

## Chapter 8: Winter Ends With a Bang

Since he had returned from his solo mission of grand larceny, Ranma had been surprised by how much Limalisha had wanted to train. The very next day, she had knocked on Ranma's door and asked to begin training with him. Despite the earliness of the hour, Ranma had been happy to oblige and was still happy now a few weeks later. During that time they'd continued the previous training, only more of it and of course more sparring.

While Tigre joined the physical training, Elen joined them for the sparring and Ranma always got a kick out of fighting her. With her use of Arifar, and her ability to use multiple sword styles, like Ranma could multiple martial arts styles, Elen was still a danger to Ranma, despite his much greater level of speed and endurance. She had even been able to think of ways to make their fights more fun, coming up with new and interesting ways to use the wind power granted to her by Arifar. This included an invisible Air Punch that caught Ranma by surprise the first time she used it, which directly led to a revelation with Lim that Ranma became to be very much of two minds about.

Ranma dodged around a first strike from Elen, his hands rising up in a blow towards Elen's chin. Simultaneously Ranma's other hand smacked down on the side of the blade, thrusting it further downwards and lifting himself in the same motion, twisting around into a kick to follow up on the first blow which Ranma knew that Elen would dodge. Elen didn't disappoint, dodging his punch by a minuscule amount, but then she surprised him.

Instead of ducking underneath his kick or taking a kick on her forearm and redirecting it like Ranma anticipated, Elen moved forward, using the elbow of her sword arm to block the kick, her free fist coming up into a hard against his inner thigh. Ranma moved with the blow and was able to dodge her next attack with her sword, landing a quick kick which Elen had to block. With the impetus of that kick Ranma took to the air once more, but a blow from nowhere struck him right in the chest, hurling him out of the air and sending him crashing into the snow,

Grumbling, Ranma leaped to his feet, the snow falling away from him. "What was that!?"

Elen smirked, eddies of wind moving around Arifar in her hand, his chuckle rising to match Elen's humor in the moment. "That's for me to know and you to discover."

She charged forward grinning, Ranma did the same. "Fine by me!"

Ranma tried to watch the currents of snow particles in the air to try and follow where Elen was sending Arifar's wind, but the thing about air was that, for the most part, it is kind of

invisible. Even with the snow particles, Ranma couldn't figure out where the next blow was coming from. He could anticipate some, but not all. The wind currents would move from the sword, whose red gem was glowing all the while accompanied by its laughter, to Elen's feet or her fists.

But that didn't mean Elen wasn't also prone to mistakes. Such was when Elen propelled herself into the air after smashing Ranma upward with another Air Punch.

In midair Ranma began to beat her like a drum, while they were in the air, hurl his fists and feet flashing, her own sword ability to fly completely curtailed by Ranma's skill and aerial combat. Every time she tried to cut at him, Ranma would use that attack to add to his own momentum, and after two hard blows, Elen just swooped away, using the wind to hold Ranma in place and move herself away at the same time.

"Oh no you don't!" Ranma roared. From his feet in turn came a blast of ki, hurling himself forward, breaking the wind's hold on him as he closed.

Elen's eyes widened in shock, but she got her sword up in time to block the punch grunting as the blow flung her backwards. Still in midair she adjusted her course, coming up at Ranma, her sword flashing. Ranma met it with a kick, and again used the momentum to flip over her, fists flashing down towards Elen's head. "Gaah, what is with you and being so at home in the air!?" she shouted, using a shield of wind to deflect the blows a bare inch away from her face. The next second the ruby on Arifar's guard gleamed brighter and that air flowed out, attempting to grab Ranma in place again.

A blast of ki was the only response she got, the blast pushing the gripping wind away before Ranma lashed out with a kick that got through Elen's defenses. "What is with you and all those wind attacks?" Ranma retorted.

That blow landed almost cleanly, Elen twisting her body slightly to catch it on the side. But despite that, Elen was punted back down to the ground enough that she actually had to slow her descent via Arifar once more. Upon landing she thrust up with her sword.

The blast of condensed air caught Ranma, but he twisted around and through it, landing nearby easily, his battle aura subsiding for now. Running forward, Ranma was met with a fist of air that caught him in the chest, as Elen thrust her hand forward, then ducked under another blast of air coming from her sword as she whirled around, moving into the attack even as Ranma launched a Moko Takabisha.

From the sidelines Lim and Tigre were watching this, each of them waiting for their own turn. Ranma had thought up some ways to utilize a bow and arrow in close combat and wanted to see if they were viable. If any of what could make them work, it was Tigre with that black bow of his. An item that still gave Ranma the creeps every time he looked at it. Something about that thing screamed to Ranma's danger senses.

Yet for all his extra-senses, Ranma didn't notice Lim frowning as she watched Ranma and Elen spar. A scowl that continued to grow as the battle continued, with both of them using special attacks now.

Eventually Elen scored an upset victory, a looping blast of air having upended Ranma from behind just in time for Elen to catch him with her blade on the side. And as they had agreed all the way back when they sparred in Leitmeritz, a strike directly against Ranma's side or chest with her sword was counted as a kill.

Instantly the two combatants separated, and Elen thrust her Viralt in the air, the gem glowing all the brighter as she whooped. "Heck yes! Finally! I win, Ranma!"

"You do," Ranma said ruefully, shaking his head. "I've never had to detect invisible air moving around before, and your ability to send it out through your entire body from different directions threw me at the end. I should've finished you off when you were silly enough to take to the air."

"Yeah, Heeheh..." Elen sheepishly scratched at her silver hair. "I realized that was a mistake as soon as I did it. And you don't exactly have tendency to let people survive making mistakes like that."

Ranma shrugged his shoulders. "If you're dumb enough to try to take me on in midair, I'll be more than happy to beat you down."

"But this time you didn't~," Elen sang with a whoop. "I win!"

"Yeah fine, now just win what, forty more times and we'll be even?" Ranma snarked, before looking away from Elen and over to Lim, then Tigre. "Who's next?"

After sparring with Elen, Ranma taught Tigre some moves, specifically a few grapples and chokehold that utilized his bow as well as a few points on human body to target with the points of the bow or an arrow clenched like a dagger. When he was positive Tigre had at least two of the moves down, the group switched once more, with Elen and Tigre dueling in a very unusual manner, after Lim had spent time with Elen practicing a series of what Ranma thought of as katas.

"The name of this exercise is speed, Tigre," Elen ordered, as she stood 100 paces away from him. "If you can fire six times and hit me with five before I reach the range to use one of my own attacks on you, you win. If you don't, you lose."

Tigre reluctantly drew an arrow back on his bow. "I don't want to hurt, you know."

"You're sweet, Tigre," Elen laughed as a blast of air encompassed her suddenly hurling snow in every direction, her voice changing into a growl as she went on, causing Tigre to blanch.

“Let's see if you can retain that kindness. I still have to pay you back for yesterday, when you accidentally walked in on Titta changing.”

“That, that isn't my fault!” Tigre defended himself, even as he reached for one of the arrows set in the snow to one side. “Why was she changing in the princesses sitting room anyway!?”

“No excuses!” Elen shouted, racing forwards, not propelling herself forward with her wind power but retaining the shield of it around herself. *Although, come to think of it why was... ooh, that little, grr! So 'innocent' my left tit! We will be having words Titta!*

As she closed though Elen became serious as she saw Tigre's eyes change from confused and embarrassed to arrow-straight certainty, his bow coming up with a speed that rivaled Elen's own. The black bow seemed to glimmer in the chill light of winter, almost sucking in the light, and an arrow flashed towards Elen before she could blink.

She raised Arifar smacking it out of the air, then swiftly had to redirect her sword to slice the other one next. *Tigre is so fast! Is, is he getting faster thanks to Ranma's training this winter?*

Elen jinxed to the side, but Tigre followed her and an arrow flashed underneath her feet. At first Elen thought Tigre had missed, but the next second her back foot caught on the shaft of the arrow, causing her to stumble. The next arrow came towards Elen instantly and this time, it crashed into the air shield around her, splintering directly in front of Elen's face. *I haven't even taken forty paces!*

“You've been practicing I see,” Elen quipped, shaking her head. As she stood up straight, sheathing her weapon, which in turn allowed Tigre to lower his bow. “Next time I won't be holding back then.”

“So I fear,” Tigre agreed wryly, gesturing over to where Ranma was dancing around Lim, his hand flashing up towards her face, then his foot tapping down towards her knee, which was just a bit out of position, even as his other hand smacked aside her blade. “Ranma was on me for training in speed for months before you and I met Elen and this winter I restarted much of that training in my spare time. Accuracy is all well and good, but speed is important too. I'm honestly surprised that I've been able to make as much progress as I have.”

*Although luck plays a part too,* Tigre thought, sweatdropping as he deliberately stopped Elen from locking eyes with him. The truth was that one shot that had caused Elen to stumble had been a clean miss. He had just taken advantage of it quickly. *But if Elen thinks I planned it out like that, then who am I to argue?*

Elen looked in that direction as well, frowning as she noticed the frustrated, annoyed, expression on her friend's face. Moving over to Tigre, she grabbed his arm in both of hers,

dragging him away, not noticing the guilty look on his face before it disappeared. "Come on, let's go inside. You look like you're getting cold and we can practice grappling inside just as easily out as out here."

His expression changing instantly into a blush at the touch of Elen's chest against his arm, Tigre couldn't stop the images, which popped into his head, at the idea of practicing 'grappling' with the beautiful, buxom, girl next to him. Still, he wasn't exactly certain where the heck that would go and so said, "I, I think I would rather that is, Ranma is..."

"You're right, I don't know nearly as much about grappling as Ranma does, but I can certainly at least spar with you in that manner, train your strength if nothing else. And I don't think we want to be here for a moment," Elen interrupted, both aware of the fun she could have grappling with Tigre and the fact that Lim looked as if she was about to have a major temper tantrum for some reason.

Tigre frowned in response to that, and asked her what she meant, but Elen didn't respond, still pulling him along.

As Ranma's feet swept her legs from under her, Lim collapsed into the snow, but did not immediately get up. Instead, she stayed there, grinding her teeth as she stared up at the sky. A second later Ranma's face occluded her vision, as he reached a hand down. "Sorry, did I dump you too hard? I thought that pile of snow was deep enough to..."

"No," Lim growled sharply. "You did not. I am not some effete, weak noblewoman, Ranma!"

Ranma's hand paused in reaching down to help her up but a moment later resumed, his brow furrowed. "Okay, I ain't exactly a genius when it comes to figuring out what girls are thinking, but there seems to be a lot more behind that statement than just annoyance that I had beaten you again."

"That's just it, Ranma **'again'**," Lim emphasized, before sighing, taking his arm in both of hers, allowing Ranma to pull her up like Lim was a child, so light was she to Ranma. Dusting the snow off of the polar-tooth cloak Ranma had given her as a present, Lim shook her head, looking at him sadly, frustration now visible on her normally controlled face. "That's just it. Elen is making progress, real honest progress towards closing the gap between you in terms of your physical abilities. I don't think I'll ever be able to do that and had hoped that style would allow me to cross that. Instead. But it doesn't seem as if I am going to. I've never even been able to touch you and in return it's like I've run into a wall in my training!"

Ranma frowned, then noticing that now that they weren't moving around so frenetically, Lim had started to shiver a little. In response Ranma put an arm around the blonde girl's shoulders, his life force coming out in a wave of heat that could almost be seen in the air

like the haze over a fire. Lim sighed, tension leaving her body as she leaned into his embrace but still retaining a pout on her face even so.

“Are you asking me for some advice rather than training now?” Ranma hadn't actually given her much in the way of style-based training, other than saying that she needed to increase both her strength and speed equally. Not being a swordsman, he figured that Elen would be a better person to come to if you were looking for techniques, even if he could talk the talk as it were.

“Yes,” Lim answered instantly. “I’ve run into this wall with both you and Elen’s training, and I, I’m, I’m just frustrated. Elen and you both are seemingly growing with every passing day, and the gap just seems to be growing, not just between you and I, but also in comparison to Elen and I.”

“You've never mentioned any of this before comparing yourself to Elen. You followed her around most of your life, so this can't be the first time you've done that right?” Ranma asked, more for something to say than he thought it would tell him anything new.

“No,” Lim shook her head. “I have always known that Elen was better than me, but...” she looked away, embarrassed. Ranma let her stay silent, not prompting her to speak, waiting until Lim did so on her own. “I wish to progress, I wish to move forward as you both are, and I do not think I am,” she repeated instead of telling Ranma why she wanted to move forward.

Lim didn't want to admit to Ranma her real fears. That his desire for strong women, like Sofy and Valentina, would eventually lead Ranma to leave her behind. This, coupled with an old fear of being useless to Elen, had grown within her over the past few weeks after Ranma had returned. Her growing feelings towards Ranma were slowly becoming a driving force in her life.

Ranma frowned, looking around the winter landscape all around. It was noticeably warmer than it had been when he was on his mission of larceny. *Grand Theft Ranma*, he thought to himself, chuckling internally but noticing even as he did that the snow was starting to fall, he estimated they had another month maybe before the snow would start to really melt enough to start saying that spring was her and troops would begin to move.

“If you say you’ve hit a wall with your sword techniques, well, I have a few ideas which we can follow up on if you want to hear them,” he said at last. Whatever was driving Lim to get stronger, Ranma wanted to help her, even though he felt Lim was already strong enough in a lot of other ways beyond the martial arts. Her ability with numbers and organization were frankly scary, like Nabiki squared, and her mental fortitude to live the life she and Elen had lived, and still come out as kind and well-put together as she was spoke volumes of Lim and Elen both.

Lim nodded into his shoulder, pulling back slightly to look at his face, the two of them being of the same height. “I would like to hear them Ranma, please.”

“Well first, why are you so invested in the sword?” Ranma began slowly. “There are a lot of other weapons we can try you on you know, see how well you do on them. You're comparing yourself to Elen but you really shouldn't. Elen is a swordswoman born, she has the kind of instinctual grasp of swordsmanship that only comes around once in a generation. You're not going to match up with the sword, not in pure swordsmanship so don't even try.”

Before Lim could become more depressed at that, Ranma went on. “You should instead try to separate yourself from Elen, not just to stand out, but because you need to find your **own** style, your own weapon. I can help with that,” he added hurriedly, grinning at her. “I've got so many different kinds of martial arts styles, I bet one or two of them will suit you. Weapons on the other hand, that you will have to experiment with.”

Looking up at the setting sun, Lim slowly nodded slowly, then more firmly. “I remember being shown numerous weapons when Elen and I were around eight or so... but, but the person I am now, was is not the same person I was then. Perhaps you're right Ranma, perhaps another weapon would suit me better. But we will have to wait until tomorrow to test that theory.” She shivered as the wind picked up once more. “Let us get inside.”

Ranma nodded, and with his arm still over her shoulders, the two of them entered the keep, heading up towards the dining hall where they would eat with Regin, their friends and Lord Territoire.

The princess looked up as they entered, smiling politely at them, before turning a gimlet-gaze on Ranma, a scowl on her face as there had been at every evening meal since he had returned with the entirety of the Royal Archives of Saint-Groel. This had forced her and every scribe within Territoire to work for weeks on end trying to figure out which books and which items were important, which pertained to her own genealogy, and everything else, trying to make certain his cavalier attitude hadn't destroyed anything. It had been a desecration of important historical knowledge but Ranma didn't seem to care.

Actually Ranma did a little, he understood her point about some of it being important information for Regin's cause, he just didn't think it was as important for its own sake as Regin and the other Brune natives thought. Genealogy was all well and good for horses and dogs. For people, Ranma thought it was an idiotic idea to care about that kind of thing at all. Nobility was a state of mind, not just a thing of breeding.

“If you keep on glaring at me like that every day, your face is gonna stick like that Regin,” he teased, smirking at her, while the nobles, a group allied to the Silver Meteor Army there with their armymen around the table stiffened or chuckled, looking away. They, and indeed Regin herself, had yet to get used to Ranma's ideas of how to treat nobility, and more than one of them thought that Ranma, foreigner or no, should've been punished for it by this point. Others who knew him better realized that any attempt to punish Ranma was doomed to failure at best. At worst it would lead to the public humiliation of the person attempting to do so.

Regin rolled her eyes, but allowed her face to shift back into a more pleasant expression as she smiled at one of the other Lords, engaging the man, a newcomer to the Silver Meteor Army in a conversation. It had taken weeks to go through all of the books, but she had finally found the genealogy information with which Regin could prove that she was indeed the daughter of the King. Armed with that information, Regin had begun to be more open about her presence with the Silver Meteor army. Regin wanted to hammer the idea home that Silver Meteor Army was not an army of Zhcted invaders, but an army of Brune citizens and Zhcted mercenaries retained, in an effort to make certain that the royal line stayed on the throne. With the number of Zhcted troops it was a little difficult, but she had managed to change the tone of the Army itself entirely. No longer was the Silver Meteor Army about defending their own borders. It was an army raised to put the true heir to the crown of Brune on the throne, despite Regin being a woman.

That last point was still a sticking point alas but there was only so much Regin could do about it. One could not expect to change a society within a winter's breadth after all.

Among the many letters she sent out with copies of the proof of her parentage, Regin had sent word to the Knightly Orders who held lands along the eastern and northeastern borders, requesting them to send representatives to meet with her at the very least. Two of the seven Orders had already done so and had agreed to follow her orders as rightful heir to the throne. Others were sitting on the sidelines still, unwilling to take the part of a princess, even one that could prove her ancestry.

Yet Regin knew that their neutrality would not last long. More people were coming to realize that she was the true heir to the throne, many Lords around Nice, in point of fact, had already sent representatives through the winter to Regin in response to her missives. And several had even pledged their loyalty to her cause. They didn't have much in terms of manpower, but they could provide food and transportation at the very least when the Silver Meteor army marched south.

Even better, in a way, word had reached Regin that day of another group of messengers arriving. These came from Lords from near Ganelon's territory had sent word over the frozen Resia that they were willing to look to her for leadership. According to these earls and lesser nobles, Ganelon had not been seen in a while, not since Duke Thenardier had launched his surprise winter campaign.

That invasion had arrived like a roundhouse punch, coming up from the south and west, pushing up hard into Ganelon's territory. Thenardier had crushed every defensive position or enemy holding that was set in his way, although Ganelon had taken to fighting almost guerrilla-style, attacking in penny packets, using a scorched earth style defense. But everyone knew that it was only a matter of time before Duke Thenardier reached Lutetia.

And after that, what few allies that Ganelon's still had further to the north and east, would lie supine before the Dragon Duke.



They needed help, help that could stand against dragons, and with Roland not taking part in the civil war yet, Regin was hopeful once the Silver Meteor Army marched that would change) that left only one place they could find such aid. The Vanadis currently acting as a mercenary for Regin. That was the story anyway, and everyone was willing to stick to it, even if Regin hated the idea of losing Alsace to the silver-haired woman.

Ironically, several of those nobles still retained the majority of their forces, or rather, had gathered in their forces once more. These lords had been among the first to join with Ganelon and provided the majority of the forces Ranma had faced at the bridge over the Resia. They had looked forward to eagerly plundering the lands of the Silver Meteor Army and the north east of Brune.

But instead Ranma had destroyed the bridge, and then earned his name as the 'Living Trebuchet' for the second time, dispersing their peasant army.

When Regin shared this bit of information with the others at the end of the meal, Ranma shook his head. "I'm not happy about the idea of us working with that group. Do you know what that ass Greast was offering their troops? First rights of any valuables or women of any town or city they captured. In Brune itself! They weren't even using that as an excuse to ravage an enemy country, which, even if I would hate it, I could see the point of. No, they were willing to do that to their own people. That's just not nasty, that's evil. And these lords you want to treat with were part of that army."

Regin sighed. "I know, and I know all of those Lords well enough to realize that they are cut of the same cloth as Ganelon. He has tainted every one of them in a way. But I still need to work with them for now, since they represent the only semblance of order in a decent swath of Ganelon's territory. After my throne is secure, and Ganelon and Thenardier have both been executed for treason, time will come to hopefully deal with the other lower-ranked nobles who shared Ganelon's proclivities. If I can," Regin added, looking at Tigre with a gleam in her eyes that made Titta and Elen stiffen in anger. "It will depend on how strong my position on the throne is, after all."

"And your position has been strengthened tremendously over the last month, Your Grace," Lim smiled thinly as she tapped a document in front of her. A document that Regin had a copy of, but which had been Lim's work as chief logistics officer for the Silver Meteor Army. "Six thousand men have been added to our numbers from the central plains in the last month. That is nothing to sneeze at."

"Raw recruits, that we have been forced to put through harsh training to make real soldiers of them," Elen cautioned, before going on in a more conciliatory tone of voice. "But still, Lim's right. With Ranma's added training on top of combat training, six thousand extra soldiers are nothing to sneeze at, whatever their experience."

These men came from the area around Nice, the area where the lords had originally answered the call to arms most eagerly when Regin, then disguised as Prince Regnas had led the Royal army, which Elen, the woman now sitting at the table with her, had routed so easily.

“Fine, whatever, we have to put off dealing with the pond scum until we get rid of the swamp monsters, whatever. But what will the Army do once the campaign season begins?” Ranma interjected, changing the subject.

“The capital,” Regin suggested softly, as the others clambered with their own ideas.

Elen wanted to press hard for Thenardier’s territory. “Most of his army is in the field, and his dragons, which meant we might, if we can move fast enough, take Duke Thenardier’s city from behind him!”

However, Tigre had an entirely different idea. “Interdict the supply line of Thenardier’s Army, cut across it, cut them off from home. That army’s already dealing with a scorched earth style defense around them. A lack of food may make the dragons go crazy. We could certainly force Duke Thenardier to leave off his ravages into Ganelon’s territory, to face us on a field of our own choosing. Thenardier and the dragons are the problem, not Nemetacum, or his family or even the rest of his lands. We have to bring them to battle, or else they’ll just move elsewhere, ravaging where they wish.”

Before Lim or the other lords could weigh in, the meal was interrupted by a messenger coming to the door. He moved to speak into his Lord’s ear, and Lord Hughes blinked, then looked over and Regin, his face troubled. “Lady Regin, a representative of the united Temple union has arrived to speak with you.”

Regin blinked in return, then frowned looking down at her meal. She’d already eaten about half of it, and Regin supposed that that would be enough for now. “Please, send him to the foyer, we will join them there.”

She looked around at the others, then requested, “Lord Tigre, if you could come with me please?” *The more I act as if Tigre as my chief advisor, the easier it will be to make the switch from chief advisor to consort in the future* Regin thought, as Tigre nodded.

Elen looked at her, her eyes narrowed and suspicion, but there was nothing she or the nearby Titta could say. Until they knew what the temple was here for after all, having the representative of a foreign power, no matter how much Elen was acting officially as a mercenary at the moment, would not be a good idea.

Entering the room, Regin smiled blandly at the priest, before moving around and sitting at the head of the table, folding her hands in front of her. “Good evening sir, I understand you represent the temples? Might I know your rank within your specific parent temple?”

"You may Your Grace," the middle-aged man answered, and Regin smiled turned into a quirk of the lips at the inherent admission of her heritage in that term but not her rank as heiress-presumptive. "I am a prelate of the god Perkunas and I serve as second in command of the temple in Nice. I was asked to come here in the dead of winter, despite the danger of doing so, in order to speak to you." He gestured, to four men armed in full plate armor, and wearing heavy swords and baldrics, showing the image representing Perkunas a half-sun with rays scattering across a white background.

Tigre stared at the men, but did not raise an objection to their presence, instead standing beside Regin's chair, his bow strapped to his back. *I could fell at least two before they reached sword range and could possibly hold off the other two until help arrives.*

"Before we begin to speak about my reasons for making such an arduous journey, might I ask after the whereabouts of the secret archives from Saint-Groel? Those represent a priceless artifact of the temple after all, not just the information your family has always asked us to keep over the years."

"If you would like to be shown it instantly, we have it here, stored within several rooms on the fifth floor of this keep. We tried to retain the organization, but I'm afraid some of that was lost during the transportation. Only one or two of the most fragile scrolls within were damaged, however. I must commend the temple for its record keeping, many of those scrolls looked almost new, such was the skill with which they had been copied over the centuries," Regin answered politely.

"It is the task of the monks of the Saint-Groel monastery to see to such Your Grace. I will pass on my regards to them for you. And it does my heart good to know that all of the books and everything else have been looked after. Many nobles would simply have searched out the information they desired to find and not cared about the rest discarding it is useless. But your method of taking that information from the grotto is why I am here."

"I was hardly in a position to officially request the information I needed prelate," Regin retorted, smiling thinly. "Even if I had been able to, no doubt it would have taken months to get to us, by which time the war would have heated up once more. I'm sorry if the theft of the books offended you and your brethren, and I will willing to pay remuneration in some fashion for any damages caused during the theft once I have secured my crown and my father. But I will not apologize for needing those records in the first place."

"Nor would we expect you to," the Prelate answered easily. "We do not quibble about whether or not you need them, or indeed the act of taking them. It is the how which is of such interest. The fact that you are blessed by a messenger of the gods is something that every temple within Brune is eager to confirm."

“...I'm sorry,” Regin said, nearly collapsing out of her chair in shock while Tiger seemed to be having a coughing fit to one side. “Could you repeat that? You think I sent an, a messenger of the gods to take the records?”

“A young man able to pass through walls unseen, there one moment gone the next, someone able to take all of those books make them disappear and then leave just as easily? Only the gods can bestow such power,” the man answered sternly. “They do oftentimes move in mysterious ways but we wish to know what is behind this visitation. Are the gods backing your assumption of the crown or is there a deeper meaning? Regardless, I wish to meet with the gods-touched in question.”

A bubble of amusement threatening to burst out, Regin looked over at a servant by the doorway. “C, could you please send to Ranma?” her voice faltered as she tried to keep a straight face. “We require his presence for this discussion.”

Soon Ranma came in, followed by Elen and Lim. For a moment Regin thought about restricting their access but decided that the two would find this too humorous to see them out. The sight of the Vanadis did cause the Prelate to stiffen a little, and his four guards fingered their swords, but the prelate, who had yet to tell Regin his name, kept his attention on Ranma for the most part.

Ranma looked at Regin and Tigre, one eyebrow rising. “You wanted to speak to me? If this is about something I broke when I was in the temple down in Artishem, I’ll volunteer to help fix it but not until after everything else we want to accomplish is done okay? Priorities, y’know.”

“Nothing of the sort,” the prelate smiled. “We just wish to know which particular God has deigned to bless you, my son.”

Ranma's eyes flew wide, as Elen and Lim also stared in shock before the Vanadis started to grin like a pumpkin. “Er, whut, just, whut?”

At that, Tigre burst out in laughter, nearly collapsing to his knees as he lost control of his carefully hidden humor. Loud guffaws burst out of him as he shook his head. Regin too was laughing but Tigre still managed to explain. “The, the temple thinks,” he gasped, “they think that you are blessed by one of the ten gods.”

“What the heck!? I'm no, that is, I've never been blessed by anyone or anything! Cursed, sure, but blessed, no!” Ranma nearly shouted, shaking his head and baking away. *What the hell is this!?*

“Few people who are blessed by God believe in point of fact that they are. And yet, your abilities speak for themselves,” the priest replied, before listing the abilities that Ranma had been seen to use in his mission of thievery.

“N, now hold on a minute everything I...” Ranma began, only to be interrupted as Elen smacked a hand over Ranma's mouth, while Lim smacked him in the rear at the same time.

Shocked at that Ranma looked over his shoulder at him, while Tigre instantly took up the tale. No one wanted the full gamut of Ranma's abilities to become common knowledge, or the fact that some could apparently be taught. “I am afraid Prelate, that the temple is off base with this idea. Ranma has come to us from a distant land, an island between the Beast Lands and our own. And beyond endurance and strength, he is unable to teach anyone or explain any of his other abilities to us in ways we can understand.”

“So he is not teaching the Brune army to fight as holy warriors then?” the prelate inquired. “We have heard rumors of that as well.”

“I'm helping to train the Silver Meteor army, out of friendships sake. I've got nothing to do with Brune as a whole,” Ranma said shaking his head, while Regin winced horribly at the bluntness of his tone and at the fact she suddenly realized they had just missed a golden opportunity to bring the temples onto her side.

The prelate's eyes narrowed slightly at that. “Friendship is a thin reed in comparison to the power of faith, or even loyalty to the crown or nation one is born in. Surely there is more to why you are here aiding the princess than that.”

“Why would I be loyal to Brune?” Ranma asked shrugging his shoulders and ignoring the glare from Regin or the wince from Tigre, while in the background Lim and Elen exchanged smirks, enjoying this immensely. “I wasn't even loyal much to my own country to be frank. My loyalty is to my friends, which I have said dozens of times before.”

The priest looked horrified, but Ranma went on, pointing a thumb towards Regin. “She's one of my friends too, and since she wants to beat Thenardier and Ganelon and find out what's going on with her father, I'll be fighting alongside her to succeed at all that. Beyond that, I'm not going to be tied down to anything.” Ranma shook his head ruefully. “Believe me, if you had lived my life, you would understand why friendship matters to me way more than anything else.”

The priest frowned at all this. Part of him was annoyed, having hoped that Ranma had some kind of central theme or goal that the god who had blessed him wanted Ranma for. He didn't put much stock in Ranma or Lord Vorn's protestations of not being gods-touched, of course. The proof was in the pudding after all, and there was no possible way Ranma's abilities could be explained away. If Vorn believed what he was saying he was foolish, or simply believing Ranma's words over his own eyes.

Still if the Princess was happy enough with Ranma's divided loyalties and trusted him well enough to allow him to train the Silver Meteor army that she would lead to reclaiming her crown, the prelate couldn't say anything against it. And as for his friendship with Vorn, that was

another connection both to Brune as a whole and this new royal crown, if the prelate was reading the atmosphere between Regin and Tigre right. He was certain on Regin's part, not so certain on Vorn's the young nobleman having a very decent poker face. *However, the fact that Ranma does not have some kind of overarching goal or mission means there is leeway to force Regin to pay us for our backing her push to the throne.*

"This casts an entirely new light on matters. If we are to take Ranma's words at face value, this shifts the concept of your rise to Queenship from blessed by the gods to a major societal change. Surely you must understand that," the prelate began, looking at Regin. "While we are not compared to back either Duke Thenardier or Duke Ganelon, neither are we willing to back a woman who is not strong enough to hold onto her throne on her own without aid from the unnatural Vanadis."

Ranma shook his head, turning around and exiting the room. "I'm done. You don't need me here for this conversation and anything I could add would be unprintable anyway. To my mind priest boy, you and your lot are stuck in a very hard place right now between two avalanches and Regin is the best option you've got. Everything else, that's just semantics and stupidity. That whole women can't be ruler's thing is freaking stupid point blank."

The prelate scowled, before his face clamped down as a very nasty thought occurred to him. *Is, is that the message Perkunas and the other members of the Ten wish us to learn? That we have been wrong all this time about women's place being subservient to that of men? No, no! That cannot be! Thousands of years of tradition going back to before there was even a Brune cannot be wrong!*

With some relief the prelate banished those thoughts from his mind and turned back to Regin, but she had been given time to prepare her counter-argument thanks to Ranma's interruption, and even as Lim and Elen followed Ranma out of the room, she began her own attack. "True, I am a woman, and yes, I know that in the teachings of Perkunas, Triglav, Vors, and Dirge, women are unfit to be leaders. And yet, surely the actions of Duke Ganelon and Duke Thenardier have poisoned them too in the eyes of the Gods above."

She lifted her hands, as if weighing two sides of a scale. "Duke Ganelon has publicly stated that he would tear down the temples, crush your edifice of power root and branch. Duke Thenardier's not gone that far, but you well know that he believes the Temple should be a mouthpiece of the crown, not a secondary power of its own. Certainly, you would no longer retain the benefit of the crown's approval for your separate taxation system, or the social convention of a nobleman without any heirs turning over his lands to the temple upon his death."

The prelate flinched, looking away. But he was still off-balance by his thoughts on Ranma's earlier words and Regin drove in hard. "Indeed, I would think the fact that Ganelon has practices what he preaches in terms of the destruction of the temples in his domain would put

you squarely alongside myself. The idea that I would then have to promise aught but to let your temples and your current power structure alone is the height of blind arrogance!”

The talks with the prelate were not easy by any stretch, even armed with the knowledge of what Ganelon and Thenardier planned to do with the temples in the future. The prelate wanted specific demands met, and was adamant that Ranma not knowing why he had been sent by the gods was a mark against Regin’s position. Regin’s association with Elen was also an issue as was her own femininity, one which Ranma just could not understand when he was explained to him later.

“I mean I don’t think you’d be my choice of Queen, Regin, but then again, I don’t think anyone would be,” Ranma said with a shrug later the next night as they once more all gathered for some drinks before bed. “And I know for a fact your head and shoulders above the two assholes.”

“Thank you for that faint praise.” Regin rolled her eyes, reaching out to smack Ranma on the shoulder. Regin and Ranma didn’t really get along very well. Ranma treated her, like well just another person, didn’t seem to care at all about the fact that she was a woman, her past or her being a princess. It threw Regin off tremendously and she just couldn’t get used to Ranma’s level of lese majesty.

Ranma, in turn, thought of Regin as kind of wishy-washy. And if there was one thing that Ranma didn’t like, it was weakness. Regin was smart, intelligent, and a survivor, but instead of fighting for her throne, her first instinct these days was to talk, and when she had first revealed herself, Regin had been almost hoping to hide behind Tigre. Ranma was fine with talking to a certain point but he felt that Regin took it to an extreme.

A late-night snowfall forced the group to stay inside the day after the prelate arrived, which caused Ranma to go kind of stir crazy. However, he put the day to good use, working with a few of the local artisans, joking and laughing about their latest attempts to make a steam-powered sawing machine. It hadn’t gone well, sending the saw through the wall of the workshop and deep into a stone wall. “But it’s proof of concept at least! Just imagine having that power and keeping it going on what you want it to be doing!” shouted a halfway-drunk sawyer.

Still, Ranma was ecstatic when the snow faded into nothing, adding only another six inches or so to what was already on the ground, which began to slowly subside as the day wore on.

In contrast, Tigre had spent most of that day out and about, pushing his scout troops through their paces. With winter finally ending, it would soon be time for them to prove their worth again and he was determined that they would do so.”

He was yawning as he walked through the doors of the keep, as Ranma was leaving, walking beside Lim, and paused, looking at the two of them. They were both carrying numerous weapons, and that sight made him wonder what they were up to. Ranma shrugged as Tigre voiced that question, gesturing with a finger towards Lim. "We're going to be trying Lim here out on various weapons. Seeing which one feels natural, which ones she's got an aptitude for and so forth."

Tigre's lips quirked, and Lim glared at him from over a pile of weapons. Ranma had volunteered to carry them all in his ki space, but Lim had demurred, saying that she wanted to look over the weapons before deciding which to try and she could do that while carrying them. In reality, she just didn't want to get used to relying on Ranma for every little thing, and carrying weapons wasn't exactly difficult even with this many different types.

Now however, as she saw Tigre's smirk, she glared angrily. "Do you have something to say, Lord Vorn?"

"Oh, nothing at all," Tigre said with a chuckle, backing away rapidly. "Nothing at all, I just well, it just reminds me of the time when you and Elen were trying me on various weapons. I hope it goes better for you than it did for me."

Flushing as she remembered how during one specific spar Tigre had accidentally disarmed both himself and Elen, and then landed headfirst in her lady's cleavage, Lim snarled but with her arms full of weapons, did not answer further. Instead she turned back, following Ranma out the door.

Or at least that was the plan anyway. Instead, Tigre yawned, his eyes closing for a moment as he paused in his way between the two of them. Lim didn't notice this until one of the polearms she was carrying caught in Tigre's bowstring. Tigre didn't notice this either, and when he made to step forward, the pile of weapons in Lim's hands started to overbalance just as Tigre was pulled backward. The two of them crashed into one another, weapons flying all over as Lim found herself on the floor.

"Ow, what in the world..." Lim paused, a flush suffusing her features as she saw that Tigre had somehow managed to fall with his face pressed deeply into the cleft of her thigh meeting her waist, his hands flailing to either side. The blush on his face did not register for a moment and Lim saw red.

Above them Ranma cocked his head to one side thoughtfully. "Huh, so that's what it looks like from the outside. Pity rises from deep within me Tigre, yet at the same time, I am also restraining myself from hurting you right now. Instead, I think I'll just let the punisher fit the crime."



Shaking his head, Tigre pulled back, a flush on his face and the word, "Soft," on his lips, before he realized where he had been. Then his face turned white and he leaped to his feet. "Lim, I, I,"

"No excuses!" Lim shouted, leaping after him and grabbing the first thing that came to her hand. A long-hafted warhammer for a mounted knight. "Get that perverted memory out of your mind, you, you lewd beast! I knew it! No one has luck that bad, you must plan these moments in some fashion!"

Ranma shivered as Lim rushed after Tigre with the warhammer, slamming it down as he dodged out of the way, desperately parrying her attacks with the black bow, which worked much better than one would expect, the properties of the mysterious black bow serving Tigre better than ever before as he raced back outside, Lim on his heels. Ranma followed, once more uncertain how to feel about the events happening in front of him.

A few minutes later, Elen came up watching with some amusement as Tigre dodged this way and that, cocking her head thoughtfully to one side. "So, is this dodging training for Tigre, or weapons training for Lim?"

"Honestly, I don't know anymore," Ranma sighed, looking over at Elen. The two of them shared a laugh, then moved forward, separating the two with some difficulty. "So, let's start again shall we?" Ranma said, restraining Lim with some difficulty, the famous feminine fury giving her ten times her normal strength. Meanwhile Tigre found one arm and his head caught in a choke hold, holding him in place, Elen blushing slightly but still smirking in triumph as she pressed his head deeper into her bosom.

After Tigre apologized for the accident and Lim, with Elen poking her in the side, apologized for overreacting, Elen dragged Tigre off to have breakfast with her, while Ranma and Lim finally got down to business.

The pike was right out, Ranma could see that instantly. Lim, like Elen, liked to get in close, and any kind of long staff polearm or pike just felt wrong Lim hands and Ranma shifted them out quickly one after another watching as she tried to take a stance with each in turn. "Nope."

"That was remarkably easy," Lim said with a nod glaring down at the one particular guan-do that had caused the earlier moment with Tigre. "And I can already tell you that a bow and arrow or crossbow are not my weapons either. I'd actually a recent enough shot with a crossbow but it would not be my weapon of choice."

"Good, because then I'd have to turn you over to Tigre for training and I don't think either of you would want that," Ranma snarked causing Lim to both pout and blush hotly at the earlier moment before thumping Ranma's shoulder with her tiny fist. Ranma snorted at her,

catching Lim's hand and gesturing to another group of weapons sitting in their sheathes. "Longsword we've already tried, so let's try two-handed sword maybe?"

Lim's grimace of distaste was a prelude to how that went. "A two-handed weapon was okay, Lim was able to wield it well enough, but it was obvious that she was fighting all of her previous training to which told her to use it in one hand, and after a few passes at Ranma, Ranma ducked under one blow, carried the claymore to the side, and quickly slapped his other hand down onto her the inside of her wrist, deadening it. The weapon dropped, Ranma grabbed it and tossed onto the pile of various polearms they had tried. "Next."

The short sword was better. Lim proved to be almost ambidextrous, switching from one hand to another as she came at Ranma. But again, it relied too heavily on her previous training as a swordswoman, and Lim just couldn't quite make the shift from one longsword to two short swords. The style was interesting, and Ranma made a note of it, but again it just wasn't Lim.

Then came the axe.

"Hmm, I like this," Lim announced instantly upon hefting it. "It's got more heft than my broadsword longsword, but nowhere near as much as the claymore."

The axe in question was long hafted weapon, almost a throwing axe in size, but not quite, with a smaller head to the length of the shaft than an infantryman's weapon. The length of the shaft of the weapon was about the same length as a longsword. It was the kind of weapon a mounted cavalryman would use in close range after losing his lance.

Ranma watched carefully as Lim attacked, seeing Lim quickly shifting stance and footwork to match the new weapon, using added inertia of the steel head to add speed to her blows. She even used the staff portion to block a few of his blows.

"That's interesting you did that automatically," Ranma said as pulled back from one blow, which had crashed into the center of the staff instead of Lim's chest. "I think we're getting closer."

"Definitely a possibility," Lim agreed also stepping back and looking down at the weapon with interest. "And...I think you were right the other day. I had fallen into a mold, assuming that the weapon I was given when I was younger was my best choice, just because Elen took to it like a duck to water. This is the kind of weapon I could have been training with for years, a mounted weapon and I never thought of it."

She smiled, and it completely transformed her face from that of a determined warrior woman to a teenage girl as she leaned forward and kissed Ranma on the cheek. "Thank you, Ranma." *Thank you for helping me grow stronger so I can keep standing beside my lady and beside you.*

“N, no problem.” Ranma blushed, affected by that kiss despite the number of times they had made out over the winter months for some reason. “Er, N, next.”

Next, however, was a weapon that Ranma had secretly dreaded, the bloody thing having already given him flashbacks once today to a certain tomboy from his previous life. The warhammer.

Eventually Lim selected a warhammer that was designed to perform the same job as the axe. But whereas the axe had been a wooden shaft with a steel head, the warhammer was entirely metal. Both sides of the head were a little larger than the axe, and heftier, but not so weighted that Lim was having trouble wielding it.

The smile on Lim’s face as she picked it up made Ranma want to back away rapidly and this feeling did not go away as Lim advanced towards him. “Let us see how this one works,” she said with a whisper, then attacked quickly, throwing out two short swings with the weapon, that barely went wider than her body, before twisting around and kicking out before shifting her hold on the weapon’s haft, flinging it around in a wider blow.

Ranma yelped as that blow nearly took his head off, Lim having surprised him for the first time since they had met. Part of that was the fact that despite Akane having used a mallet on him, Ranma hadn’t really **fought** anyone wielding a warhammer before, and the mallet and the warhammer were only superficially similar. And part of it was the fact that Ranma was a little freaked out at the sheer delight on Lim’s face.

“Right,” Ranma said, dodging backwards, “Time to step it up a notch.”

He dove in, his hands flashing, fist smacking into the head of the Warhammer, and then Ranma’s other fist flew towards Lim’s face. She dodged backwards, the end of the Warhammer coming up in a jab towards Ranma’s throat, even as Lim used the momentum of the block to move hit her weapon into position for that jab.

Ranma twitched his body to one side, moving around the blow, his hand flashing up to catch the shaft of the metal warhammer between her two hands, and then twirling, hurling Lim to the side to land in a nearby snowdrift. However, Lim didn’t let go of the weapon, instead getting her feet underneath her. With a grunt of effort Lim kicked off hard and flung herself back up and over, using Ranma’s grip on the shaft of the Warhammer like it was a pole her feet flashing towards Ranma in a mule kick.

Ranma found himself staring and unabashed wonder at her thighs and panties so revealed, and completely ignored the fact that her feet had just bumped into his chest with enough force to hurl a normal man off his feet. Even Ranma stumbled, then he let go of the shaft and grabbed her legs before Lim could recover, twirling her around to toss her into a nearby snowdrift.

She landed with “Oof!” but bounded up, shaking the snow off herself, and looking down at the weapon with some amusement. “I think, Ranma,” Lim whispered, “That we are even closer now. This feels almost right to me.”

“That’s what I was worried about,” Ranma said with a sigh, shaking his head to clear it of the blush that the view Lim had given him.

Lim noticed, one eyebrow rising as she was about to ask questions before she winced as the pain of her shoulders and arms began. “Ow.” A moment later as the pain in her arms began to really register, she repeated herself, louder. “OWW.”

Ranma looked at her, then moved to stand behind her, his hands on her shoulders. “Hold still.” He ran his hands down Lim’s arms, his fingers glowing blue for a moment, and Ranma shook his head. You do know you just pulled your arm muscles something fierce with that little maneuver, right? The flip thing was cool but has way more to do with arm strength than leg and you don’t have the upper body strength for that kind of thing without any preparation just yet.”

“Just yet,” Lim repeated, as Ranma’s touched soothed her pulled muscles healing them from the inside. “Does that mean you’re already thinking of a new training regimen for me?”

“Quite,” Ranma sighed. “I’m not exactly happy about it, frankly I hate mallets so much I don’t want anyone near me wielding a hammer. But it’s either that or the axe and I think a mix of the two would work pretty darn well for you.”

This led them to another weapon that knights used, one side of the weapon was a hammer, the other a short-bladed axe, the edge of the blade curved in such a way to come to a thin point. It was an ugly looking weapon, made to either smash a man’s armor to pieces, or to open it up like a crab, but Lim liked it. She still said it felt slightly wrong in her hands, but it would work for now. After the war was over, she might commission a weapon from the smiths in Leitmeritz. But until then, this would work very well.

Training began later that day not on the weapon, a but on strength training. This put Ranma in a very difficult position frankly. Most of the training techniques he knew about, especially in terms of strength training or endurance came from his old man and Cologne. In other words, they were not something Ranma wanted to do to a girl who he was, in local parlance, courting. He confessed that to Lim, and then added “I mean some of these are like really bad, especially the endurance ones.”

“Give me an example,” Lim replied not becoming angry or concerned, and not immediately deciding that Ranma was looking down on her, which Ranma had been quite frightened she would. His experience with attempting to train Akane back home was now foremost in his mind for an obvious reason.

“Well, for instance of the endurance training, well the first bit of endurance training I did was to simply be smacked between two tree limbs, while also fighting off my old man. The second, was to be tied to a rope, and then swung repeatedly into a boulder or vice versa.” That actually hadn’t been Genma’s idea, that had been Cologne’s when she trained Ryoga to be a rival for Ranma, but Ranma had followed up on it afterward, although never to the extent pig-boy had.

Lim winced, looking over at Elen. The four of them were having lunch together, something that they had been doing all winter long since Ranma had returned. It was a time where Regin was too busy to join them and the other nobles were equally occupied with their own things, a time just for the four warriors. Elen too looked a little appalled. “That is indeed a bit much. Do you know any other ways to build up Lim’s endurance?”

“Not past a certain point,” Ranma admitted. I mean we’d worked up to that point, of course, but at this point, Elen, you’re at the point where I’d be, generally speaking, starting to get into the extreme end of my repertoire of training methods anyway. I can keep giving you strength and speed training, more strength training than speed without getting too painful, but there is no way to build endurance past human norm that isn’t extreme by its very nature.”

“I understand why you don’t want to put me through this training Ranma, and why you think I’m not up to it but I think I am,” Lim said after a moment, her tone soft, yet very firm. “And I want you to try. I won’t hold it against I promise.”

Ranma sighed, then nodded his head. “Fine. We’ll try it. But I reserve the right to tell you I told you so!”

“That, might be at step too far,” Lim chuckled, with Elen nodding firmly beside her. “Being proven right is one thing, rubbing it into my face afterward is just not on.”

“Word to the wise it’s never a good thing when you’re courting to do that kind of thing,” Elen added, smirking at both boys.

Elen and Tigre soon left the lunch table, leaving the blonde woman and Ranma alone. Lim moved around the table to sit beside Ranma, reaching under the table and taking one hand in hers. “Why are you so scared about me using a hammer? You mentioned a mallet several times today.” When Ranma opened his mouth, Lim put her hand over it, shaking her head. “And don’t try to deny it Ranma, I heard you mention it too often and I saw your face when I came at you with the warhammer. What’s wrong?”

Ranma looked away for a moment, but didn’t pull his hand out of Lim’s, turning back after taking several deep breaths. “I, I ain’t scared of the weapon or nothin’ like that,” Ranma began his previous hick accent back home coming through now before he got a hold of himself. “But I have a whole mess of bad memories associated with a mallet. And a cast iron skillet too, admittedly. Akane wasn’t picky.”

“Akane?”

“You remember me mentioning the girls back home and how screwed up everything was thanks to my Old Man and honor pulling me this way and that? Akane was the so-called heir of the land-style of Anything Goes. The one I barely knew for two hours before dining myself engaged to her.”

Hissing, Lim nodded, remembering that conversation with Ranma and Valentina in the hot springs Ranma had made back near the refugee camp. “Yes, I remember you mentioning them, but not by name. This Akane was she being trained in a hammer? Did she often beat you in spars or something?”

Ranma cracked a laugh so loud it caused Lim to wince, but there was no humor in the sound. “Hah! She wishes! No, she wasn’t trained in it. She just smacked me with her mallet any damn time I did something she could label as being perverted or showing interest in the other girls over her. I told you, they were all more about the competition than actually trying to court me.”

Scowling Lim gave Ranma a hug. “Ranma, I promise. I will not just attack you like that. Not even if you are doing something that could be construed as perverted. You have proven trustworthy on that score several times this winter, indeed,” she smiled wryly, “precisely once a month you prove it multiple times.”

Flushing Ranma understood that Lim was talking about how he used pressure points to relieve Lim, Elen and Titta (and before them Valentina) of the monthly monster. Those pressure points were very close to the area most impacted by that time and Ranma had to renew them every six hours. Yet not once had Ranma, in his female form to make it less embarrassing, ever tried to let her hands wander.

Lim turned Ranma so their eyes locked. “Ranma, again, I promise. I will not pass judgment on you for anything like that, not without listening to your side of things first. Okay?”

“Ehe, what about how you are with Tigre?” Ranma asked, a faint frown on his face.

“Now that’s different. He’s courting Lady Eleonora, and no man is worthy of her hand!” Lim huffed, and Ranma laughed, shaking his head while Lim went on. “Besides, Vorn already has Titta and Regin interested in him, and there’s no honor obligation or anything of that nature there.” She scowled, looking away. “I understand he isn’t a pervert, nor is Vorn leading them on or anything. But he does find himself in perverted moments a little too often.”

“Just promise me to extend him the same courtesy ya do me, okay?” Ranma asked, going to bat for his friend. Lim had nearly killed him a few times during their chase earlier that day after all.

“...fine. I promise not to overreact, not without extreme provocation towards me, anyway,” Lim promised.

Chuckling, Ranma figured that was the best he was going to get, and honestly a part of him figured if Tigre did find himself in any situation with Lim, Ranma kind of wanted Lim to smack him one. Either that or Ranma would himself. “Okay, I’ll help train you in the hammer-axe thing. But I will hold ya to your word about not getting angry with me about the strength and endurance training okay?”

After her second day of endurance training, Lim understood why Ranma had wanted her to promise on that score because she felt like someone had, ironically, taken a small bung hammer to every portion of her body and bluntly beaten her black and blue. The fact that her skin wasn’t black and blue was small comfort.

As Lim felt herself being untied from a stone, Lim looked up at her tormentors/boyfriend, her eyes narrowed. “Are you telling me this is really how you built your endurance?”

“No,” Ranma said shaking his head and looking around at the straw-covered rock he’d set down a moment ago from where it had been hanging by a long rope. “I told you how I learned, all at once with one giant stone piece slamming into me. Be grateful that I’m using straw-covered rocks instead of just rocks.”

“Ugh, I believed you before, but I don’t think it really sank in how crazy this is,” Lim sighed. “As it is, I,” she pausing, trying to move her legs from where she had dropped onto her chest on the ground upon being released from the stone. “I don’t honestly think I’ll be able to move. My body’s too damn sore. No wonder you had me doing the strength training first, you masochist.”

“Yeah, it kind of does build up a bit, and I ain’t the one who wanted me to train ‘em like this Lim,” Ranma retorted before softening his tone. “So you’ve got a choice, I can take you in and have Titta feed you, or I can get you a meal and we can eat out at the hot spring. The hot spring will do your muscles way more good in the long term than relying on my ki healing you.”

“...I honestly don’t think I’ll be able to change myself Ranma,” Lim admitted after a moment shaking her head. “And while the idea of you touching me all over is both arousing and painful at the same time at the moment, I don’t think that that would be a good idea.” Lim felt actually they were closer to that moment than she felt appropriate after not even a single season of courting but Lim wasn’t about to act on that feeling. Not yet.

Ranma nodded, hefting her to up in his arms in a princess carry. Lim blushed, but could do nothing more than flop in his arms, her body just literally was not following her commands right now.

“Titta feeding you, and then a massage before you sleep it is.” Ranma smiled sympathetically and even as he spoke, he was already shunting some of his ki into her, his arms glowing blue. The touch of the blue glow soothed Lim, causing her to sigh in relief. “Thank you,” she whispered, causing Ranma to chuckle a little.

Moments later, after helping Lim change into her winter night things, Titta found it somewhat hilarious to feed the older blonde girl like she was a baby, making “Now say Ahh” noises,” and “Here comes the dragon, chomp it all down.”

Very aware of her dignity at all times, Lim spent much of the meal glaring at the girl. Still, Lim opened her mouth when needed and ate her food without complaint beyond the glare. “Shouldn’t you be saving all of this nonsense for when you’re doing this to lady Elen?”

“I’m practicing,” Titta retorted, then paused. “Do you really think that Elen will want to go through the same training you are? I know Lord Tigre decided not to.”

“The strength training no, the endurance training, perhaps?” Lim shrugged astonished to find that she could move her shoulders now. Whatever Ranma had done to her while carrying her had helped, even if he had refused to just use his ki to take away her pain entirely.

“Heh, that’s something to look forward to then,” Titta giggled maliciously, and Lim shuddered, thankful beyond measure that the two other women interested in Ranma were elsewhere at that moment,

Later on, Ranma came back into Lim’s room, to find her having been changed by Titta. Ranma too had changed, though not his clothing, his body, now being in his female form. “How are you feeling Lim?”

“Better than I expected,” Lim admitted. “Not good by any means but I don’t feel as if I will fall apart like glass if I try to move.”

Chuckling, Ranma nodded. “Yeah, that’s how Ryoga felt the first few times, and trust me, he was already more durable than you are. Not any faster and I think you have the edge on him when it comes to training too.”

*Not by much though, and his strength is a lot higher than anyone here,* she added mentally. And when it came to pure hand-to-hand, Ranma would stack pig-boy against any of the girls he’d met here except for Sasha who could probably have beaten Ryoga into submission even without her Viralt. With them, Sasha was just this side of terrifying even to Ranma. *A good target for me though,* Ranma thought, grinning at the thought of challenging that woman again.

Luckily Lim didn’t see that grin, or she might’ve misconstrued it and after a second’s hesitation, Ranma asked, “So, do you want me to massage you now?”



Lim frowned a little, then nodded. "Please. Just don't let your hands wander?" Lim tried to make it a joke, knowing she could trust Ranma, although there was real annoyance in her voice and a little concern too. The lack of control Lim currently had of her body was putting Lim on edge. One thing that Lim had learned over the years was that helplessness was never a good thing, and being this weak brought back memories that she would rather do without of her time as a young child, and some of the most dangerous moments Lim, a child born into a wandering mercenary band, had found herself in.

Ranma just nodded and without further preamble began to massage her feet. Lim blinked, the feet not having been the target of the training/torture she'd gone through that morning, but Ranma didn't answer her nonverbal question, simply channeling some ki through his hands. A second later, Lim wasn't questioning Ranma's choice, she was barely keeping in a moan of delight.

As Ranma began moving up her legs, her touch soothed Lim's sore and battered muscles, being very careful to steer clear of the pressure points that normally would've been already touched by her massage, so that the pain from Lim's monthly visitor would subside. Now, Ranma had attempted to stay away from any points that would make Lim uncomfortable, and succeeded magnificently. Yet, the areas Ranma did touch were no longer in pain. That was enough, and frankly, Ranma pressing her ki into Lim like this was causing Lim all sorts of issues. That wasn't something Ranma did normally when giving her a massage to get rid of the monthly monster, but the redhead was doing so now and to a far greater degree than he had ever done before.

"Mmm, what are you doing to me," Lim moaned, *other than driving me insane*, she mentally added.

"Trying to help your muscles along," Ranma said. "They're not broken or anything, just bruised and pulled. So I'm fixing it slightly, not enough to take the progress you made, rather, to help strengthen them as we go. It's a lot tougher than just taking away the pain, but it will help you make progress way quicker than I did," Ranma replied, even as she began to kneed at Lim's stomach. Soon though Ranma gently flipped Lim onto her front, and Lim, winced, anticipating pain that didn't come.

A second later though, as Ranma worked her back something went crack, and Lim yelped, causing Ranma to chuckle. "You are really tense back here."

"When you have a chest like mine, your back being tense is the least of your troubles," Lim retorted with some of her normal fire, shaking her head.

Ranma rolled his eyes at that, but continued to press her hands deeply into Lim's back and shoulders, working out the shoulders in particular then down her arms. Lim's arms and felt like noodles before. Now, they still felt like noodles, only extremely happy ones, as pleasure began to wash through her. Lim moaned again when Ranma worked something in her wrist and

palm, and then back up to her shoulder and neck. A sharp twist, caused Lim's eyes to fly open, and then there was a click, but her neck suddenly felt better than it had for weeks. "W, what was that?"

"A lot of tenseness leaving the body all at once," Ranma snorted, "you'd be amazed how much muscle pain sometimes builds up in your system. Now, can you do me a favor?" the redhead requested, moving down to Lim's lower back kneading and working the muscles.

Lim moaned, and Ranma took that as a reply. "Could you breath in for me when I tell you to and then exhale slowly as I begin?"

With her new range of movement, Lim nodded her head and what followed was about 20 more minutes of pure unadulterated bliss. By the end of it, Lim felt like she'd been put through a charge once more, but all of the pain from her day had gone. She didn't feel revitalized or anything like that, but there was no more pain and Lim fell asleep right there on her bed at as Ranma continued to work her muscles for a few moments until she he noticed that she was now starting to snore lightly under her breath.

With a faint fond smile on her face, Ranma left her there, shaking her head. *Well, this winter is getting more interesting now, isn't it?*

**OOOOOO**

After rubbing at her nose with a handkerchief from a sneeze which had gripped her for no reason she could discover, Valentina set the cloth down and went back to tapping her lips with a finger, staring at her secret ledger in annoyance. This was the ledger no one else saw, the one where she kept the monetary side of her clandestine activities in order, the things that she did not want anyone, and in particular, the tax collectors to know about. Yes, even Vanadis were taxed, just as the equivalent of the noble Lords of their station. Of course, given the size of Osterode, the tax collectors had never really been able to, in the words of one taxman 'get as much milk without the moo' out of this particular cow as they could have wished.

That would have changed, had they seen this book.

Normally, Valentina was good enough at keeping her activities off the record and in particular her various contacts with other countries, that looking at this book made her smile. Now, however, there was no smile on her face, merely a slight downturn of her lips as she tapped them, working out the numbers in her head. That was because of the amount of liquid assets Valentina had been forced to turn over to a few of her local factors in the capital city,

along with their specific orders as to what to pursue after she left. That, on top of the purchases that she had made herself.

First were the things she hadn't had to hide. With the news that the Horse Lords were possibly uniting under new warlord, Valentina could get away with quite a bit in terms of planning for that eventuality. So long as the taxman did not actually ask how she was paying for them anyway.

These kinds of purchases included a full work team of men who could build crossbows, and would be willing to both move and train others in their craft. A farseeing device, the kind that Ranma had called a primitive spyglass, which were in use by mariners for the most part, and whose utility had not yet quite been grasped by nobles in terms of its impact on warfare, at least not in Brune or Zhcted. On top of that, she had retained the services of a master map maker, as well as his apprentices.

Other purchases, however, had to be clandestine due to the impact she hoped to see them have in the future.

In the two days that she had spent in the capital before being pointedly reminded that she should be 'voluntarily' exiling herself back to Osterode, Valentina had hunted down a few very odd folk. Natural scientists they were called. People who looked at the world and questioned why. Why was lightning attracted to high points? What kind of soil was best for what plant? How did you go about collecting this or that natural element?

Valentina also pouched a few discontented blacksmith apprentices, offering them money to leave their masters. Considering what she wanted them for, apprentices were more than enough. Valentina also had two master blacksmiths in her lands already, who could be coerced into taking more apprentices at need. To have a few more people around to train couldn't be any worse than working with the alchemist's guild after all

The worst expense however had been the items Valentina had to purchase. Her lands could produce a lot of what she needed to needed, but harvesting the items in her lands however was going to be very difficult, hence the natural scientists. And to start off with, to get the alchemists working, she'd had to bring in a lot of charcoal, bat guano, saltpeter and metal. The metal would be an ongoing expense, since Valentina had overestimated how much iron Osterode's tiny mine could produce.

If it all worked, and over the past month Valentina had seen some progress perhaps it might, it would be well worth the investment. If not, well...

Sighing, Valentina reached for a cup of tea that she had been drinking as she continued to work the numbers in her head. Right now Valentina was operating in the red, both on this book and the official one. *There isn't enough leeway for me to pay for actually fielding my troops.* An army on the march always cost more to maintain than an army at rest. Even if you

could, somehow, live off the land there were many other expenses, and far more wear and tear on equipment.

*If the Horse Lords do come across the border in force, I might be forced to use ransoms and pillaging in order to pay my troops! Or worse, Valentina actually shuddered, hugging her cup of tea to her bosom in horror, go to a money lender! That would be disgusting on many levels.*

Of course, if I had made that deal with Ganelon to provide him and his crony sanctuary, money would not be an object. Even as she thought that in a rather rueful tone, Valentina knew that she wouldn't have after meeting Ranma. Somehow, she just knew doing so would've bitten her in the rear eventually, specifically the exact moment that her prospective swain discovered Valentina had done so. Although he had evinced a willingness to back her ambitions, Valentina instinctively knew that there was a limit to what Ranma would condone.

No. I must find the means to raise the money somehow. Or cut down further on ongoing expenses. *Hmm... while Master Trivedi is already working wonders, and he has willingly agreed to both use the new method of mapmaking, I think I will need to see if he is willing to take a pay cut to pay for learning it. That, and his use of my spyglass. Other than that, perhaps a direct tax on the purchase of a plow, paid upon receipt of the plow? Make it a silver crown, and most farmers would leap at it, even on top of actually buying the plow at two. Given the demonstrations I've had the smiths put on that could work. That will raise more money, although I doubt it...*

Valentina's reverie on the money issue was disturbed by a pounding on her door. *Who would dare?* Valentina thought, getting to her feet, and grasping Ezendeis as she moved towards the doorway to her inner sanctum. All her servants knew not to disturb her unless called for, and indeed, only Valentina had the keys to this room.

Outside she found one of her servants grappling with one of the alchemists. "I'm sorry my lady, the servant said bowing his head to her as he kept a hold on the other man's shoulders. "The man just wouldn't take no for an answer, he barreled past the guards, and..."

"It's all right, thank you Arthur," Valentina interjected, nodding her head politely to the older man. "You can let him go."

The older man did so, scowling as Valentina looked at the alchemist in question.

If someone from Ranma's world was going to paint a picture of a mad scientist, albeit one dressed in medieval clothing, this person would be it. His eyes were somewhat wild, his eyes also never quite tracked person he was talking to, his face and hands stained with soot. His hair was a frizzy mass of cloud around his head, and he moved with the same jittery, swift movement of a squirrel, his hands constantly moving this way or that, as if he had a thousand thoughts in his head and couldn't really concentrate on what was going on in front of him.

Before Valentina could address him, the man began to prattle. "We've done it! We've done it, and controlled to, the new blasto-sphere my own name you know, thoroughly excellent, the compound is almost perfect, and the explosive properties, yes and and..."

Valentina's eyebrows rose, and she smiled in delight. "Show me."

From her keep, Valentina followed the man through a side door leading out into a former training area for the pikemen but which had been turned into a kind of laboratory in school, by local artisans. It was a series of buildings with heavy stone sides, but very flimsy roofs. Another design she had gotten from Ranma to, as he put it, "Make the explosions happen upward."

Here, a mix of alchemists, natural scientists and local men moved around, with two of the blacksmiths' apprentices she had retained a few months back currently arguing about some kind of mix or other of metal with a few of them. The phrase 'Mix' was certainly on the mind of the alchemist who had brought her here, who continued to prattle on about this or that compound as he led her to an area near the back.

"Stand well back my lady," the alchemists said, gleefully picking up a large clay container, his voice misting in the chill of winter. "I'm going to add the fire now, and this compound, my blasto-sphere, it doesn't like fire."

A long string had been steeped in wine, and stuck on the top of a clay bottle. The alchemists now moved over to a brazier, lighting the string's tip, before tossing the clay jar.

It clunked down onto a strong mattress set nearby, and Valentina looked at the man quizzically. He shrugged, the length of the burning match is something we haven't quite gotten right. So, if the compound hits the claw will break and then the compound will spread, it won't explode because the fire won't reach every part."

A second later, the explosion went off with a dull \*Whump!\* the straw mattress was gone, blasted into pieces.

Valentina smiled. It wasn't a large explosion, but it was most decidedly an explosion, and a controlled, created on purpose, rather than accidentally like so many others had been since work on this project had begun.

This most decidedly gave her hope for the future, and staring down at the explosion, she even knew how to go about utilizing them. Looking around, she beckoned to one of the locals, a former servant of hers who she had decided to set to work with the alchemists due to his ability to smooth ruffled feathers. When he came close, Valentina smiled gently at him, causing the young man to blush. Young Dimitri had a bit of a crush on her, but he also had a very good grasp of math, and both a willingness to work with the alchemists, who were crazy to a man and a loyalty to her which could not be denied to go with his ability to work well with others.

“Dimitri, you were once a shepherd, weren't you? I imagine you still have your sling. Could you show these gentlemen how large a clay container you could hold in a sling? And then, show me how far a sling staff could hurl something.”

Looking between his Lady and the smoldering fire to one side, Dimitri's eyes widened, then he nodded hurriedly, twisted and ran off like a hare.

Valentina chuckled at that before turning back to the mad scientist. “Now, tell me more about this compound, what it is made of, and how volatile it is. Can you transport it?” It wasn't quite the gunpowder that Ranma had talked about, but it was certainly a step in the right direction and made Valentina's concerns about wasting money decrease ever so slightly.

Later that day, Valentina had her twice monthly meeting with her pike company captains. While they had more than a month and a half to go before winter ended out here, winter being slow to loosen its grip near the steppes, the Horse Lords would already be on the move. With one captain already in action in Brune, and the other leading his pike company on the road to arrive almost on the heels of the campaign season, Valentina had six captains left, leading six pike companies.

Before this winter, that had meant that each of them led a hundred and twenty to two-hundred men. Now, however, with the changes she'd made since returning to Osterode, that had changed.

“Gentlemen,” Valentina began as she sat down at the head of the table, “how goes the training on the new crossbowmen?”

The group of crossbow makers Valentina had brought along when she had left the capital city had begun to make progress on building up a large reserve of men trained with the weapon almost immediately. Indeed, creating the crossbows in the first place was the most time-consuming aspect, training people on their use was remarkably simple in comparison to bows. They didn't have the range of a long bow, but they did have as much stopping power if not more so, and since the Horse Lords usually didn't use much in the way of armor, they could be devastating on horse and man alike.

“Quite well, my lady. The new crossbowmen have taken well to our discipline and we've been working through a few tactics. We've some battle formations for you to review if you like,” the most senior of the captains answered. He was a short, very wiry old man, who almost had the look of someone's grandfather until you looked into his eyes. Then you wondered whether or not he had missed his calling as a pirate. The fact that he was indeed a grandfather always amused Valentina. Indeed, two of his sons served in the pike companies as well.

"Excellent. How many crossbowmen have the training center turned out so far?"

One of her other advisors stepped forward, bowing to the table where the captains sat with Valentina. "Three-hundred and seventy-seven so far, my lady. Another group of forty, minus one or two more dropouts, will be done training on the crossbows within the week. We don't have enough weapons for all of them just yet, but we should by the start of spring." He went on more hesitantly, "As you know of course, our local crossbowmen haven't been able to create enough of the weapons for us to use and we've been forced to purchase..."

"Yes, I know that," Valentina cut in more tartly than she would normally allow herself, the comment sparking a little too close to home considering her own worries about money.

"My lady, you have this surplus of manpower to play around with during wintertime. But once the growing season begins, most of our new recruits are going to want to go home. Contract or no contract we will have trouble keeping them under arms if they know that their farms and families need them. Are you so sure...?"

Valentina held up a hand, and the captain who had spoken, a younger man around her own age, and the son of a knight of some repute paused, bowing his head towards her. "Apologies, Lady Estes."

"Unneeded. I realize that the swing plows and the other concepts that I have been pushing for this winter are new and in your eyes untested. But they will be a major help, decreasing the number of men needed on the farms. Indeed, I expect for most farms to grow in the news few years because of them. You've already seen how much manpower the water-powered cutting mill can help with. Believe me, that is just scratching the surface."

The captains all looked at one another. To a man, they were not certain that they agreed with their lady's belief on that score. However, if they could retain their new recruits, all their companies would soon go up to over two hundred and fifty men each. That wasn't quite the two crossbowmen to one pike that Valentina had wanted to field this next yet, but it would certainly come as a surprise for the Horse Lords.

There were just so many innovations coming this winter, one after another, that the six captains were having trouble keeping up. That wasn't to say they disapproved of most, though. The idea of having a baggage train composed of mules for example rather than carts just made sense to them. Out here there were few roads that could really take a cart, let alone in spring. And each company retaining their own mules, and workers for them, was again perfectly understandable. It added an internal ability to deal with the wear and tear on equipment.

The idea of adding crossbowmen, that was a bit more difficult. The weapon wasn't unknown, but it was a thing for hunters or, at best, marines in the navy. Using them in a land engagement, in particular, in the numbers Valentina wanted to, was bizarre and simply new.

Valentina was about to make it worse. "On that note, let me tell you about what I just saw at the alchemist's workshop gentlemen. I am certain when I do, you'll understand why I am so enthusiastic about these new innovations."

*The crossbows to start with, along with the grenades. Then muskets to replace the crossbows. Everyone will be used to working with long ranged weaponry by that point and we will have tactics and formations built around it. It should only be a matter of time until we can make that switch too.*

A few moments later, the captains were once more exchanging looks, but they were now looks of speculation. The amount of destructive power that Valentina had just explained would make any kind of cavalry charge in the world stop in its tracks. It would wreck any infantry charge in the world come to that. But horses would simply panic at the first blast, the sound alone would see to that. And without their horses the Horse Lords lacked the organization necessary to stand against their forces.

"What are you imagining to do with this new creation my lady?" requested one of the captains, a man name Geppetto. Middle-aged with a bit of a paunch, he was a former merchant and not very innovative, but excellent with logistics and keeping his men fed in the field.

"Slingers," Valentina answered instantly, "sling staff users in point of fact. To show the proof of concept, Dimitri will have a bit of a show to put on for us later. And after that, I believe that I would like a team of seven trained slingers, to be attached to each company."

"You wouldn't want to retain them as a single force?" Geppetto asked.

Valentina shook her head. "No. A smaller group of men can move much faster over any kind of terrain than a larger one, and as we all know gentlemen, it is the Horse Lords mobility which has always been a major stumbling block when dealing with them. It is why I kept your pike companies to a size of two-hundred men or less before. But with the number of mules we now have, I believe that we can retain that kind of speed, and create a combined arms company," Valentina finished, stumbling over the word for a moment.

Those mules had been another 'above board' purchase, even if the monies used to do so had not been. Indeed, in total they had been the largest such. But the payoff was so obvious that Valentina had not regretted it at all.

"Combined arms company," more than one of the captains murmured, and then one of them slapped the table. "I like it. It makes sense. And these men, these slingers, they'll need to have a special name, slingers just doesn't cover it. A name to show their special status in the army. And maybe each company should also have its own personal name."

"Grenadiers," Valentina declared firmly. "And as for names for your companies, yes, you may create your own names, but I reserve the right to veto them."



Again the word was repeated down the table and met with general approval, while Valentina smiled. However, at that point, the question of logistics came, with a few of the captains still sorting out the idea of the pike companies reach that kind of size, let alone being composed of more than simple pikemen.

But Valentina was adamant, reminding herself of the conversations that she had had with Ranma about Napoleon Bonaparte, a man who Valentina had come to respect for what he had accomplished if not his priorities. Ranma had actually known quite a bit about Napoleon, and moreover, about the military innovations that Napoleon had put into place, specifically the Corps system, Miniature armies, each of them had retained infantry, cavalry, guns and artillery while on the march, while in battle the units could become interchanged or remain under the Corps command structure.

Valentina didn't have nearly enough men to really create a Corps like those of the Napoleonic era. Indeed, even if the Vanadis of Osterode put every man on her lands under arms, Valentina probably wouldn't have reached the number sufficient for a Napoleonic Corps. But the idea of smaller companies built along similar lines? With mixed arms, their own baggage trains, and everything else? Valentina was certain it could work.

The captains however were not so sanguine and the oldest, whose name was Rosco, spoke up for them. "My lady, I'm just concerned. In the past when we fought the Horse Lords you retained command of the pike companies in the field, utilizing us as a single force. I understand why moving through the field separately is a good idea but believing that we could go into battle in that fashion invites destruction in detail."

"It does," Valentina allowed. "But I do not believe that any such destruction will come at you out of nowhere, hence the scouts I will be attaching to all of you as well. Scouts, moreover, who can act as messengers at need."

Valentina had retained a dedicated scout force ever since she became the Vanadis of Osterode and it had served her people very well in the past. Most of the time before though they would report to her, now once more Valentina was putting a lot on the shoulders of her pike captains.

The conversations continued, but Valentina was able to respond to every objection with good concise points, both on logistics' matters, why mules instead of horses for example, and why there was no talk of adding further cavalry to her forces. They just didn't have the horses frankly, nor the people to mount them. Questions about the alchemist's workshop questions about why she was pushing all of these innovations, everything Valentina answered and did so well, if not convincing her captains what she was saying, then at the very least, convincing them not to argue further.

As the meeting broke up, one of them dared to ask, "My Lady, could I ask, that is, how did you come up with all of these ideas?"

Valentina smiled, putting a finger to her lips as she thought of another book, the set of notes she had made during her long discussion with Ranma, wondering what he might be up to at that moment. "Now that is a secret."

OOOOOOO

Over the next few days, and then weeks, Lim took to the strength training like a duck to water. Every week, Ranma would load her up with more training, more weight and she would take to it, grimly determined to better herself. That kind of drive made Lim all the more attractive to Ranma, and every night, the two of them would meet for a massage session,

For the first two nights, Lim fell asleep under Ranma's hands, but a few weeks into the training regimen, Lim started to have enough energy to thank him for his services. The first time the redhead found herself being pulled down into a kiss, Lim was amused to watch the pigtail stand upright, like other parts of Ranma's female body, but Lim was too tired to follow up on that, and Ranma seemed to sense that, backing off quickly. The second time, Ranma responded with no hesitation and a lot of ardor and the two girls began an intense make-out session, with Ranma on top of the taller girl.

But Lim had by that point decided that she wanted to reward her friend, her lover and it was Ranma's turn to moan in shock as Lim worked her hands in between their bodies, touching Ranma's breasts. Ranma squeaked a little, putting pulling back and shaking her head. "Ooh, I don't know if I'm..."

That was as far as she got before Lim's fingers found her nipple and began to play with it. "Oh, that feels weird!" Ranma exclaimed, shaking her head.

"Weird in a new but good way, or weird in a new and bad way?" Lim questioned, pausing her ministrations.

"Er, weird both," Ranma admitted with some hesitation. "Like I know it feels good, but I don't think it should? There's still an aspect of my mind that, you know, wants to reject my female form at moments like this.'

"That part of your psyche is stupid," Lim declared bluntly, rolling Ranma's nipples again between her fingers causing her to squeak and blush in a most fetching manner in Lim's opinion. She pulled the redhead down towards her, and the two of them again made out for several moments, until Lim once more started to nod off.

These moments escalated every few days, first an intense make out session, with Lim practically purring under Ranma's hands, becoming more and more daring in her requests. In response, Ranma became more and more comfortable with receiving affection in his female form, until they were literally humping against one another in the bed.

About two months after Lim's new training regimen began, Ranma decided that Lim deserved a reward for reaching a milestone in her training. That day Lim didn't even need a massage, although by the look in her face, she wasn't certain if that was a good thing or not. Instead of offering her a massage anyway, Ranma said hesitantly, "You know, you've done so well with all of this training, why don't we head to the hot springs?"

Over the course of the winter, Ranma had, with the help of some of the local stone masons, constructed five points along the nearby river. These were little pools where the water of the river lapped over the edge of small stone walls. If you heated up stones and tossed them in, you could get a small hot spring, for a set amount of time. Four of them were open for public use, with set times for the townsfolk, women, men and the troopers.

But one of them was only for the nobles uses like Regin, Tigre, and the others. This of course included Ranma, who could much more easily heat the thing than any of the others with his ki attacks.

Lim frowned in thought for a moment, making Ranma blanch, but then she smiled. "I think I'd like that."

Soon enough, the two of them were in the hot spring together, each of them having taken the time to change in the nearby changing rooms, a much more elaborate thing than the small shack Ranma had thrown up back at the first hot spring he'd made. Both were dressed in the same kind of towel combination that they had used the first time, hiding everything yet also titillating once wet. And as Lim looked at the male-Ranma across from her, she again paused, thinking deeply for a second, then very deliberately swam towards him.

Ranma looked at her, calmly, not retreating, just wondering where Lim was going to take this. He had said at the start that he wouldn't push, but making out in the hot spring like this was a few steps further than they'd gone. After all, when Ranma had been massaging Lim, she'd been female, and both of them had been fully clothed, despite how wet certain parts of that clothing had gotten during the massages.

Lim plopped herself in Ranma's lap and instantly began to kiss him. Ranma returned the gesture, opening his mouth and tapping his tongue against her lips, causing Lim to smile slightly, her lips moving against his before she too opened her mouth. Despite deeply appreciating the fact that Ranma wouldn't push her, Lim still liked it when Ranma took the initiative like that once Lim set the limits. And right now, those limits were a good way's away.

For several moments they simply kissed and then Lim pulled back, reaching behind her to take one of Ranma's hands. Holding it by the wrist, Lim then very deliberately placed it on her breast underneath the towel she was wearing over her chest. Ranma replied instantly, the hand moving in just the right manner to win a moan from Lim as Ranma hefted the breast, his fingers working her breasts almost as if it was just another part of Lim that needed a massage until his thumb found her nipple, flicking across it.

As Lim began to hump slowly against him, Ranma lifted his hand slightly, pulling the towel off of Lim, looking at her face all the while. She blushed, but didn't reach down and correct this, so Ranma stared at her chest unabashed interest.

Lim wasn't as big as Elen, but she still was quite big, perhaps half a size again larger than Ranma in his female form, filling Ranma's hands and then some. Her nipples were a distinct light pink color, gleaming with the water in the light of the nearby braziers. The color reminded Ranma of a Sakura blossom and about the same size. Her nipple dominated her tiny areolae and Ranma worked his fingers along both nipples at once, watching in interest as they hardened into the consistency of tiny erasers. Then Ranma put his arm around Lim, pulling her slightly forward and upward, allowing his mouth to wrap around Lim's nipple.

Once more all the while he was watching her face, but she made no motion that she was uncomfortable with this. Instead she smiled at Ranma then let her head fall back as she moaned at his touch. "Hmm, that's it Ranma, yesss..." Once more Lim began to move her hips slightly, finding Ranma's rising erection and beginning to grind a little against it working her still toweled lower regions against his.

There was no move to remove her lower towel, but this was a way's different than it had felt in girl form and Ranma found himself slowly losing control. The pleasure he was dealing with was very different in his male body, far more intense and directed. Before, Ranma had felt it in her chest and lower regions, now it was just down there, and Ranma could feel his crescendo coming quickly.

Lim seemed to sense this, and pulled away slightly, her nipple leaving Ranma's mouth with a loud pop, causing her to giggle a little, shaking her head. "We can't leave a mess in the water," she whispered, reaching past Ranma and lifting herself up over the edge behind him. In so doing Lim very deliberately grinded both her breasts and then her stomach and then even lower down into Ranma's face.

This might've backfired, her feet catching him in his crotch if Ranma hadn't her reacted quickly, boosting her up and over him with a single hand, catching both of her feet one after the other. Yet with that, it had been an extremely erotic thing to do, and Ranma shuddered a little as Lim's covered hips passed by his head even as it gently moved across his face.

Then Lim was out on the cleared area around the pool, gesturing Ranma to join her.

They didn't go any further that night, but Ranma thoroughly enjoyed himself exploring Lim's breasts and chest. The look of utter fascination on her face as Ranma joined her, did more for Ranma's ego than any amount of sparring or words from his father had ever done in his entire life. Then to his delight, he found out that she was ticklish directly around the belly button.

Neither of them noticed that they had an audience. Elen and Tigre had been out with the troops that day, pushing the regular infantrymen into an all-day march, marching along with them. While the rest of the troops had to take turns to head to the baths and cool houses, however, the two leaders, or rather Elen, had elected to head to the noble hot spring, only to arrive as Ranma and Lim began their intense make out session.

Tigre, who had been dragged there by Elen, turned instantly to leave, but Elen grabbed his shoulder whispering harshly "Don't move, they'll see us! And I am not going to embarrass my best friend like that." Instead, she dragged him into the bush, where they watched for a while, until Elen turned to Tigre, and with an intense blush on her face and a wry twist of her lips, said, "Gives you ideas, doesn't it?"

Before Tigre could answer, he felt Elen kissing him, the woman having been extremely turned on by the scene they were seeing.

The next morning as they all sat down to breakfast, Ranma looked at Tigre's blushing face, while Regin and Titta were looking between him, and the suspiciously smug-looking Elen. "You okay, Tigre? You're not coming down with a fever, are you?"

"N, no, nothing like that! It's just um, it's just momentary bug, yesterday's endurance run, was a challenge, that's all. I think I'll take it easy this morning yes, that's what I'll do," Tigre stuttered, looking away from his friend.

Ranma shrugged, and proceeded to ignore the moment, while Regin and Titta continued to glare daggers at the now quite insufferably smug Elen.

Two nights later, however, things began to change. The winter had finally begun to thaw, and that meant it was time to start moving troops.

"We need to start moving now," Tigre concluded a long oration on that score, looking at Regin in earnest, who had argued for waiting longer, thinking that Thenardier's forces would slowly come apart the longer they waited and word of her being alive spread. "The faster we do, the more troops we can have in the field, the better we'll be."

"Are you sure about that? I don't think the roads are going to be at all passable for a good while yet. Most of them anyway, remember, all of the roads are made of dirt, and what you get when you get a lot of melting snow? Water. Water plus dirt equals mud," Ranma interjected, not in favor of waiting, just commenting.

“True, but we can take precautions against that. Remember, that’s actually to our benefit.” Lord Hughes several of the other commanders looked confused, but Ranma just nodded, realizing the point that Tigre was making, as did Elen and Lim.

“Many of our best forces aren’t built for traditional warfare, our archers and scouts,” Lim explained, shrugging her shoulders. “And, those that are can operate better on their own.”

Like Valentina, Lim and Elen had decided to import mules, making a few of Zhcted’s nobles very rich in doing so from their homeland to work up for the Army. The scouts of course could operate entirely on their own carrying whatever they needed, or longer.

“We also have an advantage in leadership,” Elen intoned, gesturing around the table. “We all know and trust one another to do what we are supposed to. Thenardier only has a few such commanders, and they are all apparently in the army or currently contemplating suicide,” she added with a snort, looking over at Ranma. Word of one nobleman who was trying to kill himself after having been robbed of all strength after his run-in with Ranma had reached them through the priesthood. Ranma winced, not exactly happy with that, but he still felt that giving Armand the Moxibustion treatment had been a great example of the punishment fitting the crime.

Between them, Elen and Tigre browbeat Regin and the others down and soon the army was gearing up for war. The troops would move out from their scattered camps, but in small lots for now and in different directions. Regin and Tigre, at the princess’s insistence and over Elen’s objection, would take a company enforcement and horse archers, along with the latest nightly order representative, heading straight east to talk to the Knightly Orders who had yet to commit to the Silver Meteor Army in person.

Meanwhile, Elen would lead a force of engineers and archers, along with a company of Valentina’s pikemen to take over command of the Eagle’s Tower, the Silver Meteor Army’s forward position. They would start to prepare bridges there. Bridges would help the army cross all the faster into what had previously been the a no man’s land between the Silver Meteor Army’s territory and the territory that had gone over to Thenardier. That territory was now in severe doubt however, considering how many of its nobles had basically told Regin that they would support her as heiress presumptive.

“Of course,” Regin mused as they talked about that point, “The one person we haven’t heard from yet is the most important, my father’s Chamberlain Bedouin.”

“You mean the asshat that had a hand in trying to kill Sofy,” Ranma growled, his face turning dark, as his hands clenched dangerously. “I don’t think I want to hear anything he has to say.”

“I’ve tried to explain, that was simply...”

“I don’t fucking care what it was,” Ranma said coldly, cutting off Regin more rudely than he normally would when talking to anyone, let alone a girl.

In response Regin’s mouth clamped down, as she saw the genuine anger in Ranma’s expression. “I’ve told you, but maybe it hasn’t sunk in. I don’t fight for Kings, I don’t fight for country, I fight for friends. Sofy is my friend and he tried to kill her. You do not want me anywhere near that man, unless you want him dead or at least broken. Am I clear?”

“So, what will you do instead?” Regin said, shaking her head.

Ranma looked over at Elen. “You taking Lim?”

Lim shook her head. “No, I’ll be staying here, preparing the Army to march in small lots after Lady Eleonora.”

“In that case, I’ll stay here too.” Elen began to grin at him, and Ranma blushed looking away. “It’s not about that! But I figure any training I can give the troops right up until they start marching is a good idea, especially with the raw recruits that we’ve been dealing with for the past few months.”

And so just like that the somewhat idyllic winter time ended, and the Silver Meteor Army went to war. But fate had two tricks up its sleeve...

The first came in the reports from the nobles around Nice that arrived a bare day after Ranma and Lim led the last group of four hundred infantrymen to the fords. Muozinel had crossed the border, and had taken South Port. Suddenly, the Civil War took second place in everyone’s priority list.

And at the same time, an object fell from the sky, straight towards Lim.

Ranma saw it first, hearing something in the distance he looked around and saw something falling towards them like a star. “Look out!”

Everyone looked where he was pointing, and everyone obeyed instantly, wondering where this attack had come from. But a moment later, Elen heard Arifar speaking, and she shouted, “Wait, everyone, It’s not an attack, it’s...”

A second later, the object halted in midair as if it had a special understanding with the laws of physics, something that Ranma felt he should be somewhat jealous of. The object in question was a weapon, a massive, double-bladed axe in point of fact. The weapon was embedded with a fist sized topaz and engraved with delicate patterns. But beyond the fact it was hovering in the air, there were two facts about it that grabbed Ranma’s attention.

First, it was pink. It was perhaps the girliest of girly weapons, so girly it made Ranma wonder if it might belong to a certain kleptomaniac skater of his acquaintance.

And second, the observation that drove the first out of his mind, was that it was hovering in the air right in front of Limalisha.

“That’s a Viralt,” Elen whispered. “It’s one I’ve never seen before, so either that is Muma, or Valitsaif. But if it’s here, then...”

Ranma’s girlfriend was staring at the weapon as if hearing a voice in her head, and after a moment, she whispered, “The King, he, he declared Muma’s previous wielder disloyal to Zhcted, and recalled it, breaking their bond. But a Viralt must instantly find another user, so instead of returning to the king, Muma, he found me...” Gulping, Lim reached forward, placing her hand on the weapon. The thing glowed for a moment, then shrank in her grip, to the point where she could place it on her back like a throwing axe.

After a moment spent staring, Ranma spoke up, trying to make light of the situation just a bit. “Huh, well, it looks like we were wrong Lim, it’s the axe you...” the pigtailed martial artist paused then, his eyes narrowing as laughter began to assail his mind.

The laughter of a small child who just looked around the corner and saw something hilarious.

“Oh come on!” he shouted, causing Elen and Lim to break out into hysterical laughter of their own.

## End Chapter

**This doesn’t cover as much as I had hoped, but given I wrote it in two days I figure it’s pretty damn good LOL. Hope you all enjoyed this, and look forward to January when it will return in the patron-only poll. Maybe. Unless I go with my semi-normal two large stories in January thing.**