Okay, so this chapter is a heck of a lot larger than I expected. I went into this with the assumption that I’d be able to knock off all of the winter setting in one go, since most of the time in medieval times and before winter, especially in places like Brune and Zhcted, where they have severe winters, the action closes down. And I got through most of it, but I let my goal drive the length of the chapter. Still, this allowed me to introduce Valentina to Ranma and vice-versa, as well as get most of the boring stuff out of the way quick. And move the romance aspect on at the same time…

This has been edited by me with Grammarly and *Hiryo* for grammar mistakes, Ranma and Vanadis knowhow. For instance, he noticed that two names from Vanadis are spelled differently on the wiki page after the first time, but then consistently, while I didn’t.

**Chapter 6: Winter Wonderland’s Marvelous Meetings**

For the first month of winter, it had been snowing off and on in little drips and drabs, giving the lands around the refugee camp an almost idyllic wintry appearance but not enough to halt all travel as it would elsewhere in Brune or in Zhcted. Not being all that close to the Voyes Mountain range, the refugee camp would never get the snow Alsace did. But the cold was enough to give most men frostbite if they went outside without proper protection.

This made it all the more surprising to the would-be troopers Ranma was training to see their taskmaster, currently in his female form, racing ahead of them on the circuit so fast she actually lapped them, still wearing her long-sleeved cotton shirt and silk pants. Then she was back among them, dodging through the group as she shouted out encouragement and derogatory remarks with equal fervor. “Come on, you lot! Last time you all finished this run in two hours. But at the rate you’re going, it’ll take you three this time. If that happens, I’ll have to think of some kind of punishment in detail.”

“Screw you, boss-mistress!” shouted one of them. The speaker was a man from down on Viscount Tourmaline’s lands. Indeed, most of the trainees were soldiers still loaned out in service to the refugee camp instead of ordered home for the winter, rather than one of the refugees. There were not nearly enough refugees interested in training under arms given the number of fit men of age among them to Ranma’s mind, a scarce hundred out of the entire refugee camp. The rest of the volunteers to take Ranma’s training, and thus be eligible to become heavy infantry or the elite scouts, numbered about nine hundred, despite having come from the lands of various lords to be here rather than the camp.

“There is more snow on the ground,” agreed another. “It’s making it harder going.”

“There’s barely six inches on the ground away from the beaten path and barely three on it. It almost sounds as if I am hearing excuses,” Ranma drawled, cocking a hand to one ear, her eyes narrowed dangerously. “Remind me again what I said about what I’d do to you all did you gave me excuses?”

“It’s not an excuse, Sir,” said a third man, stammering slightly as he tried to think of the words to get on their torturer’s good side for once. “There really is more snow on the ground after last night. I don’t know about you but were having to slog through it.”

Then pick your knees up more and put your feet down more gently. What the hell has Tigre been teaching you anyway?”

“There’s a limit to how fast we can learn to move like that over snow,” groused yet a fourth man, his breath coming in gasps from under his hood.

But he did so under his breath, so Ranma decided not to take issue with it. She knew she was pushing them pretty hard. But this group was about to be ready to graduate from what Ranma called her phase one training: simple endurance strength and reaction speed training. They’d also already begun to learn from Tigre the fine arts of the archer, although Ranma doubted any of this group would choose to join the archery core or the scouts.

*No, these men will be the bedrock of the regular heavy infantry, when we have enough arms and armor to go around anyway. Still, we have the entire winter to build that up, and won’t they all be surprised when they learn how light the regular weapons are in comparison to the stuff I’ll have been forcing them to swing around,* she thought with some sadistic glee.

“All right,” she said, gesturing them to halt, her own legs stopped moving but her feet sinking only lightly into the snow. The men looked at this in confusion, wondering not for the first time how they hell Ranma did that. But the distribution of weight like that was second nature to Ranma thanks to her training. “We’ll walk back to the camp, then have a quick thirty minutes strength training, before we break for lunch. After that, you’ll be free for three hours before we’re back up out here, with the training weapons and coordination training.”

The man all groaned at that, but it was a halfhearted thing. More than one of them was already talking eagerly about the food that lady Titta – they insisted on the lady part despite the maid’s best efforts to force them not to - would prepare for the refugee camp. Working with Ranma worked up an appetite, one that the camp had trouble keeping up with along with all the other demands on it.

The refugee camp that Ranma led them to was very different from the one that had been there when Roland had been released. For one thing, there was now a full palisade around the entire camp, with guards walking along the, their armor resplendent in the midmorning sun and the glint off the snow on the ground beneath. Two of them saw the returning column, shouted something unheard from this distance, and the gate opened.

Inside, there was still space for more log houses, but the majority had already been put up, enough to house the majority of the refugees in this camp, which had swelled to nearly fifteen thousand to the shock of everyone involved over the same time frame. This had occurred because one of the other camps had been abandoned, the refugees within unwilling to stay where they had originally been put. This left two other refugee camps elsewhere in the Silver Meteor Army’s lands now, but they weren’t nearly the problem this camp was.

One was on Earl Mashas’ land. He had returned to his land to take them in hand along with the majority of his men, including the few of them who had been put through Ranma’s training before this. But those refugees would find work on the farms that were once more being rebuilt on the Dinant Plains near Mashas’ lands and on it. Tigre knew that Mashas would be able to handle them.

Similarly, the other was building up around the town of Territoire. Now with winter on them and most travel slowing down, that camp was the only one still growing. But Viscount Augre was taking them in hand. His town had numerous small-scale businesses that the refugees could work at, and he wasn’t willing to let them do nothing.

But the main thing this camp had going for it was the distance from the so-called front with the rest of disputed Brune, and Ranma, Tigre and their abilities. If not for Ranma’s strength and Tigre’s bow, this mass of people would have starved in the past few weeks or had no protection against the elements. If not for lord Augre and the other nobles sending them vegetables and grain, they would still do so. The situation really was a logistical nightmare, according to Elen and she and Tigre spent every morning trying to deal with it.

Work was ongoing to furnish the log houses, to caulk their sides to let them stand up against the wind, which could be downright nasty Ranma knew, having already gone through one winter in Alsace. They were still temporary houses because there was nothing here to base a village off unless they could clear the nearby forest for farming.

Ranma had asked about that and been told, in rather derogatory tones, that it wouldn’t be worth the labor. There were too many stones, the soil wasn’t rich enough to do for farm crops, and removing the stones, the stumps of the trees that Ranma had already been knocking down along with their roots would be backbreaking labor at the best of times. In winter, even with Ranma around, it would probably be an almost murderous effort for very little gain. Something about that had made him think of a few pictures he’d seen of farming in the old days in high school, but he had quickly forgotten it, busy as he was with the recruits.

But for all the organization that went into it to keep it running and the people inside fed, the refugee camp was still a refugee camp. As Elen had explained painstakingly to Ranma, in that same discussion about why it couldn’t be a permanent town, there just wasn’t any way that the people here could generate income. They could barely sustain themselves in terms of food thanks to the largesse of others and Tigre downing a wyvern last week, but not at all in terms of clothing, metalwork, or anything else that people needed to live. Logging could keep the economy going, with charcoal and cut logs sent to Territoire, but not enough to pay for the food they were eating.

As he passed inside the camp, Ranma nodded to Tigre as he led a group of seven men out of the camp. “You heading out?”

“As you can see,” Tigre said with a faint smile, gesturing to the men with him. Ranma nodded to them all, then turned her gaze back to Tigre, one eyebrow rising. Tigre shrugged, then indicated with a finger that he felt that at least four of this group would pan out as good archers, who then would be trained by Tigre and Ranma throughout the rest of the winter to join the scout. She had already picked out eighty men from the refugees to be trained for that role, but Tigre and Elen were adamant at adding more scouts and archers to their forces. The scouts’ abilities and the way Tigre could train them in irregular combat was a strength that they doubted anyone else would be able to match.

“And how is her Royal highness doing today?” Ranma teased, causing Tigre to wince, hearing the sardonic amusement in his friend’s voice.

“She’s happier, and yet, not very happy right now. The reality of what we have to do to put her on the throne has sunk in, and she is still terribly frightened about being betrayed by the other nobles in the Silver Meteor Army, despite Lords Mashas and me vouching for them. Gerard isn’t so certain about their loyalties, and that and her past experiences has swayed her to the side of caution.”

Ranma grunted in acknowledgment, and Tigre sighed. Ranma’s complete disinterest in the political side of things put his own ignorance to shame, and now that he was being forced to play that game, Tigre didn’t know whether to be annoyed by the currently redheaded warrior’s attitude or amused by it. “In any event, Gerard has yet to tell his father about her, and I still think that should be the first thing we should do. If we can get Viscount Augre on our side along with lord Mashas, then between them and me, we can convince the others of the rightness of our cause.”

“Good luck with that, I guess?” Ranma said, still somewhat uninterested. While she’d sat in on many of these conversations, she disdained politics and didn’t care about what happened after the war. Win the war, kick Thenardier’s head in, and jump up and down on Ganelon’s corpse. Only after that, could you care for the future.

And once that was finished, so too would Ranma’s interest in fighting a war at all. She was in this because both of the aforementioned dead men walking were assholes of the first order, who needed killing and due to his friendship with Tigre. Regin was nice he supposed, but Ranma wasn’t friends with her as she was with Tigre. Or even Elen or Sofy for that matter, to make no mention of Lim, who she found herself missing. Missing Lim anyway. Her emotions towards Sofy boarded more on the worried side of things.

“I still think we should do more training,” she went on, changing the subject abruptly. “Forced marches in weighted packs and then a few days out in the woods roughing it. There’s no nothing better to instill some endurance and discipline into the men.”

“Ranma, you can’t hold our people up to your standards. Furthermore, remember that you and Elen both have some kind of inbuilt stove,” Tigre laughed, ignoring the fact that he too wasn’t exactly as heavily clothed as the men who were moving around them. “We can’t push the men that hard, and there isn’t any need to in winter. Keep training up a cadre for now, and come next month, we’ll really start to build up our numbers. Somehow.”

“I know that. It’s just I wish more refugees were interested in joining up without us pressing them into service, that’s all. Most of the troops we have are men-at-arms from the various lords, and that’s good, since it gave us a starting point, but it won’t really add to our numbers. And when we go on the attack, we’ll need more infantry. Still, I do suppose we have the rest of winter to worry about that,” Ranma said, suddenly changing her moods in a way that made Tigre twitch a little.

This wasn’t the first time that he had been around Ranma in his female form when her time in that form added up to a month. But it had yet to really sink in how his friend’s female body was indeed fully functional, with all the issues that implied. The mood shifts like the one which had just occurred were bizarre, and Ranma was far quicker to anger and violence than normal. Tigre had to step in occasionally when he thought that Ranma was being unfair to the recruits or was about to blow up at some ham-handed man working on the log houses. Not often, Ranma seemed able to control herself pretty well, but the mood swings were still bizarre and worse than what Tigre was used to with Titta.

“Just keep that thought in mind. We’re in no rush on the training side of things. Right now, the priority is to keep feeding everyone. I’ll see you in a bit, Ranma,” Tigre said, clapping the girl on the shoulder, and she nodded at him, waving one finger to indicate he should head off.

Watching him go, Ranma shook her head. Tigre was like a pent-up cage animal sometimes. The guy just liked to hunt, liked to be out on his own, and with the sheer number of people in the refugee camp, and with Titta, Elen, and Regin now, the guy didn’t really have much time to himself. *Well, at least Elen seems to have realized that lately, and is no longer just trying to keep him penned up doing organizational stuff with her*, Ranma thought, shaking her head, not realizing the irony of her thoughts towards Tigre.

Several hours later, the volunteers were still at it. Now they were outside the camp once more in among the stumps of the trees that Ranma, Roland, and then Elen had knocked or cut down. Festooned around the ground were dozens of thin ropes that were paired with piles of small hardened snowballs on the stumps. Through these ropes, the men jumped and leaped, while Ranma threw snowballs at them from random points, leaping around herself from one point to another. After this, there would be formation fighting practice, which Ranma wouldn’t handle turning it over to captain Marsh of the pikemen, who routinely joined the recruits for endurance and strength training but never this aspect. Then would come a final hour of further reflex training.

However, today Ranma’s victims were going to get a reprieve. From the palisade around the camp, there came the sound of a horn. It blew three times, twice quickly, then one long burst, signaling there were riders approaching but they were friendlies. Ranma stopped what she was doing, turning in that direction. A moment later, she grinned as she saw Elen’s banner over the head of a convoy and the flash of familiar dark green armor in the distance.

**OOOOOOO**

Lim and Valentina had made somewhat good time after leaving Leitmeritz but only at first. They had then run into a snowstorm on the Dinant Planes, which slowed their column down considerably. After that, they had beaten off four attempts at robbery, again slowing them down considerably. And of course, even good time was somewhat subjective when you were moving a long column of heavy carts loaded with foodstuffs in winter. What would have taken the Vanadis and Lim alone barely a week, if that, on their own, had dragged into nearly a month by the time they got into Brune.

However, Lord Mashas must have had word of their coming because there they received more carts, allowing them to spread their loads and thus speed up the train and more mules to use to rotate their beasts.

But to offset this good cheer was the column of Zhcted troopers traveling back into Elen’s lands. “What do you mean that you all were ordered home?” Lim had growled at the time, staring daggers at the man in charge of the thousand-plus troops.

“Erm, just that, my lady,” the leader of the group said. He was a mere sergeant, Elen having made the decision to keep most of her officers, what few she had in the field already, with her. But his age and experience as a soldier was no aid in the face of Lim’s glare. “I wasn’t told the exact reasoning behind my lady. Bu, but I was told that the King had basically ordered it.”

At that, Lim scowled but her anger faded into thoughtfulness. “Why? I understood some of the moves before this, but now cutting Lady Elena’s troops to a bare third?”

“Er, I, I said I wasn’t told why, ma’am,” the man stuttered, still with his back straight.

Valentina sighed, nudging her horse against Lim’s. “Stop scowling so much at the good sergeant and let him go on his way,” she remonstrated lightly. “I can explain the King’s reasoning to you if you want me to. But we are burning daylight.”

Over the next hour, Valentina attempted to explain the ins and outs of power at the highest levels, and why the King was interested in handicapping Elen, while not looking to do so. Lim didn’t understand at first, but when Valentina started to put it into military terms she finally understood. “So, it’s about borders and the ability to secure them then. Is Muozinel making so much noise that such a thing’s important?”

Valentina frowned, going over in her mind her own information about Muozinel. “Not… yet…” she finally answered hesitantly. “But with the amount of manpower they have, Muozinel can build up to a military undertaking far faster than Brune or we could. Their troops aren’t nearly as well-trained man-to-man, but they have a lot more of them, and their logistics corps are top-notch. They have to be. But yes, it is about border security. We don’t want to be to lose the almost entirely secure border we have with Brune now for one with little in the way of natural defenses.”

“And it is Muozinel that everyone is worried about? Not Asvarre?”

That won an extremely unladylike snort from Valentina. “To be a threat to us, Asvarre would have to land a military force on our shores. To do that, they would have to get past Sasha and her navy.” She raised an eyebrow in question, and Lim nodded, conceding the point. The oceanic border was now secure once more, for certain.

“You’re right, they aren’t a threat. But what about the Horse Lords?”

“A threat, true, but not a massive one. The Horse Lord clans do not band together easily. Thus, they aren’t a threat to Zhcted as a whole.” Valentina’s lips twisted, allowing more bitterness to show than she normally would. “Just those of us who live across an imaginary line in the dirt called a border with them.”

Lim had nodded in silent commiseration at that, and the two of them continued riding on at the head of the column. The two women had gotten to know one another rather well by this point and that silence was more comradely than tense.

For her part, Lim felt that Valentina was somewhat mysterious, even now after more than a month with her, but she had a wry, subtle and dark sense of humor at times that called out to Lim and her own at-times jaundiced view of the world. She was a very good conversationalist and extremely well-read. Talking with her had taught Lim a lot she didn’t know about her adopted kingdom. It had expanded her knowledge of what Valentina had called the balance of trade and the various power brokers in Zhcted.

For her part, Valentina had not seen any reason to not tell Lim about this stuff. It was important to her that Lim understood the true flow of power in Zhcted, so long as she did not come to understand that Valentina herself was going to upset that balance. Everything she had told the woman was simply information that a man born into the nobility would understand or have been told already. Moreover, a friendship with Lim and with Elen was all to the good in Valentina’s mind.

And not just because Lim had a connection to Elen either. The other woman’s head for numbers was utterly astonishing. Her ability to organize, to create lists and to catalog and understand connections between different aspects of what she was told was amazing and actually helped Valentina herself understand them more. She was also pleasant, somewhat funny with her anecdotes about Elen and their early years as mercenaries, and generally pleasant to be around, if far too formal to really be called more than an acquaintance.

And of course, talking to Lim had also given Valentina a bit more insight into Ranma or at least his personality. This was something Valentina quite liked, both the fact Lim shared it and what she had heard of him. Not only was he a handsome, powerful young man, but his personality was fascinating, so strangely lacking in awe towards the nobility, so wild and free yet possessing a Code that guided his actions. And more importantly, beyond his strength and handsomeness, Ranma had little to no ambition as far as Lim knew. Certainly, no political or noble kind of ambition. That was all to the good for Valentina’s own ambitions.

The mystery surrounding him, though, was what drew Valentina and what he could do for her own ambitions. As she cantered along the side Lim, taking in the road ahead of them with a jaundiced eye, Valentina once more affirmed her vow. *I will be Queen. I will be a queen like Queen Zephyria, who will be remembered for all time.*

Now more than a month and a half after she had left Leitmeritz, Valentina blinked, staring at the main refugee camp. “How long has this place been like here again?” she murmured, her hands falling from above her eyes where it had shielded her eyes from the sun as she stared ahead of them.

“I have no idea, but the men we met who were being sent back to Leitmeritz left barely two months ago,” Lim answered.

“And in that time they put up a palisade and what I can see are some rather large log houses within. Amazing industry,” Valentina mused, spurring her horse forward.

“Somehow, I think that has more to do with Ranma than anything else,” Lim replied, a faint smile on her face.

Valentina giggled mentally as she saw that smile. The woman was not very obvious, but to Valentina, it was clear that Lim was quite smitten with Ranma. Soft-spoken sort of way certainly.

About halfway to the camp, they were greeted by a shout. “Lim!”

Both women turned and saw Ranma at the head of a group of troopers with heavy bags on their back. Ranma was in his female form for some reason, splitting off as she shouted something to them before heading towards the newcomers.

For a moment, Valentina blanked at the sight of the redhead, then she remembered the curse. *Ah, I had forgotten that.*

Beside Valentina Lim spurred her horse to meet Ranma, causing Valentina to start, and watch as the blonde-haired woman moved to meet the redhaired woman.

Once the two of them reached one another, Ranma smiled up at Lim, shaking her head as she said mockingly. “Since when did you get all slow, huh? I thought you were right behind Sofy and me, and here you show up months later?”

Lim rolled her eyes. “Not all of us are supernaturally strong warriors who can move through winter as if it doesn’t exist,” she said tartly, then moved to slide out of the saddle. Before she could do so, Ranma quickly grabbed her, lifting her out of the saddle easily, taking the time to get a hug in before Lim could blink.

“S, stop that!” she smacked her upside the head lightly for that, but there was no malice in it nor any strength. It was what Ranma had heard termed a love tap. A very different thing from being hit by Akane or one of his other suitors back in his old dimension.

It certainly wasn’t enough to cut into Ranma’s simple enjoyment of seeing her ‘friend’ again. *Although that armor is kind of annoying when hugging her like this.*

Lim mock-huffed at Ranma, shaking her head before her face softened and she smiled back. The weeks since they had last seen one another had not made her any less fond of the aqua-transsexual as she thought it might have. She was still very interested in him, or her at the moment, and seeing Ranma, hearing her voice and the gentle jocular mocking tone of it just made her realize that once more. *Whatever his form, I am decidedly interested in Ranma*, she admitted to herself.

Yet despite that, there were other matters to see to and proprieties to observe. “Is lady Elen here?” she blurted out quickly, looking away from the somewhat goofy smile on Ranma’s face before her own could shift to match it. “And would you mind getting some men to help mine unload? We’ve brought several months’ worth of bread and vegetables. No fruit, of course, save for a few dried strawberries, hellishly expensive though they were.”

Transporting food was very hard in winter in any large amount, hence why armies did not move in winter. The camp had been under rationing in terms of that kind of food and indeed would have been in big trouble were it not for the hardtack sent from Lord Augre, and Tigre’s bow. This food was going to have to be enough to see them through the rest of winter.

“Elen’s inside in what we call the main log house,” Ranma said, before pausing as she turned at the sound of a horse’s hoof’s coming towards them ahead of the rest of Lim’s column. “Tigre’s still out hunting, but I’ll show you to Elen anyway. And Titta can probably prepare you something warm.”

The redhead’s eyes widened at the sight of the woman on the horse, who was wielding a weapon whose sheer oddity marked it out as yet another one of the magical Dragon Weapons. Lim looked at the newcomer, then bowed her head formally, her entire mannerism shifting back to the formal attitude she normally had, yet this did not stop her from poking gentle fun at Ranma. “Ranma of the confused gender identity and no country, be known to, Lady Valentina Glinka Estes, Vanadis of Osterode and Lady Estes.”

Ranma looked at the newcomer, trying desperately to stop her eyes from raking down the newcomer’s body as she reined in her horse lightly, looking back at Ranma with equal interest. *Eyes on her face, asshole! How would you like to be ogled, huh?*

Of course, that had happened in both of his bodies more times than Ranma could count, but to her mind, it just seemed more disrespectful to do it to women. *Maybe because men’s chests aren’t erogenous zones?* Whatever the case, staring at this new woman, Ranma realized that perhaps it wasn’t just their blonde hair that had attracted Ranma to Sofy and Lim. *Nope, their chests most definitely had something to do with that too, and holy hell does this woman seem to dress to bring that to your attention!*

Like Elen and Ranma, Valentina had made no allowance for winter’s cold, seemingly not feeling it at all. Taller than Elen by a few inches, she wore a white silk dress with roses of different colors places at her waist and a scarf which exposed a little more of her chest than Sofy’s green dress which Ranma remembered far too well. The body underneath was curvy as all get out, almost up to Sofy in the chest department, while also as thin in the waist, part of the dress opening up to show a flat but not toned stomach. Her legs were also on display more than a bit, thanks to slits to either side of the dress.

Licking suddenly dry lips, Ranma nodded her head in greeting. “Erm, happy to meet you. Um, your Viralt’s not as annoying as others I’ve heard, so I suppose I can honestly say that for once upon meeting a Vanadis, funny. Nothing like the hysterics I’ve heard from Arifar or Ludmila’s weapon, whatever it was called, or the childish howling hysterics from Bargren. But um, no offense, but why are you here? Only, I thought it was kind of unusual for Vanadis to go past Zhcted’s borders.”

“Well, now that is interesting. As to my Ezendeis’ reaction to you, he is rather the strong, silent type, so even his current chortle is rather out of character,” the newcomer replied, a winsome smile on her face.

Gauging Ranma’s reaction to her, Valentina was somewhat impressed. Most men - and she knew despite his current body Ranma was a man - when they first met her could not stop themselves from ogling her for at least a few seconds, Ezendeis by her side or not. Not that Valentina minded really. If she did, she wouldn’t dress as she did, just like Sofy didn’t particularly mind it. Both women saw their sexuality as another, if not so lethal weapon in their arsenals. And just like Sofy, Valentina would always hint, tease, and yet would never fulfill any such so-called promises.

She smiled at Ranma, dropping from her own saddle easily as the column of carts went down the road towards the camp. “Normally, I wouldn’t be interested in anything occurring in this country, except for the fact that Duke Ganelon had made overtures to me about opening up certain trades with my lands. That brought my interest to Brune, which was further flamed by stories about your abilities, which I paid Elen for by sending my pikemen to help her and Earl Vorn. Where are they, might I ask? I would like to check in with Captain Marsh.”

“I’ll show you to them on our way to the noble’s log house,” Ranma answered easily. “They have their own log house, and it’s mostly been fitted for furniture and suchlike already too.”

Valentina nodded at that, and she and Lim remounted and followed Ranma, who was on her feet back towards the camp after he dismissed his victims early for once. Valentina examined them and the training area for a moment as they rode past, then looking around with interest at the camp. “This is all well done,” she enthused, no prevarication needed. “But Lim guessed this work might have been mostly done by you?”

Ranma nodded. “I was the one knocking down trees and putting up houses, so yes, a lot of it’s been done by me.” Explaining some of the work being done, Ranma led the duo through the camp, nodding to a few of Titta’s workers, who were already starting to organize where the foodstuffs would be stored and where the donkeys had to be housed and so forth.

At that sight, Lim paused, taking it in a glance nodding her head in approval at that before hurrying to catch up to the other two.

By the time they reached the log house that housed Valentina’s pikemen, they had heard of their lady’s arrival and had somehow prepared a parade formation outside, causing Ranma to blink in surprise.

Valentina smiled, nodding her head to them and crooking a finger towards Captain Marsh, whispering a few questions to him to, which he replied, gesturing into the log house.

Ranma followed Valentina insides as did Lim, looking around in interest.

It was crude for the most part, the floors still having some back on it, the sides rough, but well caulked against winter’s bite. It had a nice, well-maintained fire in the middle, with a small chimney directly little overhead to provide warmth and air circulation.

Seeing all she had wanted to, Lim turned back to Ranma as Valentina was being shown around the log house and talking to her men, “Can I ask, why are you in your female form? You told me that you don’t normally like being in it for too long.”

“That hasn’t changed since we last saw one another, don’t worry,” Ranma answered dryly. “It’s just my time in this form was close to adding up to a month, and I figured to bite the arrow and get it over with quickly. That way, it won’t take me by surprise when I least expect it.”

Lim frowned at that, then nodded her head, remembering that Ranma had told her once that his female form was completely female, including having monthlies. “And yet you were out training with that group of soldiers. You don’t seem to be in any pain. Is this another pressure point thing?” she quipped, thinking it wasn’t, simply another aspect of Ranma’s durability and stubborn nature.

But Ranma surprised her by nodding seriously. “Yeah, I learned a series of pressure points that help relieve most of the physical issues with the monthly monster. It’s only the emotional stuff I can’t do anything about. My mood swings come and go, but IEEEE!!” The redhead yelped, stumbling backward as suddenly Lim thrust her face almost into Ranma’s own, staring at Ranma in shock. Beside her, Valentina had seemingly teleported (without the use of her weapon) into her personal space as well.

“You know pressure points to help with that issue!? And you haven’t already shared them with us!?” Lim snarled darkly.

Ranma could only stammer. “U, um, well, er, Titta’s known for months now. I figured that she had talked about it with Elen at least, but since no one’s mentioned it, I thought no one was interested given um, where the pressure points are located.”

*A mental note, somehow, someway Titta must pay for this!* For now, Lim set that aside, preparing instead to let Ranma have it.

The blonde reared her head back and was about to launch into a tirade when Valentina interposed herself. A surprisingly strong arm pushed Lim backward as she took the blonde’s place in front of Ranma. “Gently Lim. You said he is frequently tactless and tends not to think in terms of his doctoral abilities. Furthermore, this Titta woman also bears some of the blame for keeping such a thing to herself. Might we ask, that if you are around us when that issue rears its head for either one of us, that you give us access to this ability of yours?”

Ranma nodded rapidly, happy for the reprieve. “S, sure. But like I just said, the pressure points in question, um, where they are on the body is a bit perverted.” She gestured down to her legs, and then right above her private area, tapping a finger there significantly. “If you’re still fine with that, I can help, but I don’t wanna hear any complaints afterward.”

The Vanadis and Lim looked at one another, then Lim sighed and said, “For as long as I’ve known him, he hasn’t acted at all perverted, or outright lied. So, I would say he is both telling the truth and would not take any kind of sick pleasure in it.”

Ranma nodded seriously. “I know that time of the month isn’t exactly the moment when a woman feels all sexy, firsthand.” She paused then added hastily, “Erm, not that I ever feel sexy in that form, but er, you know what I mean.”

The two women laughed darkly, indicating without words they too understood all too well what Ranma meant. Then, with a shake of her head, Valentina, indicated Ranma should keep leading them on.

As she did, Ranma told Lim about everything that had happened since Ranma and Sofy had left her back in Elen’s territory. When she heard about how Roland had been both defeated and then allowed to leave to head back to the border with Sachstein, after giving his parole, Valentina scowled, shaking her head. “That was ill done,” she said, almost growling the words. “He should have at least paid some kind of fine, rather than just simple vows of neutrality.”

Lim nodded at that. “I’m surprised that lady Elen let him go at all. He’s not known as Brune’s greatest knight for no reason, and whatever his promises, he has his oath to Brune. If the King, or whoever steps forward as ruler in his place, orders him to, then he will have no choice but to break his personal word and do his duty.”

“Meh, that’s not happening anytime soon. Roland basically said that unless the order is given to him by the King in person, then he will be able to ignore any other attempts to order him around. Beyond that, there were extenuating circumstances,” Ranma replied dryly. “Besides, he wasn’t doing anyone any good here.”

‘Extenuating circumstances? Are you talking about how his loss had opened up that the border to Sachstein and Asvarre? Or something else entirely?” Valentina questioned, her tone rising to indicate her interest. International politics was Sofy’s area of authority, but Valentina had made a study of it as well.

“Not really, although he knew about it. You’ll soon see the real reason, I think.”

At that point, the trio came to a log house that was built out from the palisade as if it was a keep in a castle. This log house was a two-story structure the same size as the outer wall, despite still looking as rough around the edges is everything else around the camp. On the roof were several archers, gazing not only out, but into the camp, ostensibly a show of force to help keep order among the sometimes rowdy refugees.

Lim noted that they were all men of Alsace. Not a single foreigner was up there, although there were a few Zhcted guards on the door leading into the log house.

By the time they reached the second floor where Elen was sitting at a large desk, she had heard about their arrival. She was already out of her chair, moving around the desk to pull Lim into a hug, shouting out, “It’s good to see you, at long last! What kept you!?”

“This little thing called winter lady Eleonora,” the blonde shot back, although she did allow herself a brief second to hug her friend, before pushing her away resolutely. “And that is not how a Vanadis should act in public, milady.”

“Bah!” Elen laughed, shaking her head. “I’m just happy to see you. Although,” she added, looking at Valentina, her eyes narrowing noticeably. “I’m a little confused about **your** presence.”

The word confused was polite. What Elen really was feeling was suspicious of the other woman’s being there. The fact she was looking at Ranma so closely did not assuage that suspicion.

Realizing that she couldn’t really allay the other Vanadis suspicions without being at least a bit forthright, Valentina decided to share her reasons for being there, if not her goals for being so. “In the main, I am following up on rumors of this one’s abilities,” she said, flicking her hand towards Ranma. “I have already discovered those rumors do not mention everything, such as his odd ability to hear our Viralts, which you hinted at, but which did not mention he could hear every Viralt he comes in contact with.”

Elen winced. “Have those rumors…”

“The king had not heard anything more about them officially before I left the capital. By this point, that might well have changed.” Valentina shrugged. “He will want some information, but Lim explained to me on our trip here that Ranma refuses to be tied down. So, I will endeavor to share as much information as I must, without sharing any that I do not. But I have ever been more inquisitive than is good for me. Hence, here I am.”

“I see,” Elen muttered, staring at the other Vanadis before launching a light verbal jab her way. “It must be nice to be able to range so far afield and you with your sickly body as well.”

Valentina smiled thinly. “No more so than you, able to leave her own lands behind in the hands of capable administrators and instead, what was it, oh yes, gallivanting around in an enemy country for personal remuneration. I have to wonder if the King may be forced to officially censor you in some fashion.”

At that, Elen’s eyes narrowed once more, glaring at the older Vanadis. But Valentina merely threw back her shoulders, staring back at the other woman, a faint smirk on her face.

Watching this, Ranma only had one comment to make. “So, is this the norm among you Vanadis, fighting one another like two cats in heat? Or are ya just special Elen, with this and your reaction to the blue-haired gal.”

The two Vanadis turned their glares on Ranma, who grinned back at them unrepentantly. “You have a death wish, Ranma?” Elen snarled.

Ranma shrugged. “Not really, but I’m getting bored just training people. We haven’t had time to spar in a week,” he mock-whined looking at her soulfully, batting her eyelashes at the other woman.

Despite her previous ill-humor Elen could do little but giggle at that, shaking her head at Ranma’s attitude, while Valentina simply smiled indulgently. Then, she surprised Elen by curtsying. “I understand why you are asking, but truthfully, I am indeed here for my own reasons and my own interest in Ranma. I will not share anything with other people he does not wish to, but…” She turned her attention to Ranma, looking at her the redhead thoughtfully. “But you must admit that your abilities, not just your abilities as a warrior, but your abilities as a doctor, mark you out as a person of interest. One who has no prior loyalties,” she added leadingly.

Ranma scowled, but then smirked suddenly, cracking her knuckles. “How about this. For every day you spar with me, while you’re here with us, I’ll answer your questions. If not, you’re going to just have to get by with observation.”

While Valentina knew she could probably learn quite a bit via observation, she also knew that asking questions would be a much better way to learn what she really wanted to know. She could also, oddly, feel Ezendeis’ excitement at the idea. “Realize that I am not as good as Sasha. I know that you and she sparred routinely during your stay in Legnica, but I am not her equal.”

The words were said easily, with no jealousy or annoyance at the need to make that confession. Valentina knew herself all too well, and also knew that Sasha’s abilities had been created through more than ten years as a Vanadis, having bonded with Bargren when she was barely nine years old.

“You talked to Sasha,” Elen said thoughtfully, looking at Ranma then back to the new Vanadis. “Is she doing well? Even with Ranma and Sofy telling me she had been cured, I’ve still been worried about a relapse. After all, I thought that her condition was a familial thing, one that would come and go.”

“Oh indeed, she’s doing quite well,” Valentina replied with a light laugh, although she was watching the other woman closely if unobtrusively. *Hmm, I didn’t think Sasha would want the fact she was poisoned to become common knowledge. But did Ranma still tell Eleonora about it?*

Elen subsided at that, looking away.

Valentina turned back to Ranma, agreeing to her conditions, so long as they didn’t do so today. “My rear is rather sore, and my legs are not in the best of shape after a little under two months in the saddle. I would like at least a day to work out the kinks in my legs.” With that, she reached down to her thighs with both hands, rubbing at them. This act brought Ranma’s eyes down to those hands, as Valentina had hoped, and a second later, the redhead agreed with her almost automatically, her mind visibly elsewhere.

With that out of the way, Valentina turned back to Elen, asking, “By the way, Ranma told us about your defeat of Roland, the wielder of Durandal. Whatever possessed you to just let him go like that?”

“Extenuating circumstances,” Elen replied dryly, having no desire to inform the other woman of those circumstances as well as no knowledge that she was stealing Ranma’s words from earlier.

But if Elen had thought she could keep the princess’s presence, her actually being alive as well as a princess rather than a prince, under wraps, her hope was in vain. Because almost as soon as she stopped speaking, the door to Elen’s makeshift office opened and a blonde head stuck his layout of the doorway, looking inside.

“Lady Elen, has Lord Vorn returned? I think I’ve mapped out a route that…” Regin blinked at the sight of not just Ranma and Elen, but two women she hadn’t seen before. “Ah, good evening,” she said, nodding her head looking at Elen, cocking her head quizzically, wondering what she just stuck her head into.

“And you would be?” Lim asked before anyone else could say anything.

“This is the princess who was a prince,” Ranma said with a laugh, ruffling Regin’s hair, causing her to scowl outrageously at him and bat his hand away with both of her own, much like a puppy attempting to bat away his master’s hand with just as little effect. She’d had a while now to get used to Ranma’s attitude towards royalty but had yet to do so. They weren’t truly friendly by any means, but he treated her like, well, a young girl, like he treated Titta, ignoring her royal rank utterly. It was weird, to say the least, from someone who knew about her identity in the first place.

Valentina's eyebrows flew up in surprise, looking from the young woman to Elen then to Ranma. “Excuse me?”

Groaning slightly, Elen muttered, “Ranma, you need to remember to keep your mouth shut. This is supposed to be a secret.”

“Why?” he asked, looking at her in confusion. “Lim’s your lady, your right-hand woman. And Valentina’s another Vanadis. One who apparently doesn’t have anything to do or any interest in the Brune.”

“I wouldn’t say that,” Valentina demurred. “I am after all a Vanadis, and our neighbors have to perforce interest me in some fashion. With that said, I do not have anything outside of a few trade agreements with various smalltime nobles connecting myself or Osterode to Brune in general.”

Elen scowled, but since she honestly couldn’t put into words why she didn’t want Valentina to know about the princess, she eventually sighed and introduced the woman explaining her background while the princess nodded her head politely to Valentina.

Listening to this, Valentina became somewhat angry and annoyed for two reasons, even though she didn’t let her emotions show at all. *How dare there be another Queen! And at the same time, I plan to become one? This is a rank bad comedy!* The rest of her anger came from the fact that despite her own crackerjack espionage service, and her own connection to Zhcted’s own spy ring she had never heard even a hint of the fact that the crown prince of Brune was a cross-dressing woman.

Looking over at Elen, she asked simply, “You believe this? I have to say it all sounds far too fantastical.”

“Tigre does, they apparently met when they were younger. In the Royal preserve. They both shared enough details of that meeting to make it seem accurate.”

“How fortuitous,” Valentina murmured, looking at Elen thoughtfully. “And what does this have to do with your releasing Roland?”

The reasoning behind that decision came out, and though she thought it rather too gentle, Valentina was willing to let it slide. She kept her eyes on Regin the entire time, examining her closely as Ranma and Elen spoke about what her presence in the camp meant.

*Gentle, soft-spoken, pretty, in a cute young girl sort of manner. The way she keeps talking about Lord Tigre, and the little almost-glares she is sending to towards Elen, interesting. Beyond that, I need to know more about this girl and what she could mean for my plans going forward.* With that in mind, she interrupted the ongoing explanation, cutting to the heart of the matter. “I see. So, the war to simply protect your people from Thenardier and Ganelon have shifted to a war of, what, restoration?”

When Regin nodded, Valentina looked over to Elen. “And have you thought about asking what our own King would feel about this?” Elen stiffened, but before she could reply, Valentina waved her to silence. “Never mind, I can see from your face that you have not. Still… I doubt he would object. However, my men were here for a single campaign, one to protect your new lands from conquest. If your goals change, and you are no longer just aiding Lord Vorn in keeping his lands safe, I believe we need to renegotiate that point.”

“Bah, and people called me a mercenary,” Elen grumbled.

“Mah, and are you and your men not still being paid for your time here?” Valentina retorted archly. “Still, any agreement need not be just for my one company of pikemen. You have a force of five hundred or so correct Eleonora?” The other Vanadis nodded choppily, and Valentina turned to Regin. “In light of that, I can see the way clear to sending for another company to add to our numbers. It will take them a long while to get here, but I believe their aid would be most helpful. Especially since I rather doubt you will be able to keep the Silver Meteor Army intact once this news comes out.”

Elen sighed, as did Regin, looking away, while Ranma frowned, leaning back as Lim too watched on, looking confused. “You’re talking about the whole ‘no queen has ever ruled’ thing, right? You really think that the lords who sided with Tigre would be unwilling to follow Regin?”

Regin, for all her youth, was not naïve about how politics was played, not like Tigre. While Tigre and Lord Mashas would follow her, Gerard had been silent on if his father would do the same. And the other lords who supplied the large majority of the army’s troops, troops who had gone home for winter and who had already proven unwilling to fight the Knights of Navarre? It was a tossup if they would willingly follow a princess who fought to restore her position. So she said nothing, looking away from Ranma’s searching gaze.

Seeing this, Valentina moved in for the kill. “However, I can even help there. I have created various contacts in Brune over the years to aide Osterode’s growth. With that, and information we can get from… various other means… I can help prepare you to deal with each noble in turn.”

While Regin nodded thoughtfully at that, Elen scowled, angrily asking her fellow Vanadis, “What kind of price do you want for this aid, huh?”

Valentina waved her hand airily. “Noting from you, Elen. No, I wish for the future Queen here to agree to certain things.”

Reluctantly, Regin looked to Elen. She would rather have had Tigre to advise her, but in this area, Tigre might not have been all that much help anyway. He didn’t know other lords beyond Lord Mashas very well, and he was in no way a political animal. If this was a military or even logistical question, Regin would happily listen to his advice, but this was a diplomatic problem, and Tigre had been so insulated from the normal Brunish noblemen that Regin often wondered if Lord Urs Vorn had done so deliberately.

“…Darn it. I’d say take it,” Elen said with a sigh. “But make it official too, with both parties knowing precisely what they are getting out of it, no more, no less. Lim?”

Moving over to Elen’s desk, Lim pulled out a piece of parchment from somewhere on her person, Ranma had no idea where, not having seen her hands at that moment, sitting down. She quickly wrote out, “On this day, the fourth day in the month of Eris Lady Valentina Glinka Estes and Princess Regin Estelle Loire Bastien do Charles did enter into an agreement. To wit: the acceptance of a mercenary contract for two companies of Osterode Pikemen along with Lady Estes taking on the role of advisor, and temporary aid in the now, for remunerations in the future in the form of…” she paused, looking up at Regin and Valentina.

Elen smirked, thinking that putting it into a formal agreement like that might stop whatever lot Valentina had. And again, though she didn’t know why her instincts were telling her that Valentina was plotting something.

To her surprise, Valentina simply nodded. “Trade goods. Specifically trade agreements. Specifically for cloth, wool, cotton and wheat…” Valentina began to then rattle off a series of prices and traveling fees, local prizes and whatnot, with Lim writing each down on a separate paper. At first, Regin was simply nodding, but Elen hissed into her ear and the two began to haggle back.

As this was going on, Ranma looked on, pulling at her red hair thoughtfully while silently observing. While Ranma didn’t particularly like the way Valentina was basically pushing Regin over a barrel, he didn’t object to her strongarm tactics either. After all, Brune was an enemy nation. That she was willing to even consider helping Regin spoke somewhat decently of her and Ranma had no trouble with people being paid for their time. Although really, her mind wasn’t actually on the conversation going on in front of her.

At first, her mind had gone into odd places, thinking about the highlight of Lim’s blond hair in the light of the candles. Now, as Regin began to bargain back, badly in Ranma’s opinion, her face was an open book, a few of the words caught Ranma’s attention.

Something about how farming was done in this world and how worker-intensive it was trying to niggle something from the back of Ranma’s mind. But she couldn’t bring it to mind and eventually gave it up, watching as Regin attempted to talk Valentina down, the redhead went back to just watching Lim and the others, sitting and shifting in place as she began to be bored.

While the discussion was still going on, Titta came in and placed bowls of steaming soup near everyone, with only Ranma noticing enough to thank her verbally. The others all just nodded her way before going back on their own discussions, though Titta didn’t care much when, not five minutes later, Tigre came in.

He stopped in the doorway smiling at the sight of Lim, before his eyes slid to Valentina, where his brows furrowed in confusion. “Another Vanadis?” he whispered to Titta and Ranma. “Do we know why she is here?”

“She’s here to learn about me and my abilities. Her name’s Valentina something or other, and she’s already talked to Sasha and run down most of the rumors. Heck, the girl didn’t even blink at my curse form, since that bit apparently Elen already blabbed about,” Ranma replied, not looking up from where she had been setting out the pieces for a local game of cards that Titta was trying to teach her.

“Indeed, Lady Estes seems to be most interested in learning about Ranma, Milord Tigre. But she also seems to be willing to aid Princess Regin, for the right price. Hence the discussion,” Titta added. She then smiled and made room for him on the simple wooden bench that lay alongside one wall of the small office, allowing it to double as a dining room, gesturing at the camp table between herself and Ranma. “But come, Lord Tigre, I need help teaching Ranma about playing cards. He has literally no ability to dissemble at all. It’s quite funny, really.”

“Oy!” Ranma growled, but Tigre laughed and shifted into the bench next to Titta, much to the girl’s delight.

With the others so busy with their own discussion, Titta was able to monopolize Tigre’s time while they ate, with Ranma only interrupting once to ask Tigre if he had brought back anything. He hadn’t, but he had proven that three of the refugees he was working with currently had the instincts to join the rest of his scouts. The others would make for good archers, at least.

Eventually, the deals were made, Regin and Elen having agreed to separate the two things they were talking about with Valentina into two separate agreements. The first contract became easier at that point and was concluded quickly when Elen and Lim tag-teamed a pouting Valentina on how mercenary work was paid per head, regardless of the skill or abilities of the mercenaries in question, with only the signing bonus showing the reputation of the mercenary band in question.

The second contract, the one covering paying Valentina for her political advice was much worse. It took several hours. It was, at last, determined that Valentina would be paid per the nobles she helped sway to remain with the Silver Meteor Army despite its new goal with her information or words. From there, it became a talk about what goods or material she would be owed, in what quantity, and so forth.

Despite how long they had haggled, Valentina was somewhat unsurprised when the Princess instantly handed Captain Marsh’s pike company over to Tigre’s command. “You and Elen are the generals of the Silver Meteor Army after all. While our goals might have changed, I do not have the military wherewithal to command troops. I, I think the Dinant Plains disaster shows that.”

“Now wait a minute, that wasn’t your fault!” Tigre protested. He then took the Regin’s hands in his squeezing as he looked earnestly into her eyes. “You were never given a fair chance. That army was rotten from the inside out, not one in ten of those nobles was truly loyal to your family. Every one of them was there for their personal glory or gain, not for you, not for the kingdom.”

Regin blushed but held firm. “Y, yes, but it is because I could not see that and because I didn’t even think of the possibility of Lady Viltaria’s night attack, that I can say I don’t have a head for warfare. I realize you probably don’t want the added responsibility Tigre, but there is no one else I could trust in this.”

Watching this, Valentina felt a few of her previous assumptions about the girl had been confirmed. The complete disaster that the Princess had led in the Dinant Plains had not been just because of the attempts on her life, but the fact she was also quite naïve and perhaps a bit weak. *Or perhaps her experiences since have weakened her. She does not lack for personal courage, perhaps, but when it comes to it, she does not seem to have any willingness to lead. Rather, she will be led in turn. Excellent. I can influence her easily enough if I am subtle about it. And the agreements I help her make will aid me in the future and not just due to the various payment I will receive from Regin should she take the throne.*

“I, I would prefer to see you lead them yourself, princess, but if you want me to do so in your name, I will,” Tigre replied.

“Good. Now, um, I am rather hungry, so could I trouble you and Titta-san to accompany me to get more food? Only, I’m afraid the soup has grown cold,” Regin replied, looking a little sheepish.

Before Elen could say anything, the three Brune natives exited the room, with Tigre promising to bring back more a bit more food for the others. Ranma followed quickly, eager for more food too. With the rationing system the camp had to follow, it was hard for him to stay fed.

Watching the redhead slip out the door after the others, Elen scowled, but before she could follow them out, Valentina spoke up, a sly smile on her face as she did. “Well, that was interesting. I had no idea and I don’t mind admitting it. Did you?”

“About Regin’s gender?” Elen scoffed, shaking her head. “No, I didn’t, but it makes sense considering how Brune is so against women holding power. There just isn’t any real way for a woman to rule on her own merit.”

“You said it, not me, ‘on her own merit’,” Valentina added a bit of a giggle to her voice, winking at Elen as she twisted the knife. “It seems to me that she has already decided on a potential King to rein beside her.”

“I have noticed that too!” Elen growled, her hands clenching on her desk. “But whatever else changes, Tigre is still mine, as is Alsace. The territory will remain mine, and Tigre will remain in my employ!”

“Poo, you sound so clinical about it. So, if Regin makes her own feelings plain faster than you,…” Valentina trailed off, then shrugged her shoulders. “Even if you own a horse, it might race off to greener pastures.”

“To keep using that metaphor, not if I keep a firm hold of the bridle!” Elen grumped, flushing irritably at the way this discussion had gone, hoping that Valentina would stop pushing.

Lim came to our lady’s rescue, yawning loudly. Valentina surprised herself by also following quickly, yawns being catching like that. “I’m sorry milady, Lady Estes, it’s been a long day on top of several long weeks in the saddle.”

“Agreed. I’ll talk to you more tomorrow, Valentina,” Elen said, pushing yourself to her feet and moving to her friend, linking arms with her and dragging her towards the doorway. “Let me show you where you two are staying first. Then I think I’m going to go after Tigre. Darn it, what is up with him and his not knowing he belongs to me!”

Valentina had no objections to this, and she followed the other women out, down the wooden hallway, amused anew at the idea of a log house with a second story, and how rough the floor was underneath her feet. However, the bed was soft enough, and there was a faint smell of pine in the room they apparently would be sharing with Elen. Regin and Titta had their own room, smaller and further down the hallway from the stairs leading down to the first floor. Ranma had designed it thus, so that no one could get to Regin’s room without Tigre or Ranma, who slept on the first floor, or Elen, hearing them.

The bedroom was also warm, thanks to a brazier set in the center of it, and Valentina found her eyes already closing us she pulled off her clothing, wiggling into bed. She didn’t even notice that Lim was given the second bed in the room. It had indeed been a long day, and Valentina fell asleep with dreams of what questions she would ask Ranma on the morrow.

Just as her mind began to drift off to sleep, a thought occurred to her. *Oh drat, did I actually agree to spar with someone who sparred with Sasha* ***willingly****? …Perhaps I haven’t thought this through…*

**OOOOOOO**

The next morning saw Ranma and Lim up earlier than any of the others. For Lim, this was both personal preference and training, while for Ranma, it was simply training. She had been trained to get up that early thanks to his/her father’s habit of dumping water over her head, and now she was doing it, because she also had to get the recruits up and moving. By this point though, the current batch of trainees was so used to training that once Ranma got them started, she could leave their own officers in charge. This let Ranma speak to Lim about what had happened since the last time they had seen one another.

Lim told Ranma about the troubles on the road, the bandit attacks they had to beat off, and how much effort it had taken to keep the supply convoy moving as conditions worsened. “Which was made worse when we got a message that told us how many refugees needed feeding. Doing this has severely cut into Leitmeritz’s surplus. I can only hope that it doesn’t come back to bite us on the rear.”

When told about what Ranma had been up to, the organization expert was surprised more by Ranma’s non-combat skills than she had been the evening before that he had defeated Roland. Anyone who would willingly, even cheerfully, spar with Lady Alshavin would not lose to anyone else one-on-one. But Ranma’s ability when it came to putting up the camp, the walls, even training people to help with the woodwork, that was more surprising.

“You can put up a house, you can fight, you can cook. Is there anything you can’t do? Physically, I mean. I know about your educational shortcomings,” she teased.

Ranma seemed to take this seriously, her face scrunching up in thought. “Mmm, can’t work with animals very well. Most of them don’t like me other than Lunie. Can’t paint, ain’t got an artist’s eye, so anything artsy is out of the question. Can’t smith, I tried once in Alsace, and it was abysmal. And according to both Titta and a few misadventures back home, I can’t play cards for the life o’ me.” She shrugged.

Lim smiled, not having heard this story before. “Oh, do tell?”

A minute later, she could barely keep from collapsing into the snow in laughter up at the amount of trouble Ranma had with a simple card trick using bully and hustler. Yet, at the same time, she liked that. It made Ranma seem more human, somehow.

Later, watching Ranma train the would-be soldiers, was also enlightening. The redhead was harsh-sounding, but always ready with a hand or easy-going advice, pushing the men hard but not to the point they couldn’t handle it*. The fact Ranma was doing it at all is a little surprising. But considering he’s agreed to stay with Tigre until Thenardier and Ganelon are dealt with, I suppose Ranma thinks that this is simply a way to help.*

Ranma left Lim there by the training ground for a second and came back with breakfast for the two of them, while the soldiers broke off for their own breakfast. This allowed the two of them some more time to walk around the camp and speak of less important things.

Lim began this time, saying, “Oddly enough, this isn’t the coldest winter I’ve seen although there is so much snow on the ground is kind of a surprise. Do you remember me telling you about how Elen and I were born into a mercenary company? We spent one winter up on the northern plains of the Horse Lords. There’s never any snow up there for some reason. But it’s chilly up there year-round, and when winter comes, it becomes almost murderously cold.”

Ranma’s brows furrowed in interest. “What were you doing up there?”. “And where did your mercenary company even… what’s the word to use…originate? Where was it created?”

“I believe the company was originally formed in a small nation called Elesia three generations back. They were conquered by Muozinel some sixty years ago.” Lim supplied with a shrug. “Elen and I were actually born during a campaign in Sachstein. As for what we were doing up there, the acting seneschal of Brest had paid our company to hunt down and destroy a clan of Horse Lords who had raided deep into the territory, escaping before any defense could be organized. We lost that campaign, though, badly.”

Ranma winced. “Let me guess you weren’t prepared for the winter?”

“Yes, you correctly defined where this story was going.” Lim chuckled harshly, gesturing over to the men and women moving around the camp, clearing away more snow from a snowfall the night before last. All of them were bundled up against the cold in simple but warm woolen jackets and pants. “We lost fifty men simply because we had no idea how cold it would honestly get out there. We had not brought enough fur, we hadn’t brought enough equipment to dig into the ground to create hovels, and there was the entire lack of local wood to use for fires. The Horse Lords beat us simply by avoiding us long enough and we were forced to retreat. One of the more shameful episodes of the Silver Gale Mercenaries.”

Lim shrugged. “Of course, Eleonora and I were only ten at the time. After that, Elen’s father kept us moving, keeping ahead of winter. I think the entire mercenary company had developed a phobia for it.”

“Actually, that brings a good point. You just said that your mercenary company moved during winter right, so I’m assuming that only mercenary companies will try. But then, what is stopping Duke Thenardier from employing them?” Ranma mused, thinking that while Lim had tried to find an interesting story from her past, it certainly wasn’t as funny as some of the stories she told about her and Elen’s childhood.

“Nothing, really. If he wanted to, I’m certain Duke Thenardier could find a mercenary company somewhere to throw at us. But the quality of mercenary companies varies greatly, and using mercenaries isn’t a tradition in Brune as it is in Zhcted, Asvarre or Sachstein,” Lim began, then shook her head, somewhat frustrated. She had hoped to lead into a nice conversation about past winters, not into military matters.

Ranma seemed to sense this and surprised her by taking her hand, squeezing it. When she looked at Ranma with a faint flush on her face, Ranma began her own tale.

“Your experience with that mercenary guilt reminds me of this time with my Pops. We were on an island called Hokkaido at the time, and let me tell you, winter up there is really different from anywhere else we’ve been. It’s so amazing out up there in terms of how long it’s winter and how much snow they get, that building snow forts and snowmen are a national pastime. Seriously, they give out money as rewards for the top prize. So my Pops, forgetting the fact that neither of us had a single artistic bone in our bodies, decided we should enter. Now, I was only nine at the time, I think, so I was all for it. Hey, getting paid for playing in the snow? Sign me up, right? My Pops made it even better, saying it could be turned into training, speed and hand hardening training.”

Lim laughed, and once more, it was not the last time she laughed during one of Ranma’s story. She replied with a story about how she and Elen had first discovered snow when they were much younger than the time up in the north. It had led to Lim almost being frostbitten and Elen getting her first spanking by her father for endangering the two of their lives with her antics.

Eventually, they were nearly back to where Ranma would have to once more lead of the troops into the training, and Lim posed a question. “Is that where you got your immunity to cold temperatures, that incident in Hokkaido, I mean? Only, you seem to be is immune to the cold as the Vanadis all are.”

Ranma mock-scowled. “Was Elen immune to the cold before she became a Vanadis?” When Lim shook her head, Ranma smirked. “In that case, credit where it’s due, I had to work for my immunity. Not be given it like a prize from the gods that just fell from the sky.”

Lim laughed, but Ranma went on more seriously. “It has to do with ki, I think. Even from an early age I was being trained to unconsciously use it to heighten my body’s ability in various ways, and that was one of them. I’ve never been sick in my life, as far as I can remember anyway, I’m not going to speak for my toddler years. Anyway, my body runs hot all the time.”

Feeling greatly daring, Ranma put an arm around Lim’s shoulders, pulling her into a gentle sideways hug, as Ranma brought out a bit of her ki. Not enough to create an aura, but certainly enough to warm her body up appreciably. “What do you think? Can you tell the difference?”

Lim was flustered at this unexpected contact, but also smiled slightly, and didn’t try to pull away. Or, she wasn’t at first. Then Lim noticed a few of the refugees looking at them, some of them pouting, others giggling behind their hands, while the men were sending Ranma approving nods. Embarrassed, she pushed out of Ranma’s grip, and then tried desperately to find something else to talk about. “Training,” she said abruptly.

Ranma scowled, then looked ahead of them down the street to where one of the gathering points was, he could already see some of the troopers returning from their breakfast. “Yeah, I suppose I should get back to it. Although, I’m not certain how it happened that I’m suddenly the army’s chief trainer at all. I mean, I’ve worked off my debt to Elen with Sasha’s healing, and certainly, nowhere in my friendship with Tigre did it say that I had to train all of his troops.”

“Probably because you were bored, and like putting up these houses, it’s a way to help these people,” Lim replied her tone turning gently cajoling for a moment, the tone she would use when Elen was having a snit about something that Elen actually commiserated with her about. “But that wasn’t what I was talking about.”

As Ranma had replied to her somewhat desperate quip, an idea had formed Lim’s mind, a somewhat devious idea. “I was actually wondering if you would care to try to train with me as we did on the way to Legnica. I think that this time we should concentrate on sparring rather than you just showing me sword forms or strength exercises.”

Ranma blinked, then looked at Lim, a part of her a little annoyed. I mean yes, Ranma did like training people. But that wasn’t all Ranma wanted out of her life. There was her own training to consider after all! Still, this was Lim asking, and who knew, she might surprise him. *Probably won’t, though. Still, it’s an excuse to spend more time with Lim.*

When that thought occurred to her, Ranma perked up, nodding instantly. “Sure, I’m down with that. Although I think you’d have to join the refugees first, to warm up, you know. Wouldn’t want you pulling anything,” she teased.

Lim smirked, taking up the challenge with a nod. “As you would put it, bring it on!”

Later, Ranma was unsurprised to find that Lim had kept up the exercises Ranma had shown her on their trip to Legnica. Lim would have been in better shape than most without that, but with it, she easily kept pace with the other trainees, not even looking as if she was out of breath. She was also much more flexible, able to go through the calisthenics exercises without a single groan or mutter.

*That leaves endurance to pain and injury to work on. Ugh, I am not looking forward to that. Sparring, yeah, start with that. Way better than explaining she needs to let me just hit her with a large rock or whatever.*

Eventually, two hours after breakfast, Ranma had the rest of the recruits running circuits around the camp for an endurance exercise, while she paired off with Lim, moving away from the camp and into an area by the trees where they could see the camp and the men racing around the camp, but not be seen easily.

Lim had requested that, saying that if Ranma beat her badly she didn’t want to make a fool of herself in front of others. The fact she might have had ulterior motives had not occurred to Ranma.

In her hands the redhead held a long, chipped broadsword made out of wood. It was one of the same training weapons that Ranma had made for his victims and was quite a bit heavier than normal broadsword would be. “Okay, let’s see what you can do.”

Lim needed no further urging and launched herself into a quick strike. She took three steps forward fast as she could move through the snow, which up here was not as packed down as around the camp. Still, it didn’t seem to slow her down much.

Her sword first thrust out, but then Lim whirled to the side, her sword lashing out in a cut at Ranma’s side, before coming up into a real thrust straight for Ranma’s chest. Ranma parried both easily, not fooled by her initial feint at all and replied with a blow towards her head.

Where Elen would have blocked it, and then going on the attack instantly, Lim ducked underneath. She then hopped backward, moving back onto the defensive, allowing Ranma to take some of the initiative, before kicking up some of the ice and snow underneath them into her face.

Ranma blocked most of it with the side of his broadsword. But it still cost a brief second in the redhead’s assault, and Lim pounced, pressing hard.

But it was instantly apparent to her that Ranma was playing with her, her sword batted Lim’s attacks aside instead of knocking Lim’s sword out her grip, or simply striking with enough force to send her flying. Still, that was all right. She wasn’t looking to win this competition. *I’m just looking to see what I can learn and to perhaps set up a different kind of spar.*

The men came through twice more on their rounds around the camp, all of them looking over to where Ranma was sparring with Lim, which they could hear, but couldn’t quite see thanks to the mounds of snow in the way. By that point, Ranma was now moving around her, calling out suggestions, mostly to do with the movement of her waist and her need to get her full body behind a strike.

Generally speaking, Lim’s style was very good. She had excellent footwork, very good instincts, and never seemed to forget the environment around her. She was nowhere near as good with a sword as Elen, nor did she have the sheer physical abilities of a Vanadis. But she was better than Akane or Ukyo back home. *Maybe not up to Shampoo’s level, not with a weapon in Shampoo's hand, but when I first met Shampoo, I think Lim could have given her a run for her money.* Of the girls, only Shampoo had shown marked improvement after arriving in Nerima.

“Good but remember to raise your blade up a little more when you are using that strike. Then quickly segue into your next, you’re taking too long to recover! We’re going to have to work on your arm strength, as well as your core more.” *Thank goodness!* Ranma thought happily. *I don’t have to start training her ability to take hits. Still not looking forward to that.*

“Excuse me?!” Lim grunted in annoyance. Having replied to most of those suggestions and critiques with aplomb before this, she now looked incensed. “I’ll have you know that my core is perfectly acceptable, thank you very much!”

To show this, Lim began to put more energy into her strengths. Although she did take Ranma’s suggestions about needing to cut down on the time it took her to go from one series of attacks to another to heart, pressing forward hard, pushing her body as fast as she could go.

It still wasn’t anywhere near fast enough to challenge Ranma, but the redhead let it press her backward, away from the refugee camp, and around a large windrow of snow that had been pushed away from the track circuit around the refugee camp, where they were no completely hidden from anyone in the camp, even the guards on the wall. There, Lim suddenly changed tactics, lashing out with a kick to Ranma’s legs, when she landed lightly, and was about to launch an attack of her own. It didn’t really do anything other than hurt her leg, and Lim was unable to recover from the kick before Ranma’s blow landed. She was forced to block it with her sword rather than redirect it and found herself on her rear for her troubles.

“Nice try, and if you’d faced any other opponent, it might’ve worked. I wasn’t expecting you to try and kick me like that after concentrating on your sword for so long, and surprises always half the battle. But sorry, Ranma quipped, stabbing her training sword into the snow to one side. “You’re just not strong enough to knock my legs out from under me.”

“So I should have realized,” Lim grumbled, while inwardly she was quite pleased with how her little plan was going. She held up a hand to him, her face flushed with exertion and some delight. “Can you help me up?”

Like her lady, Lim was a fighter. She enjoyed it, she enjoyed sparring, and she enjoyed getting better. Ranma’s suggestions were all things that she would work on in the future, along with raising her basic strength, although Lim didn’t think she would be joining the trainees for their strength training. *Yesterday’s training looked a little humiliating frankly. And I have my dignity to maintain.*

Despite that thought, dignity was the last thing in Lim’s mind right now. Indeed, even the idea of using Ranma’s suggestions wasn’t at the forefront of her mind. Instead, high on the endorphins from the match, she was looking up at Ranma, and looking quite fetching in the light of the sun behind her. Which made Lim even more certain of the next part of her plan.

Ranma leaned down obligingly, then to Ranma’s surprise, Lim pulled. Now, Ranma could have held firm, could have easily ignored her light pull, but Ranma honestly wanted to see where the other woman was going with this, and so let the blonde pull her down. But instead of rolling or trying to stab upwards with her sword to score a victory in their spar as Ranma had anticipated, Lim caught Ranma against her smiling lightly as the other woman’s body pressed down against her, her arms around the shorter redhead. “I think in the future, we will have to find more time to spar together...”

“Oh, Oh!” Ranma gulped, now understanding what Lim was implying, along with the fact that she was pressing down on the other woman. Lim had not worn armor, and the feel of the other woman’s chest pressing into her own, divided only by their clothing, the feel of one of Lim’s knees pressed up into the cleft of her legs was causing Ranma’s breath to start to rasp out.

“Are you sure about, about um, this?” she stammered, raising one hand from where it had been propping her body up over Lim’s to gesture between them. “I mean, I’m still in my…”

Lim stopped Ranma speaking in the most expedient way possible: by occupying the redhead’s mouth with her own. The kiss was light and sweet at first, simply Lim pressing her lips against the redhead’s, but it slowly segued into something deeper, as Lim’s arm tightened around Ranma, holding her against Lim’s body on the snow, as she proceeded to attempt to kiss the living daylights out of the other girl.

This went on for some time until they heard the tramp of nearby feet once more. Ranma reluctantly, slowly started to pull back, very reluctantly removing her tongue from Lim’s mouth, licking away at some of the saliva that had formed between their tongues, as Lim panted underneath her. “What, what brought that along?”

“Two things. For one thing, what with your desire to not be tied down by anything but friendship, and my own duties to Lady Eleonora, we might have to part company again at some point. I had decided on the track here that I would rather not waste any more time dancing around the issue. I wanted to make my own intentions plane. I wouldn’t say I’m ready to leap into bed with you, Ranma, but I am most decidedly interested in you,” Lim replied, trying to get her own breath under control between each sentence. *That kiss had been something else!* “And I would rather like to see where our courtship could go.”

Ranma nodded, slowly rolling off the other woman, patting herself down, although that didn’t do much for the wet spots where the snow had melted against her legs. Thankfully none of them were in dangerous places, so to speak. *Thank goodness for small mercies. Our being so wet already will be easy to explain to the soldiers if they ask, but that would make it impossible.* And your second reason? Not that I’m arguing or anything,” she added hastily. “I’d kind of well like to see where our dating would go too.”

“Dating? I suppose that is a term for courtship where you come from?” Lim shrugged that mystery off, replying, “Well, I also wanted to show you that your female form isn’t a detriment to my interest in you.” *Rather, one could almost say that it’s a positive one,* she thought.

“Okay, I can see that. And um about the kiss, er, I’ve never been in this position before, so um, I’m not certain what to say. Great! Fantastic. Or just thank you?” Ranma trailed off, shrugging her shoulders and looking extremely embarrassed. “Sorry, I don’t know exactly what to say here.”

“I haven’t been in a relationship before either Ranma. That will make our courtship more interesting, I think. But for now, let’s get back to the recruits.”

Ranma nodded, then shyly pointed up at Lim’s hair. “But you might want to do something about that. Your ponytail came undone. Not that it doesn’t still look good, but it isn’t your normal style.”

There was another hour and a half to training after Lim and Ranma rejoined the other recruits, mostly strength training, then reflex training for forty minutes before breaking for lunch. This would be followed by reflex and speed training, then stance and shield training.

When the recruits broke off for lunch, Lim and Ranma made their way back into the central house, wondering what the others were up to. They found Titta outside doling out food from the large cauldrons that were the center of the camp’s commissary, with Tigre and Elen sitting nearby, arguing heatedly about something, which involved a lot of hand motions from Elen, such that her chest was bouncing this way and that.

Lim watched as Ranma waved at them, tracking the angle of his eyes as closely as she could possibly do so, and was amused to note that he didn’t look down at Elen’s chest, as, in her mind, far too many of the men around them were already doing. Brune people didn’t have the automatic deference or awe that people of Zhcted felt for Vanadis, which stopped the common people from ogling them like that. *Perhaps I should suggest Elen and Lady Estes wear more appropriate clothing for the season?*

To her delight, Ranma wasn’t looking at Valentina. He was eyeing up the food, smiling happily as the scent wafted to him through the crowd of people that had already gathered to eat.

He took Lim by the hand, startling her out of her musings and causing her to blush slightly at the public display of affection, tugging Lim forward. “Come on, let’s get some stew in us before it’s all gone.”

“Ara, why don’t the two of you look cute,” Valentina drawled from nearby, her own bowl of stew in hand as she looked at the two of them, cocking her head to one side as her other arm held Ezendeis against the side of her chest, pressing one breast up and out slightly in comparison to the other in such a way that it would have distracted most men. “And what have you two been up to? Or should I try to find you a chaperone?” she teased, winking.

Inside though, Valentina was somewhat annoyed. While her own plans for Ranma certainly hadn’t reached a point where they were at all solid, she was still somewhat interested in him, both as a tool for her ambition and as a man in general. Thus, she most decidedly did not want Lim to tie him down before Valentina could even get a chance.

While Ranma might well have tried to retain their handclasp, Lim didn’t give him the opportunity, pulling her hand out of his grip, and nodding respectfully to the Vanadis. “We were actually training, I decided to join the recruits, and Ranma put me through my paces both doing that and in a spar.”

Instantly Ranma’s eyes lit up, and he looked at Valentina, who blinked in return, suddenly remembering what she had agreed to the day before and cursing Lim for mentioning the S-word. “Speaking of, if you wanted to ask me questions about my curse and abilities, you said you’d be willing to spar with me, right? Do you want to do it after lunch? I can turn training the troops over to a few of the Alsace men. It’s mostly repetitive stuff at that point.”

Wincing internally, Valentina nodded, answering with only a bit of her hesitancy visible to anyone around her. “So long as you recall that I am not Sasha and measure your strength accordingly, I can agree to that.”

Ranma nodded enthusiastically. “Sure, sure, that’s fine. I’ve just never faced someone using a scythe before. The closest I’ve ever faced was a kusarigama.”

“And what is that?” Elen inquired as she and Tigre joined the others, handing Lim and Ranma a bowl of soup stew from one hand, before digging into their own. She then led the group over to a nearby log, laid out for chairs, where people hadn’t yet sat down. “And I’m surprised at you Valentina, agreeing to spar with Ranma, what with your weakness and all,” Elen gently jibed, one eyebrow rising as she looked at the other woman.

“Why does everyone want to make fun of me for that? Mou, it’s not like I could do anything about it, Elen,” the Valentina griped, rolling her eyes at the teasing. At the look on Ranma’s face, she shrugged. “Let us just say that using Ezendeis’ special attacks and abilities take it out of one. And I was not as naturally gifted as Elen or several of the other Vanadis in the purely physical arena. So using it takes quite a lot out of me.”

“You shouldn’t have to worry about that when we’re sparring, don’t worry,” Ranma said with a nod. He had seen something similar with Sofy during their time moving from Leitmeritz into Brune. “I won’t use any of my special techniques, just speed and skill.”

“That’s good to know. But my own question?” Valentina queried.

“A Kusarigama is a scythe on the one hand, but it’s connected to a long chain which has a weight on the end. It’s an interesting weapon, but it isn’t really all that good for actual hand-to-hand combat, it’s mostly a mid-range weapon. It’s also designed to help someone become more mobile in say a wooded area or something similar,” Ranma spoke authoritatively, having faced ninjas who had wielded that weapon in a few circumstances over the years, the most recent being Sasuke, coupled with his experiences with Mousse and his impossibly large bag of tricks.

Ranma went on to describe the weapon to an audience that was quite intrigued by it, save for Tigre, who had no interest in handheld weapons at all. He was a bowman, plain and simple. Ranma’s attempts to train him up on other weapons during Ranma’s first winter in this world had proven that conclusively even to the bullheaded martial artist, so it and bring it up again now.

After lunch, Ranma grabbed a few of the sergeants from Alsace and a few sergeants from among the trained men-at-arms and stick them in charge of the afternoon training. Then he found Valentina, who had been talking quietly to Elen, passing on information from home, as well as soothing the young girl’s worries about whether or not Ludmila would have gone back against her word and attacked Leitmeritz with the coming of winter. Of all the Vanadis, only Ludmila was at all comfortable moving her troops through winter. The others could do it in small bodies, but all of Ludmila’s troops – a force three thousand strong when she couldn’t order up her levy, were trained in winter warfare, despite being heavy infantry for the most part.

She looked up, with some trepidation as Ranma moved in front of her. This was not going to be fun. As a Vanadis, Valentina had honed her combat skills, but she preferred the more cerebral pursuits of strategy and logistics instead of direct combat. *Just remember that this is to feed that side of you, Valentina. I need access to what Ranma knows, and if I have to pay it like this, so be it.*

Ranma smiled at her, holding out a hand down towards her. “So, ya ready to get whupped, Valentina?”

“Has anyone told you Ranma, you have a very odd attitude towards nobility? Your lese majesty is honestly quite beyond the pale,” Valentina quipped, although she allowed Ranma to slowly pull her to her feet. “And I notice you have changed into your male body.”

Ranma shrugged. “I was so busy with the conscripts, and with Lim this morning that I didn’t think of changing, but last night was my last night on my period. Besides, a scythe gives you even more range advantage than a sword would, and I’d like to use my male body’s longer arms to offset it as much as I can. And as for my lese-majesty, if I understand what that means right, to me, respect has to be earned. You don’t get it just because of what family you were born into or even what station.”

“That’s a rather interesting way of looking at the world,” Valentina giggled, but her eyes were sharp and narrowed as she looked at Ranma, putting together a picture of his world already. One which was, frankly, getting more interesting every time she added a new detail to it. *The question is, did he come from the future, the past, or somewhere else entirely?* She lifted her weapon and gestured Ranma forward. “Shall we go?”

Elen watch them go, scratching her chin thoughtfully as she wondered if she should go and watch, before Tigre spoke up, asking her a question. Elen turned back to him with a smile, which disappeared as Titta flopped into a seat nearby, joining them without being invited to do so, glaring at Elen as she sat next to Tigre. A second later, the still haunted Regin joined them also sat down close by, staring soulfully at Tigre. *Darn it! They’re coming out of the woodwork.*

Figuring that his spar with Valentina would be quite destructive, Ranma led the two of them to the same now cleared area of forest where he and Roland had their tree knocking down the competition. The two of them stood across from one another, with Ranma’s hands empty this time as he held them in front of him, smirking at the black-haired woman. “Whenever you’re ready.”

“You don’t think you’ll want a weapon?” Valentina asked in some surprise. “I cannot dull the edge on Ezendeis, and I would hate to delimb you accidentally.”

Ranma grinned insouciantly. “Yeah, I know. I also know that it won’t matter if you can’t touch me. So let’s worry about that first.” *Besides, I bet that I can heal from any damage she can deal. Heh, in a way, I am. GOD, but I love being back in my male body, despite that moment this morning with Lim.*

Valentina’s eyes narrowed, her pride as a Vanadis suddenly correct, and she held her scythe in front of her, lengthwise and on a diagonal, crouching down and staring at Ranma. “You might regret saying that,” she warned, before launching herself forward, her scythe coming around in an arc.

Like Lim had attempted, she tried for a faint first, but unlike Lim, Valentina’s almost succeeded, because she didn’t follow up with an attack, rather another faint, that segued into a short slice not at Ranma’s body, but at his outstretched fist as he attempted to land a blow of his own.

He quickly twitched his hand out of the way, then launched a kick, only to stop as the scythe blade lashed out towards not his body or leg but his foot, which Ranma dodged, twisting around into a low kick. Valentina leaped up over it but found that her attempt to use a mule kick was parried by one of Ranma’s hands, blocking and pushing her legs to the side of him, his other fist flashing out towards her side. She rolled in midair, blocking the blow with her staff, but felt the tingles of the punch all the way down her arms, as it sent Valentina away a few feet before she could get her legs underneath her.

“Well, that was interesting! This could actually be fun,” Ranma chuckled, before launching himself forward.

In response, Valentina cut down at a log nearby, then whipped around, her palm lashing out into a bit of the log and sending it towards Ranma like out of a slingshot. “I think your definition of fun needs work.”

Ranma ducked underneath it, and came up quickly, leaping into the air over Valentina, where Valentina was hard-pressed to keep up with his speed and odd movements. Even so, she retained her intelligence and took a purely defensive stance, lashing out at Ranma’s feet and hands almost exclusively, before launching an attack at another area. This one was directly below his belt, and the shift in targets caused him to gasp.

He blocked the blow and launched himself backward, landing several yards away, staring at her in shock. “I didn’t expect that!”

Valentina smirked at him, cocking her hips coquettishly. “Perhaps you should expect the unexpected when dealing with a woman regardless.”

“Probably good advice,” Ranma replied, sweatdropping, as Valentina once more took the on-guard position. His eyes narrowed at that, and he launched himself forward without another word, this time coming in low to the right, before kicking off the ground once more taking to the air, sliding around her downward strike as if he was made of air himself, one leg flashing out towards her face.

Valentina hastily flipped her staff up to block, but the blow almost smacked her staff back into her face. She recovered falling backward from another kick, rolling on the snowy frozen ground, and lashing out with her scythe.

When Ranma went to kick again, she quickly redirected her attack, once more attacking his foot rather than the rest of them. Ranma dodged it, but barely, and when he attempted to use the top of her scythe’s staff as a momentary landing point, Valentina twisted the staff around in her hands, and the blade nearly cut into his foot again.

Once more Ranma dodged it, but Valentina surprised him by leaping up, her palm thrust out for his nose this time. This wasn’t a feint, and she nearly got her arm caught in a grip for her trouble, but she twisted around in midair, showing some ability in midair combat herself, lashing out with an elbow again towards Ranma’s boy parts. When Ranma blocked that, her staff’s butt-end caught him in the leg, letting her push-off back to the ground, and thrusting him to the side, where he landed lightly, but somewhat off-balance.

He cocked his head thoughtfully, staring at Valentina. “Now, that is a very interesting style you have.”

“Coming from you, that is a most sincere compliment, thank you,” Valentina replied, curtsied before one more taking a defensive stance. The two of them circled one another for a few more minutes before Ranma launched himself forward again.

Valentina was an extremely cool, composed customer in a fight, but her style was… well, it was composed certainly, but it was also nasty as all hell, a completely different style from either of the Vanadis that Ranma had fought before, Ranma reflected. Even as he thought that he pulled back his fingers again from being nearly sliced in half by the scythe blade. Something told him that the edge of that blade would cut him easily, and he was in no mood to have to heal from that kind of damage.

Elen’s style was a mix of different sword styles, which Ranma could equate to European, Indian, Chinese, and even a few stances that he recognized from Japan. She used her body quite well, but only occasionally. She was not as fast nor as quick as Sasha had proved to be, but she was extremely experienced, had little to no tells, and rarely made the same mistake more than twice in the few spars they’d had in Leitmeritz or even the occasional one since winter had set in.

In a way, Sasha’s style was more like Ranma’s own. She was all about forward momentum, highly mobile, extremely dexterous, and adaptable, acclimating to Ranma’s aerial style quickly. Sasha even incorporated some of it into her own as they fought during his brief stay in Legnica. She was also faster, stronger and more durable than Ranma, with even more ki, even if she hadn’t shown any ability to use that consciously during their time together.

But Valentina was subtle and deceptive. At first, her style seemed to be like a regular Vanadis’ in terms of her attacks, powerful, straightforward, composed of slashing, and the occasional attack from the bottom of her weapon. But in that initial impression was the deception. Those over the top attacks quickly segued into simpler attacks, aiming at different body parts. She attacked anything and everything, body, fingers, feet, hands, knees private parts. And she used her body better than Elen. Still rarely, but when she did, Ranma was almost always thrown by her sudden kicks or elbow blows.

“You know, I’m wondering how a lady like you developed a style like this?” Ranma said as he adapted to her style, his fingers moving just enough to dodge a blow, then his palm smacking on the backside of her scythe blade to take it out of position. The next instant, a lightning-quick palm strike caught her in the solar plexus, hurling her back several feet.

She rolled with it, but it was obvious the blow had told. “Oh,” she gasped out, rubbing at her stomach and twirling Ezendeis between them so fast it became a blur in her fingers. Seeing that Ranma knew that he did not want to get anywhere near it, and began to circle around, forcing her to turn to face him. “And what exactly is that supposed to mean?”

“Well, you can describe your style in a few ways. Subtle, deceptive, and then, just plain dirty,” Ranma quipped. “After all, this is a friendly spar, and normally in friendly spars, you don’t go for my man bits.”

“Mah, but you never mentioned that before we started fighting,” Valentina replied with some humor apparent in her tone, stopping her blade stabbing the end into the ground in front of her, cocking her head to one side and holding Ezendeis against her chest so that her breasts pressed to either side the scythe’s shaft. “Would you like me to give you a handicap?”

Ranma’s head reared back at that, and then his eyes narrowed. “You’re one of those kids who liked to poke odd things into the fireplace to see if they would burn, weren’t you?

Valentina laughed gaily, all of her earlier annoyance with the idea of fighting Ranma having disappeared by this point as the eagerness of her Viralt rose within her, causing her to show more emotion than she had in years. “I do seem to recall my parents yelled at me for playing with fire several times, yes. Why, are you going to spank me for being a bad girl?”

For a moment, Ranma’s eyes widened again, and a blush suffused his face, his mind just unable at the moment to stop itself from going there. The next moment, he flipped backward, nearly bending from the waist at a 90° angle to avoid a slicing cut from Valentina’s weapon, his leg flashing out in a kick as the other pushed him up and away into a spin.

“Poo, I thought I nearly had you!” Valentina pouted.

The next second she nearly lost her grip on her weapon, as a strike slammed into the back of her hand, then a pressure point was pushed somewhere around her elbow, causing her grip to practically spasm. Another two fingers flashed towards her neck, but Valentina dodged that, her own hand coming up quickly to connect with that hand, a fist hitting Ranma’s fingers.

But the damage was done. Ranma was within her range, and before she could pull back or switch hands - Valentina was ambidextrous – another hard blow slammed into her chest, causing her breasts to bounce but also for Valentina to be sent flying backward with a gasp of agony. Ranma was on her almost instantly, and now with one arm no longer obeying her below the elbow, Valentina could only fall back, trying desperately to block his incoming blows.

When she attempted to go on the offense, she found Ranma had adapted and her attacks could no longer surprise him. Worse, Ranma was still using the pressure point attacks that Valentina had heard of from Elen. One snuck through, and suddenly her left leg was dead from the waist down.

As Valentina faltered, staggering to the side as her leg gave out, a punch caught her in the chin, lifting her up and sending her flying backward to land on her rear. Before she could lift her weapon, she found Ranma standing over her. One foot was on her arm, the other on the haft of Ezendeis about a foot below the blade.

She scowled up at him, but Ranma’s just leaned down, tapping the same pressure points he had struck during the match, ending the deadening effect on the black-haired Vanadis’ limbs. “That was actually fun,” he admitted. “I had a devil of a time trying to figure out what your next attack was going to be, or where the heck you were going to put your staff defensively. Deceptive, like I said.”

Valentina grimaced at that, now seeing another reason why she probably should’ve bowed out of this somehow. Her personal style seemed to show more of her personality than Valentina had realized. “Yes, well, I wish I could say the same,” she replied tartly. “Your aerial style is quite an issue to deal with. And your basic strength and your basic speed. All I’ve learned is that I think I need to step up my training.”

“Isn’t that enough?” Ranma asked, honestly quizzical rather than mocking.

When she realized that for Ranma, it probably was, Valentina rolled her eyes at him but took his hand and allowed Ranma to pull her to her feet, blushing slightly at the feel of that gentle, firm, and powerful grip on her forearm. As Valentina got her feet under her, she smiled slightly as the feeling of her weapon washed over her, satisfaction pouring through her link. *Perhaps I have been neglecting to recall there is another aspect to Viralts and not just the abilities they can give one. Very well, my friend, I won’t neglect you again in the future.*

As her weapon replied with even more satisfaction at that, Valentina smiled at Ranma, and it was perhaps the most honest expression she’d had on her face in years. “Perhaps it is at that.”

For a moment, Ranma was stunned, just staring. He hadn’t known Valentina for more than a day, and while she had seemed the great beauty before this, her attitude and sly nature had made Ranma somewhat wary of her. But that smile completely transformed her face, making her seem like a maiden, then the woman she had previously appeared to be. “Damn,” he whispered to himself before shaking his head.

He didn’t notice that Valentina had heard him and had divined the reason behind his statement. To Valentina’s shock she found herself blushing, looking away slightly and playing with her hair. *Strange that the fact he did not mean to overhear it gives his honest compliment more impact.*

When he looked at her again, he noticed how dirty and wet she was, and then remembered that Lim had looked much the same after their own spar. *If not for entirely all the same reasons,* he thought, keeping a blush from his face with difficulty. *But that gives me an idea. Lim and Sophia liked it when I was doing it for the two of them when we were traveling together. I bet all of the girls would like it here. Now, where did I see that little stream?*

Valentina was also aware of how dirty and sore she was feeling at the moment and was morosely muttering to herself about the need for a bath and possibly a massage. Ranma interrupted her, saying, “Well I can’t do anything about the massage, I don’t think you know me well enough to trust me with like that. But, if you could gather up Elen, Tigre, and Lim, I might be able to do something about the need for a bath in about an hour. Ask Lim for more information about that, and I’ll see you later.”

Valentina nodded in interest, then watched as Ranma turned and raced towards the distant woods without another word. “I wonder what he’s doing? What do you think, Ezendeis?”

Once more, she didn’t get a reply from her normally silent companion, only again a feeling of satiation and satisfaction. “You’re no help at all, darling.”

Lim, on the other hand, was. When Valentina told her what Ranma had passed on, her eyes lit up, and she actually grinned, the first such expression that Valentina had seen on her despite their time travelling together from Leitmeritz. “I think we’re all in for a treat then.”

Elen looked at her quizzically, as did Tigre, Titta, and Regin, all of whom were in the office-like room at the time Valentina returned to the two-story log house. “What are you talking about, Lim?”

“How far is it from here to the nearest source of water Lady Eleonora? And how much of that water is allowed to go to cleaning one’s body instead of clothing?”

Elen snorted in disgust. “Not a lot. A quarter of a bucket to each person, every third day. Not that the water is so far away, but transporting it in winter is an issue, as is unfreezing it. Why? Are you saying that Ranma is going to take over that duty?”.

“It’s a thought, given his strength,” Tigre mused to himself, scratching at his cheek thoughtfully. “I would rather like to get more water for shaving daily myself.”

To his surprise, the girls all nodded and he frowned at them. “Why would any of you have to…”

“Lord Tigre, I beg you not to complete that question. There are just some things you are better off ignorant of,” Regin said very firmly. Then she looked back at Lim. “But you were saying something, Miss Limalisha?”

“I don’t think that’s what is in Ranma’s mind. Instead, how would all of you like to have an open-air bath?”

This was practically a rhetorical question, and later, when Ranma returned, he found all of them there, including Tigre, standing at the entrance to the camp, talking quietly to one another, as they held somewhat large bags of supplies with them. “While there are a few more of you than I expected, this should still work. And afterward, we can open it up to the rest of the camp. Although someone else will have to take up the job of warming it.”

Lim chuckled, linking arms with Ranma, and smiling happily at him. She hadn’t had a bath or anything more than a face wash on the trip here from Leitmeritz. With that added to her exertions from earlier, Lim was looking forward to this quite a bit. “You’re going to spoil me, you know that, don’t you?” she chuckled, her breath puffing out into the nighttime air.

“I thought spoiling you was part of the whole courting thing?” Ranma asked in turn, his tone making what should have been a sardonic question into an honest question instead.

Valentina wasn’t the only one who perked up at that, staring at the two of them, but Lim simply smiled slightly and shrugged her shoulders. “Perhaps. It’s a first for me, too, remember?”

Ranma led them out of the camp and into the woods for about ten minutes. Regin was about to ask if he had gotten them lost when she noticed a small, extremely crude building in the distance through the woods, lit by the light of what looked like three or four torches.

That was the first sign of what Ranma had done in the intervening hour and a half since he had last seen Valentina. The building was about wide enough for two people to move about comfortably. And next to it was a tiny pool. It wasn’t the source of water that the refugee camp had been using. Instead, it was simply a small, somewhat deep pool that fed into one of the tiny local streams. And unlike that source of water, this one didn’t have to be heated up to use the water was moving freely in the pool, and then down into the stream a little way before the top of it started to freeze again.

Regin frowned, looking over at Lim. “While it looks pretty enough, I’m afraid I am not made of stern enough stuff to wants to bath myself in frozen water.”

Lim chuckled, looking over at Ranma. “Ranma?”

At that, Ranma raised his hands from which he sent out two bolts of blue light into the stream, causing Regin to back away with a startled gasp, while the others simply watched, only Valentina’s eyes widening in surprise. That surprise and shock segued into delight as the water began to steam after a few minutes, even warming the area around the tiny pool quite nicely.

Ranma bowed toward the girls with a dramatic sweep of his hand scraping the snow beneath them, his tone sardonic. “Will that do, milady?”

“Perfectly well, thank you,” Lim replied. Then feeling greatly daring, Lim leaned forward and gave him a kiss on the cheek, which caused him to stiffen a bit as he wondered if she was really okay with being so open about their relationship. Which, after all, had only started that very day.

In the next instance, the stiffness changed into the consistency of a board of wood when Valentina, smirking slightly, did the same to his other cheek. “Indeed, this pays me back most handsomely for the way you manhandled me earlier.”

The two girls pulled back, while Ranma was frozen between them. The two girls stared at one another coolly, only to realize that they had missed their chance to be the first to change in the small changing room when Titta coughed and stated, “Lady Estes, Lady Lim, I’m afraid Princess Regin and Elen have gone ahead to change. Would you like to join me and be next, or would you prefer to allow the boys to go next?”

“Speaking of,” Tigre said, smacking Ranma in the face with the end of something in his hand.

Ranma came out of his stupor with a blink, then grabbed Tigre’s wrist when he made tried to do it again, staring at the thing in his hand. “What is this?”

“A blindfold,” Tigre replied simply.

Ranma blinked, then chuckled. “You do know that I see a girl naked every time I look at myself in my female form, right?”

“I know that. I also know that seeing is only half the equation. The other half is that the ladies in question must be comfortable with the idea.”

“I wonder if the girls should wear blindfolds too then when we come out of the changing area,” Ranma retorted. “The whole double standard thing is annoying.”

“Boo, hiss!” Valentina and Elen both said as one. This was the first moment of solidarity that they’d had since meeting one another, the silver-haired Vanadis’ words echoing out from the changing booth, causing Valentina to stare at it in amusement.

Chuckling at that, Ranma looked back at Tigre. “And this has nothing to do with the fact that you don’t feel comfortable looking at them like that?”

“There is something to that,” Tigre admitted, shrugging his shoulders. “One of them I don’t think likes me very much, the other one I barely know, a third is a princess, the other is the lady who holds my life in her hands, and the third is a young girl I see as a sister.”

Lim and Valentina stepped back slightly from Titta as she began to growl, her hands clenching and unclenching at her side. They exchanged glances, then shook their heads as one, deciding that whatever was going on in the younger girl’s mind, they did not want to get involved with it, regardless of their ‘issue’ with her.

Before Titta could formulate a reply, the door to the changing room banged open, and Elen strode out of the changing room with the same almost arrogant sense of confidence she seemed to have in everything she did, although Ranma felt that this time it was more feigned than real. Shorter than Valentina or the absent Sofy, that simply meant Elen’s curves were more noticeable. Her towels, two of them, one above and one below, strained against her hips and chest to the point where they looked more like they stayed on by an act of one of the gods than anything else. Elen’s skin was also slightly tanned, just enough to make it obvious she spent a lot of time outside, but not all her time as a farmer would. Her silver hair practically shown with the reflected light of the various torches.

It was all Titta could do not to bite through her tongue in jealousy.

“Just because I hold your life and that of Alsace in my hands Tigre, is no reason to stop looking at me. After all, you’re the one that told me I was beautiful whatever I was wearing, weren’t you?” Elen stated more than questioned as she stalked towards Tigre.

“Well yes,” Tigre said, turning his now blindfolded head towards her. “But there is such a thing as propriety.”

“Then just don’t watch us get in and out of the bath. That blindfold looks rather silly,” she said, moving towards the bath, reaching out to pull Tigre’s blindfold off his head. “And,” she added, staring challengingly first at Titta than Regin before turning back to Tigre, her face softening noticeably, “keep your eyes on me at all times. That way, propriety is doubly satisfied.”

“I, I won’t lose!” Titta barked, then twisted around and headed towards the changing room.

Behind Titta, Regin smiled thinly, shaking her head. She was not nearly as curvy as Elen, and she lacked the corded muscles or toned stomach that showed Elen’s training. She had small but full breasts hidden under a towel that more easily wound around her chest than the Vanadis, and an equally small but quite pert rear showcased in the same kind of short pants that cleaning women wore when they were steaming clothing.

“Given your presumption of taking Alsace, I can’t gainsay the fact that you have some connection to Tigre, but surely the lands are more important than Tigre is to you as a Vanadis of Zhcted, more so than any money or parole he could still owe you for your aid. And if not, I will pay whatever price you ask for him. I will not allow an Earl of Brune, especially one up with such amazing redeeming qualities and skills to be held against his will by the representative of a foreign power.”

“You’re assuming that I’m holding him against his will. But given some of his comments to me, I think he’s quite willing, aren’t you Tigre?” Elen retorted challengingly, looking over to where Tigre was now staring out into the woods as Regin got into the bath next to her. Underneath the water, they were still wearing their towels, which plastered to their skin, having left two other towels in the changing room to use afterward.

Tigre tried to think of a way to respond, but Ranma’s attention was diverted as the trio of current changers appeared once more.

Lim shared some of the body of her mistress if a bit less in the chest area, held, like her lady’s, in one towel. But her skin was also a touch more tanned, and her hair was still up in its normal ponytail, which had yet to stop grabbing his attention. Lim’s legs were also longer, her rear a bit smaller, though Lim and Elen’s hips seemed to be much the same size, although, like Regin, she had opted for short pants, hers a dark blue color. Both of them had bodies that showed their training visible on legs and arms.

To Ranma’s mind though the way her green eyes were offset by the torches made them much more attractive. And her faint blush at being dressed like this in front of Ranma and Tigre made her even more fetching in Ranma’s opinion.

A bit taller than Elen or Lim, Valentina also had more curves up top, a chest that literally had to be seen to be believed. The towel she wore over her upper body had to be held in place by one hand, so much was it straining against her chest. Valentina’s legs were not as toned as Elen or Lim, showing she didn’t spend as much time on them or in the saddle, but her rear was still firm-looking if a little fuller-seeming in a second towel than Elen’s. And to Ranma’s trained eye, her arms actually looked a bit stronger than the other Vanadis. If Elen’s hair glowed in the torchlight, Valentina’s raven locks absorbed it, and her violet eyes flashed in the shadows.

In contrast, Titta was perhaps just on the cusp of womanhood. She barely had the same curves that Regin had. And whereas Regin seemed soft, Titta had some muscle in her legs and arm. Her chest was the same size, but perkier, riding a little higher under her one towel, which covered her from collarbone down to just below her rear. Titta was also easily the most body shy, looking ready to bolt at any moment.

Shaking his head Ranma pulled his eyes away from Valentina and Lim, muttering under his breath about wondering what the heck they fed some of the women in this universe. He then grabbed at Tigre’s shoulder and pulled him towards the changing area himself.

As soon as the two boys were within the confines of the changing room, Lim stared hard at Valentina, one eyebrow rising. “I thought you were here just to question him about his healing and combat skills?”

Valentina smiled back, confidently. “Mah, perhaps at first. But I can’t deny that I am interested in Ranma for more than just for the mystery he represents.”

“I see…” Lim growled but refrained from speaking further, moving towards the heated pool.

Valentina smirked after her, smacking her hip against the other woman as she passed her.

The other three didn’t notice this byplay. Elen, Regin and Titta were instead having their own stare off, with Elen growling, “Just because you’re the Princess presumptive of Brune doesn’t mean I’m going to give over!”

“And just because you are a warmongering barbarian doesn’t mean that you can browbeat me,” Regin growled back.

“I’ve known Lord Tigre the longest, and I know him much better than either of you!” Titta squeaked, her courage slowly failing her in the face of Elen and Regin’s glares but unwilling to back down.

The other two stared at the trio across from them, then turned back to one another. “So does that mean you are interested in Ranma as a man? Even with his curse?”

Valentina turned that question back on Lim easily. “Is that a problem for you?” to that Lim could only huff and shake her head as Valentina smiled. “Then why would it be a problem for me?”

“Does that mean we are in competition as well?” Lim shot back.

“If we were, I’m certain that you would lose,” Valentina mused, “but I’m uncertain that I will stay around Ranma long enough to create a relationship. After all, while you have duties to Elen, I have duties to my own people. I can only stay here for a few weeks at the most.”

Lim paused that, surprised by the other woman’s candor, not realizing that that surprise was the reason why Valentina had been candid.

Any further discussion ended when Ranma and Tigre exited the changing room. All five of the women by the pool turned, staring at them as the two men made their way toward them.

When it came to body type, the two of them were very alike: slim, built apparently for speed more than strength, with very trim bodies, and of only fair height rather than being tall. Ranma was slightly more toned along his sides, and his calf muscles looked as if they been carved from stone. But Tigre was just as wide in the shoulders, and Valentina was impressed when she realized that, while Ranma made some noise as he stepped across the nearly frozen ground to the pool, Tigre did not.

Yet for Valentina, it was Ranma’s body that held her interest. *To think that Ranma has such strength without his body showing it overmuch.* That made him even more appealing to Valentina, never liking massive muscles on a man.

Soon they were all in the steaming water as everyone laid back against the side of the pool, smiling at one another in delight.

“This is amazing,” Regin said, sighing as she leaned her hair head back enough in the water to soak her hair before standing upright, staring across at Ranma. “However did you think of this?”

Ranma shrugged. “When I was on the trail with my Pops, we routinely had to make do. He was happy enough just to smell his own funk, but I’ve always been a bit neater than that, you know? “Well, after I grew out of believing that bathing would make me weaker o’ course.”

“Considering that statement is believed by a great amount of peasantry the world over, it isn’t quite as funny as you might believe,” Elen replied tartly. “On campaign I have a devil of a time sometimes convincing peasant levies they need to bathe and keep their camp clean to avoid disease.”

Ranma nodded at that, although the mention of disease did remind him of some of the things he’d been forced to do for the refugee camp to stave off that issue. While Elen and the others knew about camp water and to put the latrines well away from the commissary and so forth, there had been a few things that they hadn’t realized.

“Anyway, I tried this version while Lim and I were heading to heal Sasha, and it worked well enough. If not for the stupid bandits.” Ranma blinked then clicked his fingers in the water, turning to Valentina. “By the way, Valentina, where do you get your perfume?”

Valentina’s shrugged. “It’s a brand called Velvet Rose from Legnica. It ships to the capital, and I have a special courier buy it for me there. Why?”

“Ah, that might explain it. I thought I had smelled it while on the road. It’s a nice smell,” Ranma mumbled to himself, shaking his head and looking away.

Valentina flushed slightly, scratching at her nose as she remembered that time in the woods when Ranma had apparently smelled her out. She quickly changed the subject, raising a hand out of the water and saying, “I don’t suppose anyone thought to bring over the back of picnic things that young Titta made for us? I’m rather hungry. Sparring with Ranma here takes it out of one, even a Vanadis such as myself.”

“And you having a weak constitution too,” Elen retorted, rolling her eyes.

“Mah, will you stop bringing that up? I’m sorry I was too sick to help you in your campaign against Brune, but it isn’t as if you needed me, after all. At this point, you just sound rather shrewish,” Valentina replied, stretching her back and shoulders so that her breasts rose out of the water like twin mountains, sending a superior smirk at the other woman.

Although she was quite large, Elen did not quite measure up to Valentina in the chest department, and she growled irritably, turning her head away.

Titta smiled brightly and moved to the edge of the pool. “I’ll get it.”

When Tigre made to stand up and move to do it instead, she smacked his shoulder lightly. “Don’t Lord Tigre, I am the one who brought it along, remember? I am, after all, your maid.”

“I don’t know why you insist on saying that when we have known one another for most of our…” Tigre trailed off as Titta pushed herself out of the water, her wet towel clinging to her like a second skin, outlining all of her curves. Those curves weren’t equal to any of the others, not even Regin, although they were closer to her than any of the other women. But they were still amazing all the same.

Elen noticed Tigre’s staring and reached over, grabbing his ear and tugging hard. “What is up with you looking at other women, huh!? Do I have to remind you again, your mine! Don’t just go flirting with other women.”

“You might be his employer, but that doesn’t mean that he can’t look anywhere else, Lady Eleonora,” Titta replied tartly, swinging her hips slightly as she reached down and grabbed up the picnic basket, bringing it back to the pool, sliding in next to Tigre.

She gave Tigre a sandwich, then pushed the basket along the edge of the water towards Valentina before turning back to Elen, glaring daggers at the silver-haired woman. “I won’t lose!” she hissed.

“Bring it on, little girl!” Elen growled back, moving in front of Titta to stare at her directly.

They both stopped as Regin moved through the water to sit next to Tigre, smiling politely as she pointed a finger at the sandwich in his hand. “Could I have a piece of your sandwich, please?”

“I already bit into it, though,” Tigre objected.

Regin shrugged apologetically “I realize that I don’t have to, but I am still somewhat paranoid about food,”

To one side, Ranma was watching this, and he whispered out, “This is like watching a train wreck, er, a carriage losing a wheel at high speed, ya can’t turn away. Seeing Tigre and the girls like this make me really understand some of my old friends back home.”

“Oh?” Lim drawled, her eyes narrowing in sudden suspicion. “Were they in a similar situation?”

Ranma shook his head, debating for a moment, then blurted out, “No, but I was. My Pops, he wasn’t really the most honorable guy, and he made multiple agreements on our family honor for my hand in marriage. Various martial arts school, not Lords or anything like what you have here, but still important, you know?”

Lim’s eyes widened as she hissed out, “You had a fiancée!” Valentina also turned to stare at Ranma, while the other three continue to argue all around Tigre.

“Yes and no. I didn’t choose a fiancée, he basically sold my hand. One time, I suppose you could say I was sold for a peasant’s morning meal,” Ranma grumbled, shaking his head as both women’s eyes widened. “Another time, he sold me off for a food vendor’s cart, then stole the cart regardless, racing off with it and me leaving the owner and the owner’s daughter behind. And finally, you’ve seen my aerial style of combat, right?”

Both women nodded, making annoyed get on with it gestures with their hands sending droplets of water flying. Ranma was about to continue, and he realized the water was getting a little chilly. He concentrated, and both women turned their eyes down into the wall watching as the cerulean sphere shot out once more.

“I gotta remember to come back at some point to work on the bottom of this pool. Maybe even block off the river, or at least put a little wall there so that we don’t lose as much hot water so quickly,” Ranma mused. With the light of his Moko Takabisha, Ranma had been able to see the bottom of the pool easily, and it was a little too muddy away from the bank.

“That sounds like a good idea. And an excellent exercise for the troops, carrying out stone blocks. There are a few granite outcroppings near the camp,” Lim replied quickly. “But, you were saying something?”

“Right, my story. So I was taught the aerial style. This other school was supposed to teach the land-based version of Anything Goes.

“Is that what your style is called?” Valentina questioned. “Anything Goes? I quite like that.”

“You would Valentina,” Ranma replied with a laughing eye roll. “Your style could be called Anything Goes, Dirty Mode.”

“Not any longer, thanks to this bath.” Valentina downplayed it before changing the subject abruptly. “So you were affianced to the heir of this other branch of your main martial arts school? Such things are not unheard of suppose. Merchant families who send a lesser branch off to start up a new business elsewhere will occasionally remarry them back into the main family when the new business has thrived. Noble houses occasionally do similar things.”

“How many women did you have after your hand? And did you encourage them?” Lim growled, not nearly as sanguine about what they were being told as the black-haired woman.

“Not really,” Ranma said, scratching at his pigtail. “I mean, I didn’t discourage them because I honestly couldn’t figure out which way my honor should take me or my own feelings some of the time. But they each had their own issues. One of them didn’t like me and hated being forced into a relationship. The other was after me for me it’s true, but her people, they would have treated me like a secondhand citizen, like I was only worth anything helping her make babies. The third, the third, was more of a possibility at the end. But she didn’t really take martial arts as seriously as I do. Ukyo also wanted to become a cook and restaurant owner and expected me to just go along with that. Maybe watch the kids at home. I can’t say that nothing would’ve eventually happened, but I was happy to leave them behind.”

“I also hated how they went about it. I mean, the girls back home didn’t really think they had to, you know, be nice to me. Just grab my attention from the others,” Ranma added, looking over at Lim. “There was no real push go on dates, no desire to do so most of the time. Rather, they would simply attack one another, as if by eliminating the competition, they’d win by default.”

Valentina frowned, thinking. “So you don’t like being fought over then? A lot of men would, you know.”

“Hah, I’d let them have it!” Ranma scowled. “I’m not a thing, I’m not something you can possess. I’m a person.”

Valentina slowly nodded, looking over at Lim, who looked back at her. Both of them had heard that. And though it didn’t appear as if Ranma was aware that Valentina was interested in him rather than just teasing, both women realized that if there was going to be competition between the two of them, they would have to keep it subtle. Or Ranma might well react negatively.

After that, Lim and Valentina worked together to change the subject, engaging Regin in a question-and-answer session about how she and Tigre had met. Now that that was no longer a need to keep it a secret, Regin was happy to explain the adventure, which had been something of a highlight of her younger years.

Eventually, the water began to chill again. The food was also all gone, including the wine and Regin, Lim, Titta and Tigre were all ready to leave. Elen wasn’t, but she followed the others, and in groups of three, the others began to exit. Valentina, though, requested that Ranma heat up the water again. “Soaking in the hot water is helping my sore muscles, and since you caused that soreness, I think letting me have some more time in it is the least you can do.”

Lim looked back at Valentina, one eyebrow rising in suspicion, but Valentina shook her head. “I won’t do anything,” she whispered, “I was serious about my time being limited, and I really am that sore. Don’t worry.”

Lim breathed out, staring at the black-haired Vanadis for a moment before nodding her head. “I’ll take you at your word,” she said formally. Then her lips quirked, and she raised a thumb to point over towards Elen. “Besides, she has not yet gone over the paperwork I brought for her signature, and it all needs to leave tomorrow morning with a messenger unless she wants our convoy to be the only one she sees this winter.”

By the time the others had changed, Ranma had heated up the pool once more, but then had gotten out and had moved to change. However, he paused when Valentina asked, “I’ve thought about my first question for you, Ranma. Would you mind if I posed it now?”

Ranma looked back at her for a second. Then, wondering where this was going to go, simply nodded, cocking his head at her.

Valentina’s tone didn’t change at all as she turned around, pressing her chest into the side of the pool as she looked up at him, a faint smile on her face but an almost dangerous glint of something Ranma couldn’t figure out in her eyes as she spoke. “So, how far in the future do you hail from?”

**OOOOOOO**

Even in medieval times, rumors traveled somewhat faster than most could credit, but not as quickly as they would in Ranma’s original time. And if someone was moving with an army or the equivalent over rough terrain without any settled habitation nearby, rumors would not reach them at all. Unless they had a dedicated messenger service. Elizavetta Fomina of Lebus did not have such a messenger service.

This was why Elizavetta Fomina was still in the field, pushing into Legnica’s territory a month into winter.

Elizavetta had been pushing into Alexandra’s for a few weeks now. Slowly to be sure, and away from any of her developed lands. However, they were going to be coming up on a town that looked to Legnica, and perforce Alexandra, soon. When that happened, Elizavetta knew, Alexandra would have no choice but to ask for help from Elen Viltaria to combat her. Requesting aid from another noble would do nothing but set up the noble to be defeated in turn by a Vanadis.

But that was fine, Elizavetta reflected as she stared into the slowly setting sun across the wintry landscape. *After all, it isn’t as if I’m interested in the land at all. All I want to do is face Elen across the battlefield, to prove to her that I have become stronger!*

As she thought this, Elizavetta’s army slowly began to halt around her, spreading out as different groups among the army began the various tasks needed to make camp for the night. This included putting up tents, setting a perimeter, gathering firewood for the numerous fires, building fire pits, and privies, a process that looked remarkably similar for a time, Elizavetta was always amused to note. Meanwhile, a squad set up a tent for Alexandra.

Once her horse was being looked after, Elizavetta retired into her tent quickly, wishing to go over the map of the area. *With only a thousand four-hundred men, we should have been able to make decent time. But winter has slowed our pace noticeably. Honestly, at this point, I’m wondering if it would be better to call this off for the season. I want to face Elen, but she might not even hear of my encroachments until next season at best, and my troops are not equipped very well for this kind of weather.*

Her cavalry was the only portion of the army she led which was rich enough to see to their own accouterments. A score of two hundred men, light cavalry as such things were determined, they were the second or third (or more) sons of minor nobles and knights. But her infantry, while well equipped with weaponry, was not outfitted to face the cold. Nor did they have armor to speak of beyond leather jerkins, and the occasional chain mail hauberk. It was only because of the amount of wood they could find every night, and the fact winter in this area was much less cold than it would be further inland, that they hadn’t had many deaths due to the cold just yet.

*Or, I can continue. Take that town and force the locals to provision my army. Go into winter quarters there, and then resume in the spring, spearing deeper into Alexandra’s territory. The deeper, the better. The more she will be forced to send for Elen’s help.* Scowling in thought, Elizavetta leaned back in her camp chair, grabbing up a mug of camp water, grimacing at the taste. At the same time, her other hand reaching up to thread through her hair, pulling some of it down to nibble on in a manner that she had yet to break from her childhood.

Elizavetta was a statuesque woman, standing about an inch taller than Elen, who of all the Vanadis was the only one that Elizavetta compared herself to, with long dark pink hair that fell to just below her shoulders in waves, wearing what Ranma would call a gothic kind of dress, with her lips were painted light pink. She had a curvaceous body, but not quite up to Elen’s, although unlike Ludmila, she didn’t obsess about it.

What Elizavetta did obsess about was the fact that she had what most people called Evil Eyes, people being extremely superstitious and hateful towards those who appeared too different from the norm. Her eyes were heterochromatic, two different colors, gold and blue. And they had been the cause of a lot of angst for her over the years, almost as much as being the only daughter of a merchant house that had recently lost much of its fortune before she was born.

*I suppose that I should take this as a learning opportunity. I’ve never had to move a body of troops like this before beyond the roads around Lebus. And all the education about my normal duties as a Vanadis, strategy and tactics, neglected to teach me about the necessity of planning for the weather,* she thought tartly.

Her musings were interrupted by a cough of someone announcing themselves outside her tent. “What is it?”

Her second-in-command popped his head into the tent. “Mistress, one of the scouts has returned. They report a single rider coming towards the army.”

“A single rider? Some peasant out of that town we’re near? I wonder how they chose the scapegoat,” Elizavetta quipped, her red painted lips quirking.

“We don’t think so milady. For one thing, it’s a woman. No offense meant, but a typical village wouldn’t send out a woman to represent them to an invading army. For another, she’s carrying the banner of Legnica.”

“A woman out of Alexandra’s city? Now that his most interesting. I wonder…” Elizavetta thought for a second, but then abruptly ordered, “Send a report back to the scouts, they are to allow her to close with the army. Then get at least half of the army up and ready for action just in case. Make certain that half includes the cavalry. I’ll want them split into three, one group on either side of our flanks, the other in the center as a mobile reserve. The rest of the army is to continue making camp.”

The man nodded instant obedience to her words, and Elizavetta turned back to her map of the area. She calmly rolled it up and put it in a carry case before finishing her camp water and leaving the tent to go find her horse.

About an hour later, Elizavetta watched from her saddle as a single rider trooped out of the distant foliage towards the army, which was currently set up in a large rocky area. As the scouts had reported, the writer did have a banner that denoted her as coming from Legnica. But Elizavetta could see something that her scouts had not been able to. Because Elizavetta had met this woman before and knew the rider to be Alexandra Alshavin herself.

*Brave of her, but also very foolish. I am not one of those who have such reverence for her former position as the strongest of us. If I have to humiliate Alexandra to get to Elen, I will.* “You are all to wait here,” Elizavetta ordered aloud. “This is a bluff of some kind, and I mean to call it, personally.”

With that, she stirred her horse forward and pulled her weapon, the Viralt Valitsaif. Currently in its iron rod form, it shifted, its tip glowed for a moment, before it split, becoming a multi-pronged whip, the tips of the long, almost steel-like whip-ends dragging next to her horse.

When she determined that she and the other woman were in shouting distance, Elizavetta roared out, “I commend you for your courage Lady Alexandra, but we both know the truth of your condition. You are far too weak to face another Vanadis on the field of battle by this point. Still, I am magnanimous. In light of your history of service to our nation and for this act of courage, I will allow you to retreat. But I request and require you to leave immediately. Or else I will have no mercy.”

Elizavetta was somewhat shocked that Alexandra’s voice sounded as authoritative as it did when she replied, “You are on my lands, and have been for at least several days now. And you believe that **you** will be ordering **me** to retreat? Why ever would I do that?”

“Because I have no wish to kill another Vanadis. But for my people and the betterment of the men and women of Lebus, I will do what I must,” Elizavetta responded.

Now Alexandra’s voice became almost normal despite the need to shout and also somewhat derogatory, which caused Elizavetta’s hackles to rise. “That sounded very dramatic, my dear. And it is also pure rubbish. I fail to see how gaining more of my land would help yours. There are no riches or precious resources to be found here. Only people, farms, and other simple peasants going about their business. No, it seems to me that this has all been some kind of farce.”

Then her voice became cold so cold as to make the winter around them seem warm. “Regardless of your reasoning, you have invaded my land. And I will not stand for that effrontery. Not even from a fellow Vanadis.” With that, Sasha tossed aside the banner and pulled out her own weapons, the daggers Bargren.

Elizavetta scowled but still believed that she had the upper hand despite a slight unease going through her at Sasha’s willingness to fight in her weakened state. “If you wish to die in battle, far be it from me to stop you!” Elizavetta spurred her horse forward, raising her weapon above her head.

Seeing no reason to hold back, Elizavetta instantly attacked with one of her powerful assaults. “Gron Lazriga!” ("Burn and Split Heaven and Earth!") With those words, lightning flashed from each of the ends of Valitsaif’s current whip configuration. They crashed forward like an animal’s claws towards Sasha in an inescapable assault.

But as her attack closed, Alexandra’s form seemed to almost become hazy, as if seen from a far distance on a hot day. And when the attack reached her, they landed everywhere around Sasha but did not hit Sasha herself. “What!?”

An instant later, Sasha was off her horse and racing forward, sprinting forward faster than even a racing horse could have moved. In her hands, her twin blades blazed with heat and fire, which she lashed forward, not even bothering to form it into a real attack.

Elizavetta had barely a second to respond, and she spurred her horse to the side, nearly falling out of the saddle in her haste to pull her horse out of the way. The horse, maddened by the sight of fire flashing towards it, tried to escape her control, bucking and heaving under her.

By the time that Elizavetta had her horse under control, Sasha had crossed the intervening distance.

Elizavetta lashed out with Valitsaif once more in its iron rod form, but found it parried by the twin short swords of Bargren, her lightning attack dying instantly. One of them held her Viralt in check, while the other one pulled back below the belt and thrust forward, sending a blast of searing flame towards Elizavetta. Once more, Elizavetta got out of the way, rolling out of the saddle and landing on her feet, her horse racing away from the two crazy humans. But Sasha was on Elizavetta instantly and again their two Viralts clashed.

Sasha then kicked out hard, doubling Elizavetta over with the impact, the blow one of the hardest that Elizavetta had ever felt, and a second later, she felt the edge of one of the twin blades on the back of her neck. The other one quickly joined pressing up from below on the front of her neck, holding Elizavetta’s head between them like a pair of clippers about to lop off an errant branch. “I believe that you should surrender.”

“H, how?! How are you able, you were sick! Everyone knows it.” Elizavetta practically babbled, daring slightly to turn her head to look up at Alexandra with one green eye. Later would come humiliation and fury at how easily she had been dealt with, but now there was no room for that, only shock.

Sasha allowed this bit of movement. She even allowed Elizavetta to stand up straight, before pulling back her blades, gently tapping the flat of one between Elizavetta’s wide, shocked eyes. The battle had been so quick and over so swiftly that her loss was all the more humiliating. “And yet you were willing to take advantage of me in my sickness. One Vanadis attacking another. Exactly how did you think you would get away with that?”

“The, the King has turned a blind eye to conflict between Vanadis before. Like he did when Estes moved in on Brest’s territory. He would do so again,” Elizavetta blustered. The fact was she hadn’t even thought of it or cared really. She didn’t care about the laws of Zhcted at all unless they aided her. If they got in her way of wishing to be the strongest Vanadis, then she would discard them easily.

“The owner of Muma never took command of Brest at all, let alone was in-estate at the time. It was a fully accredited conquest, with barely even token resistance. Even in my weakened state, that would not have been the case here. Still, I suppose you could have thought that.”

Rolling her eyes at Elizavetta’s naivete, Sasha turned her attention away from Elizavetta for a moment, seeing the rest of the pink-haired Vanadis’ army beginning to move towards them. She held up one of Bargren’s paired short swords, which blazed into fire. A sword of flame appeared around the raised blade, flaring up into the air before she pointed it towards them, the fire sword coming down like a massive lance of fiery death.

The cavalry reared back, the horse’s now trying to flee before the riders could get them under control. The infantry too stopped in place, just staring as Sasha shouted, “You boys just stay right where you are, please. This is a conversation between Vanadis.”

Before Elizavetta could even think of taking advantage of her enemy’s momentary shift in attention, the tip of the other dagger had pressed lightly into her chest right between her breasts. “Don’t. I don’t think you want to die here, and I also don’t think that you started this little campaign of yours in the hopes of gaining more land for yourself.”

Sasha pulled the dagger back, and the fire sword died around the other as she looked at Elizavetta quizzically. “I’ve heard quite a lot about you. How you and Valentina have both turned your lands around after bad mismanagement or simply lack of care from your predecessors. How you came from an impoverished merchant house and have been fighting the stigma of those pretty eyes of yours all your life.”

She winked at the other girls, huffed, but couldn’t keep a smile from her face at the twin compliments from Sasha. But Sasha went on seriously. “That tells me that you wouldn’t be so stupid as to assume that conquest could instantly enrich your coffers. No, you are after something else. What is it?”

Even as she questioned the younger Vanadis, Sasha was dealing with Bargren’s voices in her head. They were saying something to her in her mind about the other woman, how she smelled off, how her weapon was strangely subdued. But they couldn’t give her more than that. Simple impressions only limited by their ability to communicate their impressions to her. Not enough for Sasha to act on. *Still, Fomina might bear further watching in the future.*

Grimacing, Elizavetta looked away from second, before looking back as Sasha coughed impatiently. “I thought that if I provoked you, you would have to call in Elen for help. I wanted to fight her, not you. I wanted to prove to her that I have become stronger since the last time before. That she could no longer simply brush me inside or ignore me!”

Staring at the younger woman, Sasha’s lips quirked in amusement as she analyzed what was said and how. “There seems to be something a little deeper in than just a simple desire to prove yourself. You actually sound as if you dislike Elen. Why is that?” *Frankly, she sounds like a jilted friend or lover more than anything else.*

Elizavetta didn’t answer. Instead, she looked away, powering down her weapon instead of a reply, but also making her submission to the other Vanadis clear.

“So you won’t tell me? Fine, I don’t really need to know the reasons. Every soldier you lead across my borders, I will demand a copper penny fine. For yourself, a gold coin.”

Elizavetta frowned at that, the price of their being allowed to retreat being remarkably low, considering that Sasha was holding her hostage.

Then Sasha went on. “And after you return home, you will send two shiploads of coal to my city.” Lebus was one of the eight major suppliers of coal in Zhcted. “That will be the second aspect of your payment and was actually a goodly bit more than the prize that should have been paid. Elizavetta made to object, but Sasha went on unhurriedly, her deep brown eyes staring into Elizavetta’s gold and blue. “In return, I will attempt to set up a spar between you and Elen once all this business in Brune is concluded. Will that do?”

The older Vanadis’ tone indicated that better be, and that, coupled with the easy, if not quite humiliating beatdown, it was enough for Elizavetta to nod her head. “I agree, I suppose,” Elizavetta replied, then frowned. “But might I ask, how is it that you are healed?”

Sasha smiled. “Elen sent me someone who could figure out what was wrong with me and even heal it. I owe them my life and quite a bit more. But that is all you will get out of me. For now, return to your own lands, and do not encroach on me or mine again. Or else my response will be far less kind.”

Elizavetta winced at that but nodded her head quickly. She did not want to take on the other woman, not if she had returned to full strength. There was a reason why she had been the mediator between Vanadis before Sofy, after all. *And for all my training and… other things, I am not ready for that battle. Not yet. But I will be eventually.* “I agree. Do you want to have this in writing?”

Sasha indicated she did, and Elizavetta held up a hand towards her army, a finger extended. When a rider joined them, she sent him back to the campsite to fetch her scribe. That worthy didn’t take long to arrive and the two Vanadis hammered out a simple agreement between the two of them. As they were nobles, and it would be in writing, that made it binding in the eyes of the law, just like the similar ones that Valentina had hammered out with Regin the day before.

Afterward, Elizavetta rode back to her army, scowling at how badly that they had gone. *And yet, she did say she’d set up a spar with Elen. After this humiliation I’ll take what I can get.* A few hours later though, her annoyance with what had occurred disappeared at the thought, *Oh my, I’m almost feeling sorry for the Asvarre navy or the pirates out of pirate archipelago if they try anything now.*

**OOOOOOO**

“The supplies we need to equip our army for winter movement has arrived, Lord Thenardier. I estimate another month before our army is fully equipped, trained and ready to go.”

Thenardier looked up at that from where he was working through the paperwork that was the bane of any lord regardless of station, his heavy, broad face twisted into a smile. “Excellent, Stead. What say you to that, Drekavac? What can you offer us in that same timeframe?” he demanded, looking over at the shadows to one corner of his room.

Stead turned, staring into the shadows of the command room, to see an ancient man appearing there. His body seemed somewhat deformed as well as being heavily wrinkled under his dark black cloak. “Never fear my Lord. In one more month, I can have two dragons ready to go. One Suro, one Prani. A third will take more time to prepare due to its special qualities. But I would wager we will not need it against Ganelon’s forces.”

Thenardier smiled. “Excellent. Most excellent. By the time spring is fully upon us, I want Ganelon to be but a memory, and for us to be able to turn our attention once more on the Silver Meteor Army.”

**OOOOOOO**

For a moment, Ranma wondered how to answer, to either go full denial or come up with some kind of half-baked excuse to get out of it. But Valentina continued to speak before he could, moving lazily in the water towards the edge of the pool. “Mah, it’s getting rather cold again.”

She pulled herself out of the water, her towel-clad body dripping momentarily before she grabbed up one of the other towels to wipe herself down. The motion arrested Ranma’s attention, as it would any red-blooded male, and then she spoke again, her tone still calm and matter-of-fact.

“Don’t try to deny it. I was so interested in you that I did a bit of snooping while I was in Leitmeritz and discovered that amazingly interesting little box of yours the one that is about yay wide?” Valentina held out her fingers to indicate the size of the cassette player that Ranma had brought along rather accidentally to this new dimension.

Valentina shook her head slowly, her wet hair moving only a little bit against her shoulders and back. “A made thing like that is so well beyond our capabilities today, that it must come from someplace else entirely. Even if you somehow came from the other side of the Eastern Continent, we would still have heard of such wonders before this, if only in terms of rumors. That makes me believe that you either come from the future or somewhere else, some other world perhaps. In either case, I have so many questions for you, I’m having trouble thinking of which to start with, so please don’t waste either of our time by denial.”

“Does Elen know you went snooping around her castle?” Ranma retorted feebly. He was completely flummoxed by this, having thought that Elen would be the only one to figure out his otherworldly origins beyond Tigre, who hadn’t seemed to care one way or another. And Elen hadn’t said anything to him yet, perhaps not putting it all together or perhaps not wanting the answers that she would get.

“Of course not, what will be the point of snooping if one is caught at it?” Valentina scoffed, reaching out a finger to lightly poke Ranma in his hard, muscled chest. Seeing him without a shirt on was still quite a treat, one that as a Vanadis, Valentina had not been privy to before this often. The fact he wasn’t even trying to show off only made it better frankly. But she had her mind on more important things. “Now, are you willing to answer my questions? Or should I just keep speculating?”

“Is this going to be a long question and answer session or a short one?” Ranma muttered somewhat sullenly. He was not looking forward to this conversation.

“Probably one of many,” Valentina admitted, carefully hiding a smile of triumph as she sensed Ranma give in to the inevitable. “Why, do you think this place is not secure enough?”

“While it might be getting on at night, I think that once Lim and the others make it back to camp, it will be obvious that they will have bathed. Which means we might see other people coming out here. And I really don’t want my otherworldly origins to become common knowledge. It ties into my whole not wanting to be tied down by your king or anyone else thing. If people know about my origins, they’d always be after me for information, knowledge, what I can tell them and so on!”

Ranma’s frustration was readily apparent, and Valentina, magnanimous in her victory, decided to throw the poor boy a bone. She moved past him, heading towards the changing booth. “Very well, if you know of someplace where we could talk more privately, I am perfectly willing to trust myself into your capable hands. And…”

She paused at the door to the booth, looking over at him seriously, her violet eyes locking on his blue. “I give you my word I will not share whatever you wish me to keep secret with anyone else about your personal origins. Will that suffice?”

To Ranma’s credit, in her eyes, he actually had to think about it for a moment. Then he surprised Valentina by asking, “Are you really interested in my origins only to satisfy your own curiosity, or are you hoping I can give you some actual information that can help you and yours? Like, Lim’s asked me a time or two about my medical information, and Elen and Tigre both wanted my opinion about the refugee camp and how it should be set up and stuff like that and I used my knowledge of how important cleanliness is and medical knowledge to help them. Do you want access to that kind of knowledge too?”

“… That was well thought out,” Valentina admitted, turning back now fully to Ranma instead of entering the changing area. “I would say that my curiosity comes in two forms, personal and social. Anything you tell me about yourself and your past that you wish to keep a secret, I will do so, as I said. But I do admit that a lot of my interest in you comes from the possibility of those kinds of questions. And you’re right, I would wish to use what you tell me if you give me any information I can act upon. Your medical knowledge is one such area. But if you really are from the future, there are many other ways you could perhaps help me.”

“Help you?” Ranma frowned at that since it seemed quite personal, but then shrugged, dismissing the way she had worded that. “In that case, I’ll take you up on that promise. But I will also request that you find some kind of way to… I don’t know, hide where you got the information? If I do have anything specific you can act on anyway. I wasn’t the best student, you know? I honestly don’t know if I’ll be able to give you anything beyond generalities.”

Valentina nodded, then whispered the words, “You have my oath on it,” before entering the changing area. Moments later, she was back out, with Ezendeis in her arms.

Ranma had taken the time she was within the booth to change outside of it and was now once more in his silk leggings and long-sleeved cotton jerkin. If anyone else had seen the pair of them standing there during winter in such clothing, they would probably have looked like crazy people. Right up until the supposed watcher had noticed the weapon in Valentina’s hands anyway.

“Do you have a specific place to talk?” Valentina repeated her earlier question as she moved towards Ranma, smiling beatifically at him.

Ranma grabbed one of the torches from one of the holders that he had taken out from the refugee camp, gesturing Valentina to follow him. “There’s a little cave about fifteen minutes more walking into the woods from here. I found it while I was looking for a better place than this for the bath.”

The two of them made their way through the forest in silence, a somewhat tense one in Ranma’s case, while Valentina was positively hopping on her feet in delight. Soon she would have the answers to many of her questions. *Although I will admit it didn’t occur to me that Ranma wouldn’t be able to answer some,* she admitted ruefully to herself. *If he is as far into the future as I think, or whatever, that makes more sense now that I come to think of it. Still, I was never looking for actionable intelligence, rather broad ideas, concepts and perhaps one or two inventions that can help the people of Zhcted and add to my popularity.*

Finally, they came to the small cave that Ranma had found. It was very small, almost but not quite cramped for two people, although their legs did touch as they sat across from one another, their backs against opposite sides of the cave wall. Ranma set the torch shaft first down into the snow by the entrance, where the wind wafted the smoke out and away from them. It wasn’t quite comfortable, but it was at least secluded.

The moment they were sitting down on the semi-frozen ground of the cave, Valentina began. “First, I think you should answer my question about whether or not you are from somewhere else or the future. Then if you wish to, share how you arrived here. I am more interested in the history of your world than anything else. Natural science, as well. The study of the world around us could also be of great interest to me.”

“I have seen enough maps by this point to think that I don’t come from this world’s future. I haven’t traveled all of my world duh, but I’ve traveled enough of it and seen enough maps. None of your shorelines or anything else matches what I’ve seen,” Ranma answered swiftly. “The only timeframe I could even think of that you could match would be the time where all of the world’s land passes were formed into a single huge landmass called Pangaea.”

Seeing Valentina’s quizzical expression in the light of the torch, Ranma explained about that time-period and dinosaurs, which were honestly the whole reason he knew about it in the first place. Like almost every other boy and many a girl, Ranma had gone through a time where he was dino-mad. Even while moving around Japan with his father, he had learned a lot about the huge thunder lizards.

But Valentina quickly shook her head. “No. For one thing, I refuse to believe that our entire civilization would simply have vanished without leaving anything behind. Our Viralts are practically indestructible, and certainly they at least would’ve been found by some, some studier of antiquities. Furthermore, we are not our planet’s only landmass. You no doubt heard of the pirate Archipelago, and Asvarre island when you were with Sasha. Beyond them, there are other, smaller single-island polities to the southwest, and well to the direct west across the vast oceans lie what we call the Bestial Continent.”

Ranma perked up at that, interested despite himself. “Why is it called that?”

“Because it is dominated by creatures which we humans have long thought of as bestial,” Valentina replied dryly. “Orcs, goblins, trolls, and others. Orcs seem to dominate from what little we know of it, which is, I will repeat, very little. It takes three months sailing to get over the ocean from one to the other with nothing to show for it. And they can’t make their own ships. Nor can they swim, something about the shape of their shoulders I’ve been told. They occasionally show up in pirate bands, where they are always tough to deal with, stronger and larger than most men, but wielding crude weaponry and wearing cruder armor, if any.”

“Okay… so yeah. I’m not from your world. Those are fantasy monsters from where I come from. If they ever existed, no evidence has ever been found to back it up, just like dragons. Although the dragon myth exists in, well, all of the places I’ve been to in the world in one way or another. But no evidence. Instead, we had dinosaurs way back before humans came around.”

Ranma smirked at those distant memories of his early childhood for a moment, how he played hooky from training with his father or from class – when truant officers found them and forced him to go to school – to learn about the large beasties. Then he shook his head, concentrating once more o the here and now. “But we did have magic, and some weird stuff too. Stranger even then my curse. Or at least I think so. I don’t know what you Vanadis think of the idea of women dressing up in schoolgirl costumes and fighting evil.”

“… What? Just… what’s a schoolgirl costume, and why do I think it is something inherently filthy?” Valentina asked, nonplussed.

Laughing at Valentina’s face, Ranma explained about the sailor scouts, as much as had been known back home, which Valentina was kind of intrigued by, right up until he described their outfits, which made her blanch. Not so much the fact that they sounded so childish, that part just amused her. No, she disliked the conformity of it all.

That and the speeches that they were apparently known to give before battle also annoyed her no end. “Honestly, they make speeches before they’ve dealt with their enemies? That is the most childish thing I’ve ever heard of.”

“I know, right? If you’re going to make a speech, make it over the unconscious or dead bodies of your enemies, not during the fight. If you want a rallying speech, do it before you actually see the enemy.”

The two of them shared a chuckle at that, before Ranma continued his story, telling about how he had been knocked into the portal, and then wound up several dozen miles above the ground in this world. “I tell you, that wyvern really saved my hide. If it hadn’t come along, I don’t think I’d have been able to slow my momentum enough to survive the landing. ‘Course, it then tried to eat me, but ya can’t have everything.”

“And that would’ve been a great pity,” Valentina agreed with a faint smile, then she cocked her head to one side, looking at Ranma quizzically. “And now, the history of your world, please.”

Ranma pulled at his pigtail self-consciously. “Er, what do you want to know? I mean, I was a better student in history class, some of the time anyway, than I was at anything else, but that ain’t saying much.”

“Everything!” Valentina laughed. “But, I suppose you can give me the highlights as you think of them.”

Watching Ranma’s eyes narrow at that, Valentina realized that Ranma had heard more of her yearning in that statement than she had wanted to let show. For a moment, she thought about using her feminine wiles, which Ranma seemed to be somewhat susceptible to, if not nearly as much as a few other men she had attempted to manipulate in the past. But she decided against it.

For one thing, it might backfire, which would be very bad. For another, Valentina really didn’t want to manipulate Ranma like that. Once discovered, that kind of manipulation would kill the friendship she wished to build between them.

She was getting the impression that a lot of the information she’d really want Ranma would simply let drop accidentally, where he wouldn’t be able to bring to mind under questioning. That was just the way his mind seemed to work. Further, there were his physical abilities, not just his medical ones, but his skills as a warrior. With all of that, Valentina would rather ally with him, rather than try to manipulate him or harness him like a horse.

She wanted that a lot, Valentina realized with an internal start of surprise.

But she couldn’t just come out and state that, not even the idea of allying with him in the romantic sense. She sensed that Ranma would react skittishly if at all to that. *Judging from that story, he told us.* *If I tried to make a deal with him like that, I would sound all too much like one of his former fiancées, interested in him for what he could do for me rather than courting him due to my interest in him as a man. Or woman. Best to use a bit of the truth and play it off as the whole reality.*

“You see, my county of Osterode is by far the smallest of the Vanadis holdings. Even that brat who wields Muma had a larger holding than mine,” Valentina practically hissed, before composing herself. “We are barely self-sufficient, are constantly harassed by the Horse Lords, and have little to nothing to trade with others. I’ve tried my best to better my people’s way of life, and I finally was able to get my seat at the city of the same name named an actual city, but the most lucrative market I have is in loaning out my pike companies. Farming just takes up too much of our manpower.”

Ranma looked quizzical at that, and she waved off. “Less in the way of taxes to induce people to move there, more in the way of merchants and crafters, with added inducements to entice them there than towns. It’s only begun to work recently, but at least I’ve been able to arm and armor my troops better than my predecessor. But there is still a lot of work to do, and anything you might be able to tell me about the history of your own world could perhaps help my people and me.” *In that, and in my own ambitions.*

“…I can understand that. I’ve been thinking about maybe somehow trying to spread my medical knowledge, without it coming back to me somehow. I’m just not certain how much I can help ya.”

“Do you recall any inventions that changed the world? Inventions that come from this era in your world. We have developed clocks, and all our industry, as I have heard it called, relies on waterpower,” Valentina hinted.

“…huh put it like that, I actually think I do know something,” Ranma said, frowning thoughtfully. He looked up at the ceiling of the cave for a moment, then shook his head. “But if you’re looking for like specific plans or something to these inventions, I don’t have anything like that. Would knowing something possible be enough?”

“Yes!” Valentina answered quickly, now becoming more interested and less patient.

“In that case, there’s steam, and harnessing it for engines. And coal too. Burning coal rather than water creates a lot more steam and heat. Hmm.. oh, but before that, I suppose there’s the printing press. It’s a kind of device that lets people create a lot of different copies of the same written material on parchment. Erm… I think I could describe how one works, but I doubt I could go into much detail. Ooh, but I do know a lot about water mills, and I bet I could build one that’d be able to help a lot when it comes to plating wood pieces.”

Groaning internally, Valentina realized that the way Ranma remembered things was going to act against her interest here. Still, she was patient. Valentina started to ask specific questions about what he’d already mentioned, what an engine was, what a steam engine looked like and so on. The mill he described was fascinating, and Valentina realized it would probably be the easiest to build as a proof of concept. The printing press too sounded fascinating, but not as important given how reading and writing was a rare skill outside the noble and merchant classes. And as for steam? Ooh my.

The one irritant Valentina ran into during that first discussion was the idea of ‘plastic’, the material that the ‘cassette player’ was made of. Ranma had no idea how it was made, only that it had something to do with something he called oil.

Beyond that, once Valentina had a vague idea she changed the subject, asking a few more specific questions about what Ranma’s world was like, what his country was like, how it was led, and then segueing into the history of Ranma’s world. She got the idea of fantastical level of living, and technology. Everyone having access to different outfits for every day? Schools? Cars? Planes? What they described was amazing, but so far out of her understanding and the world she lived in they were simply objects of fascination.

How long they talked, Ranma couldn’t tell, but by the time they were finished, Valentina was yawning, and Ranma teased her by poking her gently with his big toe. “Someone needs to join the endurance training, I think.”

“I rather think not, thank you,” Valentina growled back, raising her own dainty foot and poking him in the chest with it, accidentally letting it drag down a little lower, then pulling it away hastily, flushing at the accident. Ranma had barely a second to blush himself before Valentina was grabbing up the torch and heading out of the cave. “But you’re right, it’s late. And we will have more conversations like this future sure,” she shot over her shoulder.

“You’re just using me for my mind,” Ranma mock-growled, hopping after her.

“If given a choice, I certainly would be using you for much more than that,” Valentina said, turning back to him and sending him a coquettish wink, which set Ranma’s pulse racing. She saw the effect her words had on him and giggled in a show of honest enjoyment and emotion that very few people had ever seen from the secretive wielder of Ezendeis. Then Valentina turned away, swaying her hips a little, with Ranma following her out into the forest. *This is going to be fun,* she reflected.

Behind her, Ranma was thinking somewhat along the same lines. Whatever else could be said about her, Valentina was most decidedly an interesting character to be around. *Although where the heck these discussions are going to go, I don’t know.*

**OOOOOOO**

Ganelon stared at the man in front of him, debating on whether or not to kill him and send his head back to Muozinel along with a request that they choose their representatives more wisely in the future. But he decided against it. *Given the fact that I wish to retain my current persona, I do have to flee Brune, and Muozinel is still the best option*. “Why are you not willing to take myself, Greast and our most trusted retainers now? And do please choose your words carefully, your previous statement annoyed me.”

Such was the power of his reptilian gaze that the man across from Ganelon’s worktable shivered. He was a tall man, well-formed of body, with darkly tanned skin and black hair, dressed in heavy fur-lined clothing at the moment. “I apologize for my bluntness. However, your initial offer is not enough for us to harbor a nobleman from a nation that has often been our enemy. Not as implacable a foe perhaps as Zhcted, but a foe nonetheless.”

Ganelon sneered contemptuously. “And the ability to use me in the future to cause internal strife did not immediately grab your attention? Do you take me for a fool?”

“That is for the future. Furthermore, if our own plans succeed, there will be no need to cause further internal division in Brune. We will have simply conquered the country outright. Which is where you come in now,” the man replied smoothly.

“If you expect me to fight on your behalf, then you will have to pony up quite a bit more than simply promising to give me sanctuary if I am forced to flee,” Ganelon replied dryly, shaking his head.

“We do not expect you to fight overly long. But your information about Duke Thenardier’s plans to attack you during winter has interested us greatly. So much so that we intend to take advantage of that. We wish for you to hold, fight delaying actions, slow his advance down as much as you possibly can, however you can. Just until the normal campaign season begins.”

Ganelon’s eyes narrowed, seeing where this was going now that the man had corrected his words from earlier. “You’ve been planning your own campaigns, haven’t you? And you want Thenardier and his forces out of the way so that you can sweep in from the southeast.” Looking over at a map on the wall, he murmured, “But for an attack along that line of advance to succeed, you would need to take South Port to serve as your logistics beachhead.”

The Muozinel representative, who had not given his name to Ganelon, fought to keep his surprise at how quickly Ganelon had grasped that from his face, schooling his expression with the swiftness of a diplomat. Ganelon still caught it but didn’t comment as the man responded to his words. “That is beyond my purview. I have only been told what we require.”

“…” Ganelon thought about it for a moment then shrugged. “Very well. I will attempt to keep Thenardier’s attention solely on me for as long as possible. But, do not think for a moment that my forces will buy you much time. Especially if Thenardier somehow comes up with tamed dragons again, as it is rumored he did in a show of force against the Leitmeritz Vanadis and the traitor, Vorn. It might have backfired against the Vanadis, but I have no one in my command that can fight a dragon. Indeed, I don’t have any soldiers that would even try to remain on the same battlefield with such.”

“Agreed. Although, in that case, if you could see your way to providing information on the dragons and how he commands them, you would be well rewarded when you arrived in Muozinel.”

“I expect to be well rewarded regardless of this,” Ganelon replied bluntly. “But we will talk about that when I am forced to seek sanctuary. For now, you may take my agreement to this revised plan to your masters.”

The man bowed and quickly departed, eager to catch the day’s tide. A trip around the Cape of Muozinel would take him through Asvarre waters, of course. And even if you had already bribed them, Asvarre privateers were a force to be feared. The faster you could make the transition, the better.

But even at his best speed, it would be at least a month before he arrived back in Muozinel. And Ganelon would probably not receive an actual reply to his agreement regardless. The troubles in Asvarre were getting so great that even shipping from Muozinel, which Asvarre normally had good relations with, might well be targeted deliberately soon. *And by that time, Thenardier could be in marching on me already.*

Ganelon leaned back in his seat, scowling faintly. He had not anticipated this demand, or that Muozinel would already be on the move. Still, he could segue that into his own plans, with a bit of difficulty. *I will have to be careful. I cannot let Drekavac know that I’m around. I cannot face dragons in combat any more than my troops could*, he thought to himself, scowling*. Still, perhaps there will be ways to slow Thenardier down and make the destruction of my territories all the more permanent.*

If anyone else had been in the room just now, the smile on Ganelon’s face would have seemed positively demonic…

**OOOOOOO**

Winter worsened over the next week, with snow dropping from the sky to add to the bitter cold and the proportionally small amount of snow already on the ground. It piled up so high that it was a lot of work keeping the trails inside the camp clear enough to use, let alone the trails outside of it.

Yet this did not get in the way of training. Every day Ranma woke up extra early to beat out the path for the endurance runs. After that, he would return to spar with Valentina or Elen and then would lead to the volunteers and Lim through the remainder of the daily regimen, which Lim joined.

While he was occupied with that, Valentina was busy with Elen and Regin. She convinced Regin to reach out to the Knightly orders, not in a way to validate her position as Princess but to ensure their neutrality when it came to the Silver Meteor Army. She also pushed Regin to talk to the refugees and to come out into the open with them about her status as Princess.

This worked, and over the next two weeks, more refugees began to come forward for training. With the number of refugees being around eleven thousand all told, they could probably get at least another three thousand men to join the rest of the Silver Meteor Army when it became time to campaign again. Most wouldn’t be all that well trained in Raman’s opinion, but they would be better than most peasant levees.

That would give them roughly sixteen thousand men with the additions and subtractions from the noble houses in the region. But to keep the majority of that army loyal to her and her cause, Regin would have to convince not just Tigre but the other Lords involved in the Silver Meteor army of the rightness of that goal.

“That will be the true crux of the matter, my dear,” Valentina said one evening, shaking her head. “Without the support of those nobles, you will not have a chance. Yes, between them, Ranma and Tigre can probably turn these volunteers into a very decent fighting force, if a highly unconventional one with their emphasis on scouts. But you just won’t have the numbers to face either Thenardier or Ganelon in an open field battle without those nobles.”

“That’s why we’re not planning to fight either in the open field unless we have to,” Tigre replied from where he was sitting nearby. “Our rangers and scouts aren’t being trained for that kind of fight. Instead, they’re being trained for their own kind of fight: backwoods ambushes, sabotage, traps, sniping at the enemy, pillaging their supply convoy and more.”

“And if it comes to open conflict, your pikemen can possibly turn the tide in small engagements anyway,” Elen added. “If that is, you’re certain that a second company will be able to arrive here by the time the campaign season starts?”

“I sent off a message to that effect with your last post to Leitmeritz. If they can cover the distance from here to your territory in winter as fast as you boasted, then they might be able to get the message to Osterode in enough time to have the fifth pike company on the road soon after. I could wish that our King would allow us to get further involved, a regiment would’ve been much more of a telling blow. But as it is another company is all I can offer,” Valentina replied, shaking her head sadly.

Honestly, Valentina was more than happy to go along with the King’s orders in this case. She didn’t want to hazard that large an amount of her troops on a foreign venture, especially on a promise of payment in the future rather than real specie now. Yet if Regin gained her crown, the monetary and supply-type rewards that she would see would be the least of what Valentina would gain.

Like always, Valentina was playing a long game. She felt that if Brune could get used to the idea of a queen, however ineffectual she might be, then the common people would not balk at her conquest in the future any more than they would otherwise. An act which was still very much in the cards.

“You and me both,” Elen grumbled, shaking her head irritably.

Regin looked at Valentina, frowning faintly. She knew that she was building up quite a bit of debt to both Vanadis. And to Tigre, although that aspect bothered her not at all. But she could not think of a way to avoid it. Further, she was generally coming to like both Eleonora and Valentina as people. Although she felt Valentina was a little mercenary, and Elen was after **her** Tigre.

She was reminded of this fact as Elen moved from where she had been sitting, waiting for a cup of tea to boil, to sit down next to Tigre, leaning against him. “So, we are agreed then, Tigre, Regin? We’ve done all we can for the refugees here, the supplies are stocked enough, and we’ve picked out the camp overseer and everything else. It’s time to move on to Territoire, so that Regin can start making her presentation to the Lords and we can start overseeing the arming program.”

She looked over at Valentina while Regin quietly simmered at how close she was sitting to Tigre, her lips twitching in amusement at how easily she could get under the Princess’ skin like this. “That’s an interesting phrase you came up with, ‘arming program’. I have to wonder where you came up with it.”

*And why Ranma suddenly admitted to knowing a way to use waterpower to help in smithcraft. Darn it, does Valentina suspect or does she know what I know about Ranma’s origins?* Elen had hoped to not let Ranma’s secret come out before she was in a position to take advantage of it for her own people’s sake, rather than for Brune. Then too, she honestly had concerns about relying on that kind of information at all. Whatever the future held, Valentina wanted to make it with her own hands rather than attempt to use knowledge of the future to build that future in the first place.

“Thank you. And as to how I came up with it, I have had to run a similar program in my own lands, you know. My pikemen did not just spring fully formed from the ground,” Valentina answered somewhat acerbically.

“Well, it fits anyway. We’ll have to see if Ranma is as good as his word on whether or not he can make this water-powered smithy of his,” Elen shrugged. “It should be interesting, regardless.”

The phrase water-powered smithy was misleading. What Ranma had eventually described as a way to use steam to power various strength-powered things, like corning meal for flour, or to help in smithing. It would surely take them most of the winter to set up, but if it worked, then in the spring, Territoire would become a supplier of steel in a much larger quantity than now.

Since that first discussion, Valentina had continued to ask Ranma questions every night. Most of the time, these were specific questions, questions about industry, about history, about important devices, like the steam engine. Unfortunately, Ranma didn’t often have much specific knowledge to pass on, but his generalities were good enough to tell Valentina what was possible, which was enough. And he sometimes did have specifics to pass on, such as the use of steam, and a few more uses of waterpower then the people of Brune and Zhcted were already using.

She had not yet directly broached the really important topics from her perspective. Instead, Valentina concentrated on smaller questions, things that would indeed help her people, rather than just her ambitions. They were good enough and would have quite a lot more consequences than Ranma probably realized, but they weren’t what she was most interested in. No, what Valentina was most interested in was empires: how to build them, how their leaders held power, and how to make them last. These she questioned Ranma on subtly, asking about the history of his world in general rather than specifics.

Already she was becoming fascinated, not so much with what Ranma called the medieval times, which he said was the equivalent to where her world was, but the empires that came before it. Alexander the Great and his conquests, though his empire lasted barely a few years after his death. Ashoka the Great and how his name was still revered despite his kingdom lasting less than a generation after his death. The Han Dynasty, the Roman Empire, and how long they survived in one form or another.

Names which, Ranma explained, described people and empires long in the past, but which still reverberated to the present day, their impact still felt, their stories to still told. Just like Queen Zephyria had done for Valentina, the names of these places had evoked wide-eyed wonder and a desire to emulate in all who heard them.

Listening to Ranma talk about them, even in the haphazard and disorganized way he did, was enough to activate Valentina’s imagination as she thought about what the names implied, and what knowing about them could do for her. Already she was planning to figure out a way she could build better roads in her own county, perhaps even spreading that into the rest of Zhcted by convincing the King to do so, a royal courier service, available for all, the importance of engineers in building up infrastructure.

And there were several ideas that she would take and use in her own military forces: an engineering corps for one, and the idea of a shield and short sword armed unit to back up her pikemen. It would be tough to mix the two styles, but the payoff could be incredible.

Of course, the amount of time that Ranma and Valentina were spending together had not gone unnoticed. And one day, Lim called Ranma on it as they were finishing a spar. These spars routinely happened while the rest of the trainees were finishing up their endurance run, Lim having proven that she didn’t really need endurance help so much as physical strength and speed. And they routinely happened out in the forest, giving the two of them some privacy.

The two of them had used this privacy occasionally to exchange further kisses, but today, that was not on Lim’s mind. Instead, she was scowling at Ranma as she tried to hack him into pieces.

“Okay, your form is really sloppy today, and your putting way too much strength behind your strikes,” Ranma said as he ducked under one such blow. From where he had crouched, Ranma watched as the sword slammed into a tree with such power that it actually cut into the bark, sticking there.

When Lim tried to pull it back out, Ranma quickly raised his hand, slapping the inside of her arm with enough force with two fingers to deaden her grip on her sword handle. The other hand flowed out, lightly tapping her on the chest, overbalancing her so that Lim fell backward onto her rear in the snow.

As Lim grumbled and pushed to her feet, Ranma retrieved her sword, holding onto it as he looked at her. “You want to explain to me what’s got you in such an angry mood? Did I say something wrong? I mean, it’s not exactly unusual for me to accidentally say something stupid, but unless ya explain, I don’t know what to apologize for.”

“You haven’t said anything stupid to me. Rather, you haven’t said enough to me,” Lim said with a sigh, staring at Ranma’s uncomprehending face. “You’ve been spending a lot of time every night with Valentina. I’m not the only one that has remarked on it. Is there something you want to tell me?”

Ranma blinked once, then again before he understood what she was hinting at. “Oh. Um, I hadn’t realized how that could be seen, I guess. We haven’t been doing anything if that’s what you’re talking about.”

Lim reaching up to push an errant strand of hair back over her ear in a move that arrested Ranma’s attention as he stared at the blonde hair in her fingers. “Honestly, I didn’t expect you to be doing anything with her, as you put it. Nor, honestly, would I object to such if you were upfront about it.”

She saw Ranma’s eyes widen at that and hurried on before he could question her about it. “Why are you doing that anyway? I realize that Valentina is a fascinating conversationalist from my time traveling with her. But surely she isn’t so fascinating as to monopolize your time every evening.”

*Taking it away from me*, Lim thought but did not add. That would’ve seemed a little too pathetic frankly.

Ranma played with his pigtail for a moment, staring at her thoughtfully. “Do you really want to know? It’s about, about where I came from, you know?”

Blinking in surprise, Lim shook her head slowly. “How did she find out?”

“She apparently did some snooping while in Leitmeritz. Valentina said a maid talked about some of the items I’d left behind. She investigated and added two and four together to get six.” Valentina had told him that during their second night spent talking about Ranma’s old world.

“That’s annoying. I had thought that our servants knew better than to gossip like that. Regardless, yes, I would like to know about what you two have been talking about.”

“You can join us tonight for our conversation then,” Ranma offered disingenuously. He hadn’t seen any kind of tension between the two women before this, so thought that a logical idea.

Lim looked at him, then chuckled dryly. “You know what, I think I will take you up on that offer.”

So it was that Valentina was somewhat annoyed to find Lim joining Ranma and herself that evening. Looking at Ranma, she watched as he shrugged his shoulders and admitted, “She was asking why we were spending so much time together, and I figured, well, if you have questions about where I came from that can help your people, maybe she does too for Elen’s. This is a good way of spreading it around, and not getting myself tied down doing it.”

The two women looked at one another, then Valentina chuckled, rose, and curtsied to Lim somewhat mockingly. “In that case, Limalisha, welcome.”

**OOOOOOO**

Later that week, the group consisting of Elen, Tigre, Regin, Ranma, Valentina and Lim left the refugee camp with the force of twenty men around them. They left Valentina’s pikemen company, with its captain in charge of the camp, his being the most senior officer being left behind. It was time for Regin to speak to the local Lords and to start preparing the weapons necessary to equip their recruits.

Lord Augre leaned back in his chair, two fingers pressing into his forehead as he leaned on them to stare across the table at Regin and Tigre, trying hard not to glare at his son, who had apparently been keeping secrets from him. Or at least one big secret, which was currently sitting across from him primly.

Regin had been cleaned up by this point for a few weeks, so there was nothing of her life on the run remaining in her appearance. She now wore a white gown which flowed down from her shoulders to her ankles, lined with fur and made of heavy wool. She even had some jewelry, what Tigre’s mother had left the family. She looked every inch the noblewoman, and yet, while Augre had no problem giving her a title, that was a far cry from believing Regin was who she claimed to be.

For just a moment, his attempt to not glare at his son failed, and his eyes bore into the younger man. In response, Gerard simply looked back at his father, before shrugging his shoulders lightly as if to say, ‘what would you have had me do.’ A sentiment that Augre felt deserved a proper thrashing, but he set that aside for now to turn back to Regin. “And the only thing of proof of your identity we have is Earl Vorn’s word that he met you in the King’s royal hunting grounds near Vincennes? While I would not gainsay your word Earl Vorn, that is very flimsy evidence. I am all for fighting Ganelon and Thenardier, but believing you are the princess is something else entirely.”

Regin smiled, but Valentina and Eleonora had coached her on this. It was now the time to wheel and deal, to promise future aid in return for present help as she had with Valentina.

“You are not in a position of strength,” Valentina had told her, extremely bluntly for the raven-haired Vanadis. “You must acknowledge that while playing to future strength. Future favors for present aid.”

Regin tented her fingers in front of her and said simply, “While that is true, further proof of my identity will be gathered in the course of the campaign against Duke Thenardier. Or perhaps even before that. With the scouts that Tigre and Sir Ranma…”

The old man barked out a laugh, looking over at Tigre. “’Sir’ Ranma! I haven’t interacted with the youth at all to this point, but even I have heard enough to know he would react poorly to such an address.”

“Yes, we’ve been trying to convince her not to call him that, but Regin is far too polite for Ranma’s uncouth nature,” Tigre chuckled.

“And you will continue to fail,” Regin said with a laugh. “After all, while he does not have a title now if he continues to serve our cause merely for friendship’s sake, then he will have earned a title and more in the future. I might even give him Lord Thenardier’s lands, or perhaps a portion of them.”

“To tie him further to you, you mean,” Augre said, nodding his head slowly. “Still, he would have to accept it.”

“There is that. Still, that is but a minor problem for the future. The problem is the ‘now.’ The goal of the Silver Meteor Army must change. We have already begun to do so. Lady Viltaria agreeing to cut back on the Zhcted troops that are part of the Army, lady Estes agreeing to loan her own troops out to us as mercenaries. I have also argued with both and told them very firmly that there will be no further territorial gains by Zhcted beyond Alsace.

“That just means that you have finalized the agreements we have already reached with them,” the older man interjected.

“But I was making that agreement as a future head of state, rather than a group of landed nobles in a broken kingdom who had no idea what might occur after the war was over.” She smiled thinly, having been coached on this point by Valentina especially. “That gives my words further added weight with the king of Zhcted.”

The man across the table from her set up abruptly. “You’ve been in contact with him.”

“I have. I have yet to hear back from my fellow royal, but that in itself is telling, is it not?” This wasn’t true, of course, the distance was much too far. But it was a white lie, as Regin knew that the King of Zhcted did not want to enlarge his lands overmuch. Even Alsace was a bit too much, judging from what Elen had passed on about her orders from the man.

“If he wanted to repudiate you, to formally make this a war of conquest he would’ve sent orders for Eleonora to take you into custody,” Augre mused, looking over to Eleonora, then looking to Valentina, who had, beyond introducing herself, remained silent throughout this conversation, sipping at her tea with evident delight.

Valentina smiled prettily back at him, shifting slightly in her chair, but the old man turned back to Regin, who simply nodded her head in acknowledgment of his words. “The king of Zhcted is wise in this. Alsace itself could be a manageable break in the defense between our two countries that the Voyes Mountain Range represents. Any further…” she shrugged, and the older man nodded.

Despite what Tigre and Eleonora had been able to do before winter began, there was really no good natural defensive line in the interior of Brune against a determined foe. Once winter ended, the river would cease to be any defense.

So you would either have to conquer the entire thing, or you would be forced to sink a large number of troops into guarding your new border. And Zhcted was not as populous as Brune was. Even though it had more cities, each of those cities was much smaller than the larger Nice, East Port and so forth.

The thought of those cities brought to mind what Augre wanted most of all, and he leaned forward. “Very well. Say perhaps that I believe you, that you are indeed Princess rather than the Prince. You ask me to overturn centuries of tradition, tradition indeed which go back to the creation of Brune itself. While you might be the titular heir, you are a woman,” he said bluntly. “A woman has **never** held the crown. Indeed, a woman has never held a noble title for longer than it has taken her to find a husband. In Brune anyway.”

His eyes slid to the two Vanadis, his face becoming apologetic. “I realize that it is not the case in Zhcted, but this is Brune. That tradition is held up by the priesthood and the power structure of the nobility. Do you think you can honestly claim to be able to overturn it once you have the crown? And why should I even think of doing so?”

“What would the alternative be?” Regin questioned sharply, showing more steel than she had previously, leaning forward angrily. “Which noble do you think has the strength to take it? Lord Ganelon? You have already repudiated any allegiance his way. Lord Thenardier? You have fought his forces!”

“Lord Tigre?” Augre asked, looking at the young man. “It was he who united us, who forced us to see it was our duty to stand against Thenardier and Ganelon.”

Tigre blanched, shaking his head violently. “Not a chance! Are you crazy, why in the world would I want that?”

The old man smiled thinly. “To stop a civil war from devolving into one consisting of dozens of tiny kinglets trying to fight for the crown.”

Regin smiled prettily. “Again, Lord Augre, you see correctly. So why would you not back me instead?” She stated it as if it was the most obvious thing possible, a foregone conclusion rather than a question.

“There are those who will say that the tradition of a male King is more important than any momentary stability you might offer,” Augre countered.

“And are you one of those?”

Augre smiled thinly and discarding any attempt to hide his avarice said, “Say rather that I can be persuaded not to be.”

“Ah, then we are down to brass tacks.” Regin smiled, leaning back in her chair. “What is it you want?”

The Viscount hesitated unconsciously, glancing at his son. For a moment he considered asking for a dynastic marriage, but he felt that perhaps that would take it too far. The Viscount was in a strong enough position to perhaps push for it, but frankly speaking, Gerard didn’t really have enough ambition or military ability to truly be a worthwhile king. He loved his son very much and believed that his head for numbers was a phenomenal skill. But he lacked the people power as it were, and so he decided against it.

So Augre went back to another demand, one his house had long coveted. “Did you know that your father the king declined to give me the freedom to grow my town into a city? He felt that at the time there was no need for another town to become a city in Brune. That it would upset the balance of power.”

“Whereas currently, the balance of power is so badly up in the air at present, that doing so could not have any appreciable impact,” Regin answered with a nod. “I remember that discussion, I was listening in on my father’s request. My father felt that while your town was perfectly placed and could perhaps grow into a city, that it was premature. You didn’t have the population numbers, nor any easy way to convince artisans or merchants to move to your lands over their current domiciles. Has that changed?”

“You might not have noticed, but we have had a tremendous influx of population recently,” the older man replied dryly.

Regin smiled and nodded. “But that is ephemeral perhaps, if you could give the crown a bit more in the future, then we could see to giving you that city charter…”

In her corner, Valentina smiled thinly behind her teacup. *She learns quickly, and yet, there is still that core of softness. Excellent. She will be you a useful ally for now, and easy enough to supplant later if needs be. Although, I doubt if it will come to that. If she cannot have Tigre by her side, and Elen certainly will fight against any such move, I rather think that this young princess will realize that reining as Queen is not in her. Give it a few years, and then she may welcome integration into a greater Zhcted.*

**OOOOOOO**

That was the first meeting but not the last in which Regin was forced to wheel and deal to retain the goodwill of the nobles whose men made up the majority of the Silver Meteor Army. During this, her presence, and the fact that Regin had been a princess rather than a prince became better known among the townsfolk. As before in the refugee camp, men came forward, willing to fight for the Princess, adding several hundred more volunteers to the recruits.

Thankfully for all concerned, Ranma didn’t handle any of their training any longer. He had trained enough men already, they could keep it going now. Nor was he involved with the political discussions, thankfully for all concerned.

Instead, he spent most of his mornings with the blacksmiths, trying to figure out a way to make a steam engine from scratch. This was not, needless to say, a smooth operation since, as Ranma had warned, he didn’t have any specific plans or really enough information to describe much except the paddlewheel steamer which he’d seen at one point in a picture. Even with that, the idea of using steam to power something that would normally take men to do seemed far away. The Blacksmiths understood the principle, but making it work was something else entirely.

However, one of Ranma’s other suggestions was much easier to put into production: the water-powered sawmill. After a little under a week of trial and error, Ranma, the local blacksmith, and the local miller had been able to construct one in a preexisting watermill that was used to make grain. The idea of using it in this manner had never occurred to anyone, but now that it had, it was clearly a game-changer.

“So, what do you think? I mean, this is only our second success, but I think it works pretty darn well,” Ranma stated proudly, for once taking pride in something beyond his martial arts or healing skills. He had helped build this, and the first success, which he called a swing plow. He and the blacksmith had built it after Ranma had taken a look at some of the farm tools the man sold, including one horse-drawn plow

The first time they saw this new version of the plow, the farmers in town called a miracle of Iarilo, goddess of the harvest. Plowing was always the hardest and most-man intensive aspect of farming, and that plow could mean a single man with a horse or mule could do the work of several in half the time.

Valentina, too, was extremely happy at what these two devices meant, both in themselves and what they meant for the future. “It’s enough to make us understand that your other ideas can work,” she answered aloud, not taking her eyes off the sawmill as it cut through several large planks of wood, something like avarice visible in her face for a moment.

The amount of manpower this device alone could save would be a massive boon in terms of smithing alone, especially for Osterode, which already had limited manpower to work with. It and the plow were more than enough to pay for her time here, to say nothing of the other inventions that Ranma had hinted to her about.

“I thank you for this, Ranma,” she said, grasping his hand and squeezing it. “The money and goods I might win for Osterode if the Silver Meteor Army succeeds in putting Regin on the throne is one thing. But this design is a very tangible benefit that I will be able to utilize upon returning home.”

But more Importantly to Valentina were their ongoing discussions. As their conversations continued, Valentina had somewhat steered clear of directly asking about the two subjects of most importance to her ambition: weapons and ruling. Yet eventually, the time when she would have to leave started to loom. Unlike Eleonora, Valentina had no real purpose to keep her here now that all the deal-making had been accomplished, and she had her letters of mark from Regin.

Combined, they were worth practically a princess’s ransom by this point. But in return for Valentina’s expertise, Regin had her army, and a basis on which to deal with other minor nobles, to convince them to come to her side, and perhaps, a way in which the Knightly orders could be convinced to break their neutrality in the Civil War. Or, if not, they would, at the very least, not work against the Silver Meteor Army.

However, her time with Ranma was somewhat hindered by the fact that Eleonora had decided to join the training times during the evening, which lengthened the time of those training sessions considerably. And yet, to Ranma, that was all the good, so she couldn’t complain.

Moreover, from Ranma’s perspective, one of these moments gave him a new insight into Valentina’s personality. It showed that despite the way she sometimes acted, that Valentina was still very much a maiden.

Elen’s sword flashed towards Ranma’s head, but he ducked underneath the blow instead of trying to sway to the side or leap over it, something that had never failed to take Elen by surprise.

This time, it didn’t. Instead, Elen moved with Ranma’s dodge lashing downwards with a strike from her blade.

Ranma ducked around this one, his fist flashing up towards her head as he pushed upright. But Elen dodged as well, but then Ranma caught her sword arm and pulled her down and to the right, his other hand reaching for a pressure point. But Elen got out of Ranma’s hold in an unusual way, going with the movement, then just as Ranma lashed out with his free hand, she dodged it and then reared backward and then shot her head forward in a headbutt.

The headbutt smashed into Ranma’s forehead but simply blinked, his head shifting back very slightly as Elen’s bounced off. “Ouch,” he said blandly while letting go of Elen, who stumbled to her knees in the snow of the training salle.

“W, what just happened?” the silver-haired girl moaned, her sword dropping to the ground as she raised both hands to her head. “Oww….”

“Yeah. You probably shouldn’t try that again. My head is just as hard as the rest of me,” Ranma said as nearby Valentina started to giggle.

“Of gods, no kidding! I think I gave myself a concussion! What is your body made up, Stone?!” Elen moaned. Closing her eyes tightly. “Oh Eris, the light hurts…”

“Bah, most stones could only wish to be as hard as my body!” Ranma said with a laugh, reaching down to pick Elen up and gently carry her over to the side of the training salle, where Tigre had stopped instructing a series of archers to watch.

He wasn’t the only one. The rest of his men were also doing the same, but most of their attention wasn’t on Elen, Rather, it was on the sight of Valentina. The raven-haired Vanadis had largely exuded a mysterious, aloof, somewhat winsome air before this. Now she was, down on her knees laughing her head off like a lady who had just seen the funniest thing in the world, while deep in her cups. This of course set her chest to jiggling in a way that was completely distracting to every male there. Even Ranma couldn’t stop himself from looking.

Valentina continued to laugh for a full minute before getting control of herself and looking around. Tracing the lines of sight of all the men there, she blushed furiously. Placing one hand over her chest, she quickly twisted around, using Ezendeis to throw up a cloud of snow particles, and by the time it cleared, Valentina had already hidden herself beyond a snowdrift.

The next day, Elen did not join them for obvious reasons. And Valentina, once Ranma finished teasing her mercilessly about her little moment, lead her conversation with Ranma to the topics she wanted to discuss. “So Ranma, we’ve discussed science and the lack of magic in your world, and you’ve described many of the wonders from your own time. But with everything you’ve described, I can’t imagine that you are a typical example of even a, what was it, a samurai in the present day. So, what are soldiers like in your world? What are their weapons and training like?”

Ranma tried to keep the conversation away on soldiers and their training, but that didn’t work as Valentina kept on shifting the topic back to their gear. The idea of Soldiers carrying most of their own kit was interesting, and one she could possibly follow up on, but it was the weapons she was most interested in.

Eventually, Ranma caved and began to talk about guns: what they were, what he knew of how they worked and their history. In this, Ranma described the earliest kind of guns he could remember seeing pictures of, the kind that had been used during the Napoleonic Wars, an area of time that had interested him a lot at one point simply because of how the wars had been of maneuver and terrain, morale and training, way more than sheer numbers. The Guerilla War that the Spaniards had fought against the French had also impressed Ranma despite their numerous setbacks.

It interested Valentina too, and after writing down all the notes she could make of guns, adding them to her notes about medical techniques and various other bits of information – she’d had to spend several gold coins on parchment by this point - she began to ask questions about Napoleon and his rise to power. At first, she was utterly horrified. A minor noble taking part of a, a people’s revolution? Why ever would the people want to govern themselves like that? Certainly, the idea didn’t seem one that would occur to any of the peasants or yeomen she knew.

And yet, as the story continued, she found there was much to admire in. Napoleon’s practicality, his ruthlessness with his enemies, and yet his willingness to make those enemies into allies. Did Napoleon treat them poorly, yes, which was a mistake, one that she felt any true dynast would have seen. And as for that idiotic Continental System? Pure folly. Even a practically landlocked lord like Valentina knew that it cost less to ship more supplies over water than overland.

Yet, it was the size of his empire, and how it was held together by the military that drew her eyes. How he conquered and then had added many of those conquered enemies into his armies at times. Yes, there was quite a lot to learn there she felt, both in terms of what to do and what not to.

During this discussion, Ranma surprised her. “I’m kind of surprised that you’re interested in guns, Valentina. Since historically speaking, ya could say they’re are one of the main reasons why the idea of nobility and suchlike failed in my world.”

Valentina paused her notetaking, looking up at Ranma thoughtfully. They had touched on the aspect of governance in his world, and much like with the French Revolution, she had been appalled to learn that the majority of the better, more profitable and stable governments of the world in his time had been what Ranma called democracies. The very idea of democracy was silly, in her opinion. Four years on the job? How would you ever learn how to do a job properly in so little a time? However, she realized that even with weapons like these, any such movement would be hundreds of years in the future.

“To my mind, most of your nobility seems to have failed on the two most basic tests of all dynasts. They stopped thinking about the dynasty, about the future, and only thought of themselves. They started to see the world as they wished it to be, rather than as it really was. That is not my problem, nor will it ever be,” she said dryly. “My problem is the conservation of manpower and creation of said. The various concepts and ideas you have given me to build on will help in that area. Furthermore, we have magic. There will always be a need for such in our world. And tell me this, could these weapons from the Napoleonic era hurt you?”

“Nope,” Ranma answered, shaking his head. “They’d sting like blazes, but they wouldn’t be able to break skin or bone or even bruise much, the speed they travel isn’t fast enough. And cannonballs are too slow too, I’d just be able to dodge them. Modern guns back are a different thing entirely. Some of them can hurt me a lot, some of them could even kill me if I didn’t see the shooter in time to dodge. Or if the bullet was just too damn fast for me to. And that says nothing about a lot of other modern weapons that you don’t have near enough knowledge to understand. There was a reason why martial arts and magic were beginning to disappear for my world entirely after all.”

“Exactly, but that time is not here in this world. Magic is very prevalent here even if most of it is not usable by the majority of people. Magical beasts occasionally range out from the mountains. Dragons, all of whom I believe would bounce weapons off easily, and others. And of course our Viralts whose abilities no amount of science will ever match.” Valentina smiled, laying a hand down on her notes careful to avoid the recently inked ones. “These weapons, what they will really mean if we can build them, is the doom of the **barbarian,”** she emphasized. “The Horse Lords from beyond the steps, the armies of Muozinel…”

“You sure about that one?” Ranma interrupted, his brow furrowing.

She waved her hand airily. “Muozinel doesn’t have the industrial capacity to follow up on some of these suggestions, or even the agricultural. They could perhaps produce gunpowder, but they couldn’t produce enough bronze, or enough iron. Not quickly. Whereas I, I have a small iron mine. I have a budding alchemist’s guild since I made an effort to bring them in several years ago. I have access to what you call sulfur, saltpeter in terms of bat guano if my memory is correct on the connection there, and my lands can create charcoal, if not cheaply. I can start experimenting with guns, organize the industry behind them, and train my army in their use. And with it, my lands will **never** be able to threatened by barbarians again.”

*And my personal power will be magnified hundred-fold! And if the wielder of Muma hasn’t returned before then, I might just absorb her lands into my own entirely. I would go from the smallest Vanadis land to the third largest.* Legnica was the largest by a significant margin thanks to the money its city created, while Sofy’s land was just large in terms of area, being mostly farmland. Leitmeritz was currently tied as third along with Ludmila’s territory. *With such a powerbase, the king might be forced to take me into consideration as his successor directly rather than*

Ranma nodded slowly cocking his head thoughtfully as he watched Valentina turn back to her notes. Her free hand was playing with her raven locks while she stared with a surprising amount of intensity at the notes in front of her. Her eyes practically sparkled, and occasionally her tongue flicked out just a bit as she made this or that note on Napoleon and his campaigns, making connections and adding her own impressions. It was a kind of sexy look, Ranma thought, but that didn’t stop him from asking his next question. “And the conversations on statecraft and so on?”

At that, Valentina looked up again from her notes, her eyes suddenly narrowing. “You’ve noticed. I had wondered.”

Ranma laughed, his chuckle half-wry, half-mocking. “I may act like a hick that just came in on the turnip cart sometimes, but I ain’t stupid Valentina. You asked a lot of questions about empires, about how they were formed, how long they existed, why they fell and so forth, but you never asked about their leadership directly. Did you think I wouldn’t notice?”

“I wasn’t certain what you thought of my questions honestly. Most of the time, I felt as if you were simply answering my questions because, as our agreement stated, I was sparring with you every day, and you were bored with training. Was I wrong?” Valentina smiled faintly, leaning back in her chair now and looking at him.

“Hehe, there was a bit of that, especially at first, but I’ve also been getting to know you,” Ranma answered, his shoulders twitching in a shrug. “I don’t think you’re as pure as the driven snow or whatever, and I think you’re ambitious, but I don’t know the extent of it. Ya could be after independence for Osterode, too long forgotten by the players of the kingdom perhaps?”

Valentina’s lips twitched in a smile, and Ranma smirked. “Okay, so not that. But I’m not going to play twenty questions with you. If you want to continue to ask me these questions about my world, and everything there, our histories and everything else, you’re going to have to start ponying up some information on your own.”

For a moment, Valentina thought once more about trying to seduce Ranma. She had seen his looks her way and indeed had sent a few of her own his way. That would definitely be interesting. But there were problems with that, and Valentina realized any attempt to get out of this in such a manner would alienate Ranma either now or in the future. She licked suddenly dry lips and fought the urge to look over at her Ezendeis, wondering what it thought of this. But all Valentina received in reply was the same feeling of approval she always did.

“Ranma…” Valentina paused, licked lips again, then began anew. “I… did you know that my family is a very minor line of the royal house? I have known that forever. And… ever since Prince Ruslan died, I looked at the people who might be in line for the throne and found them wanting.”

“No,” she said, suddenly shaking her head, deciding to come clean with all the swiftness of a gambler deciding to go all in. “Even before that. When I was a little girl, when Osterode was overrun by Horse Lords’ raiders again, and I was in the palace being looked after by our distant cousins. As my father went to war to throw them out, I read a novel, a history book about a queen of Asvarre. The Conquering Queen it was called.”

“That tale enthralled me. Something about that story grabbed my attention and would not let me go. I decided then and there that I would become queen. I would become the queen of Zhcted, the greatest queen of all time. I would lead to my people to hegemony, I would build an empire!” Valentina’s voice rang out, like a clarion bell full of confidence, vigor and just a hint of obsession.

Looking at her, Ranma was struck by the willpower of the woman. Every woman Ranma had met in this universe had it, a lot of willpower. So much so that the women back home looked like pale limitations. Elen’s willpower to be the best warrior, to be the best commander she could be. Sasha’s to defend her city and lands. Titta to find Tigre’s heart. Even Regin. Though hidden most of the time, Regin had it too, a will to claim her throne.

But all of them paled in the face of Valentina Glinka Estes and her driving passion for this dream of hers. *But is that a good thing or a bad thing?*

Valentina put her hand on Ranma’s on the table between them, her voice and tone earnest and forceful. “Will you help me? Will you help me achieve my ambition? To unite this continent under one banner?”

Ranma looked from that hand to Valentina’s hopeful face, his own showing his inner turmoil. This was quite a bit more than he had expected. Although now that it came to it, Ranma didn’t know what he had expected, just not this. Not that look of complete and total conviction, not that strength of her dream. *And the fact of the matter is, I don’t know Valentina well enough to know what kind of queen she’d be. But… But I can judge her by her actions, and how she answers one very specific question.*

His face firming, Ranma said, “You want to conquer the continent, but you have helped Regin strengthen her position. Why would you want her on the throne?”

“Yes. Another woman on a throne. That can only be to the good in many ways. And frankly, I don’t know if Regin will actually want to keep it once she has the throne. I believe that she is trying for the throne now because the alternatives are so much worse. But will she have the wherewithal, the character and personality to retain the throne?” Valentina shrugged. “Either Regin will, and she becomes a strong ally, one who I can deal with, or, she doesn’t, asks for my help, and becomes a vassal in the future. Until then, Regin’s being on the throne will hopefully secure our border with Brune, and once the Horse Lords are cowed, we can turn our attention on Muozinel, perhaps be in a position to invade them in turn when they attempt us once more.”

Nodding his head thoughtfully, Ranma decided that, coming from her background, that was actually pretty honest dealing. Not in his terms, but then again, Ranma wasn’t a noble. *And I’ve never wanted to be any kind of leader, let alone a king. Time for another angle here.* “The King of Zhcted, could he have been behind the poisoning of Sasha?” Ranma shot out, springing it on the woman as abruptly as he could. “I healed her of it, and I know it wasn’t her family’s normal sickness.”

Valentina’s eyes widened, and she looked around quickly. But thankfully, they were talking alone in her quarters at present, and no one was around.

Or at least she thought that was the case until the door burst open and Elen strode in shouting, “What!?”

Valentina crossed the distance between where he had been sitting at the table and to the doorway in an eyeblink and was holding her hand over the other Vanadis’ mouth. “Quiet!” Elen glared at her Arifar vibrating in its sheath as air eddies began to build up around it, but Valentina glared right back. “Tossing around accusations like that, even here in enemy territory, is not a good idea.”

She looked over at Ranma, who moved around the two women and stared down the hallway in either direction. Since the coast was still clear, he nodded to Valentina as he picked up a basket of food that Elen had dropped by the door. He set it on the table, then moved back to the doorway, pulling the door off the floor and setting it back upright, where he quickly went to work repairing the hinges.

“At least you came alone,” Valentina muttered, removing her hand from Elen’s mouth and wiping it on her skirt. “Honestly, Elen, did you have to lick my hand?”

Elen shrugged unrepentantly. “I always found it a good way to get people to stop doing that when I was younger. That, or biting. Now explain! I thought you were just after Ranma for his information, but this is something new.”

“How much did you overhear?” Valentina riposted, beside herself with worry but womanfully not showing it.

“I wasn’t eavesdropping!” Elen huffed. “I was coming to tell Ranma that I am sick and tired of sitting on my rear and ‘letting my mind rest’ like he told me too and wanted to rejoin our training. I only heard him asking you about the whole poison thing. Why didn’t you tell me about that when you first arrived!? Why didn’t Lim?”

“Because Sasha swore us to secrecy. I wouldn’t have even asked Valentina about it, but she mentioned that she had talked with Sasha before tracking me down,” Ranma said with a shrug.

“And he wondered if Sasha had recruited me into looking for her poisoner,” Valentina added, carefully hiding a smile as Ranma trotted that out, knowing where his question had been going. She also knew Ranma liked Elen. “She did not, but she hinted at it. And I will have your vow Elen, right here and now, to not look into this!”

“Wh, what!? Sasha’s my friend damn it, why would I…” Elen spluttered.

“Because you have little to no ability when it comes to politics or spycraft!” Valentina hissed. “Because this is big, and it could be bigger still, and if you go barging around asking questions, you will be discovered and possibly silenced. Or force the individuals in question into hiding, which would be bad too. Now your oath, Eleonora Viltaria!”

Elen glared, but Ranma reached over and tugged her to sit down on the bed, sitting down at the table himself. “She’s right, Elen. I don’t like it, but neither of us would be any good on this particular battlefield.”

“Fine, I give you my word I won’t discuss this or even act on anything I hear about this information!” Elen snarled, then sagged a bit, looking somewhat bewildered now as well as quietly furious. “But the king? That, that can’t be right.”

Ranma sighed. “Sasha was poisoned, and the man who supplied the poison got away before Sasha’s men could catch up to him. The guy doing it had no idea where the poison came from, or why it was being administered. He was just in debt and was taking money on the side to pay it off. What little I was told, hinted at some kind of connection to your country’s royal court in the guy who got away.”

From there Ranma described more about the poison. How it was chosen to emulate the sickness that had passed down Sasha’s family for so many generations. How he had been forced to burn it out of her, essentially replaced her blood entirely, and how it had pushed him to his limits.

When he finished, Valentina spoke up. “As for me, while I met with Sasha, there is no evidence I know to point to the King himself ordering that poisoning. But, and here is an interesting point, I was never able to discover whether or not Crown Prince Ruslan’s illness and subsequent slide into madness was natural either when I investigated it.”

Elen hissed at that, her eyes widening but Valentina continued unhurriedly. “There is some evidence there I cannot disclose without permission that could point to his death being unnatural. But it is circumstantial at best. Yet he was the crown prince…”

“So either it is the king, or there is some kind of shadowy cabal moving in the shadows, of your government at the highest level,” Ranma replied with a sigh.

“Though redundant, that is essentially the case,” Valentina chuckled wanly, staring daggers at Elen. “These are very murky waters indeed, and if there is a cabal in Zhcted with the reach and desire to move against Vanadis, we cannot afford to have you bumbling about. Even I might be in danger if I return to the capital and start asking the wrong kind of questions.”

“Fine, I’ll agree with that. It’s not like I’ll have time anyway, with everything going on here in Brune. But, but if it is the king…” Trailing off, Elen looked troubled.

“I don’t think it is,” Valentina answered reluctantly. It would have been a perfect way to bring Elen alongside her ascension to the throne, but it would have been based on a lie. And one of the things that she had learned from talking to Ranma was that Emperors whose rule was based on lies and shadow politics rarely lasted.

Especially if they alienated their best generals in the doing. “I do think someone in the court is part of this conspiracy, but I do not see what the king would have gotten out of it. Yes, he has always been leery of the power that Vanadis wield, but that is a far cry from severely weakening the defense of our country by murdering Sasha.”

Elen breathed a sigh of relief, then nodded more firmly. “I’ll leave you to it then. But if you do need help hunting these people down contact me and I’ll help as best I can.” She looked over at the basket, then shook her head. “For some reason though I’m not in the mood to eat or to spar. I think I’ll go take a walk through the town with Tigre. I need to do something to clear my head.”

Ranma and Valentina were silent as they watched Elen leave, though Ranma was amused that Elen brought the food with her despite what she’d said. He watched as Valentina moved to the door, checking the corridor outside before returning. “So you don’t think it is the king?”

“I have no information or evidence to point in that direction. I have no evidence to point anywhere else.” Valentina shrugged. “I haven’t had the time to look into it. My interest in you pulled me in this direction, and I don’t trust any of my agents to ask questions on something that could be so potentially disastrous. I will make subtle inquiries later, but it is just too dangerous to look into with anything but my full attention. And the last thing I want is to get Elen or any of the other Vanadis involved in this.”

“I see…” Ranma said, then made his decision. “I, I don’t know enough about you as a ruler to say you would be a good queen. But I know enough to think that you’d try to be. I won’t fight against you. I won’t support you against your king, or against Brune if it comes to it unless they attack first. But I will call you a friend, and if Zhcted is invaded, I’ll stand with you. If you need help against this shadow faction, I will help you. And if it does turn out to be the King… then I will help you there too. But I already have friends here in Brune that come first. Sorry, but the threat here is the kind I’m most suited to face, not this ‘daggers in the dark’ stuff, or even helping you set up guns and everything else in your county.”

For once Valentina allowed all her thoughts to be visible in her body language as she sagged, smiling happily at Ranma. “I, at this point that is far better than I expected Ranma. I realize I can’t be your priority and I am fine with that, I just didn’t, after these past few weeks, I just didn’t want to turn you into an enemy. Having you as a possible ally is so much better. I… thank you. Just thank you.”

Once more, Ranma found himself somewhat stunned by how a simple smile could transform Valentina’s face, making it younger, more girlish, and honestly far more attractive. “Heh, well, yeah, I um, I, er, I better get going. Unless you want to talk more?” The emotions he saw in Valentina’s face were making him kind of uncomfortable, making him wonder what Lim would think about all this.

Valentina shook her head, then as he walked off fell back on her bed, dizzy with delight. Valentina had what she wanted now: aid in building up Osterode as much as possible, information that she could use to guide her steps forward. She had been warned against too many backroom dealings before she stepped into that world too far to back off. Enough aid, perhaps to not need to move in the shadows to remove the other possible successors for the throne at all.

That should have been the source of her giddy joy, but it wasn’t. No, that was caused by something else. The fact that Ranma hadn’t rejected her, had even said he would stand beside her at need. And what that might imply in the future. *I might have found not just an ally, but a man to stand beside me as well. Although I suppose I should make it clear to him that I desire Ranma in that capacity as well. And… and perhaps point out to him and Limalisha some facts of life that Lim seems to want to avoid.*

Of course, Ranma didn’t spend all of his time trying to transform his very vague memories of school into something tangible in this new world. Nor did he spent all of his time training or talking with Valentina. Occasionally, he simply spent time with his friends.

He and Tigre had a competition on if he throws a javelin to hit a target before Tigre could launch an arrow. Ranma lost most of the time, but the fact that he won even a few times was enough to push Tigre to better his own training. The two of them talk strategy tactics and war, a conversation that Eleonora, Gerard, Lord Augre, Valentina and Lim all joined.

They also played pranks on one another, something they’d done during the first winter Ranma had spent in this world, dragging Titta and several others into their war. Valentina at first abstained from this, thinking pranks beneath her, until she found the shaft Ezendeis smeared with grease, in her sleep, with neither her, nor astonishingly Ezendeis, knowing how it happened. Then she joined in wholeheartedly. Titta alas, found herself the brunt of many of these pranks once Lim had informed Elen of Ranma’s knowledge of a way to help the pain of the monthly monster.

But every so often Ranma wandered the town with Lim. Territoire didn’t have much in the way of real artisans outside of its metalworking, but it made up for that lack in food, and with all the refugees around, adding around three and a half thousand more mouths to feed to the regular town’s inhabitants, this aspect of its life had grown even as the actual supplies started to dwindle. But Lord Augre was a very good organizer and had laid aside enough grain and other foodstuffs to see them all through the winter without too much in the way of rationing.

Two days after the interrupted discussion with Valentina found Ranma and Lim putting together a picnic basket in the town, and then leaving on a minor date. It wasn’t quite impossible to have a real picnic type date during winter, but it was hard, yet that made it all the better for the both of them, and both had found that they rather prefer to get out and about occasionally away from the busy, crowded town.

This evening found Ranma and Lim around a campfire that Ranma had made for them well out beyond Territoire’s outskirts, cheerfully warming their feet as they snacked on brandy cakes. These were cakes which had been cooked in some kind of sauce that had brandy, cinnamon and honey. They warmed the body within and without, though they had been expensive, a full two silver pieces for a bushel of twelve. But worth it, Ranma reflected. They, some sweetmeats and cheese, and a good cider had made for an extremely pleasant meal. *Not the kind of thing I’d have eaten back in my old world, but still damn good. And the company makes it better.*

He looked over at Lim who also seemed to approve greatly of the cakes, if the happy smile on her face was any indication. “Remind me to thank Eleonora for the recommendation of these.”

Lim nodded firmly, swallowing her bite quickly. “I could wish that she and Tigre would stop sneaking out and think that they are actually able to do so without being noticed, but even so, they are incredibly tasty.”

“Heh, me I think it’s mostly Elen pushing him to come out with her. He’s been spending too much time in those meetings with Regin, and she’s been excluded from most of them.” Ranma chuckled, then pointed to Lim’s mouth, “You have something right there.”

At that Lim flicked her tongue out to try to get the offending bit of pastry, and Ranma found his eyes locked on the pink appendage like a heat-seeking missile. “Did I get it?”

“Not quite,” Ranma rumbled, his voice low and deep. “Let me.” He leaned forward, licking the cake away before his lips shifted over just slightly to kiss her, his arm going around her and pulling her close. Lim did not fight it, kissing him back just as ardently. They hadn’t gone any further than kisses, but they had kissed many times before this, and each time was as sweet as the last. The added brandy spice to her lips just added to the effect.

Before they could get too into it though, they were interrupted by a voice, one they both knew quite well, but had not anticipated hearing at that moment. “Ara, that looks rather nice, can I have one?” The voice asked, the tone somewhere between pouting and coquettish.

The two would-be lovers pulled away from one another, turning to stare at where the voice came from only to find Sophia standing there. She was clad in a long dark gray cloak over her normal green and white dress, her hair was somewhat frazzled, and she looked exhausted. But her eyes were sparkling with delight as she stared at the two of them, and her mouth was set in a smile as she leaned on Zaht, who was now chuckling loud enough to grab Ranma’s attention.

The moment Lim moved away from Ranma, feeling the pull of propriety on her person, Sophia swooped in, nuzzling into his side while pulling one of Ranma’s arms unresisting over her shoulders. So ensconced Sofy then grabbed up one of the cakes, and took a bite, munching on it happily. “Now this, I could get used to. Thank you, Ranma.”

“Lady Sophia!” Lim barked. “There are proprieties to consider.”

“Oh poo, don’t be like that. Surely you’re not against sharing some of your meal with a poor traveler,” she quipped, the look in her eyes telling Lim she was talking about something else entirely when it came to sharing. Lim spluttered, and Ranma just stared down at Lim and how she had pressed her full, soft, beautiful body against his like a deer caught in the headlights. Sophia took the opportunity to finish the cake she’d picked up, then leaned up and gave Ranma a kiss on the chin, then the neck before she pulled back, sighing contentedly. “I take it that because of the two of your presence, that Eleonora and Lord Tigre are here?”

“Along with others,” Lim said somewhat stiffly. “Lady Estes came to make inquiries on Ranma and his origins. And one of the refugees was not… was not who she seemed to be,” Lim finished somewhat lamely, unable to really think of discussing the appearance of Princess Regin among them in less than a parchment’s worth of words. “You will have to meet her to understand all of the changes her presence has wrought.”

From her place on the other side of Ranma, Lim glared at the other woman for a moment. Then she seemed to sigh, nodding her head and leaning back into Ranma’s chest from that side. Ranma froze at that, then as Lim hugged him, looked at her in question.

“Ara, I believe that Lim hasn’t yet pointed out to you Ranma that harems are quite the thing in this world. So there is no stigma among the noble class for this kind of thing,” Sofy replied, humming in delight at the warmth Ranma naturally gave off. She had been on the road for more than two months now, trying to get to the bottom of the dragon mystery with limited success, and being warm, safe and with friends again was a true joy.

Ranma blinked, then blinked again, several times. “I… what? Just what? How does that make sense?”

Lim shrugged her shoulders, looking a little annoyed but not nearly as much as Ranma would have expected any woman to be when another woman was making moves on her boyfriend. “Honestly, I sort of saw this coming when the three of us were on the road. So it isn’t that strange that Lady Sofya would be interested in spending time with you.”

“But I… what?” Ranma repeated, utterly stupefied. Two women were showing him affection at the same time, and we're not fighting over him or blaming him for leading the other woman along? This did not compute. “Where’s the shouting, the weapons being pulled out, the accusations of my being a pervert or smashing me with a hammer?”

Making a note of that, and Lim’s look of understanding for further discussion, Sofy kept a smile on her face, hugging Ranma tighter even as she felt his muscles (mmm, yummy) bunch under his clothing ready to bolt. “It’s not that difficult to understand. Outside of Zhcted, women are at best secondary citizens. Even the highest of nobility, the daughters of Dukes or even princesses, are seen as bargaining chips rather than actual players in the great game. And inside our country, men have always been allowed to create their own harems due to a legend leading back to the Black Dragon and the creation of the Vanadis. Then too, harems have always been lauded by the priesthood as a way to bring powerful bloodlines together.”

“I know about the Black Dragon legend, Elen explained it to Tigre and me when we were her prisoners in Leitmeritz. But I haven’t even bothered learning about your religions at all. I am beginning to think I probably should have,” Ranma muttered, looking at the two of them. “So, you’re all right with this Lim?” Ranma wanted to be clear on this before he let his body calm down from its current flight or fight state.

“All right is perhaps a little strong,” the blonde on his left answered honestly. “Say rather that I am not willing to alienate either Lady Sofya, or in any way bother you by trying to fight for your affections against her. I would rather take your affections as I can get them, especially considering, as I have mentioned before, that our lives might take us apart just as easily as they brought us together.”

“That is a thought uppermost in my mind as well,” Sofy said. “I’ve been thinking about this for a while as I was out on this mission. At first, I was worried about, well, getting involved with you emotionally. But after weeks of worrying at the problem in my spare time, I decided that with our lives the way they are, perhaps it is better to take what happiness we can.”

“And you don’t have a problem with, with sharing a guy either Sofy? I mean, you’re a Vanadis! If any woman has enough power in this world to make their own decisions, to not settle for someone who already has a girl after them, it would be you,” Ranma protested.

“True. But once I reached thirty, if I reach thirty at all, I would be expected to willingly pass on my weapon to the next Vanadis. There has never been a Vanadis older than thirty, and very rarely have Vanadis died in bed. And as for sharing, I…”

Sofy blushed looking down at Ranma’s chest, her hair hiding her eyes from her for a moment as she bit her lip before going on. “I have not met a man before you that grabbed my interest so much Ranma. It’s not just your handsomeness, but your skills, your kindness, the way you talk to me, how you don’t see me as a Vanadis or even a noblewoman, just a girl who happens to be a friend. Your face when you saw me just now clinched it for me. I cannot say I love you Ranma, we don’t know one another nearly well enough for that, but I would like to get to know you better.”

“Okay,” Ranma said slowly. “Okay. So we’re not, not talking about anything permanent, no official harem here just yet. I, I can see that I guess. If, if that’s um…” He looked down at Lim, hesitating, trying to scrunch up his courage to ask a question this whole conversation had brought to the fore of his brain.

Thankfully Lim did it for him. “You’re talking about Lady Valentina? I know she’s interested in you as well… I at least I think she is. Although to the best of my knowledge she hasn’t done anything beyond that kiss to the cheek that first at the baths.”

“What’s this? You said she was just interested in questioning Ranma about his origins!” Sofy said suddenly, rearing up slightly and twisting around to stare at both of them in surprise.

“It’s just a feeling. Lady Valentina is somewhat hard to read at times beyond her normal bubbly attitude,” Lim answered, also pulling away from the group hug to look up at Ranma. “Ranma?”

“Valentina hasn’t flirted with me or anything like that if that’s what you’re asking. Although some of the things she’s said, you could take them to mean that she was interested in me? I don’t know. I just think it’s well it’s a possibility.”

Sofy’s eyes narrowed. “Because you’re interested in her,” she intoned, her tone accusing despite her best efforts to not let it become so.

Ranma flinched, looking away and once more, Sofy noticed his body tense for flight. But he didn’t. Instead, Ranma slowly nodded his head. “Sorry, I realize that I’m sort of…I think myself a tool for saying this, but I know I’d be interested in getting to know her better too. Her mind and her personality are just really interesting, that, that’s about the only way I can say it,” he finished, which sounded lame even to his ears.

Sofy sighed, then deliberately moved back down to lean against him again, tracing her fingers up and down his chest. “Ugh, fine. Given what I’ve already said about my duties pulling me away from you, I can hardly say that one more girl being interested in you is a problem, especially one who will face the same constraints. Get to know her, I suppose, just don’t expect me to be happy about it. I’m perfectly willing to put up with it, but I don’t know Tina all that well either, which is rather irritating given my position as the mediator been Vanadis.”

Ranma nodded, then added earnestly, “I’m not going to push for anything there, I’m not even going to mention it. I’m just asking that if she comes on to me, do you want me to turn her down? I will if it bothers you.”

“Would you? Would you really? Even I have to admit Valentina Glinka Estes is a great beauty. I can’t imagine a man would not want her interest.” Sofy was skeptical, although the fact that Lim silently reclaimed her position on Ranma’s other side, saying nothing on this topic was a bit of a surprise.

“Yeah, well, I ain’t normal then,” Ranma replied with a laugh, but his voice was earnest as he went on. “I wouldn’t do it without some regret, but well Lim and I have been courting for two weeks, you and I and Lim traveled together before that, and you and I are friends. Valentina is a friend too, but I’ve only **known** her for two weeks entirely, so it’s an easy decision to make.”

Sofy smiled, and kissed his cheek again, her lips lingering there much closer to Ranma’s mouth than before. “Thank you, Ranma,” she whispered, before kissing his neck this time, delighting in the shiver this caused him, the twitch of his muscles under her.

During her time away on this last mission, Sofy had, as she had stated, a change of heart when it came to Ranma and her attraction to the martial artist, which she repeated in her mind now. *Life is too short to worry about the bad things that might happen, especially when you consider the bad things that will happen regardless. Few Vanadis die in bed, and my occupation as a special envoy puts me in danger far more than even the other Vanadis. If I can find some pleasure in flirting with Ranma, or, or more… if I can really forge a connection on an emotional level with him despite my duties taking me away from Ranma, despite his own nature keeping him here in Brune, then I will take what fun I can have.*

Eventually Sofy pulled back, smiling brightly at Ranma. “Thank you for that. However, like myself, Valentina will not be able to spend all that much time around you, as I said. So long as you enter any relationship with her with that in mind, I’m willing to put up with calling another Vanadis sister.”

Ranma frowned in confusion, and Lim supplied, “That is what the women of the harem routinely call one another. Of course, there are sisters, and then there are sisters, so the tone of the word can defer wildly.”

“Three doesn’t make a real harem in any event,” Sofy added, shaking her head. “None of us are going to fight for priority or anything like that. And I’m not saying this is going to be permanent either. I hate to repeat this, but I must. I’m interested in you, Ranma, quite a bit. But my duties as Vanadis will always come first, and I will not change that for anyone. Don’t become our enemy,” she whispered to herself, her eyes pleading with Ranma to understand that hidden message.

Ranma seems to do so, simply nodding his head once, then shrugging. Understood. So we're all going to be courting then, on and off? This is just us all getting to know one another like Lim and I have been doing? Nothing permanent, no vows or promises?”

“I rather like that better,” Lim said with a nod.

“Well, other than the fact that we would rather like to know if someone else catches your eye, or if you decide you would rather settle down with one of us,” Sofy retorted, but then chuckled. “But yes, slow, often interrupted courtship is going to eb the name of this little game.”

“Where the heck have you been anyway?” Ranma queried, somewhat desperate to change the subject. *I have no idea at all what the heck I’m supposed to say or do right now!*

Sophia scowled in annoyance. “I was nearly back to that river, whatever its name is, when my horse pulled up lame. Trying to find another horse took me about a week I think, by which time I began to hear some disturbing rumors about Lord Thenardier having access to dragons. That reminded me of the attack on Alsace, where he did indeed have dragons. So I decided to investigate that while I was here in Brune. If Thenardier can weaponize dragons then it was something that we as Vanadis would have to deal with, and would no doubt secure the kingdom for him. I wasn’t able to find anything. Not after a month of searching his lands. Only the fact that there is some old ‘wizard’,” she raised both hands to make quote marks, “who apparently works for Duke Thenardier. And that there are indeed rumors that there are at least two more dragons under his control now and that they will be marching with his army shortly on Duke Ganelon.”

“Well crap,” Ranma muttered remembering how his own attacks hadn’t really done all that much to the land Dragon. *Although, there supposed to be the ones with the most defense. Maybe I’d have better luck against another variety? Something to look forward to,* he thought, cracking his knuckles as he thought about it.

Sofy then shivered. She had been out in the winter for a little more than two months now, and even a Vanadis would eventually start feeling the cold. Ranma instantly put his arms around her again, before sliding one arm down her back towards her rear She blushed hotly and was about to say that he shouldn’t take such liberties so quickly after they had declared they were courting, but then Ranma lifted her into his arms as he got to his feet. Looking at Lim, he gestured with his head towards the distant Territoire. “Come on, let’s get this one some more warm type food, and I bet she should talk to Tigre and Elen. I think our date’s over with for now.”

“Date?” Sofy queried, her brows furrowing.

“That is what Ranma calls our little get-togethers,” Lim supplied as she moved around the small clearing, gathering up the bottle of water and the remnants of the food into their basket. “He’s told me much about his world in our conversations with Valentina and apparently courtship is much slower than here.”

“Ara, that sounds interesting. Tell me more,” Sofy instructed as Ranma carried her towards the town moving easily through the snow.

When they returned to Lord Augre’s small keep, they found Valentina and Elen both in the courtyard talking with Tigre about something. When they came in, Valentina’s eyes widened as she looked at the blonde Vanadis while Elen hurried forward, frowning in concern at her friend’s disheveled appearance. “Are you okay, Sofy?”

As Ranma set her down, Sofy patted down her hair, then smacked him lightly on the shoulder. “I’m perfectly well. Most of my current appearance was caused by this brute deciding he wanted to carry me back into town.”

“Mah, that’s rather nice, being treated like a princess,” Valentina said with a laugh, one hand rising to her mouth even as she stared at the other, slightly older Vanadis, one eyebrow raised in question.

Sofy slowly blushed, then looked away without answering, but that was answer enough for Valentina to let loose another giggle. Unlike Lim, Valentina knew how Sofy operated at times. Indeed, they were quite alike in how they hinted at their femininity, using it to their advantage occasionally without ever going beyond visual hints. To see Sofy actually blushing about a man was most fascinating to Valentina. *And somewhat annoying too, given my own interest in the man in question. Still, best to concentrate on the amusement factor for now.*

Trying not to let Valentina’s amusement at her expense get to her, Sofy turned to Tigre and Elen. “Suffice to say that my mission to the king did not go as I had hoped. But on the way back, I discovered rumors that Lord Thenardier was training further dragon’s even after he lost his last two against you during the Alsace campaign.”

Tigre blanched, while Elen simply frowned. “And is there any truth to them?”

“Enough smoke to indicate there’s a fire, even if I wasn’t able to discover how he was doing it. He apparently has a wizard working for him, but nothing more than that had made the common rumor mill,” Sofy said with a sigh.

Valentina scowled, but like Elen, it was more of a thoughtful expression than a worried one. Viralts were made to kill dragons, after all. “It’s not a quick process or an easy one, else he would already have them. That’s good, at least.” Then she asked the question she was most interested in. “And your mission was what, exactly?”

“Mah, you should know better than that Valentina.” Sofy laughed, her tone part jovial, part mocking. “Although should I question why exactly you are here at all? What with your illness, and Brune being on the other side of Zhcted from your holding?”

“You’re standing next to the reason and ask me that?” Valentina quipped, giggling. But there was no real humor in it, and the others all backed away a little as the two slightly older Vanadis glared at one another.

“What the heck is this about?” Ranma whispered to Elen, having moved to stand next to her as the two Vanadis glared at one another.

But Elen could just shrug her shoulders in ignorance, staring at her friend and Valentina as they stared off in turn. “I have no idea.”

“Well, in that case, perhaps we should adjourn elsewhere to discuss this further,” Sofy said, at last, still glaring at the other woman. Valentina nodded once, and the two of them turned to the others, who all flinched. “There should be somewhere we can talk in private, yes?”

“Er, me too?” Tigre asked, pointing at himself. “Only I was going out to hunt with my would-be scouts. We’re nearing the time where I am going to be giving this bunch their final test, and…”

“Oh no, if I have to sit in on this, at least I can secure some good company,” Elen rejoined, looping an arm through one of his and tugging the redheaded man along. “Come on, we can talk in the quarters Lim and I share.”

Over the next hour, Valentina explained what she was doing there in broad terms as Ranma described his world in equally broad words. Valentina made no mention of the guns or the steam engine he had described or her ambitions Ranma noticed. Still, he supposed that since this conversation was happening out in the open, that was prudent.

*And, while I doubt that Sofy would have anything to do with anyone poisoning Sasha, she is loyal to the king. Loyal beyond her own beliefs of right and wrong given this last mission of hers, so mentioning her ambitions isn’t in the cards either.*

For his part, Ranma obviously had no loyalty to the man and was very open to the possibility that he had been part of the conspiracy to murder Sasha. But that was a far cry from playing kingmaker, which sounded way too much like responsibility to Ranma’s mind. He was willing to help Valentina with information right now, and if she was attacked, he would come to her aid, be it a personal attack or a military one. But that was it.

Valentina ended the discussion by saying, “Unfortunately, my deadline has come up. I will need to leave within the next two days. If I am to make it back to my own county this season. I cannot be away for much longer. I trust my various wardens and my castellan, but there are some things that only the Lady of the county can see to.”

Ranma frowned at that but had to concede that she had warned him at one point that her deadline was coming up. Sofy frowned too, but for an entirely different reason, and her expression was much closer to a pout as she looked at Ranma and the others. “Unfortunately, I need to get on as well. The King will want to know about this. I’m afraid to say his options in terms of what to do here in Brune is going forward are going to be completely open. This might be a general war of conquest soon once he learns that the king is not only sick, but completely indisposed, unable to serve as a rallying force.”

“Or perhaps not!” Tigre interjected firmly, gesturing Sofy to wait a moment. “There is someone you need to meet.”

He got up and left the room quickly, leaving Sofy behind to look at Elen in confusion. She shrugged her shoulders wanly. “Um, let’s just say that your mission wasn’t the only thing getting complicated of late. You’ll see what I mean soon enough.”

Soon enough, Tigre came back, leading a confused looking Regin, who had been in council with Lord Augre and two more nobles who had recently arrived. When Tigre had said there was someone she needed to meet, Regin had cut their meeting short, trusting Tigre to know what he was saying. When she saw Sofya Obertas, who Regin had seen occasionally in her father’s court, she knew he had made the right decision. “Miss Sofya, may I introduce Princess Regin Estelle Loire Bastien do Charles, rightful heiress to the throne of Brune.”

Sofy’s mug of hot tea clattered to the table, and it was only Valentina’s quick thinking that stopped the tea from spilling all over her.

Later, after Regin shared her tale, Sofy scowled, biting her nail in thought, looking over at Valentina then Elen, then Lim. She did not look at Tigre nor Ranma, although it was clear that she wanted to. “This, this changes things. But, how it changes things is not a decision we should be making. The king is going be furious with all of us!” she suddenly exclaimed. “Three Vanadis conspiring to put a Princess on the throne of another country? Without his orders or even asking his opinion? That is so far beyond our remit, it’s not even funny.”

“True. But exactly how long do you think we would have to wait for an appropriate response?” Valentina quipped, gesturing toward the outer wall of the room. “And I would also argue that it is most certainly not three Vanadis conspiring here. You just arrived back from your own sanctioned mission, and I am here for my own reasons.”

“That is true,” Sofy said with a sigh. “And I’m not saying that he wouldn’t do this anyway. But King Richard has always been leery of the power we Vanadis have in national affairs. Unless this is handled appropriately, he may simply declare that is what is going on and castigate all three of us severely.”

She noticed a glance from Elen to Valentina at that, but Valentina didn’t respond to it, simply replying blandly with “yes he is, among other things.”

“And he and his for forebears have also been fighting Brune since Brune came together as a nation. Who’s to say he could avoid the temptation of simply ignoring this and deciding it is just another sign of Brune’s inherent fragility?” Sofy went on, not responding to that.

“Duke Thenardier’s dragons for one,” Regin said, pointing a delicate finger towards Sofy. “As you said, Lady Sofya. True, your nation has the Vanadis, but how many of those would you wish to tie down here in Brune?”

Sofy sighed. “You speak sense Regin, but that is not my decision to make. I am going to have to inform King Victor, however. My duty as his ambassador plenipotentiary demands it. And you, maybe forced to pay for going your own way on this Elen.” She now looked over at Ranma, her face turning truly apologetic. “I may be forced to tell him why you have also taken an interest in Brune Valentina, and more about Ranma too if the rumor of his being the one who healed Sasha has reached the court.”

“I already have a report ready for that,” Valentina too looked at Ranma, but her face was only mildly apologetic, a sly twist to her lips ruining it. “I’m sorry, Ranma, but your medical knowledge is going to come out. Indeed, I’m going to use this to spread much of that medical knowledge.”

She tapped a large, leather valise next to her with a few fingers. Within, she carried at least a large book’s worth of notes made in neat, small handwriting. It was disorganized at present thanks to the nature of their discussion and how they rambled, but there were a lot of them.

“’The healer of the horribly sick Vanadis Sasha has deigned to share his medical knowledge,’” she went on, deepening her voice and making it seem a little more sonorous. “We must spread this information as much as possible.”

Ranma looked at her, one eyebrow raised, “You think that’s best?”

“I think that’s the best way to spread your medical knowledge without tying you down, yes,” she said, emphasizing the words ‘medical knowledge’ subtly.

Sofy still caught it and carefully schooled her expression to not show any of her sudden interest as she realized that Valentina had gotten a lot more out of Ranma than just that information. *What else? And why doesn’t Elen look more worried? Regardless, my own duty remains plane.* “Excellent idea. That should be enough to stop the king from trying to order us to force you to come to the capital to at least meet with him.”

“I wouldn’t have a problem meeting with him, I’d have a problem kowtowing to him.” Ranma looked at their blank faces and sighed. “Sorry, that’s another idiom. It means to show respect, I suppose, only it’s like more over-the-top than that. Like…”

Deciding the conversation had become too serious for him, Ranma stood up and backed away from the table. “This is a regular bow,” he said, bowing from his waist to Lim, winking at her.

Lim surprised the others there by smiling faintly, just a hint of a blush to her cheeks.

“And this is a kowtow.” With that, Ranma got down on his knees and banged his forehead against the ground. “One’s a little too close to kneeling,” he said as he popped up like a Jack-in-the-Box. “And far too, what’s the word…”

“Deferential, overawed?” Tigre supplied with a chuckle as the others all laughed at Ranma’s antics.

“Those will work. I ain’t the type to be overawed by anyone, and I give respect when it’s earned. Your king, he hasn’t earned anything from me. Certainly not my loyalty.”

Sofy sighed. “Understood. And frankly, I don’t think it would be a good use of my time to try to convince you otherwise.”

“You show much wisdom for one so young,” Ranma replied tartly, making his voice sound almost like a decrepit old man, causing another round of chuckles.

“Nonetheless…” Sofy said, her own lips twitching, “As I said, I must return and informed him of what has happened. I am well overdue as it is. The only reason he won’t have been panicking is that Zaht has not yet been displayed to him by a new Vanadis.”

Ranma looked at the three weapons where they sat next to their wielders. “How does that work anyway?”

None were laughing at him currently, which was all to the good in his mind. But he had to admit to some confusion still about how the weapons passed from one Vanadis to another. A confusion made worse by the example of the Lourie line and what Sofy had said about no Vanadis remaining in office after thirty.

“Upon the death or a maiden becoming too old or weak to wield it, a Viralt will disappear from their current user’s person, reappearing in the presence of the closest most compatible individual. That individual will then have a set amount of time to show herself to the King of Zhcted. She will then be given the title of Vanadis. If they do not show themselves to the king in that timeframe, the Viralt will leave the woman in question and search for another wielder. Our weapons may be bound to us, but they are tied to the throne of Zhcted,” Sofy replied, almost by rote, before turning back to the previous topic. “I will have to leave shortly. Within the day, in fact. That will give the king the rest of winter to decide how to respond to everything going on in Brune.”

Winter in this world lasted for five months most of the time, with the yearly calendar having fourteen months in it, with the year ending and starting with months named after the chief deity, Perkunas, in Brune and Zhcted. The other months had different names depending on what nation you were in, but Ranma hadn’t bothered to learn them.

Currently it was about halfway through winter, and snow was building up everywhere, almost entirely halting travel. If Sofy and Valentina didn’t leave soon, they wouldn’t be leaving at all.

Ranma winced. “But you just arrived.”

“And even with my powers, it will take me at least another week to get to Zhcted’s borders, another week to get to the capital.”

“I believe we can speed that up a little more, if we work together,” Valentina interjected with a sigh looking at Ranma soulfully, not even bothering to look at Regin or the others as if their situation had any impact on her reluctance to leave. “As I said, I have to leave as well, and traveling with Sofy the two of us can speed up our travels commensurately. I think that the more Vanadis we can remove from the vicinity the better. To make it seem as if this really is a war of reclamation.”

Ranma scowled in annoyance but couldn’t deny either Sofy or Valentina’s words. Yet the word ‘reclamation’ made him remember something. He turned to look at the princess, cocking his head to one side. “Regin, you said that there was a way to prove your lineage at that church or whatever it was in Thenardier’s territory, right? But we gave up on the idea thanks to it being winter, and too dangerous to get to. But did you have to be the one to go, I mean, is it written in some secret language? If it is, it wouldn’t help to back up your position much.”

Regin blinked, surprised at being addressed then answered the question quickly. “Oh, no, the record in the Holy Grotto of Saint-Groel isn’t in cipher. Its strength is in secrecy and the fact that it is impossible to enter if you are not part of the royal line. That, and only the chief priest, who wouldn’t know what they contain being deliberately illiterate, would know where the current archives are kept.”

Ranma grinned, while Tigre’s eyes widened, looking at his friend in wild surmise. “Define impossible?”

Nonplussed for a second time, Regin stammered, “We, well, it, it’s a holy site. The priests within would not allow anyone who is not a firm believer within, and as I said, it is a secret. It’s not the kind of place you could just wander into.”

“Meh, it’s got an entrance, that’s enough for me. I just wanted to make certain that there was no spell or anything that would stop someone not connected to your family from entering it. And as for the archives, well, I suppose that kidnapping a single priest and absconding with these archives isn’t the worst thing I’ve ever done.”

*Damn, I should have thought of this when she first mentioned the grotto! But Regin and everyone else dropped the idea so quickly it didn’t occur to me then to ask. Hells, it’s only because of Valentina and Sofy talking about traveling and my own boredom that I thought about it now,* Ranma thought, kicking himself more than a bit for a fool.

Eyes widening, Sofy began to giggle. “That, that would, yes that would simplify things a lot! If Regin could use those archives to strengthen her position, prove her lineage, then King Victor won’t want to bother with further expansion into Brune. Not when he could expect the country to come together against any such general invasion and with the threat of Muozinel always looming.”

“Yes!” Elen shouted with a laugh of her own as Valentina chuckled. “Yes, your ki space thing. With that and your speed, you could get in and out, just take the entire archive, and we could look through it all at our leisure.”

Regin’s eyes were wide as she looked at Ranma. “What?” When his ki space was explained to her, she shook her head in delight. “I had never even thought of, that is, the grotto is sacred, so even thinking this way is a bit sacrilegious, but it is certainly possible. As I said, the archives aren’t in any cipher. We will need time to go through it, but we will have the rest of the winter to do so.”

“Ugh, don’t remind me. After we return, I’ll have to think of something else to occupy my time,” Ranma groaned, causing Regin to giggle at his antics while everyone else just rolled their eyes.

“Should any of us go with you?” Tigre asked.

Ranma hesitated, but then shook his head. “Any trouble I can’t overcome, I can run away from, and none of you could keep up with me. Although I would like as good a map and directions, both as good as you can make them.”

“We can do that. And I can even give you a letter of introduction to the priests. I was there when I was a toddler, and they will remember one of my adventures there I think,” Regin said, becoming excited at the idea of having those records to back her up. With them in hand, not only would the various lords of the Silver Meteor Army be even more willing to back her, but she could order the Knightly Orders into action if need be. Even as a woman, she could command them if her lineage was proven to their satisfaction. The other nobles throughout Brune would probably still balk at the idea of a queen, but not the Knightly Orders or the common people. Not all that much anyway. “I’ll get on the directions right away, and that message. If you could copy out a map for our friend, Lord Tigre?”

So it was that only a day after Sofy arrived, she was once more on the road, and she was not alone. Elen had given her a new horse, and enough carrots and sugar cubes for the animal to perhaps be coaxed into dealing with her teleportation magic in the future.

Valentina too was next to her on her own horse. This was a dusky-hued mare, which whickered happily as Valentina gently led her out of her area of Lord Augre’s stables. This was a far cry from Sofy’s new horse, who did not seem to like the idea of moving in winter at all pulling at the reins ineffectually as Sofy led it along.

Elen, Ranma, Tigre, Regin, and Lim were there to say farewell. Elen hugged Sofy and shook hands formally with Valentina, saying, “Do follow up on what we talked about would you?” To which Valentina nodded equably although internally she had to fight not to roll her eyes at the other girl’s attempt to be subtle.

Of course, Ranma too was leaving on his own mission. Tigre had again attempted to talk him into bringing at least Tigre, but Elen, Lord Augre and Regin had sat on that idea. Tigre was needed here, as the official general of the Silver Meteor Army. That role could not be left to Eleonora, after all. It just wouldn’t do to have a foreigner in charge of an army that was almost entirely Brunish now.

But it was too cold even in the stables Regin and Lim after yet another snowstorm last night, and after hugging Ranma, Lim left him there with the Vanadis. Elen quickly followed her, Tigre having been pulled back inside by Regin.

“So um, Any idea when I’ll see either of you again?” he muttered, not looking at either of the Vanadis instead, holding the horses as the two of them moved around.

Valentina answered first, causing Sofy to pout a bit. “Honestly, Ranma, I have no idea. I might send you an invitation to Osterode after this conflict in Brune is dealt with. If we don’t see one another before that, that will be a good thing in a way because it will have meant there will have been no further troubles popping up. But I am afraid my duties to Osterode will keep me there for some time.”

*To make no mention of my subtle inquiries about this secret cabal that could be moving in the shadows of our country. If it truly exists, it will have to be excised.* Valentina had not forgotten what she had surmised about Sasha’s poisoning and had made plans to see if there had been any further acts like Sasha’s poisoning in the past or any real connection between it and the Prince’s madness-inducing illness.

“Indeed, but just because we’ll be absent from one another does not mean my heart’s fondness for you will fade,” Sofy quipped, giving Ranma a kiss on the cheek, winking at him. “You after all, could come and visit us after you this war is over, couldn’t you?”

“Believe it,” Ranma said with a nod and a grin.

Valentina stared at the two of them, then seemed to come to a decision. When Ranma moved to hold up a hand to shake hers, she instead stepped into his arms giving him a hug. This was the first time she had done such a thing, and she felt Ranma stiffen in her hug, but it faded almost as soon as she noticed it, and then Ranma’s arms went around Valentina just as they had around Sofy. Valentina then leaned her head just slightly to the side and up.

Ranma saw this, and could have stepped back, he could have stopped it. But with his discussion the other day with Lim and Sofy in his mind about harems, and the fact that simply courting, as it was called here, wasn’t enough to permanently tie him to someone right off the bat, Ranma didn’t. Instead, he leaned down just slightly, and their lips met in a kiss.

*My first kiss,* Valentina thought somewhat giddily, as her lips moved against Ranma’s. His mouth tasted like apples from breakfast at present, and they were thin, not full as Valentina knew her own to be. They pushed against hers, not demanding, but also kind of guiding her own as his arms tightened around Valentina’s body, her chest molding against his. One hand wound down to the small of her back, resting there, just resting directly above her rear as his lips moved against hers. It was clear to Valentina that Ranma had more experience in this but wasn’t pushing.

It was a light kiss, but it was a meaningful one, especially when mixed with the look she gave him as she pulled back. “…What Sofy said goes for me as well. You are far too interesting both as a man, and as a warrior and everything else for me to lose **interest** in.”

She gave the word ‘interest’ a special twist, and Ranma, with his discussions with the other two uppermost in his mind, just nodded. “I, I see. Um, I, I can’t say that that interest isn’t mutual, but, but you have to understand that I, erm, I mean, er, I’m kind of already involved with Lim and…”

“And me,” Sofy interrupted. She moved forward and, after sending a glare at Valentina, moved into Ranma’s arms, leaning up to give him a kiss in turn. This one was a bit deeper as Lim held her lips against Ranma’s and Ranma returned the kiss instantly, even if a little sheepishly with Valentina as an observer. When she pulled back, she shot Valentina a triumphant look. “Would you be willing to share Ranma’s time and affections?”

To her annoyance though, Valentina took this surprise with aplomb. “Hmm… Well, I can’t say I didn’t see this coming, at least with Lim. Sofy being interested in you is a bit beyond my expectations, but regardless, I retain my interest in you Ranma. As our current parting shows, none of us have the time to really dedicate to truly courting one another at this time. But showing interest is more than enough, yes?”

“Uh, yeah… yeah it is, Valentina,” Ranma said, staring between them, still stunned by all of this. Even though he knew now that harems were common in this world the idea of any woman wanting Ranma but not fighting over him was astonishing.

Added to that, Ranma knew all three were interested in him as an individual, not just because they felt honor bound, or for any other reason. Yes, Valentina wanted his help for her ambitions, but that didn’t bother Ranma all that much at this point. Later it might, if she chose to manipulate him, but Valentina had very deliberately not done so thus far, even as Valentina admitted to wanting to use what he told her to her advantage. She hadn’t been open about her ambitions, but she had been forthright with them, and that was good.

“Tina,” Valentina declared firmly. “If we are going to be courting, I think you should at least do me the courtesy of using a less formal name for me.”

“Heh, okay, Tina.” Ranma replied, causing Tina to shiver. It was the first time any man had ever called her that, and the impact was somewhat surprising, making their current moment more personal despite Sofy being there as well.

Breathing in, Ranma pulled both Vanadis to him in a hug, causing both to let out squeaks of surprise at his sudden action. He held them against him, then kissed first Tina then Sofy on the foreheads as he said, “I promise. As soon as Duke Pervo and Duke Dragon Dick are dealt with, I’ll come to see you, both of you. Me and Lim, maybe, if I can get her to come with me. But definitely want to see both of you again. We can talk, get to know one another more, and, um, maybe do more of this kind of thing if we all want to. Okay?”

The two Vanadis looked at one another, and for once, there was more sardonic humor in that look than wariness. “Ranma isn’t the most eloquent man, is he? Still, he gets his meaning across, I suppose,” Sofy judged, amusement plain in her voice as she flushed slightly, enjoying Ranma’s warmth more than she felt she honestly should. Her attraction to Ranma physically was something she could combat, but her attraction to his spirit was something else.

“Indeed. And as Ranma said, this is merely courting. Nothing permanent need occur for now,” Valentina agreed, before sighing sadly. She had really not seen any of this coming. Not the connection, the friendship she had forged with Ranma over the last two weeks. Ranma now knew her, knew more about Valentina and her ambitions than any other person alive and had accepted it. Had accepted it and had even said he might aid her in the future. He had then shown interest in her as a woman, not Vanadis, not the would-be queen. Seeing both aspects of her at once, and then saying that he wanted to court her anyway made Ranma all the more alluring.

But she couldn’t wallow in this moment as the girly, inner romantic part of her wanted to. “But we have to go. We need to make as much time as we can per day, and winter days are too short as it is.”

Sofy nodded, reluctantly pulling away from Ranma too, before heading over to her horse. Ranma helped both women into the saddle, getting the last hug in as he lifted them one after another like they weighed nothing at all, settling them into their saddles.

When the roan tried to buck under Sofy, he grabbed it by the mane and pulled hard, keeping it in place and glaring the dumb beast into submission. Meanwhile, Valentina’s mare stayed put happy and docile as anything.

“Farewell for now, Ranma,” Valentina intoned formally once she was in the saddle.

“Yeah…farewell, Tina,” Ranma said, using the shorter version of her name once more, staring at her earnestly. “Until we meet again.”

At that, Tina smiled widely but made no further verbal reply before she turned and guided her horse out the stable’s open doorway into the town beyond.

Sofy lingered for a moment, leaning over and giving Ranma another kiss, blushing very slightly as she pulled back. “Farewell from me too, Ranma. I could wish we were not parting, but such is the world. So long as I can see you again as soon as we both can contrive it.”

“Heh, sure. That’s easy on my end, I only have two corrupt bastards and their armies to deal with, then I’m free as a bird. You and Tina, that’s a different story, Sofy. Still, I’ll see you sometime in the spring. That’s a promise. No way will this war last long after the campaign season begins. Not even if I have to bring a hurricane down on their sorry asses.” Sofy blinked at that, and Ranma grinned evilly. “Don’t ask. You wouldn’t believe me anyway.”

Shaking her head Sofy turned her mare away, and, after a final farewell, set her new horse into a canter after Valentina. And like her fellow Vanadis, she very deliberately did not look back. Doing so would only have made it harder to leave the young man she was developing feelings for behind.

Ranma watched them go, then sighed before turning his eyes down the so-called road leading towards the rivers and beyond, the south east of the country, where Duke Thenardier’s lands were. He idly wondered if assassinating the asshole would be a better plan, but since Regin and Tigre had both said it was a bad idea more than once over the last few months, decided against it. If it really would just hand Ganelon the throne as is without Thenardier there to act as a counterweight, they had to gather more power to themselves first*.*

*And that means legitimizing Regin as princess,* he thought, as he began to pick up speed, racing along the snow-strewn lands, quickly leaving behind Territoire and racing on, tireless and finally able to act instead of simply prepare for the future. *Seriously, I should have thought about this months ago!*

**OOOOOOO**

For their part, the two Vanadis were much slower on their horses, not wanting to wind the beasts and needing to conserve their body heat in this cold, despite both horses being wrapped liberally in cloaks of their own. They were silent for a time, neither looking at the other, before Sofy sighed and pulled her horse to a halt. Valentina halted too, looking at her expectantly. “Since we are in a rush, I propose that we take turns using our Viralt’s teleportation powers,” she said formally. “I know that Ezendeis’ takes a lot out of you, but I think we both know we need to get this trip over with quickly.”

Valentina sighed in turn but nodded. *I will have to keep my ability to use my doorways easily a secret as well as how far I can travel, but she’s right, we need both need to get back to Zhcted. It took Lim and I far too long to get to the refugee camp, darn it. I should have left her behind, but that darn sickness rumor is getting in my way darn it.* “I agree. I think I can transport two people at least twice a day, but I won’t be able to move much after the second. And if I am sick, I pray you never mention it to anyone else.”

Sofy replied in the affirmative, then gestured Valentina to move her mare close as possible to her own horse. “If you could grab my reins, that will no doubt help. Horses tend not to respond to this very well the first time. With that, Sofy held Zaht out lengthwise so that the cap went slightly past Valentina in the saddle, and then intoned, "Mirashem!"

The two horses and their riders all disappeared from that frozen wasteland and appeared twenty-five leagues in the appropriate direction, appearing in another portion of the frozen wasteland. When they appeared, both horses reared. Sofy nearly found herself being flung out of the saddle, while Valentina kept her saddle, and her grip on the blonde woman’s reins, but looked as if she was about to lose her lunch swaying in the saddle. “What is that…,” she muttered. “I, and I thought Ezendeis’ skills were bad!”

“My teleportation!” Sofy grunted, getting her horse under control, pulling the reins back from Valentina. She held a sugar cube in front of her horse’s mouth and after a few minutes the horse finally calmed down enough to smell it out, then snuffled it from her hand. Two carrots later, it was calm once more, or at least seemed so to Sofy. “Your turn I think.”

Valentina looked at her, her face still kind of green. But she smirked suddenly, nodding her head as she raised Ezendeis to one side, “Very well.” She then slashed the scythe blade forward in a circle, intoning, “Vol Dole!” At those words and gesture there appeared a circular cut in the universe, which suddenly reached back towards Valentina and her companion and their horses, like a moving tube of vari-colored light, covering them both.

The next second, they were standing somewhere else entirely. Valentina had aimed them to a point near the border of the Dinant plains, several hundred leagues away from where they had been previously.

She and her mare had taken this teleportation easily, although Valentina’s stomach had obviously not recovered from Sofy’s teleportation skill. She groaned, slumping against her mare’s neck.

On the other side, Sofy blanched, swaying in the saddle. Her horse, the traitor, didn’t seem bothered by it at all, simply looking around in interest. “All was down, red was green, and cold was weird.” She glared at the other Vanadis. “That wasn’t nice.”

“We’re even then,” Valentina retorted, glaring back at the other woman. The two glared at one another, until Valentina quipped. “So, I can take it that one type of teleportation does not necessarily prepare you for the other.”

“Truer words were never spoken. I also see you can teleport much further per jump than I can,” Sofy’s said with forced affability. But she became serious as she moved her horse next to Valentina. “Are you ready for my turn?”

Valentina grimaced, but also reached other hand. “Further, but only to places where I have already been. Luckily Ezendeis seems to ignore changes brought upon by seasons else it would be next to useless across long distances. And yes, let’s get this over with. The sooner we move, the sooner this trip is over with.” Both women could feel their horses shivering under them despite being wrapped around woolen blanket under their saddles.

This time Valentina nearly swooned out of the saddle entirely, crashing sideways into Sofy, as her horse bucked underneath her tossing Sofy out of the saddle. They both fell into the snow to one side, grimacing and cursing under their breaths as Sofy’s horse bolted away.

“So much for the sugar and carrot method of training,” Sofy grumbled, trying to push out of the snow with scant success. Wherever they were this, was powder snow, and it rather sank around her for a moment, until Valentina reached in, pushing her mare’s reins into the blonde’s hands. The mare was then coaxed backward, slowly pulling Sofy out of the snow.

When she was free, she noticed Valentina too had fallen into the snow, and her face was decidedly green, one hand clamped over her stomach at the moment. The two women looked at one another, covered in snow and annoyance in equal measure, before bursting out laughing.

“Some mighty Vanadis we are. Covered in snow, annoyed, by the powers of our own weapons, and both of us debating fighting over a man. Our predecessors would be rolling in their graves,” Valentina joked, still holding her stomach.

“Truly,” Sofy said, before becoming serious. “I am rather serious about Ranma, astonishingly enough. I might have not pushed for anything more formal, but that my emotions are leaning in that direction, somewhat, despite the issues involved. Please don’t try to play with his heart.”

Valentina could’ve replied hotly to that since it was well known in Vanadis circles that Sofy used her feminine wiles occasionally while on diplomatic missions for the king and that she was one of the most loyal to the present king among them. However, she didn’t. She simply nodded seriously. “I am too. I too cannot say that I am in love with him or anything so brazen, not after only knowing him a few weeks. But I am most decidedly interested in him, as well.”

“Good. In that case, I suppose it behooves me to ask what exactly attracted you to Ranma?” Sofy asked, mock-innocently.

Chuckling, Valentina replied, and the two women moved on, somewhat more equably, their wariness not forgotten but set aside for now as they waited for Valentina’s stomach to settle down before she could use her powers once more. When she did, Sofy took over for a third, by which time they were in Zhcted. Another day, and, thanks to Ezendeis teleportation powers able to jump farther than Sofy’s, they found themselves within sight of Leitmeritz.

And so the journey continued, covering the same distance two riders would have covered in a matter of weeks in barely two days. However, when they arrived in Leitmeritz, the news Elen’s seneschal passed on made them both set aside their private issues.

Muozinel was on the move, building up supplies across the border with Zhcted. Worse yet, the king had ordered both of them to appear at his court for orders and to answer questions about their recent activities. It looked as if winter was not going to get any warmer for either of them. Worse the spring to come would make up for it with the most unwelcome kind of heat…

**End Chapter**