Here is the next chapter of Sword, Bow, and Horse. In other, less fun news, I can’t see myself finishing Stallion of the Line by the end of the month. I have the main fight done. It’s the secondary fights and the lead up to the climax that is giving me issues. On the other hand, that means that I’ll be able to send it out to my editors and let them have time to work on it. Hopefully, that means it will be better for the wait.

This has been edited by Hiryo and myself.

**Chapter 5: Surprises and Plots in Equal Measure**

Once more, Ranma woke up in some pain, although as they flooded back into his mind, the memories of how he did so were not nearly as nice as the last time. No scratches down my back, no line fractures in my hip bones because someone forgot their own strength. Huh, and not nearly as much pain in general. That was his first thought. On its heels was the thought, Oh good, it looks as if Tigre or Elen figured out that I needed to be fed in order to power my healing ki.

For a moment he lay there, not trying to move as he concentrated on his ki. His ki was nowhere near as high as he wanted it to be, in fact, it was barely a fiftieth of where it should be. But, all of his more serious wounds had repaired themselves. His rib, which he’d had to set back in place, was healed, along with his face, everything else. That’s a trade-off I’ll take, he thought to himself, and slowly opened his eyes just as he felt the mattress underneath him shift, a new weight pressing down on the right side near his head.

He opened his eyes and stared at heaven. Utter heaven. A vast expanse of healthy pink skin forming a deep crevice between large hills housed in a dress that hugged the underside of those hills like a second skin, but which was open from the top to Ranma’s appreciative, if still sleepy, gaze. Oh mighty Empress Takahashi, you never built them like this at home! Shampoo came closest, and not all that close either.

Then those hills closed with Ranma’s eyes which widened as those soft pillows of feminine flesh swayed closer, actually pressing into his face. Ranma could hear Sofy whisper an apology while trying to reach for something, then evidently succeeding in grabbing whatever before pulling away. Ranma had to bite at his lower lip to keep from blushing. I’ll go straight from heaven to hell if she finds out I’m awake now! I do not want to find out what the Vanadis equivalent of a mallet is!

Sofy sat back in her chair holding the carafe of water and moved to pour herself another drink, then frowned as she noticed that Ranma’s expression had changed. Oh my, was he…Blushing slightly, she reached out with her foot and prodded his side. “Ranma, are you awake?”

“If I say no will you hurt me less?” Ranma asked, his eyes still scrunched tightly shut. Don’t make eye contact, that’s the way.

“Ranma I’m not going to hurt you,” Sofy, even as she blushed. Yes, Sofy could be a flirt occasionally, when she found someone interesting, or when she wanted something out of some man as part of a mission. But that was a far cry from almost literally pressing her chest into his face like that.

“Are you sure?” Ranma asked. “I mean, I er, I didn’t do it on purpose or anything, but I thought, that is...”

“I don’t solve problems with violence at all if I can help it. If I was that kind of maiden, I wouldn’t be the diplomat of our group or the king’s own diplomat either. And I’m not one to jump to conclusions either.” Sofy suddenly smiled. “Besides, you saw quite a bit more than that when we ran into one another in the baths when I was changing, or don’t you remember?”

“You’ve got a point…” Ranma sweatdropped as he remembered that incident. As if I’ll ever forget, damn, although I suppose I should have expected she’d be okay with it, so long as it wasn’t on purpose. With that he opened his eyes, locking them on Sofy’s face. She smiled at him, and he blushed again, staring into her face as he poked to his fingers together.

“So,” Sofy whispered, leaning forward a little, and winking at him, hoping to gain some of her normal equilibrium at Ranma’s expense. “How did it feel then?”

The words slipped out before Ranma could stop them. “Like heaven.” Ranma belatedly clapped both hands over his mouth looking away. In so doing he missed the sight of Sofy’s porcelain cheeks turning a light rosy hue. “S, sorry, I think I was waking up just as you were doing whatever it was.”

Still flushed very slightly, Sofy held up the carafe. “I, I was reaching for this. And If I wanted to take revenge for you’re being awake as I accidentally did that, I’d use water instead of violence…” Thinking that a brilliant idea at the moment, Sofy instantly suited actions to words, pouring some of the cold water over Ranma’s head, giggling all the while.

“Gah!” Ranma squawked. The now-redhead glared at the blonde Vanadis, then laughed ruefully. “Alright, that’s fair I guess.”

“Good.” Sofy looked away for a moment, sitting back down and touching her Viralt’s shaft with one hand, somewhat bemused to find her chest still thumping in her chest.

Sofy routinely used her body to make men’s minds turn into mush, as her friend Sasha once put it. It was just another weapon in her arsenal as a troubleshooter for King Victor. But setting aside her own reactions to Ranma’s body, being around Ranma was just plain fun. Ranma was often hilariously tongue-tied in her presence, but when he was able to communicate, it wasn’t about praising her or showing himself or his abilities to the best light he could. He wasn’t trying to overawe Sofy or woo her or anything. No, over the weeks they’d traveled with one another they had talked about any topic that came to mind.

And whenever they did, Ranma listened to Sofy, not just because she was a Vanadis or even Sofya Obertas, but because she was Sofy, a distinction that while subtle was all too rare. Ranma seemed to genuinely like her as a person, as a whole individual rather than as a Vanadis or simply for her body. On top of that, the way Ranma controlled himself - even now he was simply looking at her face rather than down at her chest or the rest of her – and looked at her more like he was staring at a great work of art rather than as a woman he wanted to possess, was beginning to affect her on the emotional level.

No wonder Lim is falling for him when he acts like that. Unfortunately, my own position is much less free of constraints than hers. I thought back when we met up in the bath that teasing Ranma would be a lot of fun, perhaps even pursuing a physical relationship. But if my heart is really going to get involved in this, that might not be the safest thing.

After all, Sofy was not just a Vanadis. She was the special diplomatic representative of King Victor, she had just too many oaths got controlling her actions, too many demands on her honor and time, to be with a man long term. It was a weakness and a personal demand on her time that she could ill-afford.

“How are you feeling?” she asked, more to distract her own thoughts than she believed Ranma was still injured really.

“I’m tired, and I need food. Other than that, I’m good,” Ranma said bluntly. “My own healing factor is extremely well trained. So long as I’ve got ki, I can heal myself.”

Sofy smiled at that information and the fact that she believed him too. “Good. I’m glad you’re all right.”

“Well thanks,” Ranma said, then feeling greatly daring, reached up to her face. The redhead used a gentle finger to trace up the side of her jawline and then push a lock of her blonde hair behind her ear, causing a shiver to go up and down Sofy’s spine. “What about you? Did you get involved in the battle?”

“N-no,” Sofy replied, her voice a little tremulous even as she kept her body from reacting, pulling away from Ranma’s touch to sit back down in the camp chair she’d been using a moment ago. Good grief, and that’s with him as a girl. How did Ranma know my jawline’s one of my sensitive spots?

Ranma actually hadn’t known any such thing of course. Like in so many things, she was just going with his instincts. That, and the lock of blond hair falling down the side of Sofy’s face had been distracting her something fierce.

Shaking her head very slightly, Sofy determinedly turned her mind to answering Ranma’s question in greater detail. “I arrived as your battle ended. The Knights of Navarre had already retreated from the pikes, leaving their commander, the man you fought Roland, on this side of the river. If you hadn’t attacked him though, he could well have turned on them, and completely destroyed their formation. With that, his own knights would’ve been across the river, and this whole war could have been turned on its ear.”

“Can you tell me what happened? I mean how long have I been out, and what’s been going on?”

“Well, for one thing, you’ve been out of it for three days.”

Ranma started at that, shocked. Damn, that long? I know Roland pounded me like a pancake, but even so… ouch.

Unaware of Ranma’s thoughts, Sofy continued. “The campaign season has officially begun to end. You might not be able to tell, because of the fire over there, but outside this tent, it’s getting incredibly cold. Freezing in point of fact.” She gestured to one side where a fire was burning in a small well-created pit in the center of the tent, and several heating stones were at the bottom of each bed.

Ranma blinked as she realized there was another bed in the tent, but ignored it for now looking back at Sofy. “Because of that, and because you captured Roland, the knights have been forced to retreat several leagues away from the other side of the river to get out of the area before it could turn to deep mud thanks to a trick Lord Vorn used apparently. Instead of pursuing, Elen and Lord Vorn took the opportunity to pull back to their own winter quarters.”

“That’s basically meant reinforcing the tower and that one town to the northeast. They’ve also been throwing up what Lord Vorn calls scout towers.” The blonde Vanadis giggled, “That man thinks more in terms of archery than any other commander I’ve ever met. But I think it was a good idea, nonetheless. What he’s done is to splits up those scouts that you apparently trained, into teams of three. He calls them fire teams for some reason and has assigned them to put up what amounts to child’s treehouses. They are spread out all along the portions of the river, which could possibly be cross in wintertime, or even in summer. Each fire team was assigned a horse to carry messages. It was an ingenious idea really.”

Her giggle trailed off, and Sofy winced. “And a very good one in terms of the changes that are going to be occurring very shortly to the makeup of the Silver Meteor Army.” She shook her head sadly. "I’m afraid I’m going to have to inform Elen of some uncomfortable realities soon. I’ve been putting it off due to the fact she hasn’t been around much, but she just returned this morning from that tower. She’s not going to be happy.”

Shaking her head, Sofy went on determinedly keeping her tone upbeat. “Anyway, another of infantry is going to be kept in the tower, and the main force of cavalry at Territoire. There’s also going to be a training range for the archers to be set up there as well. Lord Vorn wants to incorporate at least several hundred more archers into the Army before the next campaign season begins.”

“That’s nice and all,” Ranma interrupted, at last, shaking her head. “But not all that interesting to me. Sorry but I’m not a general. What about my friends?”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Sofy said with a laugh. “I sometimes forget that you’re not a Vanadis yourself, something made much harder given your current gender.” She winked at the redhead and giggled as Ranma blushed looking away. He is so fun to tease, regardless of his current gender, Sofy thought, even while part of her was telling her that she shouldn’t do so if she was going to try to make a clean break of it.

“But yes, our friends are fine. Elen broke a bone in her side when she was tossed off her horse, but she was still moving around and seems energetic enough the few times I’ve seen her. Lord Vorn took a slash to one arm, but not a large one. I don’t think I’ve heard of anyone being mentioned as your friend other than those two, so I’m afraid I couldn’t tell you if you are asking about anyone else specific. Oh, except for those scouts you trained. Lord Vorn mentioned they had all come through this latest campaign in good health.”

Ranma shrugged. “That’s fine, it was those two who I was worried about. The scouts I’m not as close to.”

“The two of them are out and about in the camp at present if you want me to get them for you.” She sobered, shaking her head. “The main issue right now is the refugees. I hadn’t realized how many of them there were, but I think in this camp alone there are at least two thousand, maybe closer to four thousand men, women and children. And this is but one of several camps spread out in the area Lord Vorn and his allies have taken over. This is the largest one admittedly, but a lot of people have fled from further to the west, and even down south towards Thenardier’s territory. On top of the refugees that had been displaced by the retreating forces from the Dinant Plains too.”

“At least those have already been returned to their lands, but that still leaves a major issue. There have been small allotments of food and clothing arriving since Lord Vorn set up this camp. One major one came in today with that young maid, Titta, hence why Elen and Lord Vorn returned. But I don’t know if it’ll be enough to get most of these people through winter.”

Ranma grimaced, shaking her head his head. “That I can help with at least, once I have some energy back. Knocking down enough trees to make log houses is actually kind of easy.”

“Oh, I know you can do that at least,” Sofy said with a laugh. “You’re already proven to be quite the deforestation expert.”

Ranma blinked, then remembered the mess that he and Roland had made of that forest they’d fought in. He then gulped asking “UM, this might sound weird, but that wasn’t any kind of religious site or anything like that, was it? Only, if it is, I want it on record that at least two-thirds of that destruction was Roland’s fault."

“Did someone say my name?” Roland groaned from the side.

The other two looked at him, and Roland blinked, opening his eyes. The first thing he saw was Sofy, who began giggling as he muttered, “Am I in heaven?” following Ranma’s earlier comments and thoughts. Then her face actually registered along with the Viralt beside her and he winced. “Lady Obertas I presume?”

“So, I’m a prisoner then,” Roland guessed, before looking across at Ranma in confusion. “Who is this? Another prisoner? Red hair… I have heard talk about some kind of maiden of healing.”

“Yeah, no. That maiden of healing thing doesn’t exist. It’s just me. I’m Ranma, dude.” Ranma replied, shaking out her still-damp hair.

Roland just stared at her for a second, then turned to Sofy. “I believe there are healers that are supposed to specialize in mental trauma in Nice. Perhaps you should send for one for your friend here.”

Rolling her eyes, Ranma reached for the carafe, finding it only had a tiny bit of water, causing her to scowl.

Sofy however, giggled. She might have asked Ranma to keep his shape change a secret from the Brunish Knight, but since it was Sofy’s fault that he was in his female form, to begin with at present, she felt the least she could do would be to help explain it. “I’m afraid my redheaded companion is actually telling the truth. Ranma has a magical curse that turns him into a woman when he is splashed by cold water. Which I did a few moments before you began to awake.”

Seeing that Roland was now gazing at her skeptically, Sofy stood up. “I will prove it to you. A moment please.”

She left the tent, and there was an awkward silence as Roland looked anywhere but at the female Ranma, whose wet top was clinging to her leaving very little to the imagination. For her part, Ranma was looking away too. He hated introducing his female form to people. It was getting old really quickly even in this world where she didn’t have all the various issues with other people reacting negatively to it for one reason or another. Huh, come to think of it, only a few of Elen’s soldiers have reacted negatively to my curse. Well them, and that one ass from Tigre’s village who tried to hit on me when it was pouring rain once. None of the people who I’ve actually gotten to know have cared much about it one way or another.

Thankfully for the silence between them, Sofy was soon back with a full carafe of cold water and a goblet. “It’s camp water, don’t worry,” Sofy said to the worried looks from Ranma and Roland both. She then poured some water into the goblet before handing it to Ranma and stepping back.

Ranma held a hand up above the goblet, then sent out a teeny tiny pulse of ki, instantly warming the water to boiling. Ranma then poured it over herself, hissing slightly at the pain of it, but then smirking over at Roland’s wide-eyed, gape-mouthed stare. “Heh, told ya. Let’s see, um, no, my mind doesn’t change much including my preferences if ya know what I mean, taste does, but that’s it. Yer a little old to ask ta see my bits but no I won’t show them to ya, and it’s a full-body change, yes. Cold equals girl, hot equals man, and no I’m not going to tell you how I got it, ya wouldn’t believe me. Any other questions?”

“Er…no, no I think that’s about all I want to know, thank you,” Roland muttered, looking a little queasy.

The two men stared at one another, and for a moment Sofy thought that now that Ranma was back in his male body they might actually start fighting again. Then Ranma shook his head. “Now that that’s been explained you gotta tell me something. Why the hell do you have so much magical energy or whatever? And if you tell me that it’s because of that sword of yours, I’m going to call you a freaking cheat!”

“I cheated!? What about that superspeed technique that you could use, I’ve never even heard of the like. Gods, that felt like a hummingbird the size of the mule was running into me constantly. And you took far more punishment than someone your age or size should be able to take.

“Hey, don’t diss my size, it’s not my fault I’m short for my age. Damn Pops and his gluttony. And maybe you could take as much damage as me if you were a little younger yourself!”

“I’m not even going to deign to respond to that one. And who are you calling old punk, I’m barely in my thirties!”

“That just means you’re over the hill!” Ranma shouted back and the two men stared at one another, then began to laugh in unison.

Sofy had watched this exchange, her head twisting back and forth from one to the other, but now she simply sighed. “Men. Giant children, the lot of them if they get the chance.”

There was some truth resigned exclamation, but for men such as these, it went further than that. Some people could just understand other people better after exchanging blows with them. Roland had always been able to do that. Something he had felt during his time-fighting Tigre and Elen had crystallized during his fight with Ranma: Whatever else, Ranma is not someone who would serve a conqueror. A liberator perhaps, but not a conqueror, Roland thought now, staring at the laughing young man across from him, then over to Sofy and back again as his thoughts went to Tigre and their initial clash.

“I still can’t believe I couldn’t get under your skin,” Ranma said, causing Roland’s attention to twitch back to him. “I could’ve sworn I’d at least be able to use my taunting technique to get you riled up.” Ranma snickered then. “Fair dues though, your reply was just hilarious, threw me off my game something fierce. Come on, calling that sword of yours proportionate. You didn’t come up with down the fly, did you?”

“Do you have any idea how many people have tried to get under my skin by insinuating I’m overcompensating with Durandal?” Roland replied drolly, before adding reluctantly. “However, it did take me some time to figure out a reply to such blandishments.”

The two of them were interrupted by that point by Sofy, who both of them had sort of forgotten was still in the tent. “Hmmm, I’ve actually seen that sword in both its forms. So I have to wonder if you mean is it proportionate to the large, or to the small? Or is that your way to say you are a grow-er, not a show-er?”

Roland coughed, looking away with an embarrassed look on his face while Ranma nodded, decided to shift away from that subject. “Note to self, never make comments up like that in front of women, they are brutal.”

“Girl, please,” Sofy replied, laying a hand on her chest. “I am a Vanadis, a maiden by definition please.”

Both men looked at her, with Roland actually going so far as to look her up and down before looking back to her face, and both of them said as one, “Woman.”

She blushed at that, as well as the fact that Ranma hadn’t looked away from her face instead the man had been looking into her eyes, his blue eyes almost enchanting. That’s not fair, I’m supposed to be the tempter, the flirtatious one. He shouldn’t be able to make my heart race like this, certainly not after only a few weeks, just by looking into my eyes! Maybe I really do need to stop flirting with them.

The thought saddened her, but it was true. In a desperate attempt to shift attention away from her own blush, Sofy grabbed at the carafe and splashed Ranma. “Meanies have to be punished a little bit more I think.”

Grumbling, the once more female Ranma was about to respond to this effrontery, perhaps by tickle torture or a dose of Noogie Hell, when his stomach began to let out a loud gurgle. Shaking that thought out of her head in order to concentrate on more important things, Ranma hopped to her feet, patting her stomach. “Right. The master must be fed, and then, are any of the refugees or soldiers injured?”

Sofy nodded and told Ranma to look for the larger tents near the center of the camp marked out with white crosses, and Ranma turned to Roland. “Will you give us you that parole thing?”

“Parole thing?” Roland muttered, shaking his head. “Where do you come from that paroles aren’t a normal aspect of warfare?” Ranma said nothing, and Roland chuckled. “Fine, keep your secrets. But yes, I will give you my parole. I’ll even do it again to Lord Vorn and Vanadis Viltaria.”

I do like a man of mystery, Sofy thought, as Roland gave his oath, wondering much the same thing as the Brunish knight, and not for the first time. However, as Ranma left, she looked over at Roland, setting Ranma and anything to do with him aside. “I have a small question, Lord Roland if you don’t mind?” When he nodded, she went on, still smiling that almost airy, what Ranma would have labeled a Kasumi-like smile. “I have a message from King Victor to be handed directly to King Faron’s hands. Is he well enough to receive visitors?”

Roland immediately clammed up, but even that was a response of a sort and Sofy continued to smile pleasantly even as she internally scowled. “Thank you, that was enough of an answer.” She quickly got to her feet, heading towards the tent flaps herself.

**OOOOOOO**

Out in the camp, other people were thinking about food, a lot of other people. The Vanadis of Polesia had been understating things tremendously when she said that the situation among the refugees had gotten bad. Winter had begun over the last few days, the temperature dropped precipitously, something few refugees had been in any position to handle. Only a handful had died of the elements as yet, the oldest among them and one very young baby whose mother had yet to be found, but if they didn’t get in more heavy clothing soon, that problem would get worse as the days went on.

Added to this issue was the fact that Tigre and his allies had no idea how many refugees would be coming over the river into their territory, so no one had set aside enough food to feed this many new mouths. This problem was made worse by the fact that most of the tilled land towards the Dinant Plains hadn’t been worked since the campaign against Zhcted had begun. That was the richest arable land on this side of the rivers, and of the rest, only Lord Mashas’ and lord Hughes’ land could produce more than they needed to feed their own people. Territoire could possibly eventually supply the needed clothing, but they could do little in the way of food.

Alsace was fine and had even begun to create a small surplus for the refugees that had already reached Tigre’s original earldom, as had several of the other more prominent lords. But the rest, this main camp and six smaller camps spread out everywhere around the Silver Meteor Army’s territory, they were in a bad way. And it was only thanks to Titta leading a large group of supply wagons to them recently that had allowed the formation of this larger camp in the first place.

Now Tigre and Titta stood together as part of a long line of cooks. Most lords would have disdained such work, looking down at it as beneath them. But Tigre believed that his first and foremost duty was to the common man, to see that they were protected from any enemy, including hunger. With that in mind, he had embraced the idea of giving out food to the refuges rather than giving out arrows to their attackers. It was a much cleaner kind of duty in his opinion. So, he smiled and exchanged a few words with each of the refugees as he worked.

Tigre never noticed that one of the refugees was staring at him. This refugee was short, nondescript almost in a large hood pulled down low over her face from a cloak even more dirt-encrusts and ratty than most, and larger than the body of the refugee underneath. The only thing hinting at the refugee being a 'her' was the individual’s general size and the fact that he or she was being so careful to not let his or her gender be correctly divined. No matter where you were, refugees of all types tended to try to hide such things as a defensive measure. Even other refugees could become predators, after all.

Most of the time this woman would disappear into the crowd or into the rest of the camp, before moving towards one of the women in the cooking line. Or perhaps she would try to wait it out then take a bowl from someone else who had set down for a moment, no matter how little it might contain. Much better than mingling with this large crowd, which jostled and bumped into her from every side. However, not only was this woman desperate for a full meal, rather than scraps, but she had finally heard the name of the individual in charge of this land, the one who had risen up against Duke Thenardier and Duke pervert: Tigrervurmud Vorn, Earl of Alsace.

Now she stared at that young man, feeling an odd feeling within her. It was a feeling she had not felt in several months, ever since her time on the road as a refugee had begun. But the feeling was fleeting, so tiny and weak she couldn’t discern what it might be.

Hesitantly the young woman made her way forward, moving through the crowd even when she had to move against it until she was directly in front of Tigre. She held out a hand, and Tigre obligingly poured some soup for her into a small bowl. But she hesitated, an old fear appearing in her eyes and he asked, “What’s wrong?”

“Are you going to eat?” the young woman asked. Her low, squeaky yet dulcet tone indicated her gender to Tigre’s ears.

He looked at her quizzically, head cocked to one side. “Well I am kind of hungry, but only later, not until everyone else has been fed.”

She then sat the bowl down and backed away without a word. Tigre frowned and asked, “Is something wrong?” but by that point, she had moved well back into the crowd. He was about to call out to her when the bowl was quickly picked up by one of the other refugees, who was in turn replaced by another. Four refugees later, Tigre had almost forgotten about the strange incident.

He never noticed that he was still being observed by the girl from the shadows between two nearby tents. She froze as Elen moved through the crowd, looping one arm around Tigre’s, and whispering something into his ear. He nodded back but made no move when Elen tugged on him gently. She muttered something loudly enough that the woman nearby heard it now. “You really don’t have the proper attitude for a servant to you.”

“Well, you might own me, and Alsace, but that doesn’t necessarily mean I’m your servant.”

“Oh yes it does,” Elen joked back. “An important one, but still a servant.”

“Excuse me but it most certainly does not!” Titta barked from Tigre’s other side. “Tigre still is a Lord, even if he surrendered himself and Alsace to you. If you need someone to act as a servant Viltaria-sama, that is what I am here for. You don’t have to pull on Tigre like that!”

“But I want to,” Elen mock-whined.

Titta scowled, shaking her ladle at the Vanadis without any sign of fear. Watching the two young women tugging on Tigre as if he was some kind of toy, the watching woman felt another emotion well up inside her an emotion she didn’t understand for a moment. Annoyance. Anger. Emotions that had been not fit into her life full of, running, always running, never trusting, harried, poisoned, hiding as best she could, forgetting nearly who she was, in order to hide. But now, she felt that those emotions, and didn’t understand why.

Then her eyes locked on Tigre’s face as a female voice shouted, “As hilarious as it is to see you three flirting, you got some hungry people here and some injured people. And the sooner you feed me, the sooner I can help deal with that second issue.”

“Ranma!” shouted all three as one, and girl in hiding watched as the crowd of refugees parted, like a crowd in front of a nobleman as this Ranma person appeared. She had heard of this one too, rumors only about the Maiden of Healing, and for a moment the girl scowled. I know Earl Tigre didn’t have a sister, so where did this redheaded slattern come from?

Ranma was short, almost as short as the girl in hiding, but also busty, which the girl in hiding was not. Indeed, she looked almost to be as busty as the Vanadis, although that might have been her clothing, which looked wet, clinging to her slightly. Her clothing looked extremely high class as well, being silk or something similar, and was incredibly well-crafted too, the girl in hiding could tell. Raiment fit for a high lord or lady for certain, but pantaloons and a tight shirt? And it looks as if the size isn’t quite a good fit for her either.

Even more oddly than the cut and the clothing was how this woman wore it casually, not caring about the dirt that was getting on it, or the mud she was slogging through in the center of the cold camp? It was odd, very odd. Although, thankfully, he doesn’t seem to be looking at her like a romantic interest either, judging by the look in his face. Wait, why am I thankful for that?

The woman in hiding kept on finding her eyes switching over to Tigre, as he exchanged arm clasps with the woman as if she were a warrior like the Vanadis. Their voices were now muted over the sound of the crowd as it once more shifted forward to the food, so she could not make out any of their words.

But behind the mysterious Ranma, came another Vanadis. This one was lady Sofy, who the woman had seen before from afar, another lifetime ago, before her world changed. For a moment the sight made the girl in hiding a smile as she remembered better times, but she had to shake that off. Another Vanadis? Does, does this mean Tigre really has sold out Brune? But… if so, is that really any worse than what Thenardier and Ganelon have done and plan to do?

With that thought, she slunk backward through the camp, dodging around all of the tents, until she found a small one that she and a few other women had been assigned. She moved inside, grateful to find that the others were gone, and huddled there, trying to gather up her courage once more to steal some food as her mind worked on the main problem. What should I do now?

**OOOOOOO**

After eating more than any four men could have, Ranma had gone around and healed the worst of the refugees and soldiers. Most of the wounded refugees had minor wounds like cuts and gashes that had become infected. Ranma could use her rejuvenated ki to burn out the infection and even heal the wounds, but that left the severe malnourishment and lack of energy. It would be up to them if they would pull through. The wounded soldiers were easier to handle, their wounds more recent and well looked after, even a few who had taken wounds to their guts or heads were easier to deal with than the infections. Only one soldier’s wounds, a head wound that had crushed his eye and shattered his skull, pushed Ranma to her utmost. Still, by sundown, she was done with the worst wounded.

The rest would pull through. After Ranma had finished shouting at the sawbones and so-called nurses on how to handle them anyway. “And if any cloth that hasn’t been soaked in alcohol to kill the germs comes within a foot of your patients, I will rip out your fingers one by one and then stab you to do death with them!” Ranma snarled, staring at the three now completely cowed so-called healers.

Two of them were barely wet nurses pushed into doing more, old folk remedy healers who had no idea about much beyond herbs and poultices. They were okay with those, but neither of them had been the primary healers for their communities, those worthies had been rounded up by their lords for their armies. The other was one of the healers who Ranma had worked with after the battle against the dragons and had waaaay less excuse for the state of the tents which had been turned over to the wounded.

“G, germs?” that worthy stuttered.

“GRAAHAHH! Germs, yes, little dangerous things that can’t be seen,” Ranma growled, grabbing her self-control with both hands so as to not go through with his threat. “The same reason why you never drink water from a stream near an army camp or eat meat that’s gone green. Constant cleaning of the wounds. Small, freaking small stitches. Find a few womenfolk with solid stomachs who know their way around a needle. That should be the first thing you do when you set up shop! And remember, boil and clean every tool, every needle, every saw or dagger that comes near them.”

The two wet nurses slowly started to nod, understanding the point as the man with them was too cowed to do so. “But, but what about our poultices and herbal remedies?”

“…I would love to say I knew something about them, but I don’t. If you think they can help, and they don’t interfere with anything else, then try them out. I don’t know anything about healing plants or anything like that. Not around here anyway. But you better watch them, and if they don’t seem to be getting better, you’ll need to stop. This ain’t about proving your tonics work, it is about the patients. Understand?” Unlike when she threatened the idiot ‘healer’ Ranma’s voice was a lot calmer as she spoke to the two wet nurses. It wasn’t their fault after all they didn’t have the knowledge their job needed.

After a few more dozen questions mostly about specific patients, Ranma finally was able to leave the three of them behind, having put one of the wet nurses in overall charge. A no-nonsense sort of young woman, she seemed to have taken heart the most from Ranma’s direction. And she hadn’t completely tossed out everything Ranma had taught her earlier either like the ‘healer’ had.

Later that day, after Ranma had healed a few of the more wounded refugees, and a few of the soldiers, Ranma was sitting across from Sofy and Elen in another tent, as Titta puttered around them. Roland had been fed, and his parole repeated earlier to Tigre and Elen. The two of them had accepted it before letting the older knight, who was still nursing his own wounds, to fall back asleep.

But for now, Sofy held the attention of Elen and Tigre with the news she had been ordered to pass along from the king of Zhcted. “What do you mean I’m being ordered to return to Leitmeritz!?”

“I didn’t say you were being ordered to return Elen, don’t put words in my mouth,” Sofy said calmly, sipping at her foot at her own soup. “Mah, this is quite good.”

“Thank you milady,” Titta replied, curtsying towards her. “It’s a family recipe.”

“Answer the question Sofy,” Elen scowled. “Although I do agree the tea is good.”

“As a nation, Zhcted will not take part in this civil war of Brune’s. So says the King,” Sofy said, subtly emphasizing the two words. “That means, that the majority of Zhcted’s troops must be pulled back across the border. Only you and a personal guard of five hundred can remain to protect your new investments.”

Ranma held up a hand, taking a sip from his own teacup after having used the water to turn back into his male form. “Wait a minute. I thought Vanadis generals are Lords of their domain. That means all of the troops that she can raise on her land are her personal guard, right?”

“Not exactly. Defensively, she or any other lord can raise as many troops as they want. Indeed, we Vanadis are required to do so. But this is not a defensive action. This is offense, taking part in another nation’s civil war. A civil war that the king is afraid will bog down into turmoil chaos and strife. In cases like this, the king can forbid a Vanadis from using her full might. He’s worried that strife will then pass over the borders into Zhcted and refuses to let it happen.”

Not unless Zhcted as a nation can profit, and grow tremendously, Sofy thought, keeping her feelings of disgust off her face at the thought of how blatantly self-serving the king’s actions were in this. On the one hand, cutting Elen’s participation off at the knees so she personally won’t profit overmuch, while at the same time sending me to discern whether or not Brune can even be called a nation any longer, and thus can be seen as being vulnerable to direct invasion. The king’s political machinations impressed her since they at least somewhat served Zhcted and its central government but they also appalled her.

“So, limiting my forces is the king’s way to make certain that doesn’t happen. He’s not ordering me home though?” Eleanora asked, looking at over at Tigre. “I want to stay and protect Tigre, erm, that is my investment.”

“The King has acknowledged your receipt of Alsace and Lord Vorn as payment for your intervention in the unreasoned assault on Alsace via dragon by Duke Thenardier. It will be added to your personal holdings, although a special tax will be levied against it and any other lands that wish to switch loyalties. However, the king does not want those lands to be added into Zhcted unless, a new border, a new solid border can be created.” Sofy shrugged. “And you have to admit, His Majesty has got a point.”

“A new tax to be levied isn’t all that bad,” Elen said thoughtfully, calming down somewhat now that her worst fears had been allayed. “How much?”

“Ten percent.”

“Again not horrible,” Elen muttered after thinking it over. “Heavier than it should be for a newly acquired territory, but not all that heavier.”

“It’ll hurt, especially the timing of it, but my people can pay it. For those who can’t pay I will take up the burden,” Tigre interjected.

Elen looked at him, but he just nodded his head, and since his Alsace, along with the area called the Dinant Plains, would be the two areas most affected by the new taxation, she had to take his word for it. Her next words though cause him to nod in agreement with her in turn. “Fine, we can handle that. The rest though... The king wants us to play a defensive war? Why?”

Sipping at her tea bought Sofy time to school her face. The truth on this point was much murkier than she could reveal to Elen. Elen wasn’t a political beast save by necessity and didn’t understand King Victor’s distrust of the Vanadis. She had no idea that the man would want to cut her down to size after she had acted without his leave. And since that was something Sofy knew from interacting with Victor, it became a secret she had to keep.

“At the moment, Zhcted’s borders with Brune is by far the easiest to defend, thanks to the Voyes Mountains being impassable for most of their length. If we take all this land that you’ve been fighting over, that changes. The border becomes wide open, and the logistic aspect of seeing to both the defense and administration of our new lands is much more difficult to see to.”

“And I have to remind you both that while this has spiraled out of control, only myself and my earldom has changed allegiance. And even then, it wasn’t the king of Zhcted who helped me defend my people but Elen alone,” Tigre cut in, first almost glaring at Sofy then sending a conversely warm look toward Elen. “I doubt that any of our allies, including Viscount Augre or Earl Mashas would go along with the idea of their territories being so absorbed by Zhcted.”

While Sofy just continued to smile placidly at that, Elen coughed slightly and looked away, a faint blush on her face. “What’s so important about your mission?”

“I have a message that I must deliver directly onto the king of Brune stands from the king of our nation. No other hand may see it, no other man may open it. It bears his seal, and that is all I know,” Sofya said firmly.

Elen frowned, then her eyes widened. “Oh, that, that, oooh that’s dirty, both cautious and grasping at the same time. And that after he orders I send most of my troops home this winter?!”

“I don’t get it,” Ranma admitted.

“No reason you should, it’s a subtle thing. King Victor is using Sofy and this message to, to sort of check to see if Brune can be considered to be a nation in reality.”

“That makes no sense.”

Sofy thought of how to explain it to Ranma, while to one side Tigre was frowning heavily, his jaw visibly working. “A kind king, a weak king even is fine so long as there was someone visibly wearing the crown, the central government will keep working and you can trot the king out for special occasions or write special correspondence and so forth. If so then Brune remains a nation. A nation divided at present true, but still a nation. The king could appear in public and rally the nobles, including Duke Thenardier given their familial relationship, and perhaps even Duke Ganelon, along with the Knightly Orders against invasion.”

“The Knightly Orders, just like the Knights of Navarre,” Elen supplied morosely. Having them to their new territories direct southeast, a border that had no defensive point short of Territoire’s walls, was enough to make her worry. “Combined they can field seven-thousand of the best, most well trained, experienced, organized and armed men in Brune.”

“Men who will otherwise stay out of politics entirely, so long as they can tell themselves that they are still doing their duty to their oaths to defend those lands from Mouzinel. If Brune is no longer a nation though, without a centralized government and a leader able to rally every power block within it, then it becomes simply disparate bits and competing pieces, no longer able to provide the people with the stability they crave. In that case, an invading army from Zhcted would become not invaders, but saviors to the people,” Sofy concluded.

“And in that kind of messed up situation, a shrewd fisherman would try to catch all he could,” Ranma replied, likening it to what he knew of the Thirty Years War in a way, and not liking the comparison at all. I’m beginning to not like this Victor guy, just as much as I don’t like Ganelon and Thenardier.

“Exactly. If however the king is still alive and will recover from his illness, then it makes more sense to not get bogged down in a war that would occur entirely on another nation’s home soil, and which will, therefore, be an invasion of conquest with all that entails. Zhcted is as strong and prosperous as it is because we have not been bogged down in such for generations. King Victor is ambitious, but wise in this I feel. Double-dealing and very cynical, but wise,” Sofy said, pouting at her own words.

“And counting his chicken before they hatch!” Tigre shouted suddenly losing his temper completely for the first time since Ranma had met him, let alone Elen who looked taken aback by his sudden vehemence. “My being indebted to Elen is one thing. But I will not be a party to, to this attempt to conquer by fiat! Nor will any of my allies! If we must fight against Zhcted as well as Thenardier and Ganelon, then we will do so!”

While Ranma chuckled at that but said nothing – he had no national affiliation one way or another after all – Sofy sighed and took it upon herself to answer. Elen wasn’t going to be any help, given the stare she was giving Tigre. “What about if they really do become saviors. Accept your ranks and your oaths to his house instead? Do you really think the peasants will care what flag waves over them so long as their lives are protected along with their families?”

Tigre growled angrily but Sofy went on calmly, “Besides even if that occurs, this will not automatically mean that your allies’ lands will be added to Zhcted proper. They would simply become autonomous, allied to Zhcted, but not part of it.”

“Puppet states you mean!” Tigre snorted. “How is that any better than being incorporated entirely into Zhcted? Either way, we lose our national identity!”

As Sofy explained, Ranma tuned her out somewhat. He hadn’t really studied a lot of history, but he had studied warfare, and history leading up to and directly after the World Wars back on his old planet. The idea of a buffer zone wasn’t something new to him after studying the history of the USSR. “Just as long as he doesn’t have any plans for me,” he grunted.

“The king doesn’t know about you,” Sofy said, breaking away from arguing with Tigre and looking at Ranma with amusement clear in her face. “And he wouldn’t be able to command you in any event. You’re not a citizen of Zhcted or Brune.”

“So long as you and he don’t forget that,” Ranma replied, a hint of real warning in his tone as he scowled. “I follow Elen and Tigre because I’m their friends. I’m not their liegeman, I’m not sworn to their service. What I do, I do for friendship’s sake and because of my Code, which tells me to use my abilities to defend those around me.” He then smiled, and it was possibly the most ferocious, shark-like smile that Sofy had ever seen on a human being. Except perhaps for Sasha at some point in the past when they talked about pirates. It was a tossup really. “And my Code steps states that I will be helping him against Duke Sadist and Duke Dragon Buggerer.”

While none of them had heard the term ‘buggerer’ before, they all understood the term thanks to context and laughed while Tigre smiled at Ranma, and there was nothing of a predator in his smile, simply one of friendship.

Titta actually went so far as to hug Ranma from behind for a very brief second, before moving back over to tend the tea, as the argument continued.

Eventually the two of them, Tigre won the argument thanks to Elen weighing in on his side. She had gotten a feel for the lords and knights they worked with. In the face of both of their arguments, Sofy agreed to pass on their opinions to the king but did not agree to halt her mission. "And I wouldn't be so quick as to disparage the idea regardless. who knows what the future holds after all?"

“Agreed. That’s an idea I can get behind anyway. Let’s get through the winter first, then make grand, probably doomed from the start plans, yeah?” Ranma said, speaking up for the first time in a while.

His words caused everyone to laugh, and the tension disappeared with the conversation turning to the recent campaign and what Ranma had been up to in that time, much to his chagrin. “So, what’s this I heard from Sofy that you slept with Sasha?” Elen teased. “That’s not what I’d call healing what ails her you know.”

Ranma's blush and stammered embarrassment were all she could have asked for.

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About a day after returning to Leitmeritz, Lim was able to put together what she thought of as a relief column. It really wasn’t, since it wasn’t a military force, but rather a large supply convoy, carrying necessary foodstuffs and clothing into Brune for the refugees. Most of that had already been prepared, it was simply the command-and-control aspects of it that needed to be hammered out, as well as a few logistical matters in terms of paying for the material, finding enough mules and drovers, and assigning an overall commander for the nonmilitary side of things and the military side.

Lim handled all that with easy aplomb that reminded everyone involved once more why Eleanora output such stock in her and why she was so highly placed in Elen’s command structure. Indeed, she didn’t actually have a formal position. It was simply “She’s in charge after me,” as Elen put it. That was it. Not exactly a military rank even in a Vanadis’ land normally, but it worked here.

She also decided to send two dozen cooks, such as were available, along with Titta to command the nonmilitary aspect. She wanted someone on hand that was Brunish, could be trusted to keep a level head, not play favorites and was also connected to Tigre. All those pointed to Titta and no one else. She would have sent medical personnel too, but those which were in Eleanora’s service at this point were already with her, notably in Alsace from last reports.

At first, Lim had wanted to go with them. But the need to get supplies into Brune as quickly as possible negated the idea of waiting until all of it could be prepared to go in one large convoy. Instead, she split the supplies in two and put one of her own aides, a man named Jacort in command of the forty cavalrymen and ten archers she sent along as protection against bandits.

Work on the second convoy was ongoing, as what clothing could be bought were gathered from the citizens of Leitmeritz. The food aspect was actually quite a bit easier since a system already existing in place to gather such up for trade around the rest of Zhcted. Leitmeritz was well known for its bread and several of the towns that looked to Lady Eleanora were also known for their bread products.

About a week after Ranma and the others had departed, the second convoy was nearly ready to go. But Lim found her work on that and a few judicial matters interrupted by a messenger from the gates. The message that he brought surprised her greatly. “Lady Valentina Glinka Estes? The Vanadis of Osterode? She’s here?”

“Can’t be anyone else?” the messenger replied, a rueful shake of his head accompanying the words. “She’s, well, all maidens are distinctive you know.”

Lim gave the man a glare, but let it pass uncommented. It was true after all. And what little she knew of Valentina Estes said she stood out physically almost as much as Sofy. However, unlike Sofy, Valentina was a complete unknown to Lim.

And a very deliberate kind of unknown at that. Of all of the Vanadis, the only one who she knew less about than Valentina was the still missing Vanadis of Brest, wielder of the giant axe Muma. All the others Lim knew something of, even if she hadn’t actually met them, but Valentina very deliberately kept out of the limelight in many ways.

She didn’t participate in military affairs, despite having created the Osterode pikemen, a company of whom were even now serving with Lady Eleanora at the front. She didn’t participate normally in political affairs on the national level as far as Lim knew and was reckoned the weakest of the Vanadis given how much of her endurance using the weapon apparently took. There were no rumors about her one way or the other beyond her being soft-spoken, insightful, and, apparently, well connected among the nobility.

All of which makes it very strange that she’s here. Although perhaps she’s here to check up on the pikemen she loaned Elen? Could the payment for them not have arrived yet? Or… could she be doing her own investigation into Sasha’s revival? Regardless, both the laws of the land and good manners dictate that we welcome the woman. “Please show her to my office.”

Soon enough Valentina was shown in, and Lim had to fight down an urge to let her eyebrows draw together in consternation. The woman really was as striking as the messenger had said. Good grief, her mode of dress makes Sofy’s look banal in comparison yet doesn’t quite slip over into outright licentiousness. And in this weather… do Vanadis just not feel the cold? In Zhcted winter came just as quickly as in Brune, but snows began even earlier, and there had been two snowfalls since Lim had last seen Ranma.

She could’ve sworn she hadn’t voiced that thought or even let anything show up on her face, but Valentina giggled. “We don’t feel the cold, and before you wonder, no you didn’t verbalize that question. It’s just amazing how often that question gets asked. May I sit?”

“Of course Lady Estes, forgive me,” Lim said, hopping to her feet and gesturing to the chairs in front of her desk or the sofa that leaned against one wall.

Valentina smiled and accepted a seat on the sofa, as well as a cup of tea. The two of them made small talk as was required with moments like this, then Valentina broached the subject she knew was eating Lim alive with concern. “You’re no doubt wondering why I’m here.”

“If it pleases you, Lady Estes,” Lim said, her tone formal as it had been throughout their small talk. That would indeed be one of my questions for you. Of course, if you wish to partake in Leitmeritz’s hospitality, I am more than willing to see to whatever comfort you require. But my Lady Viltaria is not here to greet you, and if this is a formal visit then there are constraints on what I can or cannot agree to.”

Valentina laughed, a light, little giggle that somewhat put Lim at ease somehow, especially accompanied by the following words. “I’m not here for anything like that my dear. Don’t worry, the payments for my loaning you some of my pikemen for this business in Zhcted has already arrived in Osterode. And there was nothing wrong in the report I received from Captain Odell of their treatment, while in Elen’s territory.”

No, my reasoning for being here is a little more obscure. First, I wish to head into Brune in order to get a feel for myself as to the lay of the land as it were.” She held up a hand before Lim began to speak. “This is nothing to do with Sofy’s mission, I will not interfere in that, whatever you know of it, or even the ongoing civil war precisely. Although I might wish to talk to this Tigre Vorn to get a Brune native’s opinion on a few things. I also wish to check in on my pikemen. This is the first time I have allowed them to work under other Vanadis. I wish to see how they were used, to make certain that they were treated well, and to see how, in point of fact, they were used at all. You realize I’ve only ever been involved in two campaigns since my creation of that unit?”

Lim nodded, not because she did know that, but because it made sense. Yet somehow, she felt that Valentina was here for something else entirely. She just couldn’t put a finger on why. Hmm, perhaps she is something like Sasha or Elen? “Pardon me for saying this lady Estes, but I feel as if you are after more than simply, as you put it, getting a feel for the lay of the land.”

Oh oho, this one isn’t nearly as lacking in subtlety as I would have thought someone involved with Elen would be. Interesting. Still, I doubt she can’t be led astray by a little bit of the truth. Valentina sighed, setting her cup down. “What do you know about Osterode?”

“…scant little I’m afraid,” Lim admitted after a few seconds thought.

“I thought so. Most of Zhcted doesn’t know much about us. Indeed, I’ve often heard Osterode be called ‘the rump of Zhcted. And there is alas some truth in that. Osterode is historically the smallest territory among the Vanadis lands. We barely can make enough food for our own people, clothe our own people. I have made it my life’s work to better Osterode, and it is only recently that our port on the river Valla, my own capital, has been declared a city, with all that entails. But part of what I have been doing is to reach out to lords and nobles in other countries for investment money in a few mercantile pursuits of mine. Recently I was approached in turn by Lord Ganelon. I want to know more about the reality of the individual who I might be doing business with.”

Lim nodded at that. “I would advise against that given what I know of events in Brune Lady Estes, but you, of course, should make up your own mind on such things.” But her tone made it clear she was after something a little more.

Rolling her eyes mentally, Valentina let out a huff, crossing her arms and looking away. “Fine. If it was just that I could have gone with the rumor mill, after all, if there is so much smoke, there must be a fire underneath it. But I was telling the truth about how small Osterode is. I have barely seven hundred fighting men under my command, and the company I sent to work with Elen is one of my best. Is it any wonder I wish to check in on them personally on their first campaign away from my eyes?”

“Now that, I believe, Lady Estes,” Lim allowed a small smile to appear on her face. “And if I may be so bold, you should not be so embarrassed about showing you care about your people.”

“Perhaps not in front of you, or Elen. But in front of Elizaveta Fomina or several of the nobles of Zhcted, it would be a sign of weakness. One I cannot afford if I am to possibly continue the concept of loaning out my pikemen to my fellow nobles.”

The way she said that made Lim remember that Lady Estes was a noblewoman before she became a Vanadis, though unlike Sofya of Sasha, she had been born into the high nobility rather than low. Isn’t she in some way related to the king? Despite that thought though, Lim was satisfied with what Valentina had told her about her reasons for being here and graciously extended an invitation to travel with her and the next supply convoy the following day. Valentina accepted, then asked to be shown the baths.

Later that night, Valentina left her bed, making her way silent and unseen through the castle. This was easy enough for her: thanks to Ezendeis' ability to teleport away and to hide in shadows at need, coupled with the extra senses that Ezendeis gave her, it was almost child’s play to stay away from the few people awake at night. She was somewhat amused to see one of those people was Limalisha. Rather dedicated to her work that girl. I wonder how much her mind and loyalty has played a part in how strong Leitmeritz has become under Elen?

She wasn’t here to spy on anything of Elen’s, however. No, she was here to learn more about Ranma. And one thing that she had learned through her discussion with Elen back in Silesia was that Ranma had stayed here for several weeks as a prisoner. This evening she had been eavesdropping on some of the maids and had discovered that several of his items had remained here when he had left. It was a long shot, but Valentina would take any means she could get to discover more about the new wild piece that was Ranma.

So she moved through the castle until she found the room the maids had apparently been cleaning that day, where Ranma’s mysterious items were stored. There were a few guards outside the door, but Valentina didn’t need to use doors. From down in the darkness of the corridor beyond the torchlight She locked her gaze, on the door that stood revealed in the light of two torches, then closed her eyes, imagining the space on the other side of it. Then, stepping back around the corner, she used Ezendeis to create the teleportation doorway, passing through it out the other side into the room.

Glancing back at the door, she frowned for a moment, then took a few quick steps into the room, glancing around her with what little light came in from the outline of the doorway. It was a large storage room, but it was very obviously a storage room full of knickknacks, important, personal and just plain odd. This included a few strange looking trophies of past battles, one of which Valentina recognized as coming from the barbarians from the north.

It was a broken huffed horse, missing one leg. The thing was made of steel, but it had been burnished and polished and dotted here and there with tiny, cheap gems. It was the kind of thing that the horse clans gave to those who beat them in battle in return for the safe passage of their women back to their old lands. Considering that most northern clans were nomadic and took their women and children almost into battle with them, leaving them well within the range of a sudden cavalry strike, this was no small thing. Each clan’s standard was different, the style of the odd piece of art different to denote each clan.

Valentina had six of them hanging in a place of honor back in her own home. There used to be two more, from the previous owner of Ezendeis, but when those two clans had attacked Osterode early in Valentina’s time as its ruler, believing that agreement is null and void with her predecessor’s death, Valentina had shown them otherwise. She was willing to show mercy, once. Just once. You would not get mercy a second time, even if the affront was not to her personally but to her people.

When those two clans had attacked again, in concert no less, they had run into her pikes and been massacred. Then she had led a campaign into their lands, herding their womenfolk and children before forcing them onto the land of other horse lords while poisoning their wells. Those two clans had ceased to exist at that point, with no land they call their own, no warriors to defend them, and with the vast majority of their womenfolk in the hands of other clans.

It had been harsh, but it worked. The horse lords had gone seeking other easier prey and had not crossed her border since in any organized fashion.

Shaking off those memories, Valentina turned to the room at large, cocking her head thoughtfully as she pulled out the tiny thief’s lamp she had on her belt, opening the visor just slightly enough to let a tiny beam of light out. Here in pride of praise was a sword, broken off near the hilt. There, a helmet, a magnificent piece of artwork, with gold filigree, and encrusted with gems here and there. The fact that it had been nearly chopped in half showed why gold was never a good metal for armor, but it should still have been worth quite a bit. My, I wonder where that piece came from. Another example of Elen’s time as a mercenary perhaps?

And of course, there were things that just didn’t make any sense at all. A pair of spurs hung up on one wall. Several images, paintings made by children they seemed, each of them pushed up and pinned to the wall with a nail through the rock. A few crushed flowers. Very odd Elen, I cannot make head or tail of most of this.

But even as she thought that Valentina spotted something, something near the back of the room, set aside what looked like a very old, very cheap jewelry case which had despite that been lovingly maintained. The item in question was an odd thing, a small square thing connected by a rope or perhaps metal wires to some kind of headdress.

When she was in front of the odd thing, Valentina shone her light on it, taking in the details swiftly. There were several raised portions on the top, with odd markings on them, tiny, so tiny she had trouble making them out by the light of the thief’s lantern. The side had an odd round portion sticking out very slightly from it, which looked almost like the gears on some kind of clock. But it was so small. And what is it made of? She rubbed her fingers around the thin rectangle’s front and could find a bit of what felt like metal, but for the most part, it felt like nothing she had ever felt before. The raised portions were covered in what felt like rubber, something she had seen occasionally, but the rest? She had no idea.

The headdress wasn’t nearly as interesting. It looked almost like a muffler for someone’s ears, only the muffle portion was far smaller than such should be. They would fit over the ears, but they wouldn’t fit around them, in order to protect them from the weather. Strange. And why is it connected to this box?

Looking closer at the side of the thing, she discovered a few more symbols. One looked like the headdress only far smaller. Perhaps signifying this is where the wire needs to be inserted? She gently pulled that bit out and looked at what was the end of the wire, feeling it out. The wire was covered by rubber, she could tell that much, and the end of it looked as if it was covered in gold. Why?

She stared at it, then shook her head and plugged it back in, feeling a small click at that sound. She froze, but only for a second. There was no way that sound could’ve carried. Above that, Valentina found two of the other marks. One was a minus symbol, and one was a plus symbol.

She put her finger on the strange gear-like object that was between them, moving it this way and that, her eyes widening in understanding. I see, so this controls something, something within, making it lesser or greater? Could this be some kind of clock? She had opened the clock once to see the little gears moving and had been incredibly fascinated by it. Since then, she had tried to convince clockmakers, of which there are only about six or so in the entire country, to move to Osterode. But all of them were quite happy to live in Silesia, preferring to be nearer to their clients. Clocks were expensive, the work of months for a skilled craftsman.

She turned the object over again to look at the front, realizing suddenly there was something else inside a thin glass casing like a clock would be placed behind a protective case. She found a little indent to one side, which allowed her to put a finger in, and slowly opened it. Again, there was a tiny click sound but this time Valentina didn’t even respond. Instead, she looked at the object inside. A portion of what she had initially taken as part of the clockwork mechanisms had come away with the small hatch and was now being held there in two well-crafted holders like a treasured weapon would be held on the wallet in a nobleman’s main hall.

She gingerly lifted it out, watching for anything that indicated it was still connected to the larger box, but there was nothing. Staring at it in the light, she was once more astonished to see what looked like gears inside of the smaller thing, which again had a few clear places like glass, but which was not. And again, they were made of some strange new material that she had never felt before. It was hard, but it wasn’t steel or wood. There was no grain, no color, to indicate it was wood, and it didn’t feel like any metal she had ever known. She tested the strength of the little thing’s front and back, pressing in with two fingers. It gave slightly, but not a lot and Valentina desisted not wanting to break whatever it was.

At the top, there was a thin film of some kind, thinner than a leaf or the finest parchment, pulled taut between two rollers. Valentina was tempted to touch it, to see if she could figure out what it was made of but decided against it. It was evident that whatever that was, it was meant to pass through the device on an infinite loop, pulled by the gears. She used her nail to test this, twisting her nail in one of the holes and watching as the thin thing at the top moved. It moved slowly, but it did move.

But why? What is the purpose? Valentina frowned, confused and elated at the same time. Hehehe, I love mysteries! Still, there is no way that even when combined, this thing could tell the time. There’s no face to it, there are no places for the numbers to go. And yet, all of it speaks of an intense level of craft. It is not some useless gewgaw, now there is a purpose to this creation.

Hesitantly, Valentina tried to put the smaller box back into the larger one, only to realize that the larger box’s front wouldn’t close properly. She then looked at the top and bottom of the opening, when the smaller rectangle had been removed and found several bits of what looked like metal poking out like dull spikes here and there.

Valentina inserted the rectangle again, closing the thing down, and watched as those tines were paired up, along with two larger gears that would go in the two holes in the smaller rectangle. At that at least Valentina understood. One gear moves against the other, causing that, that thin whatever it is to move alone. But, how? How will they move? She turned it over, staring at the back, then all around it. There is no place for anyone to grab a handle, no place for anyone to put in some physical energy to start up the gears.

That left one possibility and her eyes widened, as she reached it her hands clenching as she stared at the device. It must be magic. Some kind of internal magic. I’ve never heard of such a thing, but that is the only explanation. But still, what does it do! It must do something, or else why would anyone bother with imbuing the thing with magic?

She stared from one piece of it to the other, then slowly, moved over and picked up the headpiece. The two bits that went over the ears were soft, obviously for comfort, but they were also a thin veneer, which she was able to peel away in order to see what lay underneath. It looked like a honeycomb, with so many different holes, almost as if something was supposed to come out, though she had no idea of anything that could be that small. But the wires…they must be there for a reason. The headpiece is part of this device in some fashion. Some kind of voice tube perhaps? But these are wires, not tubes, and where would the voice be coming from?

Those were used in several nobleman houses of Valentina’s acquaintance, allowing the nobleman in his office to pass down orders to the kitchen or wherever. They were long cloth tubes basically, which allowed the Lord to shout down to various levels of his castle without moving. Valentina always thought them rather ridiculous, but it was about the only explanation she could reach. Gingerly sitting the headpiece on her head once more, she played with it a bit before she was comfortable, wincing as a piece of hair got caught for a second.

With that done, Valentina looked at the device, then at the nodules up top. One was marked in red, but she stayed away from that. If Ranma’s people are anything like us red could indicate danger or warning as it does in shipyards or other places where dangerous work occurs.

On the other side of the row of what had to be buttons or some kind, there was another one that stood alone marked with a square. She pressed that, but nothing happened except for a low click. From inside the device. She could hear it, but she didn’t see any changes.

The others looked like directions, left, right and then a single arrow pointing right on a larger button in the middle. Opening the device again, she stared at the little rectangle, then at the thin thing on top. She twisted it one way using her finger in one of the holes again, watching it move that way, then the other. Going back the reverse to the left, was much more difficult. So it was obvious that thing was meant to go forward to the right. But there isn’t an infinite amount of the whatever-it-is. Valentina could tell that there was something at the bottom, that the thing at the top, like a string almost, would eventually end. And then the device will… what, roll it back up? Amazing!

Valentina was practically giddy now, as she inserted the rectangle again and slowly closed the lid, looking over her shoulder all the while at the doorway. But really, the fear of discovery just made this more enjoyable. I love mysteries! Working something out like this with her hands, trying to understand something, especially something that she was beginning to feel was a major find, made Valentina very happy. It was just plain fun. Playing the great game is pleasant as it is a means to my end goal, but this is amusing on its own merits.

So, if this one is to, to return the string let us call it backward, and this one is meant to go forward, what is the center one? That triangle was pointing in the same way as the movement marks pointing to the right, so she didn’t understand why there were two of them. Shrugging, she hit the button that told her that it would move the string to the right.

The thing it made a loud whirring noise, an odd noise she’d never heard before, but could almost liken to the sound of feet sliding along on a wooden floor. it was so loud Valentina instantly slammed her finger down on the square button, grateful that it worked as she thought it might, to stop whatever other action was going on.

She stared hard at the doorway, straining her ears to for any sound movement, but there was none, and she breathed a sigh of relief. However, she did set the lamp down and moved over to Ezendeis. So, using that button was too loud, and, though this, could be supposition, but I think it is going too fast. Certainly, there was no sound coming from it as I thought should be the case.

Valentina chewed on her lip for a moment, before biting the bullet, and pressing the central button, the one with the single triangle pointing right. There was a light click, and then nothing. Disappointed, she was about to click the stop button, when she frowned suddenly. The plus and minus gear? What magic does that add to this device?

She rested her finger on that little gear to the side and then began to move it from being straight on the minus slowly upwards. A few seconds later she began to hear music.

Just music, mostly a voice singing in some unknown language, but there seemed to be a certain rhythm to it, even if the background was too drum-heavy for her liking. She had never heard anything quite like the other noises in the background. But that is to be expected, Valentina reflected as she gently hit the stop button, and pulled the headdress off of her head. Nor is that really important.

What was important, was Valentina knew what this device was meant to be. All that work, all that effort to create this thing, to craft it, and it is only meant to let the user listen to, to music, copied down in some fashion as if a secretary had copied out a note for her lord or lady? Either Ranma’s people put much more emphasis on music than we do, or, or this device does not equate to any great amount of time or craft.

That was a startling thought, but it was soon overridden by another thought. Is it actually magic which powers it? If so, then why use the gears or anything else in all? Why not just make a spell to share the music somehow? Valentina was no mage of course. Beyond charlatans, and hucksters there were no actual mages in the world. What little magic Valentina knew of came in the form of weapons like her Viralt and its siblings, or from the gods bestowed upon high priests or particularly holy men.

She began to gently touch the thing all over, trying to discern if there was anything she had missed. On the back of the rectangle, there were a few squares with writing in them that she could feel and then see with the lamp, but they were foreign to her. There were a few small holes, which she realized held screws. So this thing is thus fitted together, not a whole piece. But even so, it is so far beyond any artisan I know it could well have come from the gods themselves.

There was also a second smaller catch on the bottom of the thing. Pulling it open took one of Valentina’s nails to get underneath a tiny lip there, but when it was open, it revealed two silver and light blue cylinders of some kind. Using her nail again Valentina was able to pop one free, staring at it from every angle. Then she pushed the play button on the device, and beyond a tiny click of the thing going down into its holder, there was no further noise. So these are the source of its power?

She put them back in, and then press play again, one of the earpieces held up to her ear, listening. Then she stopped again. So made out of entirely new material, a thing of masterful craftsmanship, but one used only to convey music? And it’s here rather than on Ranma’s person’s now? So he doesn’t really care about it, it is no prized possession. And the magic, whatever its form, comes from two cylinders that somehow empower all the gears and so forth within the device. However, even that was immaterial.

Valentina felt the sheer thrill of pleasure going through her. As she realized that she now knew, or suspected at any rate, where Ranma had come from. He is from the future, or from some other world perhaps. There is no way that such a wonder as this would not have been known to us in Zhcted if he was from anywhere where our ships can travel. But if so, how did he arrive here?

Yet even that question was drowned out by an even greater awareness: Ranma, Ranma could help me in my ambitions! He could make that road far easier in a myriad of ways. By the gods, even if he isn’t willing to fight for me, simply answering several of my questions about his own world would be a major help.

Thank the Gods I didn’t jump to conclusions and name him an enemy, Valentina thought as she used her Viralt to tear open a hole in time and space, stepping through to the guest quarters she had been given by Limalisha. Oh yes, I am so definitely looking forward to talking to Ranma in person now!

**OOOOOOO**

The next morning Sofya made ready to leave the makeshift refugee camp, despite the massive amount of pouting that Ranma was sending her way. “Are you sure you don’t want me to come with you?”

“Are you that worried about me?” Sofya asked mock innocently, completing the image by raising her free hand to her hair, twirling a lock of it in her finger.

Ranma shrugged. “You’re a friend and I’ve only got about seven of those in this whole world at the moment, so yeah.” To Ranma’s mind, balancing going with Sofy and protecting her from whatever might be waiting for her in Nice to the good he could do for the people in the refugee camp was a no brainer. Yes, his Code told him to help those around him, but there was nothing in it that told him he couldn’t prioritize his friends.

Sofya beamed at that. Then without any change of expression, she smacked Ranma upside the head with her staff almost faster than he could track, certainly faster than he could dodge, laying him out on the ground. “Ow!” he moaned, while to one side Tigre winced and Elen began to laugh. “Oh hush Silver, or else I’ll use a pressure point on ya to make your legs and arms feel like they’ve fallen asleep.”

That caused Elen to pout, but Sofy ignored the byplay, concentrating on Ranma for a moment, a smirk on her face as she looked down at him. “As much as I like the sentiment behind your offer, I am not some naïve young woman or weak girl, that needs you to run to her rescue Ranma. I am a diplomatic envoy of my King and have been so for several years now.” Indeed, Sofy had become such the moment she had bonded with Zaht. More than two years ago that had been, and the number of harrowing missions she had been on was quite a bit more than her predecessor had ever hinted could be the case in her notes.

Just her notes. When a new Vanadis bonded to her weapon, there was only one reason why it occurred: the death of the former holder. There had never, as far back as records went, been a case of a Vanadis being able to pass on their Viralt to a chosen successor. Even Ludmilla Lurie’s family had never been able to do that, though they routinely had husbands and even sisters or brothers occasionally to help the transition, and they had routinely died in more peaceful circumstances than most other Vanadis could contrive.

“Besides which, I have to speak to the king of Brune in any event. My political duties demand it. And I have to leave now, or else I will miss my deadline,” she said leaning down to help him up, once more showing a strength that her soft, excessively feminine form shouldn’t really have possessed.

Although of course of all people Ranma should not have been surprised by that, and he castigated himself for it. Come on man, you turn into a girl and while ya lose a bit of physical strength, the fact Sasha kicked your ass so routinely should’ve told ya that Vanadis aren’t like Akane or the others at home, only so skilled in comparison to the types of people ya run into. “Deadline?”

Sofya waved her hand. “I received word while you were unconscious that the king wanted me to get a move on,” Sofya scowled, yet even that was a beautiful expression on her angelic face. “He doesn’t normally nudge my elbow like that on a mission, but considering the ramification of this Civil War occurring, and our mission generally speaking, well…” she shrugged. “I can’t exactly blame him.”

She did sort of hold the cold anger at its timing though. It was almost as if he didn’t want her further involved in what he obviously saw as Eleanora’s personal self-aggrandizing crusade into Brune. And yet my whole mission is based on possibly taking advantage of those actions. Ugh. I hate politics. Or… well, the way the king plays them anyway.

Ranma nodded, touching his head gingerly. That blow had hurt! Not as much as a punch from Roland of course, but certainly a bit more than anything similar he’d gotten from Elen. He looked at her arms quizzically, then her old body shaking his head as he voiced some of his earlier thoughts. “You know of all people I should know that strength can be deceiving, but that blow…”

She laughed, then held out her weapon to him, hearing the light laughter in her head that was so much a part of being Vanadis to Zaht. “Would you like to try to lift it?”

A second later her eyes went wide as Ranma was able to hold it in place, grunting a little, before lifting it further. “Yeah okay, that makes more sense now,” he said mildly, holding it out to her.

She took it back, then laughed again sending her hair to fly this way and that as she laughed. “Why am I not surprised? Men aren’t supposed to be able to lift it at all. But apparently you get a pass for your feminine side.”

“Oy, I don’t have a...” Ranma began, then paused his eyes narrowing, “okay, I suppose I do have one, no matter how reluctantly. Or abnormally.”

“Unusually certainly, but I don’t think abnormal is the correct term. It’s not as if you can get rid of it any longer is it? And does that form still bother you really?” Sofy asked, poking Ranma in the forehead with a gentle finger.

“Not really,” Ranma admitted with a sigh, fighting down his normal response to that idea, a natural reaction from his time in Nerima. “Although well there are just some things that men aren’t supposed to know you know?”

“Ah, but that makes it so much better for us!” she said with a laugh.

Tigre blinked, looking her up and down not, lasciviously, merely curiously. “Um, you aren’t carrying a message pouch so where…”

Sofya smiled sweetly and reached into the opening of her blouse, pulling out the king’s letter from within her breasts.

“Because of course,” Ranma said smacking his forehead, “why ever wouldn’t you keep it there?”

Sofy laughed, shaking her head and turning away towards her horse, which Elen had given her, mounting easily. When she was in the saddle she looked back at the others, smiling faintly and trying not to smile only at Ranma, something that was rather harder than it should have been. “Until next time then.”

Elen and the two men bid her farewell, while Titta merely curtsied. Then Sofy tugged on the reins, turning her horse around, cantering out of the camp without another word.

Ranma stared after her, a scowl on her face, and Titta teased, “Ara, are you sorry to see her go Ranma?”

“You two were getting along quite well,” Elen said, joining in the teasing. “And here I thought you had eyes for Lim?”

Ranma blushed, scratched at his nose and looking away but didn’t reply.

This caused Elen’s eyes to narrow, and one hand to fall to Arifar. “If you’re even thinking about leading on my friend, I wouldn’t suggest trying to get involved with Sofy at all. Because before you can I will remove what makes you a man!”

“Nothing like that!” Ranma stammered, blushing. “It’s just well, Sofy is a friend too. Like I said, I don’t have so many of them that I want to see any of them going into danger without me around. No matter how strong she is,” he muttered, raising a hand to his forehead where Sofy’s strike had landed.

Then he shook his head resolutely, staring around at the snow-dusted ground, tapping his feet on the frozen earth beneath them. It had snowed a little under an inch last night, and the ground even where the snow had been scuffed up, was frozen. “Whatever. There’s nothing I can do about her, her own Code is putting her in danger right now. So it’s time for me to concentrate on what I can do. And I think it’s also time to get Roland out of bed. His parole doesn’t mean he can’t do work does it?”

“Rather the opposite actually, so long as the work doesn’t put Roland’s life in danger, and he is well treated. Why?” Elen asked.

“Good.” With that, Ranma moved away, heading deeper into the camp towards the tent he shared with the nominal prisoner.

Confused, Elen and Tigre followed, entering the tent just as Ranma kicked Roland’s bed out from under him, flipping man and camp-bed both. Grunting as he hit the ground, Roland growled as he rolled on the ground, coming to his feet with a growl. “What the hell was that for! I was asleep.”

“Yeah I know,” Ranma said drawling the words. “You’ve been asleep long enough, lazy old man. Get your ass up, it’s time for you to do some honest work for a change.”

“That was rather harsh, but I should have expected such blandishments from one so lacking in height,” Roland muttered, cracking his neck one side to the other, then pushing himself to his feet, so that he towered over not only Ranma but Elen and Tigre. “And what exactly has your small mind equated to honest work?”

Ranma chuckled, then pointed out the door of that tent. “You get points for trying, but I’m surely not going to react to anyone mentioning my height, that’d be just silly.” I will have my revenge you tall asshole! “Now come on, I’ll wager ya can help me smash down some trees for houses for the refugees.”

I’ll try harder next time,” Roland promised, and the two of them exited.

“Is it just me,” Titta whispered to Tigre, “or did they seem like friends there for a moment?”

Having overheard them, Elen shrugged. “You can become friends with someone after crossing blades with them, just look at me, Ranma and even Tigre.” With that she led the other two out the tent after the two men, wondering what they were going to do. She knew about Ranma’s strength certainly and had seen Roland in action too. But there was a difference between smashing a tree and knocking it down so that the wood was still useable.

“I bet that I put up more houses than you,” Ranma said as he exited the camp, with Roland beside him. The two of them had gathered a bit of a following, Roland being well known among the people of Brune. Also well-known was that he had attacked the Silver Meteor Army, but most didn’t seem to hold that against him. He had been a national hero for more than ten years now, and news of his campaigns had been the tales of many a pub or feast hall.

A few did of course. There were more than a few mutters about the mighty knight becoming a tool for the corrupt nobility, but most kept those opinions to themselves. Others were just afraid of him. One of these was a young woman in a hood, who’s eyes clung to Tigre for a moment, then shifted to Roland, becoming fearful as she shifted back into the shadows, her thoughts a confused whirl of emotions.

“You’re on,” Roland grinned, slamming his hands together, then looking at the nearby forest. “There?”

“Yep. We can either start from here and race there or start from there if you’re feeling like a short run beyond what your old bones can handle.”

“Considering how fast you are, that would give you an unfair advantage,” Roland said marching solidly over to the nearest tree, which was about eighty yards away from the start of the outskirts of the outermost tents.

“Are you sure you can handle this old man?” Ranma taunted. “After all those logs are heavy. You might pull something.”

“I’m going to hurt you for that one brat,” Roland muttered, shaking his head, then grinning at Ranma and pushing him companionably in the shoulder. “Now come on, let’s get this done.”

Ranma smirked back, and the two of them chose out their trees.

Once in front of an oak tree, Roland jabbed his fist forward without any preamble, smashing the tree near its base. Instead of shattering it, this bunch tore out most of the trunk. The rest of the tree fell, and Roland caught it, barely grunting as the weight settled on his hands before tossing it behind him.

He then stared askance at his work, seeing the number of branches that remained on the tree, several of which were keeping it from landing flat on the ground, and then asked, “I don’t suppose anyone has saws or hatchets?”

At her nod, several of the refugees and two of Elen’s infantry instantly raced to get the material needed. By the time they returned, Roland had torn off most of the larger branches and most of the smaller ones. Yet as they moved forward, they realized he had stopped and was staring at Ranma. They too stopped.

Like Roland, Ranma had easily broken off most of a tree’s trunk, although he had first smashed or torn off most of its larger branches, tossing them to one side. Wood was wood after all, and the branches would be useful for roofs, doors, and fires. Once the trunk was on the ground Ranma had then begun to create a long furrow from one side to another of the trunk with his clenched fingers. Those fingers glowed with ki as he cut into the tree.

Roland stared hard, then down at his own hands, before grimacing, his brows furrowing in concentration. For a second they too lit up, blue and yellow in color in contrast to Ranma’s own cerulean energy. “How do you make your magic form into a cutting force?” he muttered.

“It ain’t magic, it’s ki, or life energy as you lot call it, and trial and error mostly,” Ranma replied, wincing as his technique failed mid-strike, his fingers smacking painfully against the wood. “This is a ki scalpel, something I figured out when I was learning with the old bastard who taught me a lot of my healing skills. I just have taken it and mixed it with stuff I learned to do from learning about martial arts construction. It’s not an easy technique, gotta tell ya. Putting an extra sharp edge on a weapon or tool is a lot easier.”

With Ranma walking him through it, Roland was able to add an edge of the hatchet far more easily than he could with his hands, and even Ranma stopped using his hands once the tools arrived, going back to them every fourth tree as toughness training. Roland ignored that since his endurance had proven itself in their fight the day before.

Nor were they the only ones working now. Early on in the contest, Elen had laughed, pointing at the two of them as they continued to work through the forest. “Well, what are you all waiting for? Handouts?” Most of the onlookers needed no second urging and pitched in with a will. Everyone understood that the logs that the two warriors were knocking down could well mean the life or death for them if they were able to make them into locked cabins. Others retreated, unwilling to work like that or complaining that wood was not their trade.

Tigre noted these men and women out. If they were willing to shirk from work like this, then they would have to find some other way to earn their keep. My duty as a nobleman demands I protect and lead them. It does not demand that I care for them as they do nothing to look after themselves. Shaking that thought off, Tigre marched forward and began to pitch in himself.

Several hours later, Titta tugged at his shirt for a moment whispering into his ear. Tigre turned to Elen, who had been using Arifar to cut branched off the trunks along with a few other people, the magic of the sword flaring out and cutting a dozen branches off regardless of their size each time. Is it just me, or is that weapon enjoying this? “Another shipment has come in from Territoire. I’m going to go with Titta to redistribute it before it gets mobbed. Apparently, lord Hughes has also sent his son too.”

Elen nodded, rolling her shoulders this way and that and cracking her knuckles before she turned from the now finished trunk. “You go on, I’m going to catch up to these two if it kills me. No way am I going to let a musclebound oaf and a foreign knight beat out Vanadis when it comes to destruction.”

“I thought this was construction, not simple destruction?” Ranma quipped. “And I’m up to fourteen now I think.” A few trees had proven to be hollow and shattered, or just dead, and had thus been useless and been deemed unfit for the competition. Ranma, however, had put their broken bits to the side with the rest of his cleared branches and everything else. Indeed, if it was based on cleanliness rather than the number of trunks prepared to be made into walls, then Ranma would be winning, despite being behind Roland by one.

“Fifteen here,” Roland grunted as he smashed down another tree so that it crashed into a smaller tree to its side, bringing it down too. “Make that sixteen.”

“It only counts when you’re finished preparing it,” Ranma shot back as he finished the one he was working one.

“I think we will have to surely agree to disagree on that one,” Roland said back, laughing.

As Tigre walked off with Titta, most of the watchers had either long since left or pitched in. But one of them, the young woman who had been watching Tigre and Roland earlier, hadn’t. Instead, she had stayed in the shadows of the tents, staring at the work going on, her eyes flicking from one of the super-strong men to another. Now she looked from Roland to Tigre and back again, her face underneath her hood scrunching up slightly. Then, she turned and made her way through the camp after Tigre.

She arrived just as Titta and Tigre began to redistribute the heavy woolen cloaks that had been made in Territoire, one to each person, with no exceptions. There weren’t enough to go around even then, and priority went to women and younger children. Most of the menfolk agreed with this, but Tigre had to talk down several men who didn’t, and then threatened two more when they refused to budge, grabbing at a woman and trying to tear the cloak of her.

The girl who had been watching Tigre watched now as quicker than lightning, he was between the man. In one hand he held up a dagger to the face of one, in the other an arrow with the point so close that if the man blinked, he would cut himself.

“I said,” Tigre said in a cold stern, and above all lordly voice, the kind that most people in Alsace had never heard from him before, and who indeed would never have even thought he could produce, “That there is one cloak for every person. You will get yours eventually, if not from this shipment then the next. No one will go without. But women and children have priority. If you do not agree to this, you are free to seek help elsewhere. You won’t find it here.”

The two men trembled, no longer seeing Tigre as a young, idealistic fool, but a killer, who would willingly stab them both if necessary.

And he would too. Tigre was indeed kind and idealistic, but kindness had its own edge, and Tigre could be as ruthless as any man alive if he felt that his lordly duties demanded it.

The watching girl moved along the line now, as the two cowed men scurried away, and Tigre continued to hand out cloaks as if nothing had happened. She took her cloak from him, feeling its weight, much heavier than the traveling cloak she already wore. She wouldn’t be warm with it on, it wasn’t that good, and there was no fur in it, but it would keep her alive and functioning. She whispered out, “Ano, where did this come from.”

Tigre looked at her, then smiled kindly. “Ah, it’s my dinner guest from last night. You know you don’t have to whisper, no one here is going to bother you if you speak up. Or if anyone realizes your, um, a woman. I understand that keeping that kind of thing under wraps on the road is really smart, but not here. Not with Elen’s troops patrolling the camp with my own men.”

The woman under the cloak allowed a faint smile to appear just barely visible from within her hood, before asking again, “Where did these cloaks come from?”

“The town of Territoire,” Tigre replied. “Why?”

“The Lord of Territoire is with you then?” she asked quizzically.

“Yes, he loathes Duke Thenardier and Duke Ganelon strongarm tactics.”

“And they are the ones who sent Roland after us?” the woman asked.

“After me,” Tigre corrected, bemused by the young woman’s phrasing. “The King has apparently declared me an enemy of the crown, a traitor to Brune.”

“You work with a Vanadis of Zhcted,” the woman replied, her tone chilling slightly, but not so much condemnatory as forceful. “Could that be it?”

“No one else could have helped my people,” Tigre said with a shrug. “A Lord’s duty must first be to his own people, especially if it is those who were placed above him that would prey upon those people.”

“I was captured by Elen during the battle on the Dinant Plains,” Tigre began not seeing the flinch the woman gave it that name. “She was enamored with my archery skills and wanted to keep me a prisoner in order to have me train her troops to if not be my equal, then to certainly be better than with their bows than they had previously been. However, during my time with her, we learned of Duke Thenardier’s Zion marching on my lands. I was basically forced by circumstances to beg for her help and in return for that help, I was forced to sell Alsace to her, along with myself.”

“But at the time, she was the only one in a position to help. Oh, my friend, Ranma and I would have done his best, and between the two of us would’ve been able to at least slow down Thenardier’s son, but we could not protect my people, not just the two of us. So it was a good deal of the time.”

“Then you are not rebelling?” The girl asked, her tone shifting into something more skeptical than merely curious. “All this was to protect your people?”

The girl really has an amazingly well-controlled voice, Tigre thought. “If Duke Thenardier and Duke Ganelon were willing to leave me alone, this war would have already ended from my perspective. It isn’t as if lands haven’t changed hands before and conflicts between Brune and Zhcted, so the loss of my little earldom would probably not have meant much in the long run. But Duke Ganelonpreys upon the people of Brune as shamelessly as any bandit King, and Duke Thenardier, has never been one to let a slight slide. And since I was forced to kill his son and the two dragons he brought with him, he will never relent in his enmity for me.”

“And the other nobles with you?” the girl gestured around the camp, where the banners of many minor lords could be seen. The Silver Meteor Army was made up of more than just Augre, Mashas, Tigre, and Elen’s men after all, although in this case, the banners barely indicated a few dozen men each if that.

“They have joined me to free their lands of being ruled by such as the two Dukes. It’s that simple really. Honor demands we stand against them and their heavy-handed barbarism.”

Now the woman smiled at him, and Tigre actually found himself blushing a little at how pretty that smile was even if he couldn’t make out much of the rest of her face to go with it. “Then you are no enemy of the state, but a true Earl of Brune,” she said simply, taking the cloak and smiling before moving away.

Tigre blinked at the oddity of hearing those formal words, from a peasant woman but didn’t have time to dwell on it, as a hard finger poked him in the side. “Tigre-sama,” Titta asked her voice as sweet as poisoned honey, “who was that?”

“I don’t know,” Tigre responded, then yelped as an even harder finger poked him in the side again.

“I don’t believe you! The way she looks at you, Lord Tigre what have you been up to when I haven’t been around to keep an eye on you!?”

“What did I do!?” Tigre yelped, as Titta continued to poke him with a finger that oddly enough felt more like an arrow shaft than a finger.

**OOOOOOO**

As Sofy left for her mission to Nice, news of the defeat of the Knights of Asvarre was spreading throughout the country. Slowly, since no actual couriers were taking the news, and given the state of war between the three different factions in Brune, word-of-mouth was far slower than it would normally be. However, it did eventually reach the ears of Duke Thenardier and Duke Ganelon. Their reactions to the news were extremely different.

A military man, Duke Thenardier slowly read off a detailed report of what had happened and nodded. “This Earl Vorn is very interesting, isn’t he? He thinks laterally, in terms of small skirmishes, strategic targets rather than large-scale battles, which destroy the enemy’s actual military forces. Although,” he added dryly, looking over to his military analyst Stead, “he is going to get a reputation if he keeps on destroying public works. First that bridge over the Resia, and now the King’s Fingers? Amusing.”

His military advisor stared down at the map, then slowly nodded. “Do we have any reports about whether or not Roland lived my Lord? He is an extremely important resource for Brune after all.”

“None. I imagine that either he or his second-in-command is preparing a formal report, and our man in the palace will intercept and copy it out for us eventually. Although you’re right in the long term,” Thenardier added grudgingly. “Roland being dead would serve no purpose. Hopefully, Vorn isn’t that much of a traitor to Brune that he would kill Roland out of hand if he is a prisoner.”

Stead looked at him, cocking his head and Thenardier twitched a finger in response. “Ask your question.”

“You seem to have almost anticipated something like this, my Lord. Certainly, you don’t seem as angry or worried as most would have assumed you would be.”

“I am not. I did not anticipate Roland losing, but really, he completed at least his minimum objective to my mind. Going into this battle, Vorn and the Vanadis’ forces had the I believe the term used among the man is hot hand? He had the forward momentum, he had victories under his belt, and the popular support of the people. He could’ve kept pushing forward, gaining more allies, especially among the Knightly Orders. For all their disdain for politics and refusal to leave their posts, they are not immune to the tide of public opinion.”

“Now that is not going to happen. Regardless of anything else, no Knightly Order will work with him against myself or Ganelon after he has beaten off the Knights of Navarre and defeated Roland. That will have proven his perfidy in their eyes, and though I doubt they will be roused against him, they certainly won’t work with him.”

Standing, Thenardier moved over to the window staring out at his city of Nemetacum. “Furthermore, it is now winter. No army can move in winter without significant logistical preparations. And judging from what little reports we’ve been getting about swamped with refugees, Vorn doesn’t have that ability.”

“I see,” Stead said with a nod. “We will have the entire winter for me to train the Army, to set in supplies and for you to gather more allies.”

“And for the wizard to train more dragons for us.” Thenardier then looked down at the map, not the original map that showed only a segment of the northeast and west of the country. No, this showed the rest of the country in particular, where Ganelon’s lands were in the west.

On this map there were several dozen map markers, ranging from small carefully constructed notes, denoting supply points, towns, and whatnot, to a more tentative one that looked as if someone had begun to draw in a specific route of some kind.

“And while everyone else is believing that I will strike at Vorn, we will instead attack Ganelon. And we will do so before winter ends. We will take him completely by surprise,” he said, marching the route with his fingers, estimating times and distances once again.

“I will have the Army trained up in time for that March my Lord, depend upon it,” Stead promised.

Thenardier simply nodded his head, as if he expected nothing less from Stead. The two men turned their full attention on the map once more, looking at each map in turn, as they discussed the ramifications of what had just occurred and its impact on their plans in greater depth.

If however, Thenardier’s reaction was calm and calculating, Ganelon’s reaction was anything but. He heard about Roland’s defeat about a week and a half after the news reached Thenardier, due to the greater distance, and when he did, it wasn’t from nearly as well-written a report. Despite that, the reports did contain the gist of it, including one thing that even Thenardier didn’t realize had been substantiated: That Roland had been captured alive.

It was that bit that incensed Ganelon. Dammit! One of the main threats against my own real plans here in Brune is still alive. Although, if he is a prisoner, perhaps they have been intelligent enough to remove Durandal from him. Without that sword, Roland is simply an excellent general and knight, not a demon bane made into flesh.

“The sword,” he murmured, “Durandal must be dealt with.” In particular, if these reports about the black bow are accurate. I cannot let two demon-slaying weapons exist in this world. One is more than enough.

He thought about what Vorn would do with a prisoner like Roland, calculated the odds, as the shadows around him roiled, bits and pieces of them coming together and flowing out from the rest to form shadows, which almost looked like men crossed with spiders. In front of him, his second-in-command Greast shivered, but did not allow his body to betray him, making no move to flee, protected himself, or anything else. He simply knelt there on one knee, awaiting his lord’s orders.

“But I cannot afford people to realize that demons are back in the world either,” Ganelon said finally, and the shadows receded leaving his second-in-command to breathe a sigh of relief.

That sigh brought the Ganelon’s attention back to him, and he asked shrewdly “How long would it take us to set up an ambush? Or to get people inside Vorn’s forces to steal away the Durandal?”

“Where would you like the ambush set up my Lord?” Greast asked bowing his head obsequiously.

“There are only a few things that Vorn can do with a prisoner such as Roland. He is an important prisoner in and of himself, but he has no political power, and the longer he retains him as a prisoner, the more Thenardier and I will be able to turn the few remaining neutral lords against him, perhaps even the Knightly Orders. After all, only a true enemy of Brune would keep a Knight like Roland in durance vile,” Ganelon quipped, allowing a flash of humor to appear.

“In that case, the logical thing is to either let him go entirely, with his word of honor that the Knights of Asvarre will no longer fight the Silver Meteor Army. Or, Vorn might use him as a tool to discover what the king was truly thinking, and then to allow the King to perhaps point Roland in our direction. With the truth of Vorn’s rebellion laid bare, that he only reached out to Viltaria in order to defend his people, the king might well repudiate his previous letter of condemnation. So, either on the road to Nice or on the road back to his previous position on the eastern border.”

“I would hesitate to even attempt an ambush on the road my Lord,” Greast responded, showing an honesty that few among the Ganelon’s people would ever be able to for fear of displeasing him. But the man knew his position was mostly secured, Ganelon needed a general, a commander of armies and that is what he could do. “The better idea would be to ambush in Nice.”

“Trap him,” Ganelon corrected. “I already have a few thoughts on that score. There is a room there, that I have already prepared for such. But you do not think we would be able to ambush them at all on the road?”

“Not if he is even alone my Lord. Roland is rightly feared as a Knight and was so even before he was given Durandal. Perhaps getting a team into a position to steal it away while he is still a prisoner could be possible, however. Money after all talks and talks the louder to those who have lost all once already.”

“See to that. We could use the extra eyes among the refugees and Vorn’s forces regardless,” Ganelon ordered. “And then, prepare our fallback plans.”

“Lady Valentina has refused our request for asylum my Lord. That only leaves two places we could go to. Either Mouzinel or Asvarre,” Greast reminded his liege lord.

“Mouzinel,” Ganelon replied promptly. “It will be all slightly more harrowing journey, but the payoff will be even greater.” And I will not have to contend with Torbalan or his plans there. He did not say that aloud though. Despite Greast knowing about his demonic status and even taking some comfort from it, there were things Ganelon would not share with him.

“And what should we do with the armies my Lord?”

Ganelon thought for a few minutes, then shrugged his shoulders. “Have them build powerful defensive positions in our own lands. Tell them that we intend to allow Thenardier to come to us, to shatter on those defenses.”

His advisor raised an eyebrow, knowing that Ganelon knew about Thenardier’s plans to tame more dragons, against which no defense they could come up with would matter. Indeed, Ganelon knew more than that too, he knew precisely who was behind taming the dragons for the other duke. Another demon, much like himself.

Ganelon caught that look and smiled thinly. “Do you care so overmuch about the people of these lands?” When his second-in-command shook his head, Ganelon nodded back. “Exactly, let it burn. Let it all burn. After all, what I am after has never been a single slice, but all of the pie. And if I cannot have more than that one slice, why should I not leave that one slice to ruin and move on to another pie?”

**OOOOOOO**

Once that first supplies of clothing and food had arrived, things became a little looser and more informal when it came to mealtimes. Everyone was very clear about the rules now about both clothing and food. And after Tigre had five men whipped with a cat of nine tails for stealing from the supplies the day after Sofy left, and another one hung for attempted assault the day after, everyone knew that the young Lord Vorn might be kind and soft-spoken, but he had a spine as well.

In the span of five days, nine houses had already been put up, simple log affairs, but thick-walled, and easily able to house at least ten people each, even if they were not permanent houses. They would see the people in the camp through the wintertime, once they had enough of them anyway. Ranma and Roland had stopped their competition that day since they had more than enough logs and wood, and Ranma had begun to teach the older man the finer bits of what he called martial arts construction. With his help on this side of things, they had finished an entire house in one day, an amazing feat.

And for once, Tigre was eating his supper without being accompanied by his friends. He sat at a campfire, surrounded not by Titta, Ranma, Elen or Mashas or Gerard, but a few peasants he was thinking of training as huntsmen. One of the men had been a poacher of some ill-repute on some nobleman’s lands. Another a baker who had an eye for traps, the third hunter already, though one who had lost his bow.

He says he lost it trying to get his wife out of their house, but no ring on his finger or mark, and his paunch speaks of drink too. I’ll have to watch him, see if he really can use a bow. But I need to get them trained and others like them quickly to help us add to the food supplies. Four thousand, my god that’s more than nine times all the people in Alsace, town, farms, and our tiny mine included! And this is just one camp. The one nearer Lord Mashas’ land is well maintained, Elen said so. But that leaves two more to see to and each of them might be half the size of this one.

Setting that aside, Tigre began to ask the three men questions about shooting and trapping. He had decided that the overweight fellow might know his stuff when they were joined by someone else. Tigre recognized her as the young girl who had talked to him a few times before around camp. She was always very careful about not letting any of her face be seen despite his attempts to make her feel safe. Then again given that bastard I had to hang… “Hello,” he said kindly, once more shifting his mind onto a new topic. “Would you like to share our fire?”

The girl hesitated, staring at the three men across from Tigre, before nodding, and sitting next to him. She held a bowl of stew that comprised that night’s dinner, but seemed reluctant to eat, watching as Tigre took a bite from his own stew, and after chewing happily at the bit of meat in the stew, Tigre looked up at her in confusion. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s a little hot,” she said hesitantly. “Would you mind if, if we switched bowls?”

Tigre looked down at his bowl, already halfway eaten, and then to the girls, which was full. It was indeed steaming, but something told him that wasn’t the whole story. Despite that feeling though, he simply nodded. “If you wish, although is that enough?”

She nodded, and the two of them exchanged bowls.

The three men watched this with confusion written on their faces but went back to their own conversation as Tigre began to make short work of the stew again. The girl still hesitated a moment, before seeming to stiffen her resolved, and plunged her spoon into the stew, raising it to her mouth. She chewed and ate methodically for a few moments, smiling slightly at the taste under her hood.

Feeling the silence, Tigre tried to make small talk. “You know, you always seem to come to me for food, even when it’s forced you to wait or even disrupt the line. Titta was quite annoyed yesterday about it. Although for some reason I have to think there was something else going on there.”

“Titta?” the girl asked cautiously.

“Ah, my maid,” Tigre replied. “She’s in charge of the cooks and washers around camp.”

“You allow your maid to express her anger toward you?” she asked her tone both surprised and hesitant.

Tigre laughed. “Well, while I might be an Earl, Alsace is so small that the idea of putting on airs would be almost ridiculous. And Titta has been my maid most of my life. I think of her more like a sister than anything else, even if she keeps on insisting on waiting on me as a maid as she does.”

Underneath her hood, the girl allowed a small smile to flit across her face at that, amusement and something else causing that reaction. She refused to look at that something else too closely, however. “Who is the woman with silver hair to you then? She is the Vanadis is she not? Her treating you as a friend and companion rather than simply client or ally is…strange.”

Tigre shrugged, looking uncomfortable. It was true that Elen and Titta tended to follow him around the camp Elen doing so even when she had her own work to do. But occasionally, work did pile up and pull her away from Tigre. In particular, they were coming up on the deadline where she would have to send her troops back into Brune to get them across the border by the time the king wanted them there. And they’d had reports of another supply convoy coming in from Brune. She’d wanted to meet it with some of her troops to help escort them to the new position of the main refugee camp, which was several leagues away from where it had been when Titta had first arrived. They’d moved the camp even as Roland and Ranma had their contest nearer to a tiny stream.

“We’ve become friends since she took me captive,” Tigre laughed. “She’s a remarkably straightforward person in a lot of ways, and quite easygoing, just like me. So we get along quite well.”

The girl’s eyes narrowed slightly in her hood at that but decided to leave that for now. It was obvious that while Tigre wasn’t unaware of the Vanadis’ interest, he misconstrued it. That was good enough. Now she wanted to see if she could have some other questions answered. “I have also heard rumors about that redheaded girl with the same name as Sir Ranma. Is she really your sister?”

“Hahaha, um, no,” Tigre chuckled. “he most definitely isn’t. You see, both of them are the same person. Ranma is a young man I met on a hunt once, coming upon him while he was fighting a wyvern bare-handed. I helped kill it, then tended his wounds, and we became friends. Then he decided to stay with me, mostly for the sake of that friendship. That’s shifted since.”

“The same person!?” the girl squeaked, then leaned forward, feeling greatly daring and placing a hand to Tigre’s forehead. “Are you feeling alright?” Then she blushed and pulled away stammering, “It’s just, well Ranma the girl is, is very much a girl, and Ranma the boy, well I’ve seen him with his shirt off!”

The moment when he and Roland took off their shirts had drawn more than a little attention from the womenfolk among the refugees, especially the young girl among them. It had been interesting, although the girl hadn’t been as enthused by the view saw many of the other girls and women.

“Ah. Yes, both forms are, um, well. He’s got a curse you see, which turns him into a girl when he’s splashed with cold water. Warm water turns him back. He thinks of himself as a man regardless of his current gender, but…” Tigre trailed off as the girl’s body language, such as was visible through her large, new cloak, told him she didn’t believe him. “Well, I’m sure eventually you’ll see the curse in action. I understand it isn’t something that can be believed without seeing it for yourself.”

With the girl still looking skeptical, the two of them went back to eating quietly, with the girl looking at Tigre furtively occasionally, while he simply concentrated on his food, resting after a day’s labors. The girl timed her own finishing of her meal at the same time Tigre did, and the two of them stood up as one to place their bowls in a large basket set near the fire.

“M, might, I make a request?” she asked hesitantly, grabbing at Tigre’s sleeve.

He blinked and smiled down at her, nodding. “Of course, what do you need?”

When the girl explained, Tigre took her back to his own tent. There inside they found a small fireplace burning, and Tigre quickly set up a pan of water over it, waiting for it to heat, as he pulled his camp bed closer to the fire.

“There you go,” he said cheerfully, “you’re all set. And I apologize, I had completely forgotten about bathing needs entirely. I might have to see if we can set up a special tent for that in the future. Maybe get Ranma to do something. Sofy mentioned something about him and hot springs to Elen before she left.”

So saying, Tigre made for the tent flap, but the girl again halted him once again, grabbing at his wrist with surprising strength. “Wait.” He looked at her quizzically, and the woman stammered, “C, could you, that is, could you bathe me?”

Before Tigre could refuse, the girl began to undress, and he quickly twisted away, blushing hotly. What little of her body he’d seen before propriety took over had been lithe, well-formed and supple. She didn’t have the curves of Elen, but she had more curves than Titta at the least, and her rear had been magnificent. Certainly enough to make his thoughts wander, even in that brief moment. “W, why would you!?”

Chuckling, the girl gently knelt down in front of the washbasin. “I, I can’t get my back after all. So if you would mind…” She watched out of the corner of her eye as Tigre tore off a bit of his shirt and wrapped it around his eyes. Well, that’s my last test passed with flying colors! She thought, with some regret. Not a lot though, as it had proved that Tigre was the man, she thought he was.

That was why when he began, she whispered a secret. A memory that she had long kept precious, and which she knew Tigre would recognize. “We met before you know, my lord Earl.” Tigre made to interrupt, but the girl didn’t let him. “It was in Vincennes. You shot a pheasant we shared together. I’m sure you remember doing so with your prince… or rather, princess…”

Tigre gasped and tore off his blindfold to stare at her in shock, not even noticing the girl had turned toward him or that her breasts, well-formed and somewhat more than a handful, were now pressing into his inner arm. “But, you, how… Regnas!?”

“Regin, please, Tigre,” the now-named Regin replied a tremulous smile on her face. “It’s been a long time. Both since we met, and since I’ve been able to go by my real name.”

Before Tigre could do more than gape, the tent flap opened and Elen came in.

“Tigre, I…” She stopped in place staring at Tigre and this young girl in his arms before pulling Arifar, still scabbarded thankfully, off her belt. “You. You… what did you do Tigre?!”

Tigre barely had a second to realize what this must have looked like from her perspective before Elen was chasing him around the tent, with Regin gaping in shock at the two of them.

**OOOOOOO**

After Tigre and the girl, or Regin as she was named, finished explaining things, Ranma was howling with laughter, falling to his knees and onto his side clutching his chest as he shouted out, “Oh, my God, I can’t breathe, ahhh, my ribs, this is hilarious!” God, watching this shift from the outside is hilarious! No wonder Nabs was always so amused.

The others who had been called in for this little meeting were simply shocked at the information Regin had just calmly told them, not how this bit of information had come out.

Mashas actually clutched at his own chest, gasping and falling backward, causing Tigre to catch him before he could hit the floor. Gerard was simply wide-eyed at first, then his face turned calculating. A man only a little older than Tigre, he had light brown hair done in a very fancy coif and wore a silk doublet and pants in his house’s colors with a certain elegance. Elen was just staring, as was Titta. Neither were happy at how close Regin was to Tigre at present, or how she had decided to reveal herself.

More to the point, like Gerard, Elen wasn’t certain she believed the young woman was who she said she was. Launching a vicious kick into Ranma’s side, she spoke over his grunt of pain, which itself had halted his laughter. “Not to be too suspicious or anything, but is there any way you can prove you are who you say you are? I’ll admit your hair color and face look like the few descriptions I’ve heard of the prince, but I never heard any rumors that Regnas was a girl.” She frowned suddenly, staring at Tigre. “actually, why are you so quick to believe this too?”

“Aheh, um, funny story there,” Tigre said, scratching at his cheek and looking away. “Regin told me about a memory only Regnas and myself would have known about. You see, my father took me to the festival in Vincennes when I was around six years ago. We met then. I was hunting in the area marked out as a temporary royal preserve.”

Regin smiled. “I had just escaped my tutors to go exploring. I found Tigre and asked if he could really use the bow he was carrying. He then showed me he could by taking a pheasant on the wing. He shared with me some of the meat, and it was one of the best. You gave me some of your fire-cooked meat.” She touched Tigre’s hand lightly. “Later that day, as Regnas, I made him promise to tell no one, not even our parents about our meeting. That is how Tigre knows I am who I say I am.”

While Mashas still seemed tongue-tied and the others frowning for various reasons Ranma had finally recovered from his laughter at Tigre’s predicament combined with Elen’s kick and decided to speak up. “Okay, fine. We believe you’re the prince, princess,” he snarked, leaning back against the side of the bit of log Tigre used for a chair. “But what the hell happened during that attack? Or should I say, who tried to assassinate you.”

“I knew there was more confusion than my attack could have caused!” Elen crowed, flopping onto the log herself, pushing Ranma’s head away from her playfully. “A lot of the Brunish soldiers were shouting about how the prince was dead, but I never got troops that far into the noble quarters.”

Regin flinched. “I, you know why I was in command. I had to prove my abilities to the nobles, had to show them the royal line was in good hands. Ganelon and Thenardier were gaining too much influence and the royal house was fading. I, I’ve never before been to war, so my position as heir was entirely overshadowed by my father. Even his own ministers belittled my lack of combat ability and lack of strength. But it was too late.”

Her light jade-colored eyes darkened, staring at nothing any of the others could see. “The night you launched your surprise attack Lady Viltaria, my tent was attacked by assassins hidden among the servants of the nobles. My personal guard died to a man defending me, but Agnes and I were able to escape into the night. We, we were followed, however, and Agnes… she, she forced me to change clothes with her, then helped me hide, before leading them off wearing my regalia. She was about my height and had the same build and hair color, so she was able to lead them away. I…” Regin choked back a sob, wiping at her eyes to keep tears from forming. “I found her body the next day, dumped in a river. They had dumped her in the river and just moved on like she didn’t matter!”

Regin sighed, pulling herself together with difficulty before going on, smiling as Lord Mashas reached across and gently gripped her shoulder. “I decided that it had to be Thenardier. I saw Zion and his troops, and more of them seemed to have been able to escape the Zhcted assault than I thought natural. So I thought to go to Duke Ganelon.” She gulped, shuddering. “A, a marriage to him would bring out my secret, but would also put him on the throne in no uncertain manner. In that way, he could rally all the lords and Knightly Orders against Thenardier. But… but he had already begun holding funerals for ‘Prince Regnas,’ and moving against Thenardier, conscripting his peasants and abusing those who refused horribly. I fled his lands as fast as I could, linking up with other refugees as I did. That took me back east and then north until we wound up on this side of the river.”

For a moment the others were silent, with Tigre joining Mashas in giving the young princess nonverbal support in the form of a hand on her own where they lay crossed in her lap. Even Elen, who was normally quite jealous of any woman being near Tigre, said nothing to this.

But one question made her speak up. “Is it possible that Roland would know about your true gender?”

“He might possibly know the truth,” Regin said hesitantly. “Although I was not told he did. My father could have confided in him, but I couldn’t take the chance that he didn’t know the truth, especially not after he had believed the orders coming from the royal court that Tigre was a traitor without even investigating it on his own. Do you see?”

Elen nodded, but then asked. “What about asking Tigre to believe you. “That was a major risk, wasn’t it? Even with that memory you two shared I mean. And how you went about doing so…” from her tone it wasn’t clear if she approved of the woman’s basic courage or didn’t like the fact, she had let Tigre see her like that.

“I, it was,” Regin blushed hotly, looking down demurely as she remembered the moment and Tigre’s frank awe at her body. For a girl who had been forced to act as much as a boy as she could most of her life, that look had been a great boost to her ego. “But, I needed to get a final, true understanding of Tigre’s character before revealing myself. If he was the sort to take advantage of that kind of situation then I would know there was more to his ambitions than what was known by the peasantry.” She squeezed Tigre’s hand which had not moved from her lap. “Luckily, my archer proved to be a true nobleman. Now perhaps we can move forward together to try to bring this war to a close in some fashion.”

Looking up at the girl, how she looked at Tigre, Ranma shook his head. Something told him that the girl wasn’t entirely against the idea of Tigre taking advantage of her, but he wasn’t about to say that aloud.

“Let’s see if Roland can prove you are who you say you are first,” Elen said firmly. “Then we can make plans. If he does, that opens up a lot of avenues for us. If not, then I don’t know what immediate help openly announcing yourself would be.”

When he was escorted into the tent and everything explained to them, Roland stared at the girl, contemplatively tapping his chin. He was never a man to jump to conclusions or anger, even in battle and so did not dispute them immediately or denounce them as cowards. And the more he looked at the girl, the more he thought perhaps there might be some truth here. “I’m not disbelieving or believing you Regnas, or Regin, whichever you prefer. But I was never told of your true gender by King Victor, and thus cannot help you prove you are who you say you are, as Tigre could with that story of your childhood.”

The middle-aged knight turned to give the younger Earl a look. “Neither will I take just his word for something so important. I’m sorry Tigre. You’ve proven yourself a capable leader, a true Earl, and a truer man. But, this is just too fantastical for me to take just one person’s word for it. After all, whatever else he might be, Thenardier was the most powerful man in Brune beyond the king himself. Why would he need to assassinate you to get close to the throne? He was already wielding power royal anyway. Indeed, the thing to do would be to have had your gender exposed, so he could convince the king that you should marry his son.”

The others, even Mashas and Gerard seemed to take that poorly, but Roland was implacable. “That would have strengthened the throne and the royal family considerably. Furthermore, this is not Brune …” He looked to the Vanadis, then to the princess, then to Ranma and Tigre. Tell them Tigre, Gerard.”

Tigre winced. “Um, he’s right very some truth. The reason why Regin’s true gender was hidden still pertains. No queen can rule in Brune. Heck, even female earls aren’t allowed to retain their lands unless they are widows, and even then, it’s assumed they should marry after a year of mourning so that a man can look after the land. There’s no precedent for a female queen in Brune.”

“They’re right.” Gerard had been mostly silent during this discussion, not feeling he was able to contribute anything and feeling rather uncomfortable at being there at all. “Even if we can take the throne, and place a crown on her head, Regin will face a lot of trouble. But, coming forward with news for Regnas’ survival would stop Thenardier and Ganelon from open warfare, surely. At least for a time.”

“Perhaps,” Roland said with a nod. “But only if you were able to prove Regin is the prince, or rather princess. All royal documents that I’ve ever seen which mentioned him at all called Regnas a Prince, everyone thinks he’s a prince, as well as dead. You would have to disapprove that. The only way to do so would be to go to the capital and find the royal birth certificate there.

“Or perhaps the Cathedral of Perkunas in Southport. Doesn’t it keep a secondary record of all royal and noble births?” Gerard asked.

“That’s a thought. But getting there in winter is going to be the next best thing possible. Not only is it on the other side of Thenardier’s territory, but the conditions of traveling are going to be abysmal,” Tigre said with a sigh.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t able to help prove or disprove this theory that this young lady is the real princess. From what I can tell him how you’ve run this Tigre, I believe your cause is just but that is not enough to turn me to your side. Nor would I be moved even if this young woman was the princess unless her position was proven by the king himself.” He then shrugged and ran one hand through his hair before scratching at his neck as he thought. “On the other hand, I do rather wish to make war upon Thenardier and the Ganelon. So perhaps, getting those documents would be enough. If I myself go, I could persuade…”

“No,” Tigre interjected quickly. “First of all, remember that you are still are a prisoner. That would look highly unusual for us to just let you go.”

“Furthermore, don’t you think that Ganelon or Thenardier would be tempted to take your loss out on your hide?” Ranma asked.

Roland scoffed. “Impossible. I do not mean to sound arrogant, but I am rather an important figure, both among the common people, and among the Knightly Orders. Any move against me could bring the Knightly Orders in against whoever was involved, not just my own Knights of Navarre.”

“You’re making the assumption that they’d be making I’d bet that decision with their heads rather than letting their pride or anger, or just plain meanness push them into it. I’ve met that field commander of Ganelon’s, I think his name’s Greast? And a viler human being you will never find. I don’t think either he or his boss are thinking with a full set, you know? Or has any kind of care for Brune as a whole rather than their own positions. And you’re a threat to that position. Thenardier might care, I’ll grant you, but not Duke Sadist.”

“So you will just keep me a prisoner?” Roland asked, scowling. “That will surely turn people against you as well. I am not against the work I have been doing, but even so, being a prisoner chafes when Brune still needs my sword and shield.”

Tigre frowned, but Regin spoke up, drawing everyone’s eyes to her again. She didn’t flinch under those gazes however, simply locking her own eyes with Roland as she said quietly, “You gave them your parole correct?” Roland nodded, wondering where the girl was going with this. She smiled. “In that case, there is a perfect way to use you.”

She said it without any softening of the blow or quibbling about whether or not the word ‘use’ was appropriate for in a way it was. While Roland was a human being with his own thoughts and feelings, he was also a Knight, sworn to his country’s service, if that country demanded he die, then he would be willing to lay down his life, so long as that use of his life served Brune.

So he just nodded again, and the girl turned her attention to Elen and Tigre. “Would you be willing to change his parole slightly, so that he can still fight the enemies of Brune so long as they do not include you?” When Tigre nodded Regin went on, “Sending Roland back to his border post would be the best use for him. After all, Brune is very weak right now, dealing with all this internal strength and weakness attracts vultures.”

“It already did once. Sachstein sent an army across the border. I and my knights dealt with them,” Roland said, his voice simple and matter of fact rather than arrogant as he spoke about what for nearly anyone else would have been a great achievement.

“Surely other enemies will also be circling. But with Roland back on the western border, at least two of those enemies will be stymied,” Regin said, turning a gimlet gaze on Elen. “That would only leave Mouzinel to the south and east, and of course, Zhcted…”

Elen flinched but didn’t look away, while Tigre frowned, nodding his head in agreement even as most of his thoughts were kept off his face. “She’s right.”

Roland smiled at the younger girl, thumping his chest once with a fist. “If you prove yourself the princess, perhaps a queen will not be the disaster than most noblemen might think if you are able to think so clearly in the future… Indeed, if you do become queen, I may be the first to bow to you in that position.”

With that, Roland asked to be excused, so as to prepare and send a message to his knights telling him that he would soon be released.

When he did though, Ranma looked at the others. “I don’t get it. Why the sudden change of tone there, I thought he was dead set against the idea of Regin being the princess.”

“He’s not,” Regin answered before any of the others could. “Roland revered my father to a great degree. But that is not enough to prove that I would be a worthy queen of a country that has never had a queen before. Yet in Brune, strength of arms matters above all. If the Silver Meteor Army, gains not only legitimacy from being associated with me, but also wins on the battlefield, then it is obvious the gods are on our side. That will bring the nobles to us after we have beaten Thenardier and Ganelon, and Roland can follow both his conscience and the dictates of honor.”

Ranma rolled his eyes. “And that’s why I’m not a knight, folks. That Code of theirs is too convoluted by far for me and with way too much in there about obeying nobles. I’d rather just do what I think is best, thanks.”

The next morning, Roland left with his sword in hand. Regin had insisted on that saying that only Roland was worthy of being the first Knight of Brune, and with it in his hand, he would send a far greater warning to any enemies out there.

Between the two of them, she and Tigre convinced Elen of that, causing the silver-haired maiden to pout and mutter, “You’re all ganging up on me. Fine! Let him keep the darn thing. Just so long as it’s not pointed at me again.” Being smashed out of her horse by what amounted to a light backhand had a profound effect on Elen’s regard for Brune’s national treasure.

The sight of their Lord commander carrying Durandal astonished to his men, and his second-in-command wasted little time as the now somewhat diminished Knightly Order marched back the way they’d come to approach Roland to get the truth. They would not make the same time that they had on the trip out that was certain. “There has to be more to it than Vorn’s just simply releasing you on your parole. How do they know we will not respond to another order from the king? If the king so ordered us, we would have no choice but to attack them again whatever your parole might state.”

“Perhaps. But I would demand that the order be given to be by the king himself verbally,” Roland said, his tone sanguine. “Unfortunately, I do not think the king is able to do so. Even if he was, I would then demand that he do so privately, in order to ask him a few questions.”

“A few questions?” His second-in-command asked, but then shook his head. “Yet even so, why did a Vanadis like Viltaria agree to let you go? Surely there is more to it than believing you would defy the king?”

“Oh, there is more. Quite a bit more, of intrigue, possible lies and possible truths hidden among lies. But none of that will matter in the end if the Silver Meteor Army does not win through on its own merits. And even then, only if it becomes a true liberation army rather than a foreign occupation. That is enough on their end. As for ourselves, we have our duty.”

And perhaps, just perhaps, the future of Brune might be in good hands. Far more delicate hands than I would before, but still, I think perhaps I’m looking forward to the day I can kneel before Queen Regin and take my oath once more. Even if duty and honor compel me hard right raising her to that position in the first place.

**OOOOOOO**

“… So the Silver Meteor Army will no longer be receiving troops but will be receiving clothing and other foodstuffs throughout the winter. Lady Elen will be allowed to remain here in Brune, but her troops will be cut down to a group of five hundred rather than the two-thousand seven hundred that she has at the moment in Brune. Further, unless attacked herself, she has been ordered to remain on the eastern side of the river Resia.”

“While it is nice to hear that King Victor has not lost all his senses, that reduction of troops is not the same as saying that you won’t continue to back Vorn’s rebellion now is it? Even simple nonmilitary supplies still provide support for that military,” Bedouin asked, his fingers working one side of his luxuriant mustache. “And that is a rather large territory, territory that rightly belongs to Brune. You cannot expect noblemen loyal to Brune to let that stand, can you?”

“Perhaps not, but considering the number of earls, barons, and counts who have rallied to Earl Vorn’s cause, perhaps we can. Unless of course, they are no longer fighting against the power grabs of Lord Ganelon or Duke Thenardier but are called to account by the king?” Sofy asked sweetly. “If that happens, and Lady Viltaria’s ownership of Alsace is secured, then I could see the rest of the lands now controlled by the Silver Meteor Army reverting to being loyal Brune lands once more.”

“Harrumph, a ridiculous name that,” the man muttered, looking away seemingly sidetracked rather than avoiding the question on the king. “Whoever came up with it?”

“Lady Viltaria is rather a whimsical young lady at times,” Sofy said speaking as if she herself wasn’t only two years older than Elen.

“No doubt. Still, I can see your message being seen as a positive to many in the court as well as the king himself. As well as your telling me that Knight Roland is still alive. That news, coming after news of his defeat has made the king’s heart much lighter than it was.”

“I’m glad to hear that. However, beyond that point, my message is for the king himself.” Sofy smiled pleasantly and holding the missive she had been given by King Victor. “I have no idea what the message contains.”

“I will take it to him,” Bedouin said reaching out and smiling himself, though inside his guts had just knotted around themselves with fear.

When Sofy pulled the sealed letter back, his worst fears were realized. The gorgeous Vanadis shook her head. “I’m sorry, but I was pointedly told not to hand it to anyone but the king, no matter the circumstances. Surely you’re not asking me to ignore a direct order from my own king?”

“The king is ill,” Bedouin said, allowing a frown to appear on his face. “I cannot let a foreigner in to see him, not for any reason. There was a recent attempt at poisoning that we traced back to Mouzinel’s ambassador, and security has been doubled since.”

Sofy reflected that was probably a lie, but a well-chosen one, which would let the court keep the king under wraps and away from the public for a good deal longer. But it also gave credence to the rumors of the king being on his death bed. A dangerous game to play, that. Sofy debate whether or not to be blunt about asking about those rumors, or not, before shaking her head sadly. “Nonetheless, I must insist. I am an accredited special ambassador, do you honestly think that I would go against all international mores and attack the king? We Vanadis are war leaders and troubleshooters in my own case. We are not assassins.”

She then seemed to cave if very slightly. “I will only need to hand it to him, I do not need to stay in his presence as he replies. I only need to see that it is the king’s hand that opens the message. Nor does he need to be alone. You may have me guarded by a dozen strong knights if you wish.” It wouldn’t be enough if I was here for violence, but it might make Bedouin feel better.

“…Very well. wait here, I will inform the King of your request. If he is up of sound enough body today to meet with you, I will arrange it, but I’ll warn you, the poisoning was recent enough, I do not know if that is the case.”

Sofy nodded to that, and settled back in her chair, smiling pleasantly at a young maid who came over toward her with another pot of tea. Ahh, the upside of being a special envoy. All the tea I can handle.

Of course, the seneschal did no such thing. The king was not in his right mind, nor was his body more than a wasted shell any longer. His grief at Regnas’ death had completely done him in, and then there had indeed been a poisoning. Only that poisoning had succeeded at least in part. King Faron was dying. It was only a matter of time.

Instead, Bedouin reached out to the representative of Duke Thenardier and Duke Ganelon.

Both of them had retreated to their own territories, but Ganelon had turned back at some point. The answer both men gave to them was simple. “We have to kill the messenger. If Obertas does not return to Zhcted, the strength of Brune will be proven. That will force Zhcted to back off, possibly even to recall Viltaria.”

Bedouin sighed but knew they were right. Really, there was no way that allowing Sofy to meet the king could strengthen the nation’s current position. And there was only so long you could put off the request of someone of such august a personage as a Vanadis. Damn King Victor anyway! Sanctimonious old jackass.

“A pity, that we could not capture her alive. But, Vanadis are notoriously hard to kill let alone take alive,” said Duke Ganelon, smiling whimsically. I came to trap Roland if possible, but I suppose I can settle for one of the Viralt-wielding bitches. Or if not, I can find out more about how her specific weapon works. I don’t know enough about their various skills beyond the one wielded by the Lurie line. Ganelon had a run-in with the wielder of that blade centuries back but had not fought any of the other Vanadis before or since.

The seneschal shivered a little at the man’s tone but agreed with the scheme. “Very well, but how do we do it? Surely, you’re not expecting me to order a straight-up attack? The Lady Obertas is still a Vanadis for all she is a soft-spoken young woman.”

“Perhaps, but she is not immortal. And I believe there is a certain room that has been prepared for eventualities like this,” Ganelon said smiling sadistically.

“… I know the one,” Bedouin swallowed his gorge but nodded firmly. It is for the good of Brune. If nothing else, this will buy us a year before Zhcted thinks to challenge our might openly again. “Very well. I will deal with this issue.”

Moments later, Sofy was ushered into a small sitting room near to the royal chambers where she was told to wait for the king. She sat down, taking a spot of tea which had been left there for her, after passing Zaht over it, the ringlets on the staff tinkling musically. So it wasn’t poison, Sofy mused, taking a sip before looking around the room. I’ve never used this room before, but then again, I’ve only been here in the capital of Brune twice before, so I suppose it isn’t entirely unusual that I haven’t seen this particular meeting. Still, something is telling me to be wary. Is that you? She asked her weapon.

Zaht’s thoughts pulsed in her head, the jingle of the ringlets sounding almost discordant for a moment as if warning of threats to come. She nodded, looking around even more carefully wondering if this was some kind of ambush. I did rather back Bedouin into a corner. But even so, attacking me like this will prove that the king is not fit to rule. Unless they think they can truly kill me.

As she thought that, she heard a sound by the door, a heavy sort of rumble like a massive latch being shot into place. Sofy stood up and moved towards it, then held her staff in one hand and brought it crashing down the door. The door bounced but didn’t move from its place even as the wood veneer on the inside of the door cracked, crumbling away to reveal the iron underneath. “What is the meaning of this!”

Bedouin didn’t reply. Instead, it was another man’s voice, a voice that gave oily new meaning in Sofy’s mind that did so. “I’m sorry, dear, but your death is necessary. Such a pity too, we could have had so much fun otherwise. But ah well. Such is life.” The voice on the other side of the doorway cackled, and Sofy twisted, looking around her as she heard a noise rising from everywhere around her.

From hundreds of hidden holes all around the room bees appeared, buzzing towards her, and she scowled irritably. “Really? This fool obviously has no ideas about the capabilities of a Vanadis, especially me.” She held Zaht in front of her, slamming the point down, and a bright light flashed out, blinding the bees and disorienting them, numbing their bodily functions as it would a human’s.

Outside the room in a special alcove where the bee room could be watched, Ganelon twitched back from the viewing port, his eyes seared by the light so much they actually began to sizzle. Gahhh, that bitch!! Shaking his head and now wondering if this trap would actually work, he stumbled away, quickly sinking into a patch of shadows in the opposite corner. Better to err on the side of caution now. Nothing mattered more to Ganelon than preserving his own life, that was why he had lived this long, and that light had hurt him worse than anything he’d felt in a millennium.

Unfortunately for Sofy, that spell had a finite time limit, and the bees were not nearly as disoriented as people would have been, not having the brainpower to be. While the first few hundred had fallen to the floor, their wings moving feebly, there were still more coming out of the holes all the time, an equivalent of an entire forest’s worth of bees.

“Tsk.” Seeing this, Sofy flung her staff through the air, then held it perpendicular to the ground, as she intoned, "Mirashem!" With that, she appeared on the other side of the doorway, and the bees buzzed around, still incensed by whatever had driven them to fury but without any real target.

There were a few men there, guards mostly, along with Duke Thenardier’s representative to the court. He heard the light tap of Sofy’s feet on the ground as she appeared and had a second to stare, aghast. Then he was laid out with a single blow from Sofy’s fist, the power of the blow hurling him down the corridor. The other guards tried to attack, but Sofy rolled forward, then struck out behind her as she twisted around, bringing her staff will around in a wide arc smash into the lower leg of one of the guards. It didn’t just knock him off his feet, but it shattered the bone in his lower leg, dumping him to the floor.

A quick hop backward and she brought her feet down on the man’s face, crushing his skull. Daintily she stepped forward, using Zaht to block the blows from the three remaining guards, only the sound of Zaht’s warning in her mind telling her there was a fifth guard jumping at her from behind in an effort to grapple her to the ground. She ducked, jabbing her staff upwards, stabbing upward into the man’s chest as he passed through her former position before hurling his body forward into one of her attackers

Straightening Sofy sidestepped the lunge of one of the last two men, kicking out and catching him on the knee, which crunched under her slipper. Zaht then came around and blocked the blows of the second man, but he was no match for her.

A quick twist and she caught the blade of the dagger in the tines of Zaht’s head, then shattered it with another twist of the wrist, the sound of shattering metal filling the corridor. A kick sent the now weaponless man flying back-breaking some of his ribs.

And before the man who she had thrown his dead companion on could get to his feet, a light rap from Zaht sent him unconscious falling back to the stone floor of the corridor. With a similar tab to the last one, the one whose knee she had ruined, the fight was over.

“I believe I have overstayed my welcome here.” Sofy mused, closing her eyes for a moment as her Viralt spun through the air. "Mirashem!"

An instant later, she was walking up to the horse Elen had loaned her in the royal stable. In the saddle she shifted her weapon again through a circle around her, activating her teleportation spell for the third time. The horse reared up in shock as the world reeled around her but calmed down as Sofy patted its neck companionably and held out a sugar cube. With the horse making happy horse noises, Sofy set the mare into a canter, heading north and east.

Well, that was a wash. The king’s hopes were proven accurate, but with Tigre refusing to aid and abet an invasion I have no idea what he will do. Still, I can at least waste time, er, that is, spend time trying to talk Tigre around, and use it as an excuse to spend time with Elen and the others. So despite this little adventure, I suppose this mission is looking up for me.

With that happy thought, Sofy fed her horse another cube of sugar and began to hum to herself, while snow began to fall all around them.

**End Chapter**

This wasn’t the full chapter I wanted, but I decided to end it here rather than on a cliffhanger because I couldn’t’ get the scene leading up to said cliffhanger right It needs to be rewritten entirely or perhaps at least shifted. It felt really forced for some reason.

In the original, it was Ganelon who plotted Roland’s death while in the palace. But preparing a room like that and using it would take Bedouin’s okay, at the very least. A room like that can't be created on the fly after all. So I had Bedouin take on some of the responsibility. Anyway, hope that you all liked it and are staying healthy. And as always tell me what you think.