective don't we?” Tofu said with a smile, although inwardly he was very impressed. Yes, he knew that Ranma knew about how to use ki as he explained, but to go beyond that to understand that control was possible, that was even more impressive from someone so young. “We will see if we can use that mind of yours for anything but martial arts, Ranma.”

**OOOOOOO**

A few weeks went by, with everyone noticing that Ranma had adopted a new routine, which had a marked impact on his daily life. Instead of heading home with Akane, he would head to the clinic to work with and learn from Doctor Tofu. This made Genma somewhat pleased, since taking time to teach Ranma meant Tofu couldn't watch him during his job, of advertising for the clinic and cleaning up outside. He still had to deal with kids in some zookeepers coming after him occasionally, but he felt those only came around during slow weeks.

Nabiki was not so pleased. She was no longer making money on the fights that would occur at school. On Doctor Tofu's orders, Ranma would ignore, avoid or end any match with anyone who attempt to fight him without hurting them. He stopped staying after school to help the various athletics teams (much to their shrieks of dismay) and thus missed getting caught up in some of the shenanigans that the new principal was always tossing about, and didn't even chase after Happosai anymore. Instead, he had gotten together with a group of girls and actually devised a few traps for the old man to keep him away from the girls when they were changing. It cost them a few ‘lovelies’ but the girls were fine with that. This meant the girls respect for Ranma had gone through the roof, but that a large portion of the money Nabiki had been getting from their madcap chases went out the door.

Worse for her pure entertainment purposes, Ranma had learned to keep his cool, which helped keep things calm at home. This was again down to Dr. Tofu, wanting Ranma to exert control of his mouth and emotions before he learned about pressure points and using ki to heal. It was very necessary, or else he would fall into the trap of using emotion to connect to his ki, which would have long-term consequences.

At first, Akane didn't care. In fact, she actually enjoyed the fact they had time away from one another. Akane hated the fact the parents always pushed them together. And despite the fact that Ranma occasionally needed her help, mostly for schoolwork, but a few times to deal with his various enemies, like Happosai and the weakness point, Ranma was still far too arrogant, and far top irritating, always calling her names. Now, they still fought occasionally, but at least this way Akane didn't feel like she had to watch him all the time so that he wouldn't head over to see the one of the floozies that flocked around him. They didn’t get along any better, but their relationship, if it could be called that, didn’t get any worse.

For her part, Kasumi was very happy to see the change in Ranma. It meant the young boy was maturing. Indeed, she thought this was the first real step towards growing as a person outside his Art he had taken since arriving in Nerima. As such, she actively encouraged it, even coming around to prepare meals for him and Tofu, though of course this did not have the positive effect she wanted it to have.

Soun was at first not at all happy about the fact Akane and Ranma were no longer around one another after school. He felt, as did Genma, that the more time they spent around one another, the closer the two would get. But with Genma blinded by the fact Ranma was now making his life easier in the short term, Akane and Kasumi convinced Soun to not try to make trouble. Beyond a few wailing sessions about them not liking one another and how the schools would never be joined at dinner a few times of course.

Even though it was cutting into the time he could spend with her after school, Ukyo was pleased for her friend, seeing it as the first step to Ranma becoming a doctor, which, in her mind, would be fantastic. Shampoo was much the same way, since the position of healer was well-respected among her people to. On the few occasions where she came by and saw Ranma learning from Doctor Tofu, she left them alone, not barging in as she normally would with her massive maces leading the way.

“This is too-too nice that you learn from good doctor,” she said, leaning into Ranma's personal space and hanging over his shoulder to look at the book Ranma was studying. Then she frowned, tugging at his pigtail for a moment. “But you need learn in Chinese too Airen!”

“How many times do I have to say it Shampoo! I'm not learning this so that I become better stock for your tribe,” Ranma growled, but made no move to push her off. That was always a problem with Shampoo. *Where the heck do you put your hands on a girl if you're trying to push her away? Especially one who’s so curvy and smells nice and…* shaking his head Ranma should that thought off. *None of that! Remember this is the same girl who would've killed you if you were really a girl yourself. Keep that in mind at all times! And the fact that Akane would geld you, Ucchan would cry, and your father would probably try to kill you.*

Cologne was rather ambivalent about it. She was partly displeased because Ranma hadn't come to her, but knew that Ranma didn't really understand how she viewed him: rather than being there to really help her granddaughter win Ranma’s hand, she saw more as a toy and a source of amusement than anything else. Besides, she was busy with their restaurant anyway.

Doctor Tofu, the man who had forced Ranma to change in order to learn what he wanted to, was personally astonished. The boy with the odd curse was a sponge for anything when he decided to put his mind to it. After only about a month and a half, he had learned everything Doctor Tofu felt up to teaching him about using pressure points and other esoteric means of healing and had begun to be able to see ki and even manipulate his own to a certain degree. From someone so young that was astonishing, and it made Tofu realized he wasn’t really the right one to take Ranma’s training to the next level.

Of course, Genma and Soun wouldn’t hear about an opportunity to get Ranma and Akane some time away from her rivals. At first Akane didn’t want to go, but then Genma had challenged her to prove she could learn martial arts as quick as Ranma, while also taking care of him as a woman. The moment that Akane pride had been brought into question, she forced Ranma and Tofu to bring her along.

Now she sat across from him on the train in a huff, not looking at him, while Ranma morbidly wondered how badly this was going to go. He leaned over to Doctor Tofu and whispered, “So, exactly what is your old master like?”  *Please don't let him be like Gramps, please don't let him be like Gramps!*

“No he's not like Happosai,” Doctor Tofu said, wincing a little. “He's not interested in stealing your panties.”

“So what is he interested in,” Ranma said, now turning and crossing his arms, glaring at Tofu.

“Poses,” the bespectacled man said reluctantly. “Once he knows you’re female, he'll force you to pose in numerous different poses. That and cosplay outfits. He’s mad about them.”

“…How exactly do you know that?” Ranma said after moment’s silent contemplation.

Tofu shuddered, and looked away, and Ranma blanched. “You know what, I take that back, I don't want to know.”

“Thank you,” Tofu replied feelingly, trying to regain some of his dignity.

After two train changes and a bus ride followed by a 40 minute hike at Akane’s best speed, they were finally at the door of a clinic deep in the woods, part of a small yet very spread out village that looked straight out of the Showa era, complete with lots of rice fields separating the house, except for the telephone lines and the lights scattered here and there.

The building they were led to was one of the larger in the area, but still was separated by its near neighbor by a few hundred feet worth of forest, and was fronted by a large yard and a gate. Sitting out on the balcony of the house, which was much like the Tendo’s, was an old man who was extremely thin, but also quite tall: he looked as tall as Kuno or his father, but looked as if a strong breeze could blow them over. He had a short, trim beard, and absolutely no hair on the top of his head, and deeply wrinkled face.

He looked up from what he was reading when the three newcomers came within sight. His eyes narrowed, then he seemed to smile, as he caught sight of Akane before gesturing them towards him, to which all three martial artists jumped up over the small gate, landing neatly on the other side and moving towards him. This show of physical prowess did not seem to surprise the older man. He simply waited for them calmly, and then when they were within casual conversation range spoke. “Ahh Ono, I haven't seen or heard from you in years, and now you show up out of the blue like this? What's the happy occasion? Did you finally work through your issues with that girl you liked?”

“Not just yet, no,” Ranma said with a chuckle, pushing Tofu forward. “We’re still working on that, but actually we’re here for me sensei,” Ranma said, thumping one hand into his other palm, bowing over them. “My name is Ranma Saotome, and I want to learn how to use pressure points and healing other people through ki.”

“Ranma has learned all he can from me Master Oden.” Doctor Tofu said stepping forward and bowing in turn. “But I think you will find him and apt pupil for everything you can teach them.”

“Not like yourself Ono, who decided that you only wanted to learn half of my art,” the older man responded tartly, shaking his head. “You learned pressure points, you learned the first few steps of the offensive style of the Thousand Needle style, and you learned just enough of ki transference to solve simple issues, but not the full amount. Yet you were at it four over four years, and you say this boy can learn what you couldn’t? How long has he been training under you?

“A little under two months,” Tofu replied honestly. “But he has already learned all I can teach them. Ranma is an **astonishingly** fast learner, who is heir to a family style that specializes in adaptation and aerial movement.”

“Truly?” the older man replied scratching at a scar above one eye, which Ranma had just noticed. It wasn't large, but it was visible, and he wondered why Oden had one if he could use ki healing. But then he shrugged it off as not if his business is Oden hopped to his feet, surprisingly spry for his age and looks.

“Very well, let’s see how good he is. If he is good enough, I may deign to teach him, so long as he can match my price,” he said, his eyes glancing over to Akane. “And what about this one? Is she along to just pay that price or is she supposed to be here to learn too?”

Akane bristled, and Tofu made calming down gestures to her. “No sensei, Akane-san is Ranma's fiancé, and came with him,” he said.

“Almost at knife point,” Ranma said, holding up a finger.

“You're just saying that because you think you’ll learn faster than I can,” Akane growled. “I’ll show you!”

“Akane we've been over this,” Ranma replied with a sigh. “You don't take the Art nearly seriously enough to make that kind of boast. Would you want me boasting about how I can act or something?”

They’d had that conversation more than once and under Tofu's direction to keep his cool, Ranma had even refrained from insulting her. It hadn't ended very well for him besides that, but she had slowly come to understand that for Ranma, the Arts wasn't just something he did, it was something he was: his entire life was dedicated to the Art. And deep down, she wasn't certain if she could make the same claim or even wanted to. But her pride wouldn't let allow her to admit that aloud especially to Ranma, and she growled. “Just you watch, I'll learn everything he can teach us before you can!”

Rolling his eyes, Ranma turned back to the master, who was looking at them thoughtfully.

He cocked an eyebrow now then moved over into the open area of his front yard, cocking one hand behind his head the other thrust forward, the wrist angled downward in a style that Ranma recognized. “Snake fist style huh,” Ranma said, nodding and moving over to stand in front of him, bowing with his hands over his chest again, before straightening up. Unlike the older man though, Ranma didn’t take any kind of stance, just standing there watching Oden, seemingly at ease.

“Something like that yes, though there are those who would say the Thousand Needle style came first,” the older man replied dryly, then attacked without any warning, uncaring or unsurprised at Ranma's not taking a stance.

He **was** surprised however by Ranma’s speed as he dodging this way and that, not attacking yet, analyzing Oden’s style.

“You are fast,” the older man said, stepping back, with Ranma doing the same. “Let's see how fast.”

With that the man moved forward again, his slight thin frame moving almost as fast as the Amaguriken technique, causing Ranma's eyes to widen slightly. But he kept up with it, his hand flicking this way and that, until he began to feel pinpricks hitting his arms. *Thousand needle huh, kind of a descriptive name there*, he thought, concentrating on the flow of his ki for a moment as he tried to figure out why his arms were going dead and do something about it.

“Do you feel that!” the older man said with a wide proud grin. “Those are attacks of the Thousand Needles! It is the offensive style based upon pressure points, upon hitting specific spots on the boy hard enough to do whatever you wish to your enemy!” The man said, getting through Ranma's guard and going for a thrust to his chest, his fingers in a point as they had been throughout the fight.

But Ranma was still game and moved his body just enough to dodge that the attack, his leg sweeping out to force the older man back before Ranma kicked off the ground with his other foot up into the air. The man barely dodged another kick that would've taken his head off, and Ranma was then behind him, body checking into his back and sending the older man sprawling, before turning.

Having rolled away and turned to face Ranma Oden watched in amazement as Ranma’s arms glowed slightly at the points where the old master had touched him. Then they were moving again, and Ranma took up the stance facing the older man. “Neat trick.”

The older man stood up straight, signaling a pause in the bout once more before he turned to look at Tofu. “He has mastered the defensive style of ‘Open Waters Through the Dam’?”

“It seems so, although I've never seen him do it before. Ranma seems to be the type that learns best by doing apparently,” Tofu said dryly.

“Well that’s good since that’s the way I like to teach too.” Without elaborating on that, Oden turned to Akane. “And you girl? Step up and let's see what you can do.”

Akane groaned, stepping forward. “I don't suppose I can go change first?” She didn’t want to flash this possibly dirty old man her panties after all.

“When would an opponent let you go and change before attacking?” Oden said shaking his head. “Just be glad I believe in bowing before a match.”

What happened next was predictable in Ranma’s opinion. Akane charged forward, Oden ducked and dodged and then was in among her reach, deadening her arms and then his fingers slamming into her chest. At his touch, her entire body froze in place like a statue.

That hadn't been what Ranma had anticipated and he looked at the older man with more respect. “There’s a full body paralyzing point?”

“Something of the sort,” Oden said with a smirk. “But I'm not going to tell you about it right away boy, that's one of the higher level attacks of my school after all. Now,” he went on, turning away from Akane who was trying to move her jaw enough to make noise beyond a low growling sound, “let’s talk about payment. I don't need money, I don't want chores done or any of that. I hope Tofu's told you about my particular…requirements.”

“He told me that you like forcing girls to do poses and cosplay” Ranma said bluntly, glancing over to Tofu. “Depending on if I have veto power on whether or not it's too sexy or shows too much skin I don't have a problem with.

“That's nice boy, but I'm not into men,” the older man said, gesturing over to Akane. “You’ll have to get your fiancé to agree to it.”

Ranma sighed and pulled out a bottle of cold water that he'd picked up in the town. “No,” he said wryly “I won't.” With that, Ranma dumped the water over his head, then shook his hair out, staring at Oden and crossing her arms over her chest. “You ever hear of Jusenkyo?”

Oden eyes went wide for a second, and then he started to laugh raucously. “That,” he said aloud, “that works boy! I don't suppose then that you will need to do anything to pay for young Ranma’s training,” he said, tapping a counterpoint on Akane, who fell forward on her face, having been frozen in a kick and unable to recover from suddenly being able to move again. “Although we would have quite a lot of work to do with you to get you up to where you could use my school,” he said honestly. “So from you, I'm afraid I would demand more. You’re the right age to pull of the schoolgirl look. So tell me, did you bring your school swimsuit, or your exercise togs?”

Akane growled angrily, and suddenly was holding that large hammer of hers. Given the fact it wasn’t aimed at him this time Ranma watched closely, trying to figure out how the heck she did that. *It’s not like Akane used weapons space or anything, it’s almost like the hammer was constructed out of her anger somehow.*

An instant after the hammer appeared Akane swung it at Oden, who even though his eyes widened rolled away, the hammer blow slamming into the ground with enough force to create a crater where he had just been standing. “Never!” She then glared at Ranma as if it was all his fault, then turned away in a huff, the hammer disappearing. “I'm going home! This, this perverted cheating style, there's nothing here for me or any real martial artist!”

Just nodding his head and keeping quiet took all of Ranma Tofu-trained self-control, but she did so and watched her go with something approaching relief, before turning back to Oden, putting her hands behind her head. “So, when do we start?”

“Hold on girl, I suppose I'll call you girl in that form,” he Oden said with a chuckle, looking over to Tofu. If I'm going to train Ranma here, I want you to stay too Ono. I'm getting old, and you already said that Ranma is heir to another style, he can't carry on mine. You need to learn the upper level attacks and ki control techniques.”

“Master, I can’t stay here that long, I have a practice to run!” Tofu protested.

“Call in favors or what have you, I don’t care. You’re the only one of my students to return and I don’t have much time left to me before I’m too damn old to even perform at all.”

Sighing Tofu nodded while Ranma frowned at being excluded, but Oden held up his hand. “I will teach you everything about using your ki I can, and all of the defensive and Offensive styles that Tofu did not learn while training under me. I will also teach you the mid-level attacks and many of the esoteric pressure points so you can defend against and use them. But I will not teach you my Secret Arts. Those are to be taught to my successor only. This is not negotiable.”

Ranma continued to frown at that, but slowly she nodded. “I can understand that and I agree.” Then she grinned over at Tofu. “Besides, having a sparring partner around will make me learn a lot faster anyway.”

Tofu gulped at that, backing away little. “Now Ranma, let's not be hasty.”

“Look at it this way, you get some exercise one way or another, and maybe this way, we can continue to work on Kasumi addiction. Heh, I can take a picture, blow it up, and use it like a mask when we fight, maybe that'll break yer habit of going crazy.”

“That’s a disturbing thought,” Tofu replied dryly, but then sighed. “But I suppose I am kind of getting desperate to figure out a solution. Still master, surely there's someone else that could take over your school. You know I’m no martial artist, I’m a doctor first and foremost.”

“Bah!” Oden said, waving his hand. “It's all about the flashier arts, Karate and simple Judo or anything from China since anything foreign has to be better! Pathetic! I told you, you're the only one of my students to come back here in 12 years! Now come on, let’s you situated inside. We’ll have some lunch, and then we’ll talk about my training schedule for you both.”

The two younger people followed after the older man and as they stepped up to the porch. Ranma leaned over toward Tofu. “How many other students were with you?”

“Seventeen at one point,” Tofu replied in a whisper. “The four girls left first of course then the nine who had girlfriends. The rest of us stayed for a while, but all the others have gotten married since, and I doubt they'd be able to talk their wives into posing.”

Somehow, Ranma realized once more that he didn't want to know how Tofu and the remainder had paid for the man's exercises. Voyeurism, photography and of course sneaking around unseen were after all already all too known to him. W*ell, at least I'll be learning something new!* Ranma reflected, trying to keep positive thoughts in his head.

That became difficult when he learned Oden wanted to him to practice both in his male and female forms, and was going to Ranma’s own body to make him learn the pressure points in both forms! Some of these were of course on his chest, and Ranma had a very hard time not smashing Oden into pieces.

In fact, he failed in not attacking only, not breaking Oden in half. Instead, his attack hurled Oden through several walls. But Oden had what Ranma was quickly coming to believe was a normal pervert’s indestructability, and bounced back. But he did stop actually forcing Ranma to go through that. Instead, he made Tofu do it. That was only a little better, but at least Ranma had Tofu firmly in the doctor category, he could deal with it a little bit. When it came to his chest and his private parts though Ranma drew the line and Oden forced him to actually read from books. That slowed his training down tremendously, but even so, despite all of the issues…

**Training Montage:**

“Thrust that chest out more!” Oden bellowed. “You spent the entire day as a boy, now come on, give me some sugar.”

Dressed in an almost see-through white leotard, Ranma complied grumbling angrily under her breath

“Now give me some squats!”

/////

“You have got to be kidding me…” Ranma mumbled, staring at the nurse’s outfit Oden held up to him. “There’s no way that’ll fit me.”

“That’s the beauty of it Ranma me lad,” Oden cackled.

////

Argh, what the hell Oden, why the hell does my arm itch and yet not work properly!? What did you do!?”

////

“What do you mean you’re going to break a rib in order for me to understand how to heal it!”

“I told you before Ranma, the best way to learn how to heal others is to have to heal yourself first!”

**End montage**

Ranma learned everything Oden could teach him and it took him two months, not the seven months Oden had predicted. Of course, Ranma had also learned a few things he hadn't wished to. Ranma had up to this point basically treated his female form like a curse, because it was in his opinion. It was simply something he had to deal with, or could use and manipulate at need and would be discarded if he ever got the chance. The female form wasn't something he wanted to be at home with, or truly learn much about besides how to fight in it. This however shifted from how to fight in to learning about its various weaknesses strengths and more importantly why they were the way they were. He learned about the strengths and weaknesses before, but not the why of them, and he learned more about men and women here than he was really comfortable with.

For his part, Oden was astonished. Looking on as Ranma performed a perfect Thousand Needles style attack on a dummy, he shook his head slowly. One of the higher level attacks, this attack was designed to not only paralyze, but also cut off circulation to the lower extremities. “Two months,” he said to Tofu, who sat beside him. “**Two months** and he has learned everything I can and willing to teach him. Where in the hells did Ranma come from!?”

“I think you would have to ask his father about that. But from what I know, his training began when he was four years old, and was based upon a simple thought: Everything can be it training.” Tofu replied dryly. “So I think it is both the fact that he learns quickly and came to both me and then to you at an already abnormally high level.”

“Perhaps it is, but don't let that fool you, the boy’s a practical genius with anything involving the body! My God, if we could get him into the Olympics, Japan would never lose a single event again.” Oden said, chuckling at the very idea.

“The allegations of doping would get depressing,” Ranma quipped, smirking back over at the two of them, having come close enough to hear that last line if not the rest. I'm done I think,” he said, gesturing to the dummy, which had been deformed at precisely the right points to denote the pressure points he had to strike at precisely the right strength. As Oden and Tofu watched, it slowly started to fall over.

Of course, Ranma had also learned a few things he hadn't wished to. Ranma had up to this point basically treated his female form like a curse, because it was in his opinion. It was simply something he had to deal with, or could use and manipulate at need and would be discarded if he ever got the chance. The female form wasn't something he wanted to be at home with, or truly learn much about besides how to fight in it. This however shifted from how to fight in to learning about its various weaknesses strengths and more importantly why they were the way they were. He learned about the strengths and weaknesses before, but not the why of them, and he learned more about men and women here than he was really comfortable with. “What’s next? And if you say another session on how to cure internal injuries I’m going to have to practice on you!”

“I think we’re done Ranma. As I just told Tofu, you have learned everything I am willing to teach you. That last attack, that was to be your graduation essay as it were, and you performed it flawlessly. Indeed, I've seen you practice on your own. You have even modified some of my own style, adding it to your existing style.” He shook his head repeating, “I have nothing more to teach you Ranma Saotome.”

Ranma grinned then bowed, her hands to her chest. “Thank you for all that you have taught me, master. I can't say all of its been pleasant, but most of it been useful.”

He looked up at the sky then over to Tofu. “Do you think we still have time to get to the train?” Tofu had not completed his training, but he had basically informed Oden that he couldn’t in one visit. Instead, Oden would move in with him soon, after taking a few months to sell his house and other such things, which Ranma basically hadn’t cared enough to notice.

They did, and the two of them went inside, while Oden sat there, staring at the front yard contemplatively. He bid them farewell when they came out, having not noticed how long they had been gone for, or that Ranma wore a smirk on his face just a little wider than his normal arrogant expression, or the fact that Tofu too was smirking a little.

The two of them walked off, and as they passed through the outer gate, Tofu asked quietly, “So, how long do you think it'll take him to realize you erased all of your pictures from his hard drive, and burned all his hard copies?”

“Oh, I think we should be able to get through at least half the town before he realizes it,” Ranma said, walking just a bit faster. “If we hurry that is.” They were almost out of range of the scream when it occurred, and both men looked at one another before laughing and speeding up quickly.

The train deposited them in Nerima up late that evening. The streets were nearly dark, the only light coming from the various lampposts, when the two men exited the train station. “Well Ranma, it's been interesting, but I don't have anything more I can teach you. Unless you really think you're going to be a doctor?”

Ranma frowned pensively. “I don't know doc, give me a few days to think about it. I do enjoy using the Art to help people, it’s part of my Code’s main tenant, but I also well, really like punching people,” Ranma said, laughing self-consciously at himself. “The idea of becoming a policeman seems a little more realistic to me. But I'll still help you around the office for a few weeks while ya get back up to speed, give me time to think about it you know.”

Tofu nodded, shook the younger man's hand, and parted ways. While Tofu walked home like a normal person, Ranma quickly hopped up onto a roof, and made his way home to the dojo over the rooftop highway. He was nearly there and about to jump over the walls, when he heard a shout of “Airen you back!”

Turning in the direction of the noise Ranma didn’t have time to dodge and ate a face full of tire, as Shampoo stopped her bicycle right on top of him, hurling them both down to the ground. Shampoo rode her bike, and her bike road Ranma, so she was able to hop off her bike quickly, going down to her knees next to him, and pulling Ranma into her chest. “Shampoo so sorry!” she said, and if Ranma didn't know her any better, he could almost have thought she was sincere. “Stopping bicycle be too too hard on rooftop.”

“That’s oka, okay,” Ranma said, stuttering a little and trying to wiggle his way out without actually touching Shampoo, which again was quite hard. He managed to do so however, and was standing up again in a few minutes, though Shampoo was still clinging to him.

This proved to be a problem when Akane marched out of the house already glowing red with anger, her hammer in hand. “You…” she hissed, ”here we all were, wondering how you were doing, and the moment you come back, you have one of your floozies hanging over you! Ranma, you **pervert**!”

Ranma had a choice then, and oddly enough time to consider it for once instead of simply reacting. He could either take the shot, and be sent flying, dodge and let Akane hit Shampoo, or try to stop Akane. The last would make him have to deal with both Akane’s renewed anger and the two fathers, who Ranma could see coming out of the house behind her, yelling at him for daring to touching their little girl/his fiancé. Letting the blow hit Shampoo, would cause Shampoo to take the rivalry between the two of them seriously, which would quickly result in Akane either been killed, or simply humiliated on a daily basis, which she would probably take out on Ranma in the long-run. Dealing with the parents would be an all-night thing, and probably would carry over into the next day. Not at all the kind of restful homecoming Ranma wanted. In the end, Ranma decided that his best option was to do as normal and let Akane hit him rather than someone else.

*But that doesn't mean I'm going to not get a few jabs in all my own*, he thought. Throwing off Tofu's injunctions about watching his mouth and keeping calm, he grinned at Akane. “Akane, hey! I see you're still suffering from tomboyitis and did your thighs become even thickerRRR!?”

With that, Ranma was punted off into the distance, having pushed Shampoo to the side, his hand pushing just below her breasts to do it. While Shampoo started yelling at Akane behind him Ranma sailed through the night air writing himself and actually crossing his legs under him as he looked around. “Ah the night is so peaceful up here….”

Then he looked where he was going, and blinked. “Is that Ryoga?”

Flipping himself a few times through the air, Ranma deadened most of his forward momentum, then landed lightly on a lamppost, before hopping down next to Ryoga. “Hey Ryoga, haven't seen you in a while. Why’re you looking so glum, chum?”

“Oh… Ranma,” the other young man said, looking at Ranma through nearly dead eyes. “You’re here. Good, I have this new technique. It probably won't work, but I want to try on you anyway. Who knows, I might luck out and finally have my revenge on you.”

Ranma frowned looking around. “It’s nighttime dude, can we put it off till tomorrow? You can come back to the Tendos for the night, I suppose. Just no sneaking into Akane’s room as P-chan dig? Only I’ve got a lot of new, nasty tricks of my own, and some of them would make you stay in that form until I released you.”

“I guess so,” Ryoga said disconsolately sighing and looking even more depressed. “Isn’t that always the way, nothing goes right for me.”

“Ryoga,” Ranma said, throwing arm around his frival. “Are you okay? You're a little bit more depressed than normal.”

A few weeks went by, with Ranma fighting Ryoga the very next day then remonstrating with the other young man harshly about the technique he'd learned. The technique was based on emotional ki, and in particular depressed the power of depression. Tofu had been very clear on that point: the more you use a ki technique like that, the more that feeling overcame you. And while poking fun at Ryoga was one of Ranma's favorite pastimes, that didn't mean that he wanted the pig-headed martial artist to collapse into a black hole of depression, which was the way he'd been going.

Instead, with Tofu’s help, the two of them worked out how to create their own pure ki attacks. Ranma learned his first, something that sent Ryoga back into depression for a time until he was cheered up by Akane of all people. Having learned how to move ki through the body to an amazing degree, using it as an attack only took visualization and practice on pushing it out of the body. But even so, it was a semi-bonding experience between the two martial artists, until Ryoga got himself lost again.

After that, life in Nerima started to wear on Ranma. Besides becoming fed up with his old man and most of the Tendos (even Kasumi occasionally). The fights were now just boring without Ryoga around. Ranma had learned enough of the offensive style of the Thousand Needles to shut everyone down around him with an ease that was simply astonishing. Even Kodachi if she bothered him in his female form (no need to hurt her or even though her besides a jab to the forehead and back) and turning Kuno into a statue soon became his favorite part of going to school. None of them could match his speed, and so none of them could dodge his attacks. Ryoga couldn’t either, but he was able to move enough so that even with Amaguriken Ranma couldn’t hit his pressure points hard and often enough to take him down quickly.

And Ranma wasn't willing to handicap himself anymore. There was just no way that his local rivals could make the fights more interesting and unless he went out of his way to give himself a major handicap they didn’t really have enough to offer in terms of exercise or training. Besides, he was still learning more from Tofu about medicine, and finding that quite interesting, even if it forced him to read a hell of a lot more than he was comfortable with. But that was just it. Ranma felt he was learning and moving on, growing up even!

But the people at the Tendo place, all of them seemed to be stuck in a rut, and he wasn't certain how to deal with it. He started to spend more time with his friend Ukyo as well as Shampoo a few times. Shampoo had backed off after that first night back, and didn't cling to him whenever someone else could be around, which Ranma was very thankful for.  *It's a pity,* he thought as he walked home one night from Ukyo’s, t*hat she comes from such a backward tribe. She's damn sexy, but the moment I act on it boom we’re hitched, and I become a second-class citizen. Screw that!*

And then there's Ukyo, he thought, chuckling. He'd spent a lot of time with her since coming home, basically helping her to get her restaurant up and running again after she'd run into a few of her own adventures while he was away. But Ranma still thought of Ukyo as the guy he'd hung out with as a young boy. *And crossed with her continued cross-dressing, well I've got enough problems in that area without adding more, thank you very much.*

On the other hand, being around the two of them, had told Ranma two things, one of which he’d realized earlier that evening. One, he wasn't interested in either of them or the restaurant life and two, Ranma wasn't actually attracted physically to Akane.

**Flashback:**

Ranma looked up, from wringing out his hair after having sprayed some hot water over his head to see Akane and two of her friends racing inside Ukyo’s restaurant. “At least I'm not the only one getting wet today,” he quipped, gesturing the three of them over to the grill. “Are you three hungry, or did you just come in here to escape the rain?”

“Both,” said Sayuri, wringing her long hair out, and then taking the towel Ranma had offered, patting her chest and back down.

As she did, Ranma couldn't stop himself from looking at the three of them from head to toe. Whatever he normally acted like, Ranma was still a guy, he still had urges. He just had a near inhuman amount of discipline and control.

The three friends were a study in contrasts. Sayuri was an athletic girl, with a modest chest, which Ranma could tell since her school uniform was clinging to her thanks to the rain, and long legs. She was something of a track and soccer star apparently. The sight of her drenched like this caused Ranma to look away hurriedly, his eyes flicking over to Yuka. Yuka too was very girly in shape, the quintessential normal girl, not very athletic, not very fit, but also not very bookish. She had more curves are then Sayuri, which she accidentally showed off to Ranma has she turned around, patting down her back in the rear, which was even more soaked than the rest of her, her knee socks soaked from some kind of splash.

Pulling his eyes back from that, Ranma's eyes rested on Akane, and he sighed. Akane had nothing up top, in comparison to the other two and had big, thick hips showing her body's strength and power. Indeed her entire body was nearly squat with muscle, but that really wasn't all that sexy to him. Yes, being strong was great and all, but Akane just didn’t have anything else going for her physically.

Sighing, Ranma turned to the grill, muttering under his breath. “No chest, just none and thick hips too, so sad,” before realizing he'd spoken aloud. Looking up, Ranma paled a little, as he saw all three girls glaring at him, and the hammer already coming towards him.

**End flashback**

*So if I don't, erm, that is, I don’t feel anything towards her y’know, physically, can I still…l…lo…like Akane, in the boy girl way?* Even in his mind, he Ranma couldn’t quite get that word out and his face went red.  *Is that even possible?*

Over the next few days, Ranma watched Akane occasionally, thinking those thoughts, and wondering if there was anything about Akane that really attracted to him besides her body, which obviously didn't. In the end, he decided that no, there wasn’t. Ranma had clung to her because of Akane’s offer of friendship, and she was a nice enough girl when she wasn’t angry or trying to be a martial artist, but was also way too prideful and prickly. The last two could be said about Ranma too. And that was the problem, some of their issues were too similar, and when they were together, they grated against one another. They could be decent friends but nothing more

Ranma’s musings as he finally came to that conclusion were interrupted by Soun’s voice and he looked up from his thoughts to see the two clowns going into one of their normal routines. “Oh happy day! Genma, look, your boy has finally understood that my little girl is a girl!”

“Yes my old friend,” Genma said with a smile. “Soon they will be married and the schools will be joined!”

“Is there a reason why you're checking out my little sister Ranma, baby?” Nabiki asked, smirking as he she saw Akane getting angrier. “Finally understanding what this whole fianncée business means maybe?”

Ranma shook his head, and then to the surprise of all simply smirked at them, then began to laugh. That caused even Akane's anger to fizzle for a moment and she stared at Ranma. “Ranma, are you all right?”

“Oh,” just remembering something,” he said, giving her a thumb’s up before smirking over at Nabiki, the same smirk that always made the girls at school blush. Nabiki didn’t but she did look worried. “Oh, just remembering that first day I was here. I was told by your old man and I quote: choose one, she'll be your fiancée. But I never **did** get to choose did I? You all chose **for** me. Which means that all this time, it’s still been up to me.”

Akane suddenly blinked, then looked at him then back to the parents, then to Nabiki who was paling, before she threw back her head laughed. “Holy hell!” she shouted between guffaws. “He's right.” Then Akane leaped up, slapping Nabiki on the shoulder. “Tag in,” she said then raced up the stairs, laughing still.

The youngest Tendo‘s reaction completely took the wind out of Soun, whose ‘Big Head Terror Attack™ faltered, leaving him look a little out of I, blinking in shock as he stared up towards where Akane had disappeared. Her reaction had caught him by complete surprise, since before this, Akane could be expected to react badly if anyone tried to even bring up her relationship for Ranma, for good or ill. But Akane had never made any bones about hating being forced into their relationship, if it could even be called that, and the fact Ranma had cut it off like this, was a great way forward for her.

Genma too was appalled, and made to speak, but Ranma beat him to it. “Don’t bother old man, we both know that was the case. And as much as you two seem to act like they don’t matter for this arrangement of yours, there are still two other Tendo daughters.”

In response Nabiki paled further so much she resembled a ghost, staring in shock at Ranma. He slowly got to his feet, picking up his plates and Akane’s to carry them into the kitchen. “Never mind Nabiki, you’re sexy as hell, but you're also the most egotistical and materialistic a girl I’ve ever met, I doubt it'd work out. Kasumi though,” he went on, winking at the older girl, “Now she’s a real consideration.”

Kasumi giggled, knowing full well that Ranma didn't see her like that so not taking it seriously.

Not only had she made it her own disinterest in him plane, but Ranma knew Tofu’s interest in Kasumi, and after all he had done to help Ranma. Going behind his back like that would be just freaking wrong in Ranma's opinion. And would have made the time they had been spending on trying to train him out of going bonkers around Kasumi a waste of time too.

“Oh, I don't know Ranma. While you might be on your way to becoming a doctor, you're not exactly a in a stable position just yet. Perhaps in a few years,” Kasumi teased. “Still I wouldn’t mind a bit more pampering and perhaps a meal or two I don’t have to cook. If that’s what I can look forward to as your fiancé, then I could put up with your lack of long term prospects.”

Staring between them, the three other people at the table could only gape, even Nabiki was thrown off completely by Kasumi’s response, though she was also still reddening at the insult Ranma had tossed her way. Not just because they were true, but because Ranma had the simple guts to say it aloud. *Just you wait Saotome, I’ll get you back for that!*

How long Ranma would've been able to remain in that house with his new attitude, and even Akane cheerfully going her own way, Ranma would never find out. The very next day as he was coming home from helping out once more at Doctor Tofu’s his life changed again. This time he had been trying to help Tofu get over his Kasumdiction, a term Ranma had come up with knowing it sounded damn dirty, and wanting to shove it down Tofu’s throat. It hadn’t worked, since Ranma just couldn’t sound like Kasumi enough to make Tofu react, and the lack of progress on that score was starting to get at Ranma.

Yet as he was roof hopping his way home, Ranma spotted what looked like some kind of blonde girl in a sailor suit and a mask rushing over the rooftops at the far edge of his line of sight. Blinking he frowned “blonde hair sailor suit, what looks like a whip coming from one hand? Either someone has gotten seriously into cosplay, or sailor Venus is real. Meh, stranger things have happened to me I suppose.”

Curiosity getting the better of him almost as if he was a furry demon Ranma hopped after the girl. Soon they exited Nerima proper and entered Juuban, the next district over where the tales of Sailor V had originated. Almost immediately after crossing the border between the two districts, Ranma saw her join a battle going on against Youma monsters that looked like a cross between various beasts and men and women, their furs dark, their eyes red or covered in shadow.

Ranma scowled angrily as he saw the monsters attacking the Sailor Soldiers. “You'd think that lot would've learned not to come near Nerima by this point. The last time they had shown up, one of them had the misfortune of being shaped a woman wearing a red brassiere, and Happi had found her. What resulted was best left to the imagination of particularly dirty people as the ki vampire met the even stronger ki vampire with the underwear fetish, and Ranma still shuddered thinking about it.  *Still, at least it looks as if most of these are asexual at best.*

Then Ranma shrugged. “Well, I wanted some excitement, sure as hell ain’t gonna look this gift horse in the mouth.”

With that, he leaped down, landing lightly on the head of one, then kicking out at two more using the first causing them to turn in his direction before plunging his fingers deep into the shadow creature’s head that he’d been using as a stand. That one screamed, causing everyone to stare at them even as the two Ranma already kicked attacked. Ranma grinned, flipped, and pulling the former prop off its feet, tossing it into two others, then ducked under and back through the attacks of the two already trying to hit him. His hands his punches caught them in the chest and Ranma’s fist plunged deep into both of them, hurling them backwards with a cry of agony. “Hey girls, is this a private party, or can anyone join in?”

“Be our guest sempai! My name’s Sailor Jupiter, and the rest of these girls are the Sailor Scouts, you’re welcome to help!” said one of them. She was pretty-looking brunette, who was a little taller than Ranma female body though why she called him sempai Ranma didn’t know. She sent him a flirtatious wink behind her mask and a smile to match before turning and firing off a powerful energy attack of some kind. “Jupiter Lightning Splash!”

The fight quickly turned against the Youma at that point and a portal quickly opened up nearby, their generals eager to get them and their stolen life energy back. Ranma grinned, pushing forward harder, ducking and weaving through them all, aiming for the ones closest to the portal, causing the retreat to slowed rather than actually taking any of them out. “Come on, I’ll cut them off form the portal! Any enemy we take out now will be one we won’t have to fight later!”

“OH, that is so true,” said a drawling voice from nearby, one Ranma only barely heard over the sound of the battle. An instant later he reached the edge of the portal, which quickly began to close. Whatever the attackers had gotten from the people Ranma could see scattered around unconscious, the ones controlling the portals had decided now to cut their losses rather than risk the Sailor Scouts and Ranma invading them in turn.

But as Ranma smashed another Youma to shadowy dust, an attack from an unseen Sailor Scout, caught him in the back. “Dead Scream,” the same voice from a few seconds earlier intoned. The attack, a large purple ball of magical force, caught Ranma in the back and propelled Ranma through the rapidly closing portal, which snapped shut an instant after he disappeared into the roiling mass of magical energy. In that millisecond, Ranma disappeared from the Earth.

“What the hell?!” Shouted the same girl who had introduced herself to Ranma as Jupiter before. She turned angrily, sending a lightning blast from one hand at the area where the attack had come from without even thinking about it, causing Sailor Pluto to gasp and duck away desperately. “Pluto! What the hell, why’d you do that to Sempai darn it!

Even as she defended herself from Jupiter and the other Sailor scout’s shouts and angry threats at the sudden dark turn the fight had taken, Pluto had to stop from smiling for joy. *Yes, one more chaotic locus down, and one of the largest ones too. We’re that much closer to Crystal Tokyo and my finally being free of my geas!* Who cared if Ranma’s leaving would cause further problems for Nerima and even Tokyo in the short term. It was the end result that mattered. For that, Pluto would cheerfully slaughter whole countries, let alone one martial artist, no matter how unusual he was.

**OOOOOOO**

Up was down, black was white, the sensation of touch was gone, his mind was purple, his skin itched and moved oddly, the air smelled of roses and tasted of old socks and then… reality reasserted itself. Ranma found himself not where he had been, but high up in the sky somewhere. Staring around and then down, Ranma could see nothing of civilization anywhere within sight, and he groaned as he plummeted through the air. “What Chaos God did my old man piss off, and how can I get him off my back?!”

But that was the last real thought Ranma could think of to explain how he got where he was, the ‘where he was’ consuming his mind quickly as he fell through the air. The air up here was thin and that told Ranma he was really high up, as if he had to leaped out of a plane without a parachute, and that meant he needed to slow his descent down or else.

He began to use all the tricks he could slow himself down, spreading his arms out, pulling off his shirt and trying to use it as a makeshift parachute. But after a few dozen feet, the shirt was shredded by the wind. He desperately reached into his ki space for another, this time pushing his ki out into it, toughening it up as much as the cloth could take. This slowed his descent, but Ranma could feel his ki leaking out of him, the air pressure threatening to tear the shirt out of his grip or his tendons as he gripped it. *The toughness training had nothing on this!!*

Ranma continued to plummet for a bit but then he spotted something in the distance, some kind of giant flying creature. It looked like a dinosaur almost, but not quite, more something from one of those fantasy novels he’d seen a time or too. Regardless, Ranma laughed in relief and then began to flip himself, discarding his shirt with relief and kicking off it before the ki he’d injected into the shirt could dissipate to move himself towards the creature, waving his hands and trying desperately to get its attention.

The wyvern had been doing its normal routine, floating on the hot air coming up from below from a few vents deep in the mountains looking for food as always. But pickings were slim on the ground. It had just begun to look for a place to land and rest when it spotted something in the distance, some kind of bird plummeting through the air. With a hungry snarl the wyvern broke off of its dissent, flapping its wings for altitude towards the bird. After all, bird on the wing was always better than birds squashed on the ground.

If wyvern’s could blink though, this one would have done so when it got close enough to make out further detail and found that the falling thing wasn't a bird, but at two legged beast, one of those which had such an odd fur, and routinely made claws out of wood and other things. But this one didn't have any such claws, and so it was lunch even if it was falling through the air. With no sign of how it had gotten there. Swooping up the wyvern opened its mouth, expecting an easy meal.

This did not happen.

As the creature snapped at him Ranma’s arms, moved faster than a striking cobra and his hands clamped onto its jaws. Slamming its jaws shut, Ranma then flipped over it as the beast try to recoil, landing on its back, and grabbing it around its neck right behind the very dangerous head. The back was made of hard scales, all of them sharper than a sword, and Ranma quickly lifted himself off with his knee protecting his man parts even as tiny cuts appeared on his thigs, slicing through his pants and making marks that looked like papercuts despite his toughness training. Of course if anyone but Ryoga had tried this, their thighs would have been sliced to ribbons. With his legs quickly healing, Ranma had to keep himself pushed off of the thing even as he tried to twist this way and that the wyvern twisting its head around in an effort to bite him despite his grip right behind its head.

Wildly the wyvern twisted this way and that, trying to first bring its fangs and then it’s claws to bear, but Ranma stamped on its back, pushing its wings down, and sending them both freefalling for a few moments before Ranma lifted up, placing his feet back on its back rather than its wings. The thing took that bare instance to twist its entire body flinging Ranma loose, his bare arms sliced quite badly for someone who had gone through the toughness training.

But the thing had done its job in Ranma’s opinion: it had slowed his fall, and even as his arms healed once more from the wounds, Ranma grabbed the chance he had now earned. Thumping his hands together, he pushed them down towards the ground, blasting out towards the ground with a blast of ki energy in intervals. It slowed him down, but it expanded his reserves like water even worse than toughening up his shirt had. But it worked, and he was able to grab at the first branch coming towards him twirling around to further deaden his momentum.

But Ranma had neglected to think about the wyvern who, angry at the fact it's meal had fought back, attacked just as Ranma reached the trees, having been somewhat unnerved by the gold and white beams of power. Ranma barely had an instant to touch the first tree limb, when the wyvern was on him from behind, slamming him down, biting down hard from the side

Any normal person would already have been dead from but the teeth of the wyvern, which barely penetrated Ranma’s skin, just enough to cause a lot of pain, but not to kill him. In response Ranma’s hands lashed out again grabbing the thing by its neck, and flipping it over his shoulder to crash into the tree that he just landed on. Then it was Ranma’s turn to charge, slamming blow after blow into the thing, using his fists and attempting to use his ki sight to find the wyvern’s pressure points, but the hardened scales of the wyvern stopped too much of his hitting power to get through. “Hard way it is then!”

A blow took the wyvern in the side of his head, flinging it sideways, but it’s wing claws still found Ranma, opening his stomach up in a cut from one side to the other. A kick send the wyvern backwards, blood exploding out of its mouth as the kick ruptured something inside, Ranma having imparted enough force to finally get through the thing’s scales, using what little remained of his ki to do it.

But instead of retreating like any sensible the wyvern stumbled back a further step then quickly turned, bringing its tail up and around like the world's largest whip slamming into Ranma and hurling him through the air. His back hit and then shattered a tree in his flight, but he rolled through, riding the hit as best he could, skidding to a halt as the rest of the tree collapsed around him. Gabbing some of the sharp bits of tree he hurled them at the wyvern. One of them slammed into its wing and through it, pinning it against another tree. A second went through its other shoulder, and a third just missed its eye as the beast reared away, squealing in pain.

Wishing to finish this, Ranma charged forward, ignoring his body giving out on him as he closed. The Wyvern too, its eyes maddened and bloodshot, pulled its wing free, tearing a long gash in its wing and charging forward, ignoring its own wounds.

Just as the two were going to slam into one another again, two arrows came out of nowhere, one right after another aimed at the same exact point. The first one impacted its eye, shattering whatever film covered it protectively even as it bounced off. The second entered the weakened eye up to the quivers. At that, the light in its eyes faded instantly and the wyvern fell like a mannequin with its string cut instantly, plowing into the ground.

Yelping Ranma leaped to one side to avoid the falling corpse and turned in the direction of the shot. From out of the surrounding foliage came a woodsman in green cloth blending in with ease except for the red hair that was almost like Ranma’s female form, if a little lighter. In his hand was a large bow, its string tight but no third arrow on it, a quiver over his shoulder, part of a larger backpack. He wore heavy bowman’s gloves of leather, brown to his clothing’s green. The man’s shoulders were almost a broad as Ranma, and he had a friendly, if somewhat warry expression on his thin face.

Ranma nodded wearily. “Well, that was anti-climactic.” Then without further word, Ranma collapsed forward his body finally shutting down from ki exhaustion.

**OOOOOOO**

As the stranger collapsed from his wounds Tigrevurmud or Tigre to his friends, Vorn, Earl of Alsace, was astonished, appalled and impressed in equal measure. He was appalled by the fact that this man had fought a wyvern with no weapon to hand, impressed that he had survived, and had been doing so well before Tigre have been able to line up a shot. As he stood stunned for a moment he watch as the man’s pants, a pocket of some kind or other, exploded outwards, some kind of spell or other the man must have been using somehow escaping it’s confines now the man had fallen unconscious.

But looking at the blood scattered around, Tigre quickly shook off his momentary astonishment, moving forward to twist the man onto his back, reaching into his bag for his medical supplies.

Even as he did so, some of the wounds began to heal under his yet still astonished eyes and he shook his head. “This warrior is something else, though I have to wonder where he came from, and why he was fighting a wyvern barehanded. And what those beams of golden light were. Tigre had actually been tracking through the woods to find this particular wyvern, when those flashes had attracted his attention.

Tigre sat those mysteries aside for now in order to help the man, binding his wounds as best he could with poultices and cloth before leaning back. He then looked at the man and then the scattered items he had been carrying in his pocket somehow. Many of them were odd, but at least there appeared to be a pair of undamaged pants. “I wonder if that trick with the pocket is something in the pants.”

A second later, a disappointed Tigre set the pants down next to the pigtailed warrior to look at the rest of the things in his pocket. There were a few things with images of food on them, but when Tigre opened one, he found what looked like dried wheat or something similar, and so set them aside. There were a few items that were much more interesting, a knife with many different parts which flicked out from a central handle, amazingly well worked. A box of some kind with an even smaller box within it with strange gears within. Several camping items whose craft was astonishing, the lightness of them putting similar items, like a pot and spoons, to shame. And a sleeping bag the lightness of which he had not seen before.

Frowning, Tigre stripped the pigtailed warrior’s pants off, and put on the ones that hadn’t been shredded in battle with the wyvern. He then reached into the pocket again, hoping the magic would now activate, but it didn’t. With a sigh, Tigre moved around, and making a makeshift bag from the sleeping bag, tied it to his back over his own. Then the created a stretcher to put the man on. The stretcher over his shoulders, he began to move through the woods back to his homeland.

He stopped twice, hearing noises in the distance and hoping that the golden flashes wouldn't lead some other district’s hunter to his prize picked before he could come back with a party and the claimant. Putting up a wyvern for food and it scales for profit was too large a job for just him though. Still, there’s nothing I can do about that,” he murmured as he bent to his work.

As he moved around, he kept on glancing at the younger man, wondering about him.  *Where did you come from, how did you survived the blow that smashed you through that tree,* Tigre thought, having seen that one. “And more importantly, why in the world you’re not wearing a shirt. I don’t need to resuscitate Titta every time she sees you.”

**OOOOOOO**

Ranma woke up to the smell of something good, and he blinked, pushing himself upright only to let out a groan at the pain of his wounds. “Hiss…riiiight, Sailor Scouts are real and one of them doesn’t like me. Wonder if my old man made a deal with her family too? Falling through the air cover, weird flying ass-hat of a lizard, fight, archer saving me with a bow and arrow…Bow and flying lizard, big ass mountains and no cities in or anything else in sight… I am so not at home it’s not even funny.”

He looked around to discover the red-haired man sitting on the other side of a well-made fire. The man smiled at him, and held up a bowl of stew he had just ladled out of the pot Ranma kept in his ki space. He didn’t make much use of that space, but kept a few emergency things in there. But since the red-haired woodsman was holding the bowl of stew out to him now, Ranma wasn’t about to begrudge him the use of it. *I guess I was so out of it my ki space collapsed. Damn that’s not good.*

Ranma took the bowl gratefully, holding it up in like a flute towards the man, then tapped his chest “Ranma.” he said. “Sorry, but I don't think that you'll understand me any better than I understand you.”

The man nodded agreeably, then shifted speaking several different languages, badly if his stuttering was any judge. One of them sounded something like English, another like Russian, deep and gargling but he shook his head again with each. The man sighed, then tapped his own chest. “Tigre, Tigre Vorn.”

“Tigre,” Ranma nodded, then gestured over the man's shoulder towards his bow, putting his hands together and bowing thanks, ignoring the twinge of his wounds. The man shrugged that off, then gestured to Ranma wounds, thumped his chest, and then pointing at Ranma. Ranma understood that to mean that this meant his fight with the wyvern had given the man the opening, but he still nodded, and began to dig in hungrily.  *Venison stew,* he thought, *been a while since I had this, but it’s still tasty.*

Soon Ranma could feel his reserves of energy slowly returning, and closing his eyes, he redirected some of that energy to healing his wounds. The gash across his stomach slowly disappeared and Ranma then redirected his ki to his broken ribs, especially the one he could feel poking into the side of his lung. Must have happened in the wyvern’s attack when I hit the woods.

His other minor aches and pains Ranma let go for now. They heal themselves once he had enough reserves. With that, he carefully pulled off the makeshift bandages Tigre must have put on him. He looked up as Tigre gasped, leaning forward only to stop in astonishment at the sight of Ranma's field-tested he nodded. “Yeah, I heal quick,” he said, holding up his bowl hopefully toward the pot.

Tigre stared at Ranma, though if that was his first name, last or if he even had two in the first place Tigre couldn’t tell and then he shook his head with a smile. “I think this is going to be an interesting tale stranger, once we can communicate anyway.”

The other man’s droll tone came through clear despite the language barrier and Ranma laughed, nodding his head. He gestured around them, then back to Tigre. I’d say yeah, I think we both have stories to tell.”

For several days the two of them traveled through the woods together, with Tigre offering his cloak to Ranma, but not his spare shirt. Ranma's shoulders were just a bit too wide for a shirt of Tigre’s to fit, which was sort of irritating for Ranma, but he put up with the lack of shirt for now, the cloak doing enough to cover him.

Tigre also attempted to teach him the local language, simple things like tree, branch, quiet, and other things of that nature. Words like ‘the’, alluded them until Tigre began to add them to other words that Ranma had already learned. In turn, Ranma tried to teach Tigre how to move through the woods even more quietly than he already could, though he didn’t have much to teach him there. Ranma reflected that he would have to wait until they could communicate better before repaying Tigre’s kindness. Tigre’s interest in his ki pocket, once he got it working on the second day, certainly gave Ranma way to pay him back.

Tigre was continually amazed by Ranma's physical abilities, while Ranma showed amazement by turned by how good a Bowman Tigre was. Several times Tigre took a rabbit or squirrel on the shot, without even seeming to pause before spotting it and losing the arrow. Yet to Tigre’s surprise, there was none of the disdain or contempt nobles and many commoners felt towards the bow. Instead, Ranma’s amazement seemed genuine.

This was because it was. Ranma had never studied the bow, but he knew the basics, Tigre’s was mastery of Kyudo, the Japanese-style of bowmanship was incredible. The idea was to make your mind see the target and arrow as one. Ranma had never been able to do that, unable to visualize the event like that in the distance, but he could recognize mastery when he saw it, and even more amazing was how fast Tigre could do it.

But of course, as Ranma knew it would, the curse came out. As they were moving through the trees, the sky above began to darken and Ranma cursed, looking around desperately for shelter, and finding none. Resignedly he held up his hands to Tigre. “You no be surprise,” he said using the word for surprise that he had heard, Tigre use the day before, when describing how he had found Ranma. “Bad magic coming.” Again, Tigre had used those words to try to describe the golden light Ranma had used, though Ranma had refrained from explaining where he came from until he could learn the language better.

“Bad magic?” Tigre asked, looking up into the sky. “It's just rain, rain,” he repeated, using the word again.

Ranma shook his head. “Rain hit me, bad magic.”

“Bad magic… curse, some kind of curse?” The man said, frowning and looking up at the sky again. While he was a nobleman and thus was learned enough to not use the word magic to describe anything inexplicable he came across, he knew it existed too. And Ranma certainly didn’t seem to be so credulous as peasants were wont to be.

“Will it hurt?” He asked gesturing along his stomach where the wound Ranma had before had been. “Erm, pain,” he said smacking a tree nearby, then wringing his hand out in an effort to mime pain

In response, Ranma shook his head. “No, no hurt,” he said, using the new word. “Bad. You look away when I say,” he said, gesturing away.

Tigre shrugged, and two of them continued on their way, with Ranma still looking around just in case he could get out of this. Alas, he couldn't and the rain began above them.

Turning slightly at Ranma’s growl of frustration Tigre looked on in shock as Ranma shrank and two… protuberances… that the male Ranma most decidedly had not had a moment ago suddenly appeared there pushing out his cloak. It was instantaneous, almost, but very odd to watch the male Ranma shifting into a very female form. Ranma’s hips widened and curved, his hair grew a little longer and changed color, his face softened, even, to go along with now having breasts. For all Tigre could see (and he didn’t want to see anymore) his new friend had just turned into a woman!

His eyes tracked down, then up, then down again, then as he began to blush, he quickly turned away shaking his head. “B, bad magic!” he stammered. “Right! “Cover yourself, please!”

Ranma pulled his cloak around him tighter, trapping one arm under but tying it closed so that her chest didn’t wink at Tigre with every step she took.

It was still suggestive, and looking at her, Tigre shook his head. “I have to wonder what Titta will think about this.” he muttered to himself, cocking his head as he looked at Ranma thoughtfully. “Are you a guy originally, or girl? Then he frowned, “guy” he said tapping himself, then gesturing to Ranma “girl. Guy first?”

“Guy first” Ranma said with a firm nod. “Girl bad magic.”

“I've never heard the like Ranma,” Tigre said reluctantly shaking his head. “But then again, I've never seen the golden light you said you created or your healing ability, so I suppose that's fair. How change, how become guy?” he asked, try to use words that he knew Ranma had already learned now given how serious that question was.

Ranma shrugged, gesturing up to the rain that was still falling of course. “That and fire.” He didn't know the word for hot yet.

“Heated water?” Tigre shrugged and gestured for the two of them to keep going down the trail. “Well if that form doesn't cause you pain, I suppose we can wait until the rain stops for you to explain that.”

But it didn't stop raining, they were able to find a nice little cave to hide out in that night, but it rained continually and Tigre, looking up in the dawn sky, sighed and shook his head. “I have to get back as quickly as I can for many reasons,” he said “so I'm going to keep going. If you want to come with me, you're welcome to, but that isn't going to let up.”

Ranma barely understood one word in three of that, but he understood enough and could read the weather just as well as Tigre could. With a philosophical shrug, he held out his hands to Tigre for the cloak then stepped out of the cave transforming instantly under the pounding rain quickly. Even so, the sight of Ranma's bare back caused Tigre to blush again before he pushed it down quickly and moved around him out into the rain while Ranma once more tied the cloak tightly against her body.

Around midday, the two of them broke out of the woods and into several farmed fields, with a few horses and other animals visible here and there. Without the trees blocking his view, Ranma could now see a small town in the distance, with a palisade around it. It looked tiny but also well made, and Ranma followed Tigre toward it without any further ado.

There was no one around in the town when they arrive, the rain having chased everyone inside. Even the guards that should've been on the outer wall of the little town weren’t there. Ranma frowned at that, and pointed it out to Tigre. “That bad, need someone there, right?”

Tigre shook his head. “There's no threat, no enemies,” he said using a new word right after one he knew Ranma had learned already. “Don't worry. Now come on. Let's get undercover and dry!”

Nodding enthusiastically, Ranma raced alongside Tigre, only to pause and stare as they came to the largest house in the small community. It was separated from the rest by a little garden of some kind, and built up out of a tiny hill, had a large upper balcony and was at least four stories, while the other buildings were a single story tall outside of the church.  *Is Tigre some kind of nobleman?*

This idea was shown to be accurate a moment later as the door opened at Tigre’s pounding and the maid stood there. *I suppose some things carry over, um, what’s it called, function forces form or something? Still, why a French maid outfit?* Ranma sweatdropped, her eyes going large.

The girl was young, younger than either redhead by two years, maybe three if Ranma was any judge, with light brown hair and a kindly face. She smiled happily at Tigre, then in shock and concern as his disheveled appearance registered. Her face closed down when she looked at Ranma, so much so even Ranma could tell something was going on there. Tigre-sama! You’re home. We were getting worried, and then this rain came in! I do wish you would bring someone else along with you on your hunting trips.”

“No one else can move through the woods as quietly as I can,” Tigre said with a shrug. “Besides, it's a Lord's duty to protect his people, I couldn’t turn around and put someone else in danger while I was doing that.” he then smiled and ruffled her hair. “Sorry I worried you Titta.”

“I knew you'd say something like that,” Titta muttered, holding the door open to let the two of them enter then glaring almost angrily at Ranma. “And who is this, and why is she wearing your cloak in such a manner!” Titta could of course see that Ranma was shirtless underneath, and was not pleased with the implications of that.

“Um, this is Ranma. She, erm, well…” Tigre trialed off, smiling as an older man came into the foyer. He was carrying a steaming silver teapot and several cups. “Bertrand, you are a lifesaver!”

The man named Bertrand was an older gentleman, but seemed to have a certain respectability to his face and bearing, Ranma thought. He also had a ready smile, which he turned on both of the redheads. “Ohoh, it does not take a genius to know that a retainer should have some warm water on hand for his master on a day like this. Autumn’s bite is on us after all Tigre-sama. Although I did not expect you would find someone like this young lady.”

“Tigre-sama” Titta interjected, staring down at Ranma chest then turning an almost accusing glare on her face then to Tigre’s. “You didn’t answer me, who is this and why is she wearing just your cloak.”

Ranma blinked at the accusatory tone he heard then suddenly understood what was going on here. He waved Tigre to silence, grinning at the younger girl and reaching forward to ruffle her hair before the girl could move. She squeaked a little, and Ranma held a thumb up. “You know worry about me, I guy.” he said, *even as he thought Gah, I sound like Shampoo! Seriously need to learn more about the local language quick.* He said aloud.

Titta blinked at that, then let her eyes drop again to Ranma’s chest before glancing back up at Ranma’s face, her expression rather droll. “Did she hit head perhaps?” she asked, looking over at Tigre.

“Um, no,” Tigre laughed, “but I suppose you wouldn’t believe me until you see it in action.”

Taking Tigre’s laugh as his cue, Ranma moved over to Bertrand and picked up the teapot pouring the steaming water over her head, instantly triggering the change. “Magic.” He said simply grinning at the girl even as he untied Tigre’s cloak and tossed it to hang on a hook set into the wall nearby.

The girl fainted immediately, swooning to one side as Bertrand suddenly went white, grasping at his heart and leaning against the wall as he stared at Ranma in shock. Tigre grabbed at Titta softly laying her down before racing over to the old man while Ranma began to laugh.

**OOOOOOO**

“Did I say you could slow down maggots?!” Ranma shouted as he jogged (walked for him really) next to twenty other men ranging from his own age into their thirties who were trying to run up a hill near Tigre’s town of Alsace.

“No you bastard you didn’t!” shouted one man, followed by another roaring out “We’re only mortal not warriors of mystical proportions you ass!”

“That’s sir bastard to you lot!” Ranma roared back with a laugh, racing forward to pluck the large backpacks off the first two men who reached the summit, adding them to his own pack, balancing them there as if they weighed nothing before racing down to the other. “Now come on, get up there and then you can rest.”

This was actually their last exercise for the day before they could return to their real jobs, and the men were nominally used to it by now. As the spring sun beat down on them, the men continued to curse and grumble at him good-naturedly, but none faltered or really meant the insults they hurled his way, for the most part anyway.

Ranma had made himself something of a home here in Alsace over the autumn and winter. At first viewed with suspicion and some fear thanks to his curse, people had warmed up to him due to his medical skills, strength and willingness to pitch in. The fact he’d carried the wyvern he and Tigre had killed back alone without help through the woods was still talked about in the taproom.

Over those months Ranma had learned the language and, insisting on repaying Tigre and his household by helping around the place specifically training the tiny militia Alsace kept up. These were mostly farmhands and young men from the few stores, including the second and third sons of the blacksmith. Ranma trained them hard, but not as hard as he could of course. Still, he had a purpose: endurance is **EVERYTHING** in battle. When the roads cleared up so too had rumors of war begun to circulate around the area, and Ranma wanted his new friends to at the least be able to run away.

Ranma was actually enjoying himself here in this new world of his, and figured if his friends back home hadn’t figured out a way to bring him back, one didn’t exist, so why sweat the small stuff? After all, if this wasn’t an honorable way out of all his commitments back home without needing to choose or hurt someone personally he didn’t know what could be. *Besides,* Ranma thought as he helped the last man up the slope, *I’ve always been more of a barbarian than a modern man anyway. This ain’t so different than living on the road in some of the places me and the old man visited, and the people are a hell of a lot nicer, not to mention Tigre, Titta and Bertrand. Oh, I miss manga and TV, but that’s about it.*

“Ranma-sama, everyone!” a female voice shouted, and Ranma turned to see Titta and several other girls from the tiny village coming up their way. He waved back, bounding forward and down the far easier slope of the hill on that side to grab at lunch baskets, piling them high and racing back up the hill, with a laughing Titta in hot pursuit. “You can’t eat all of that Ranma-sama, that’s for the poor men you’ve been torturing!”

“I’m hurt Titta-chan!” Ranma said, turning and still balancing the baskets on his outstretched arms. In his opinion, Titta was a little cutey with her devotion to Tigre. *Poor guy can’t seem to figure out she’s interested in him though, and she won’t let me just outright tell him for some reason. Eesh, is that what the girls thought I was like? I knew at least Shampoo and Kodachi and maybe even Ukyo were really interested in me, but I had reasons for not returning their affections as I did.* Titta surely didn’t have any negative sides to her Ranma had discovered and he was rooting for her.

“Where’s Tigre?” Ranma asked several minutes later as the others were eating and talking to their girlfriends, sisters or wives. Many of these men were already married for all they were near Ranma’s age, but he supposed that went in line with the whole dark ages level of tech here.

“He is out hunting of course as you would know if you had actually listened to Bertrand this morning before you came out here to torture these poor men,” Titta said primly, sitting down next to him carefully. The two had become something like friends in the past months, though Titta still had a problem with Ranma’s general uncaring attitude for things like titles and such.

“It’s called training Titta, not torturing,” Ranma said with an eye-roll then his eyes narrowed as he stared into the distance. “Is Tigre or one of the merchants expecting a messenger today?” Out on the road leading into town, the only real road Ranma had seen in Alsace, there was a single rider racing up the road.

Titta too looked, and frowned, getting to her feet. “I suppose I should be there to greet him if he’s looking for Tigre-sama.”

“No need,” Ranma said, pointing in the other direction towards one of the outlying farms close to the village’s wall. There a mop of red hair could just be seen coming around the corner of the farmstead. “Still… I think somethings up, we should get back.”

Later, Ranma was unsurprised to find that his instincts were correct. Tigre set the message down and looked at Ranma steadily. That was something Ranma really respected about Tigre, he took his duties to his people seriously and never backed down. Even now faced with the prospect of war, he met that duty steadily. “Ranma, I can’t ask you to…”

“You don’t have to ask, you’re my friend. This might not be my war, but if you and your militia are being called up, it becomes my fight.” Ranma said simply. “I’ll go with you, just don’t expect me to bow and scrape to any of the other nobles.”

“Hohoho, do you even know how to bow, let alone scrape?” Bertrand asked, shaking his head. “The best idea for you would be to simply stay quiet in the background.

“What ‘quiet’ mean?” Ranma asked, effecting the same sort of accent he’d had when he arrived with Tigre, causing the others to laugh. But then Tigre began issuing orders to Bertrand and Titta, and the two of them moved off.

The two young men stood there for a moment then Tigre picked the Black Bow off the wall where it hung. That thing always gave Ranma a weird feeling, like being near a dormant volcano or something, something just at the edge of his sixth sense. Weird, but Tigre seemed at home with it. “Any word on what this war is about?”

Tigre winced, not putting the bow down even as he turned to address Ranma. “No, but it looks as if the young prince is being forced to take action. He needs to make a name for himself quickly, to force the greater nobles to respect his position as heir. So we have invaded Zhcted.

Ranma frowned. Ranma knew Brune was a relatively small nation, but one that had natural defenses on most of its side, and apparently one massively powerful noble and another knight who protected it from two of the other, larger nations out there, including one that made use of slaves. He knew this because a few of the merchants had wondered about Ranma possibly being the knight in question, a man named Roland.

The other nation, the one they were apparently attacking had been described to him by Tifa. It was apparently the home of women called Vanadis, who each wielded a different magical weapon. Ranma supposed that they could be fun to fight, but he didn’t like the idea of Brune being the invader. Or war at all really. It seemed to make violence far too serious and just as impersonal.

Tigre seemed to understand much of that and he sighed, setting down the bow now, it having not reacted to him once more. “I’m not looking forward to it either. It won’t be the first time I’ve killed but it is never easy. But I have to ask, what can I and my people expect from you when we go to war?”

“I’ll keep you and as many of them alive as I possibly can, I’ll bleed and fight for them and you. But I’m not a natural killer Tigre. I’ll kill monsters, maddened beasts, but a person? No,” Ranma said with a shake of his head. “Not unless there’s no other way, and with all of my skills there is always another way.” Ranma smirked wintrily. “Now breaking bones, shattering hands, unhorsing people, and of course, deadening their bodies from the neck down, those are my preferred ways of dealing with multiple people at once.”

“Aheheh,” Tigre chuckled weakly, a sweatdrop appearing on his head. “Can you at least promise to only turn those skills on the soldiers on the other side?”

“I make no promises,” Ranma said, his smirk now much more impish.

**OOOOOOO**

Several weeks later, Ranma found himself scowling as he moved through the camp of the Brune army. *I’m not a soldier, but I sure know about fighting and this group is too freaking confident and not unified enough. They’re not ready for a real fight.* He smirked. *But it ain’t my business. Keeping the Alsace troop alive is the only reason I’m here. And afterward…*Ranma sighed. *Afterward I’ll have paid off my debt to Tigre, so I might move on, if I’ve brought too much attention to myself.*

Actually, Ranma might have said something, if he hadn’t seen the contempt Tigre was looked at by the other nobles. That had tipped most of the nobles here onto the ‘possible enemy’ camp.

A case in point was the confrontation Ranma came back to with food for Tigre and Bertrand from the commissary. Sighing he reached out to the back of a young man in violet colored armor. Lifting him off his feet and nodding over to Tigre. “Yo Tigre, food’s up. And who’s the guy with the gay armor?” Ranma normally wasn’t one to use such crude jokes, not being a bigot or even really caring at all what others got up to. But he didn’t have anything else to work with at the moment except for the guy’s face.

“Wh, how dare, let me go!” shouted the young man, as his two friends moved away quickly, hands dropping to their sword blades.

One of them, a boy with a blonde mop for hair shouted, “Let Lord Zion go, don’t you know who he is!?”

“Nope, don’t care,” Ranma said, before lifting the young man up over his head, holding him there despite all his wriggling, his arm showing and indeed feeling no strain from the activity. “And I don’t particularly like other people trying to pick fights with my friends so…”

Tigre moved forward from where he had been squaring off against Zion and his two cronies but didn't move to help Ranma or calm him down. Instead, he simply took the food out of Ranma’s hand then sat back down at the fire had been sitting at. “I apologize for my bodyguard,” he said, winking at Ranma. “He's a foreigner, a former slave who escaped from his masters. I'm afraid he doesn't have much respect for our nobility here in Brune.”

“Then you should beat him!” Shouted the man Ranma was still holding up air in the air.

“Now, now,” said a calm older man, laying a hand on Ranma’s shoulder as he spoke. “I'm sure this isn’t that important, and I am equally certain this young man will set you down Lord Zion. After all, you certainly should also be getting back to your friends and fellow high nobles, shouldn't you?”

Sighing Ranma did so, even setting the man down lightly enough that he didn’t stumble when his feet hit the ground. Ranma thought that was rather nice of him, frankly. I suppose I should let you go yeah. Although he couldn't stop himself from getting in a final dig as he pointed to his own face. “Oh, and um I can make you up a poultice to clear up that acne of yours if ya want.”

The boy in purple armor glared, one hand reaching for his sword. But staring around him, ion thought better of it, and Ranma huffed, turning away. “Tease.”

He sat down across from Tigre, who smiled at him, shaking his head as Zion led his followers off. “Well, I suppose given what I've seen you do that was relatively diplomatic.”

The old man sat next to them, looking at Ranma for a moment before smiling over at Tigre. “Tigre-san, it's been a long while since I visited Alsace. How are you?”

“I am well Lord Roland thank you for the help just now. I'm afraid Ranma doesn’t understand how to defuse situations very well.” Tigre replied.

“I understand how, I just don't care to use those skills” Ranma reported.

So I could tell,” The older man replied with a shake his head. “And it is just Mashas, Tigre-san, you know that.”

They fell silent as a stream of conversation from a tent over reached him from two nobles saying how they had mistreated their people but hadn’t gotten away with nearly as much as the Dukes. Tigre immediately made to standup, while Ranma's grip on his bowl started to leave indents in the hard clay. “Calm down,” Mashas said to both young men, smiling approvingly at their actions even so. “Pathetic examples of nobility like that are the rule here, their troops make up the majority of this army. You need to be aware of that.”

“But what they said, that strikes directly against the laws of the land!” Tigre protested.

“I know, but you're in no position to enforce those laws, nor, to be fair is the prince at the moment. If the Prince wins his spurs with this campaign, then the position of the royal family will be solidified, and the strength of the powerful nobles checked. Until then, there is scant little two young man even such as you can do.” Mashas replied, still holding both men’s upper arms, though he knew having seen it earlier Ranma could break free easily.

Ranma growled something about disagreeing with that, but shook his head to focus on something else. He could indeed fight all the nobles here, indeed, probably a large portion of the army, but not all of it, not without killing most of the soldiers, who were just doing their jobs for the most part, and making a lot of trouble for Tigre and his friends in Alsace in turn. “I think we need to camp with the rest of the men,” he said seriously.

“Why?” Tigre asked before Mashas could question it. The rule of thumb was for soldiers in a Brune army camp to be segregated by rank, with nobles like Tigre and their personal servants in one area, as they were now. This of course allowed them access to certain… benefits, neither young man had made use of.

Ranma gestured all around them. “Come on! This isn’t really an army, this is just a group of troops brought together. He waved his hands vaguely trying to figure out how to say it while Mashas looked on, knowing what the young man was going to say but wanting to see what he came up with. “ It's like, it's like someone has gathered up all these different martial art schools, and expected them to work together under one person.”

That was the only way Ranma could describe it. Ranma wasn't used to politics, or the idea of levy factions loyal more to their lords then to the central authority. Nonetheless, his explanation worked, and Tigre looked around. “You think that most of the troops here are more loyal to their own lords than to the Prince?”

“That goes without saying,” Mashas said with a nod of approval. “Yet bunking with your troops rather than in the royal quarters? That would be seen as a sign of weakness. It might result in even more confrontations like the one I just defused.”

“So we sneak over there after everyone's gone to sleep,” Ranma said shrugged. “But I think we need to warn the troops that they should be compared for a fight against their own sides too.

The other two looked at him in surprise even Mashas not seeing where that was leading and he shrugged. “Think about it, we supposedly outnumber the enemy tremendously right? So if we crush them, what's going to happen after? We’re going to fight over the spoils of course.”

Ranma had quite a bit of experience with that, having dealt with Mousse and Ryoga, joining forces to go after a cure for their cruses several times only to fight about it after they found it or right before. He’d even seen the pervert brigade occasionally break apart like that after he and Akane made it clear to everyone they were no longer a couple the disparate groups attacking one another just as furiously as they were trying to attack Akane.

“That might occur yes,” the older man said with a sigh. “I believe that the prince’s tactical acumen is decent enough for someone untried, but he does not have the loyalty of the troops yet. He cannot command a halt to such conflict.”

Tigre slowly nodded then stood up resolutely. “All right,” he said setting his empty bowl to Bertrand. Ranma looked down his own meal and was surprised he’d also finished eating but set it aside looking up at Tigre. “I'm going out to scout around a bit,” he said simply. “Ranma, get in touch with Torsam and the others, tell them about our suspicions. We’ll go with your plan of staying in the royal court tonight, and moving over there when everyone else is asleep. Mashas, I am sorry to cut this short.”

“Its fine,” Mashas said with a smile. “The fact that you are taking your duties to your people so seriously as to prepare for the worst-case scenario says much of you Tigre. I will inform my own men of this same point, and will join them tonight as well. I'm an old campaigner, I can get away with carousing with my sergeants, whereas a youngster like you cannot afford to lose face like that.” he smirked. “Your abstemious attitude towards wine and the camp women has already been noted I'm afraid.”

Both Ranma and Tigre shuddered. “I’ve learned a lot about medicine and disease of late,” Tigre said diplomatically, “I'm afraid that such does not interest me.”

Ranma just shook his head for an entirely different reason. As far as he could tell from looking at them and even talking to a few on the march most of the camp women were there by personal choice, but he was still getting used to the fact that at least in Brune there weren't very many jobs women could take without a man's permission. Courtesan and whore were among those, and some women chose to do so, to use their bodies to make money and to make their own way in the world rather than to try to be beholden to a man.

From Tigre, he understood that that wasn't the case in other countries, some were worse such as in the slaving country called Muozinel, or the other major power, Sachstein. But in Zhcted, women had a far greater role in society, their example shining through. It was part of why Ranma thought he might want to go exploring in some point in the future. Or, as he’d heard it put once, ‘go on a walk’, a very vigorous walk, through both the larger countries.

Instead of giving voice to those thoughts, he said, “Like either of us care what the rest of these fops think.”

Mashas laughed, shaking his head as Tigre nodded in agreement.

Ranma was asleep by the time Tigre got back, the two young men sharing a tent in the noble quarter of the camp. Tigre snorted at that, but seeing as there was quite a bit of carousing and merry-making still going on, he decided to follow Ranma’s example, although he slept on top of his bedroll, not in it as Ranma did. And his bow and quiver were both set by his side.

This proved to be a very good thing.

Just as the noble quarter of the camp was beginning to simmer down from its drunken revelry, shouts and screams started near the edge of the camp. It took a while for those shouts to really register with most of the inhabitants though. Even the regular troops had been given wine and allowed to carouse, but it started to spread slowly and then shrieks of “attack, it's an attack!” began to move through the camp.

However, the attackers had been quite crafty. They had closed with the camp, taking out the few watchmen around it, without a warning being sounded. With that done, they sent in a small group to attack one portion of the camp, as others on two other points infiltrated. These two teams set fire to everything they could before escaping. And as the camp began to rouse and all of the better, more responsible soldiers raced to respond to that first attack, out of the night came a horde of cavalry, smashing through into the camp from the other side.

Tigre woke up at the first shouts of the first attack hopping up and kicking at Ranma’s side, as he grabbed up his bow. “Wake uPPP!” He found himself on his back, and groaned remembering. “Oh yes, his sleep-fu, though what a few is still eludes me.”

Ranma however was awake, the attempt at kicking him in the side and the shout getting through his sleep-addled brain. He hopped up, looked over at Tigre and said we need to get to your folk!

Nodding quickly, the two of them raced out of the tent, and into chaos. Every noble was stumbling around, shouting various contradictory orders, their retainers racing off to their men. But few enough of them had made any attempt to really keep in communication with their troops once they were in the noble quarter, which left the troops outside without orders, and also dealing with the effects of the party they too had thrown.

Shaking his head, Ranma grabbed at Tigre when he what was about to start bellowing his own orders around. “Let's go, we can’t do any good here!”

Tigre balked a brief moment, but then nodded, and the two of them raced to the camp, with Ranma almost leaving Tigre behind before grabbing Tigre up onto his back. With Tigre in place, he leaped over several tents before racing on. They found their own troops awake, Spears being handed out by Bertrand, not moving but staying together in a clump. Four of their men had been on guard on Ranma’s orders, and then roused the others the instant trouble began. They'd even had time to buckle on their armor, and were a pebble of calm in a sea of chaos.

Some order had just begun to return to the rest of the troops, and men began to march towards the sound of the fight on the side of the camp, when another's shouts and screams were heard. This time it came from the direct opposite side of the camp. “Cavalry! Calvary!”

Ranma scowled, and Tigre shouted. “Form square! Spears out!”

“What about the others?” shouted one of his men, Duncan, the oldest of the two blacksmith boys.

“If they've got weapons and are willing to follow orders, let them in,” Tigre said and before Ranma could say anything suddenly his bow was in his hand, and an arrow flew past through an open tent to impact the first cavalry trooper charging through the camp towards them. But there were dozens of others, and the men on foot all around them in the camp began to show the fear that any man on foot showed to heavy cavalry.

Then the fires began in several different places in the camp, and Ranma knew that no one was going to be able to rally the troops. Tigre seemed to realize it top, because he put up his bow, and began to shout orders. “Break to the left from here!” he said. “We need to get out of the camp. There is a small ditch, a dry riverbed there we can hide in.”

He ordered ten of the men to take point while the others formed a square now around them. The men in the lead lowered their spears, while the others didn’t holding them at port arms, but ready to lower if someone tried to get in their way. Several times horsemen appeared out of the fire and confusion, but the spears the men held were quite a bit longer than cavalry lances and most veered off cursing.

In the next few minutes seventeen more men joined them, with ten of them bringing their own spears. These were slightly older men, who recognized the danger of panic, and had stayed together. One of them wore Mashas’ colors, and he whispered breathlessly to Tigre. “My Lord has already led his own troops out of the camp and sent me to try to find you. But there's worse going on here than just the attack. There's rumors that the Prince himself is dead! Killed by an assassin some say, others say that he was cut down by the first attack.”

“It's every man for himself,” Ranma said grimly, having overheard this. He just then jumped up and out, leaping into a group of enemy soldiers.

These were all heavy infantry, wearing plate to go with their blue surcoats. Their large shields and swords made them the worst enemy to face for the spear and scantly armored troops from Alsace.

To Ranma though, they were just so many targets. Swords flashed out, only to be batted aside, and his fingers flashed out aimed at hinge points, deadening arms and legs. Fists and feet lashed out crumpling armor. The first type of attack sent men to their knees in shocked horror. The second sent them flying or to their knees in agony.

When an officer looking fellow (his armor was shinier) attacked him, Ranma grabbed a sword out of one man’s hand, flipping it up and over to bring it back down to lay next to the man's neck. Holding it there then shaking his head his finger in the man's face, before ducking under another blow, kicking out backwards, and then flipping himself up and over their heads, resting lightly on one head, before leaping back over to Tigre in his men, who had made a fair bit of distance since Ranma had disrupted that attack.

The men he had attacked would live, Ranma wasn’t a killer. But taking care of the fifteen men Ranma had just done that too would keep the thirty others he hadn't touched from attacking Tigre and his men.

Ranma did that twice more as they pushed through the camp, once against a group of Brune troops who seemed unable to tell friend from foe. They also gathered up a few more men, some of them in the livery of the royal house itself, and all of them armed with swords and armor rather than spears and leather jerkins, which Ranma thought was the booby prize in terms of armor.

These men affirmed the rumors that Sergeant Licht, Mashas’ man, had already explained to Tigre and Ranma. The Prince was dead, and all of the nobles were busy retreating, taking their own troops with them fighting anyone that got in their way.

How long the chaotic fiery mess lasted until they reached the end of the camp, Ranma didn't know. But eventually they did, and Tigre pushed through the spear wall, moving to the right and facing back the way they'd come, and around, oddly enough finding no one trying to break out in this direction. “The dry riverbed is that way,” he said, pointing over his shoulder. “Move!”

The group quickly reached the dry riverbed, sliding down and spreading out along it. They had been spotted by a few troopers sneaking out into the darkness behind the fires of the camp, but all of them went down from Tigre’s arrows. He sent out single shots each finding a horse or visor despite the fact there was little to no light out here.

Ranma waited by the entrance to the stream for Tigre, nodding at him, but making no move to leave until Tigre entered nodding to Bertrand and his other men, barley able to make them out from the starlight above. A quick call for injuries showed nothing serious, and Tigre moved to stand by Ranma after ordering his men to just bed down and keep quiet.

This had been the first of what the locals would probably call a real fight Ranma had been in, and it disturbed him on many levels. Not only was it far more serious, everyone involved was so mad by anger or fear, it was like nothing else he had ever been involved in. Despite that however, what really worried Ranma was something else altogether.

On the one hand, he really hadn't had any inclination or desire to help these soldiers. They were the invaders after all, and whatever else he was, Ranma wasn't a person to go around starting shit like that. He also wasn’t a killer, but he had killed us tonight.

*Four men,* Ranma thought, *four men whose lives I snuffed out like…* he shook his head, refusing to even attempt to use a euphemism for that. *I killed them, I murdered them.* *There should have been another way, there was another way, but in the heat of the moment, I didn't think of any.*

Three of those deaths were caused when Ranma moved to defend someone else, pulling out of his own fight to do so when he saw one of the Alsace men were in trouble, having tripped or otherwise been caught out. The last had been almost an accident. Ranma had kicked a man, and he had flown through the air, but where Ranma had thought he was aiming for a toppled tent, proved to not have been quite as toppled as he had expected. The man had become impaled on the shattered tent post like it had been a spear.

It had been a grizzly death and Ranma knew he would probably have issues with that later on. But right now all he was feeling was a little numb and grateful that they had gotten all of their own men out. A few had been wounded in the last final moments, fighting against their own people, who were attempting to head someplace else, but they were all still alive, and that was the most important thing.

Dawn broke several hours later on a ruined, blasted camp, and Ranma scowled as he looked around, sticking his head up just enough to take a look around. “Well, this is a good hiding place I suppose but…”

“But we are kind of trapped here,” Tigre said with a sigh. There was very little cover between here and the forest at the horizon to the northeast, which was why the camp had been situated where it had been. And if the camp had been guarded as well as it should have, or perhaps even had a palisade thrown up around it, it would've been perfect. As it was, the attacker’s organization and strategy had quickly turned the camp into a death trap.

Now the Alsace men and their fellows were faced with having to figure out a way out of here, with foreign troops no doubt somewhere out here, searching for them and other survivors.

“We have a choice,” Tigre said softly, turning to look at Ranma and then down into the culvert towards his men. A few of them still retained their spears, but Tigre knew that any organized troop movement would probably bring down a heavy response from the enemy troopers who had won the war the evening before. He voiced that, then added “That's option one. Option two is to try to sneak out in small groups while I cover you all.”

“And I cover you,” Ranma said firmly.

Tigre saw his men were willing to do whatever he said including the others would join them. Sergeant Licht slapped his chest hard. “Just give the word Sir, all of us are willing to do whatever you say. You got us out of that camp, we figure what you say will be the best way to get us home.”

Tigre nodded then tapped his quiver thoughtfully. They’d picked up arrows throughout the night or rather he had, the only one here who practiced archery as his primary weapon. A few of his other men had bows however, even if their quivers were not nearly as full. “All right, here's the plan. We’ll split out in groups of four. There are few rocks out there, we can use them for cover for a time, but then, after that it'll be down to individual speed.”

“Then I think we’re all very damn glad that Ranma made us run so much,” said one of the Alsace men dryly.

This caused Ranma to grin briefly. “You won't be able to out run a horse,” he warned seriously “but you probably could out endurance one.”

Tigre peaked out over the lip of the gorge again, and nodded. “I’ll move out to halfway to the horizon, by those four large rocks there.” Those rocks had marked a side of the camp the evening before, but there was nothing near them now to indicate that.

“But you’ll be out in the open a target for anyone still around,” protested Bertrand.

“So what?” Ranma interjected before Tigre could. “If we’re targets, they'll come after us, not you and the rest of the men.”

Tigre nodded then without further ado hopped up out of the riverbed, his bow in hand. He moved forwards cautiously, staring around him as Ranma quickly joined him. There was a shout from nearby, and a horseman appeared from among the wreckage of the camp, racing towards them.

An instant later the man was flung out of the saddle, an arrow straight through his visor having hit with enough force to hurl him from the saddle like a lance strike. The horse however skidded to the side and whinnied, racing away.

“Drat,” Tigre muttered. “I wanted that horse.”

Ranma shrugged. “Why? I can carry you faster than any horse can.”

Tigre looked at him, then laughed, causing Ranma to laugh too. Still laughing, they signaled the first of their men out of cover, before Tigre shook his head and stared at Ranma as Ranma did the same. “How can we laugh after last night?”

Ranma shrugged. “The mysteries of the human mind, man. I’m more grateful for it than surprised, let me tell ya.”

They stood there out in the open, with Tigre shooting down three more men as they came over the horizon, to the west as his men traveled straight east, first trying to sneak low to the ground to try and remain unseen, then sprinting after they reached where Ranma and Tigre waited.

But there really was no cover from that point on, and it was only a matter of time before the small trickle of men was spotted.

A large group of horsemen soon came into view, not making towards Tigre and Ranma at first, but towards the forest, where their men word got were heading.

As they came into view, Ranma could make out details. It was a group of seven, with two women in the lead. Ranma could tell from the way the knight in green’s chest looked that she was a woman, though at this distance that was doubtful. The other didn't leave him in any doubt at all though wearing a quite cute little outfit admittedly, and with long silver hair, and a feminine body. *Is that the Vanadis who was commanding the troops from last night?*

Before Ranma could do anything, Tigre quickly raised his bow, aiming. An instant later his first arrow took out one of the horses, the one under the woman in armor, sending her crashing to the ground and two of the other men behind her crashing into her dead horse in turn. The others all twisted around, and the girl with silver hair suddenly seemed to perk up in the saddle, and raced towards them, her hand grabbing at the sword.

“Concentrate on the others,” Ranma said calmly, stepping forward around Tigre and crouching. “I’ll deal with her.”

Ignoring that, Tigre sent an arrow straight at the woman's chest, a shot that was so true, even if she had attempted to dodge it she still should've been hit unless she dove out of the saddle. Instead, it hit some kind of shield made entirely of wind, shattering.

“Oh great more magic,” Ranma muttered, charging forward.

Eleanora Viltaria, Elen to her friends whatever her retainer might say, had been irritated beyond belief for hours now. The battle last night had been sooooo anti-climactic! The invading army had come apart like a rotten fruit at what she thought of as simple nighttime assault tactics. She had routed a force several dozen times her own group size, and not even taken that many casualties doing it.

Although as she rode, she reflected that a lot of those casualties had seemingly been very odd indeed. Groups of soldiers tried to explain how one man had hurt them somehow, smashing through their armor to make their bodies go numb, shattering steel plate with his hands, or simply hurling them around like toys.

Elen had not seen any sign of that the night before herself, being eager to take the prince’s head, only to find the prince either dead already, or just gone. She wasn't certain which frankly and suspected a lot of things had been going on last night that had nothing to do with her own attack. Other than the rumors about that super soldier however, the night had been **utterly** boring.

Then came the arrows, and suddenly Elen’s ennui disappeared. *This looks like fun!*

A man with red hair stood there in the open of plain next to a series of rocks and a man with black hair done up in a little pigtail. There was no weapon in his hand, but no fear in his stance either. And not only did the men make the decision to bring her attention down on them rather than others she could see in the distance, but the first shot had crippled the horses behind her, and dumped both Lim and two of her other retainers on their asses!

Grinning, Elen lifted her sword out of its sheath and began to ride towards the two men.

She was surprised when the man with black hair rushed forward, but his speed was such that Elen took it seriously despite that, bringing Arifar up and around from where it had created the windshield to try and cut the man.

Ranma smacked her magical sword aside to one side, wincing as the wind around it cut into his hands and fingers like tiny papercuts, though those wounds healed quickly. Then he was in the air kicking up hard, forcing the woman with silver hair to roll out of the saddle forward over her horse’s head. She then brought her sword around under the horse as it continued on its way leaping over her.

If Ranma wasn't a master of aerial style, that blow would've done him in. But as it was, Ranma smacked the sword down, and kicked out again, causing her to dodge backwards and away to one side. Though she did not release her sword as she did and her own leg came around in a kick that Ranma blocked almost casually, whistling a little at the strength of it even so.

Then he began to feel something, something niggling at his senses from the sword. It was almost as if there was a sound in the distance, the sound of laughter. And it was… At the same time, the girl’s face twisted into a look of confusion while around them more troops were unhorsed by Tigre. “Is it just may or…”

“Is there any so reason my sword would be laughing at you?” the woman said looking up at him quizzically even as she attacked forcing Ranma to dodge this way and that. Around her a wind picked up, covering her body and speeding her along, allowing her to keep up with Ranma’s own speed.

“Wait,” Ranma groaned, allowing the blade to pass just barely to one side of him before striking out, his fist nearly catching the girl in the face, though she ducked under at the last instant, gesturing forward and sending a blast of wind his way. “Magic sword. I’d heard about that, but is it sentient? Able to sense magic?”

“Of course!” the woman said with a laugh, as she continued attacking. “I am a Vanadis after all!” The laughter from Arifar was irritating, and kind of ruined the mood of the fight, but didn’t actually take away from his deadliness in any way, so Elen was prepared to deal with her partner’s odd sense of humor.

“I will break you over my freaking knee magic sword!” Ranma growled angrily dodging again and this time getting a hit in, sending the woman skidding back then ducking desperately as Ranma pressed in. “My curse is not a joke!”

“Curse?” Elen asked, stumbling back and then calling on more of Arifar’s magic to speed her movements. *This man’s speed is incredible!*

Ranma growled, and began to move his hands into the Amaguriken speed attack. But the woman matched him, and then a spear was thrusting at Ranma's back from one of the last remaining cavalrymen. Ranma however dodged to one side and grabbed the spear then flung the man out of the saddle and towards the woman with silver hair. She leaped up over him, and landed, launching forward sword tip first.

“I surrender,” Tigre said from nearby, holding his bow out to one side by one of the tips as two of the men raced towards him. “Ranma, I think we need to surrender now.”

Ranma glanced over his shoulder but nearly got cut in two for his trouble. “What! Why!?”

“You can't fight them all,” Tigre said philosophically even as a sword point began to press into his back and he held up his hands even higher, letting someone else take his bow without protest.

“Says you!” Ranma shouted, dodging another blow and returning one that caught the woman in the side, causing her to grunt in pain. That had been a punch rather than a pressure point attack, simply because facing an opponent like this Ranma had fallen back completely on his old, more familiar style. The two of them exchanged several more blows until one attack got through to score Ranma on his side.

But even as she pulled back, Ranma's injuries healed, and she paused frowning now. “Are you even human?”

“That’s what my old man told me,” Ranma said with a shrug, “but I wouldn’t take his word if he said the sky was blue, so who knows? Maybe my mother was a demon or something? Would make a lot of sense considering how much karma likes to make me its bitch.”

Elen giggled at that, stepping back and laughing, throwing her head back and giggling merrily.

“A warlord who giggles, that's a new one,” Ranma quipped, coming out of his own stance and looking around, finally finding himself, Tigre and the woman surrounded by dozens of her men. *Huh, where’d the hell they come from?* Ranma hadn’t noticed the arrival of still more troops during his one on one battle against the woman.

A sword landed on his shoulder, and a voice growled. “That is not the proper attitude for a prisoner!”

“Oh no,” Ranma groaned, looking over to Elen having found in her something of a kindred spirit over the course of the short conflict. “So she's the studious officious sort is she?”

“Yep,” Elen said still giggling.

Ranma groaned then grabbed the sword point in his hand, holding it still like it had been caught in a vice. “When I release your sword, you’re going to take it away from my neck if you want to keep it,” he said, almost conversationally.

“Do as he says Lim,” Elen laughed, looking between the two young men. “What are your names you two?”

“Ranma,” Ranma said simply. “No last name you'd know, I'm thinking of actually giving myself a new one around here.”

“Earl Tigrevurmud Vorn, Of Alsace” Tigre said, nodding his head.

“Very well. I am Eleonora Viltaria, and you are both my prisoners.”

Ranma crossed his arms, staring almost contemptuously around her soldiers. “And if I refuse? Our fight was just getting good!”

“I know,” Elen said with a sigh while her men bristled. “But I am as you put it warlord, and I can't just set my duties slide out here in the field. If you refuse, maybe I'll send some soldiers on horseback after those men. I was ordered to, as my king put it, ‘wipe out the fifth of Brune that dare invade our holy territories’.”

Ranma glanced at Tigre who nodded. “Why did you think I was surrendering before? You really can't fight them all: they won't come to you alone.”

Scowling at that Ranma scuffed his foot in the ground. “Fine be that way.” The brief spar with Elen had reminded him of some of his best martial arts matches, completely wiping the stain of last nights’ carnage out of his mind. It would come back, perhaps, at night. But for now he’d had quite a bit of fun there.

Eleonora laughed, linking arms with both men and pulling them towards her horse, which had moved over towards her, looking for all the world as if it dealt with this kind of thing every day. “Don't be like that, it’s not like being my prisoner will be all that bad or that long. In fact, I have a proposal for both of you.”

“Milady you can't be serious!” said the woman, her voice almost tinny from the helmet she was still wearing. “These men are enemies! That one is far too dangerous to live, and the archer killed at least 15 of our horse, and who knows how many men before that.”

“That was in war,” Tigre said simply. “If I give you my parole I will keep it.”

“And what would that be worth? You're just an archer!” said one of the other knights.

The woman in the light green armor nodded her head. “Milady, surely we have better things to do than taking two prisoners. Searching for evidence of what happened to the Brune Prince for one.”

Tigre looked over at Ranma and leaned in whispering. “What's her problem?”

“A lot of people take this whole war thing more seriously than you and I do, or rather take it longer, letting resentment and hate still guide them after the fight.” Ranma said with a shake of his head before going on far less philosophically. “Besides, it was her horse you killed with your first arrow, you probably should apologize for that one.”

“It was war,” Tigre said again, before blinking. “And… her?”

“Duh, can't you tell?”

Tigre looked at Elen then to the other one, his eyes going down each of their forms before blushing slightly and looking away muttering, “Well you’d know more about that kind of thing than me.”

Ranma growled, his hands flexing a little. “Tigre, don't make me choke you.”

Listening to all this Elen laughed, shaking her head. “You two are truly funny!”

Some of the others also began to laugh, although they didn't know why Tigre had said that line of his. The sword still chuckling in Ranma and Elen's mind though was beginning to get to Ranma’s nerves and he growled, pointing down at it. “Is there anything you could do about that!?”

“Nope,” Elen said with a laugh. Ignoring the looks form her men at that exchange she pulled herself up into the saddle, patting her horse affectionately as she leaned over into its mane to stare down at Ranma. “Arifar is a rather recalcitrant child at times, especially when it finds something funny.”

Then she pushed herself upright, staring down at the young man her face becoming serious. “Will you give me your paroles?”

Ranma scowled, then thumped his chest once with his head. “I, Ranma will give you my word not to try to escape unless you try to torture me or my friend, or otherwise turn out to be a bit of a dick. That's the best you’re going to get for me.”

Tigre groaned, as many of those men and women around them muttered angrily the woman in green pointing at him and shouting, “you see Milady!”

“Actually I think that was the most logical parole vow I've ever heard.” Elen said with another laugh. Then she looked at Tigre, her eyes softening slightly from the hawkish evaluating look she had been giving Ranma despite their merriment. “And you Tigrevurmud Vorn?”

Tigre nodded. “I give you my parole of parole Lady Viltaria.”

The woman smiled, banishing her serious air, and gestured to a few of her soldiers. “Excellent, now go find these two some horses, we should be getting back. I don't think we need to continue the pursuit any longer.” Then she began to laugh once more as she turned back towards her own territory in Zhcted, the horse under her actually dancing. “This day is looking a lot better now.”

The two young men looked at one another, then as one shrugged, and followed after the troop. There were a lot of hot harsher ways of being taken prisoner after all.

**End Chapter**

The way Ranma is shifted into the Vanadis universe is from the old Anime Addventure restart point called Setsuna’s fault. Basically for those who don’t know, the premise is that Ranma is a threat to the ‘perfect utopia’ of Crystal Tokyo, and has to be eliminated. These attempts to eliminate him often make the problem worse or put him into other dimensions. I would particularly recommend going back and looking at the addition called Wonder about Zero. I like the Henrietta and Ranma pairing quite a bit created there by MIlkagaaard, and might actually write up my own version if I can at some point.

I am uncertain I did this chapter as well as I could, but given familiar and health constraints, I feel alright with the outcome. At this point anyway, I can move on into the real canon plot and then shatter it utterly as is my wont.

The Pairing for this is somewhat up in the air. I like the original Elen/Tigre pairing a lot, but I also like Tigre/Mila, and would like to remove one of them from that competition.

Ranma/Sofy/Sasha/much later Valentina/I’d also like to pair him with Lim, and have her be the first girl he shows interest in, but if I pair Tigre with Mila, I’d switch Lim to being interested in Tigre instead. Uncertain.

The only other thing I can tell you for certain is, if I ever come back to this world, the demons will be a far larger part of the story then even in the light novels.

Anyway, hope you all enjoyed it, now I need some freaking sleep LOL.