

Hey all, so here is the next chapter of Sword, Bow and Horse! I hope you enjoy.

In other news, I am about halfway done the next chapter of FILFy. I have finished the prebattle scenes and two of the battle scenes. I need the rest of the battle scenes and then the few after-battle scenes. Heh, how's that for not giving any spoilers away, LOL.

Anyway, this is has been edited by me via Grammarly and Hiryō.

Thought for the day: the creator of Lord Marksman and Vanadis naming Olga Tamm's lands Brest had to be deliberate...

Chapter 11: Iron Rusts

From the main gate tower situated over Southport's main entrance, Thenardier stared out over the city, having turned his back on the horizon a moment ago. He would be going in that direction soon enough. Right now, the city demanded a few more minutes of his attention.

The fires were nearly out now, but Muozinel troopers and civilians were still being ferreted out by the city's inhabitants. Some of them would be torn limb from limb, Thenardier knew and approved of. The invaders had not been kind to the city, and Thenardier was quietly furious about it. Not because he had any sentimentality for Southport or cared about its people. But this was one of the two cities that looked to him as their lord, and Thenardier believed that any affront to it was one to his own person. And as all Brune knew, Thenardier would not forgive such.

But the good news outweighed the bad, in his opinion. The small army, which had come over the Straits with Muozinel's supply train, had been broken. They had been taken from behind by Thenardier and his men when all of their attention was on the dragons after Thenardier's attack force had secured the transport ship. The goods aboard those ships would serve Thenardier well, funding the rest of his campaign to become King and into his reign afterward.

The fact that some of those goods, in particular the riches, gold, jewelry, expensive clothing, carpets and so forth, had been stolen first by the invaders as they pushed out slowly from Southport was something that the Iron Duke didn't care about one way or the other. If the people who had owned those baubles had been strong enough, they wouldn't have lost them in the first place, and if so, why should he care about their opinions or well-being?

This also extended to the slaves that had been aboard three of the supply ships, their former goods having been offloaded during the occupation. A few other ships had already left laden with slaves taken from Southport in the initial assault, and Thenardier was somewhat pleased about it. The slavers had removed the poor and riffraff from the city, but there the slavers had stopped. After all, the Muozinel army had needed a workforce here to unload their supplies, let alone keep the smithy, textile workers, and rest of the things they would need to supply their conquest of Brune.

The survivors of Muozinel's invasion had been in a prime position to see what would happen to them if they were not productive. And with a little bit of prodding, Thenardier knew they would be more than willing to work for him even harder so that such a fate could never again befall them.

As for the slaves still on ships in the harbor when he took them, Thenardier had already sentenced them to his mines in Nemetacum. After all, the mines always needed more workers. They were already on the way to his city in chains and a small band of thirty men watching over them. *Speaking of forces being sent out...*

"Have the supplies been sent to the Army?" he asked without turning around.

One of his supply officers hastily replied in the affirmative. Two of the dragons had been sent loaded with foodstuffs for the Thenardier's army to meet it on the way so that they could turn their attention to the Silver Meteor Army or the invading Muozinel army coming through the past. Whichever emerged victorious from the campaign in the Charles Gap.

"And the rest of our men?" Now he turned, looking at one of his officers, a separate lieutenant from his own lands. The man was known as a very stern disciplinarian and had originally come from Southport, so was the obvious choice to leave in command of the force that Thenardier would be leaving behind to restore order within the city, and make sure that the ships he had taken would remain in his hands and undamaged by the furious citizenry of the city.

"Sire, I've stationed the majority of our men on the docks themselves. Lookouts are on the wall at intervals, while I have ten roaming groups of twenty man minimum moving through the city at all times," the man replied crisply. "We've instituted a curfew and a rationing system so that the locals can be fed more regularly than they were during the invasion. With that and the fact we're not stopping them from taking revenge so long as they don't start fires, I feel that we can keep order after my lord and your dragons leave."

Thenardier nodded firmly, then turned around, moving towards the doorway. "I will hold you to that, Penfield. Be certain of it."

Soon, Thenardier joined the last dragon to leave, the double-headed one, and a group of seventeen men, who would be going with him back to the rest of his army. A little under a week

later, outriders from his army reached him, bearing news that Steid felt could not wait. And reading the missive, Thenardier agreed.

Rumors had begun to spread about a victory in the Gap. The invading army had not just been halted long enough to learn about his own victory and know that they could not conquer Brune. Instead, the entire invading army had been smashed to ribbons, a scant few thousand retreating down the Gap. Apparently due to magic, either created by two Vanadis working together or Ranma of Alsace, the same warrior who had fought and captured Roland last autumn.

That kind of total victory was something that Thenardier had not anticipated and reading about it having possibly been Ranma who did it, Thenardier suppressed a shiver as he recalled what had happened to Armand. Losing all of his strength and physical power was a horrifying thought, and Thenardier resolved to have one of the dragons detailed to dealing with Ranma if he could do so.

Staring to the northeast, Thenardier stroked his beard thoughtfully. "And yet, they are still positioned near the Gap..." Thenardier fell silent, picturing his mind's eye a map of Brune. He didn't know the rest of the country as well as his own lands, but he had the general geography memorized. So he knew that the Silver Meteor Army's current position gave him an opportunity.

Quickly, he cut orders and sent the runner back to the army. He wanted the army up and moving by the time he arrived. With the Silver Meteor Army so far away from their own territory, Thenardier could cut them off from the lands of the Knightly Orders and the area across the Resia which had joined them. *And once between them and their lands, many different options will be available to me. All of them bad for the Silver Meteor Army.*

OOOOOO

After the campaign in the Charles Gap had been decided, the Silver Meteor Army had pulled back away from the Gap. Not far, only to the nearest keep, its original residents having fled or been killed by one of the slaving expeditions that had raced ahead of the main Muozinel army. The type that the Silver Meteor Army had smashed before reaching the Gap. Since then, Gerard had used it as a base of operations to bring in supplies for the army. This made it a natural place for the army to recuperate.

Ranma had gone with the other officers, for once actually riding a horse, if a sack of flour could be called riding it, as after his collapse, Ranma was practically unresponsive, forcing Tigre and Eleonora to set him on the horse and tie him there. This near unresponsiveness

continued when they arrived as Ranma isolated himself in his room, alone with his grief and horror.

Every time Ranma closed his eyes, he came back to that moment, his treacherous mind replaying the end of the battle, when Ranma had realized what he had done. The blood sprayed around the Gap, the body parts strewn everywhere, the dead lying in piles scattered around the gap, their faces contorted in pain and terror, the smell. It all came back to him, and more than once, Ranma found himself screaming, crying, or throwing up into a basin Titta had set aside his bed.

Central to Ranma's being was the Code, a system of beliefs he followed as a martial artist. It wasn't just the hoary old homilies Genma had tried to instill in Ranma without following most of them. Ranma had developed his own Code over his lifetime, and a major part of that Code was that all life was precious.

This had been heightened to a new degree in his training with Tofu and then with Oden. Here in this new world, where conflict was so raw and widespread, he had to modify that aspect of his morality. Life was still precious, yes, but the lives of those on your side were more precious than the enemy. Sometimes you had to kill in battle to save lives on your own side.

But this, it hadn't been a battle. It hadn't even been murder. It had been straight up, unmitigated **slaughter**, the equivalent of a child using a watering hose to drown an anthill.

And Ranma was the cause of it. Ranma had killed thousands of men, who, at base, might not have been bad people. Might have simply been following orders. Now, Ranma was locked in his own mind, unable to rationalize his actions after the fact, to come to terms with what he had done and unable to push past it.

Tigre, Elen and Ludmila attempted to help as best they could, but this was something that Ranma needed to work through on his own. Perhaps if Sofy or Lim, or maybe even Valentina were there, they could have gotten through to Ranma, but none of his three friends had the right words.

After two days of trying to help him through it and letting the army's leadership devolve to Regin and the Knights Commandants, it was clear that Ranma wasn't listening to any of them. He only responded to anything said to him by grunts or shakes of his head, pulling away from them even as his own mind and memory rebelled.

"We've both been there before," Elen said, nodding her head to Ludmila. For once, neither of them was willing to argue or bring up their old rivalry. "Killing is just part of being a soldier, kill or be killed. But using magic as we do sometimes, it makes it so impersonal and almost surreal the first few times. It makes the killing so impersonal and so easy that it's horrifying. And neither of us have ever done anything on such a scale before."

"Agreed. I remember the first time that I killed a large group of bandits with my Cielo Zam Kafa," Ludmila admitted. "I don't know how I would've reacted if I had killed several thousand men with it at once. And that is not considering that by Ranma's own admission, he wasn't raised as a warrior, rather as a martial artist, whatever that might be and he sanctifies life. Ranma will need time to get through this, and that's about all the help we can give until he's ready to listen."

Tigre nodded solemnly, shaking his head. He had no experience with what Ranma was feeling. Oh, he had caused a lot of death on his own in that battle, but his own morality was a mixture of a huntsman's and that of a nobleman. The men he had faced were simply the enemy, and as much as Tigre would have preferred to simply be a provincial Earl, he had been trained from a very early age to understand that enemies of the nation deserve no mercy, much like an animal taken on the hunt.

Tigre had tried explaining this to Ranma numerous times, hoping to help him, but nothing had sunk in yet. "He's listening to us. It's just that he needs to really understand that what he did was the lesser of two evils, and until he does, nothing we say is going to help." He looked over at Titta. "You'll keep watch on the door?"

It wasn't a suicide watch, not really. Tigre didn't think Ranma would take his own life over this but he also didn't his best friend to fight the nightmares on his own.

Titta nodded her head firmly. "Leave it to me, Tigre-sama. I'll keep Ranma fed and force him to change his clothing, at least. Healing his heart and soul, I have to leave to you, but at least I can keep him clean." Her small button nose wrinkled as she looked into the darkened room Ranma had been assigned when they arrived. "And that room needs an airing out too."

Smiling at her, Tigre patted her head, amused by the pout on her face as he treated Titta like a child once more. But then Tigre froze when Titta gave him a quick hug, pressing her small chest against his stomach before she pulled away, heading into the room with Ranma.

To one side of the doorway Elen scowled, glaring after the maid, her arms crossed under her bust, bringing Tigre's attention to it despite all he could do. "What am I going to do with you, Tigre?"

Knowing that Elen didn't like Titta or anyone else being affectionate towards him, Tigre defused the situation quickly by stating simply, "Whatever you want? After all, you own both me and Alsace."

"That's right," Elen laughed, her anger instantly dissipating, as she took one of Tigre's arms in her own, squeezing her chest against his side and leaning up to give him a kiss despite Ludmila glaring at them both. "And don't you forget it, **my** Tigre."

"Could you please, act appropriately in public!" Ludmila growled, tempted to poke Elen with Lavias but deciding against it for now. For some reason, she felt more annoyed every time she saw these little moments between Tigre and Elen. "Public displays of affection and jealousy are beneath a proper Vanadis of Zhcted. We have a duty to uphold the dignity of our station."

"Jealousy being beneath a Vanadis? Do you want to take that statement back before I start laughing at its absurdity, or should I just start calling you the pot calling the kettle black now?" Elen countered archly.

Growling, Ludmila hefted her weapon, but Tigre quickly pulled himself away from Elen, gesturing down the hall. "Er ladies, we do have a meeting to get to, so can we move on, please?"

Both Vanadis subsided nodding in agreement, because despite Ranma's convalescence, life went on.

Over the past few days, the army had regrouped, and a tally had been taken. While their preferred method of warfare in the mountains had kept their losses to a minimum, the Silver Meteor Army hadn't been all that large to begin with, so any losses hurt.

The units which had come out of the Gap campaign in the best shape were Lady Este's pike companies. In the two battles they had taken part of the pikemen had acquitted themselves well and had performed excellently on the field engineer side of things, but they hadn't faced the attritional warfare the more mobile companies had.

Since the campaign had ended, Captain Marsh and Gerard had basically taken over the running of the army, while Tigre met with various local nobles, those that had survived up to this point, along with the Princess. At the same time a few of the nobles who had backed Regin, had also arrived with their men. These armsmen had gone through some of the training that the regular Silver Meteor Army troopers had, but not all of it, and their equipment and organization still relied on their personal preferences and the nobles who they were sworn to.

Mashas and Hughes, who had arrived more than a month before their fellows, had made themselves busy behind the lines. Mashas led his men and Hughes' troops around the surrounding lands, wiping out a few bandit bands who had sprung up in the turmoil of the invasion, as well as smashing two smaller Muozinel forces who had somehow kept clear of the Silver Meteor Army when they marched through. Hughes had instantly started to help his son in organizing the army's supplies, keeping it flowing even as those supplies, particularly steel and iron, became ever scarcer.

Yet while those tasks had been difficult, the horse archers, men and horse alike, Elen's troopers from Zhcted and the irregular infantry, and to a lesser extent Ludmila's troops, had all been pushed to the brink of utter collapse in the campaign in the mountains.

The Silver Meteor Army had entered the campaign in the Gap with three thousand horse archers, further organized into what Tigre after consultation with Ranma called fire teams of four. With them came the two pike companies from Osterode, making up a little over four hundred men. One heavy infantry battalion of a thousand two hundred men, two light infantry battalions of nearly two thousand five hundred men, two light cavalry companies of over five hundred men, and a reinforced battalion of archers with a thousand, five hundred men. The scouts, and around three hundred heavy cavalry rounded out the Silver Meteor Army's main combat strength, coming to a total of around nine thousand, five hundred men.

The horse archers had lost almost nine-hundred men and more horses in the campaign in the mountains. The heavy infantry had lost far less, only two hundred men all told. In contrast, the light cavalry and infantry who had been fighting it out in the mountains had been mauled, the cavalry losing more than a third of their number and the infantry a full half. The archers too had been hammered, losing six hundred men in the various engagements.

The heavy cavalry, Elen's troops, had lost a hundred and ten. In comparison to the losses they had given the Muozinel army, their losses were almost insignificant. But to the Silver Meteor Army it was a grievous total.

All of Tigre's men needed this downtime desperately, not just in terms of themselves but also in terms of equipment. While Gerard had been keeping up a steady supply of bows and arrows, the rest of the equipment needed for an army to function had been equally hammered in the mountains. To say nothing of the number of horses lost.

Despite all of that and Tigre's sadness at the lives lost, the army was, relatively speaking, in one piece. Better, they had been reinforced somewhat in the days since they had moved here.

Yet, they still had another enemy to deal with. So, Tigre knew that they could only spend so much time here before they had to move on.

However, as he sat down next to the Princess at the conference table, that kind of future planning was not what he had in his mind at present. Instead, his mind was on a comment a soldier had made as he and the Vanadis passed. The man had looked past them towards Ranma's room, then called Ranma the servant of Perkunas. Indeed, the man had even called Ranma's grief a, "Sign that the messenger is still mortal as the rest of us, here to deliver the hammer of Perkunas and Triglav no matter how sad it makes the messenger himself."

To say Tigre had mixed feelings on that point was an understatement.

He held his peace, however, as the Princess began the conference. The young girl looked around the table, her expression seeming a bit hesitant. But due to her training over the winter, she hesitated only a brief second before speaking, addressing the men and women around the

table in a formal tone. "Ladies and gentlemen, at this time, we have a report from the order of the Holy Rose that they have taken the fortress at the far end of the Charles Gap."

She held up the note that had been delivered to her that morning, smiling gently at the remaining Commandants and then over to Tigre, deliberately avoiding looking at the nobles who hadn't taken part in the campaign. They had arrived far too late to be awarded any 'glory' for simply taking part. "I have already ordered Commander Auguste and his men to remain there to guard against further incursions through the Charles Gap. Tigre, I have also written out orders for Duncan and his scouts to remain there. They were a major part of the reason why Auguste was able to take the siege equipment Muozinel army had left there intact. That equipment will serve the Calvados Knight in good stead defending the fortress until they can be relieved."

"Agreed, Your Highness." Unlike Regin, Tigre did not dare use a more familiar mode of address in public, already feeling the looks he was getting from the other nobles and, well, Elen's normal scowl whenever it came to Regin. "The scout troops are at your service just like the rest of the Silver Meteor Army."

"Thank you. You do your station as a noble of Brune credit." Regin let her smile widen slightly as she looked at Tigre, enjoying simply smiling at him and the look in Elen's face as Regin subtly flirted with Tigre before her face firmed and she looked around the table again. "That goes for you, Lord Vorn, Emil, Scheie, Edmund, Hughes, Gerard, Mashas. Because of all of you and your men, and the absent Ranma, Muozinel's invasion of our country has been defeated. It will be a decade or more before they become a threat to our realm once more."

There was a scattered round of nods as the leaders of the Silver Meteor Army and its allies smiled grimly. Although only a few of the nobles didn't look somewhat dyspeptic, not having been included in Regin's address. Yet everyone there knew that the reward for a job well done, and when the Princess spoke again, her words bore that out.

"Unfortunately, Muozinel was not the only enemy that Brune is faced with currently. The other enemy is internal: Duke Thenardier, his army and his dragons."

The word dragons sent a quiver in of unease through even the leaders of the Knightly Orders. All of these men knew that the only people at the table who could fight dragons with any chance of victory were Elen and Ludmila. Numbers mattered not at all against dragons. No weapon not blessed by the gods could harm them, and no man had the strength to fight one.

But the Princess didn't allow them to dwell on it for more than a few seconds. "To save this country we all love..." she paused, looking at Eleanor and Ludmila then, a faint smile on her face, "well, most of us anyway."

Both Vanadis acknowledged the point with a nod, and Regin went on. "We must move to combat Duke Thenardier. We will not make plans for that eventual confrontation so far

ahead of time, but I would like a timetable, as well as an accounting of our forces now that more of our allies have joined us at last." The final words caused still more wincing from most of the nobles there, bar Mashas and Hughes, who had been busy supporting the Silver Meteor Army in other ways, and Regin went on, seeing that her message was received. "After that, we will hear from a few agents of the prime minister who has been sent here on the state of the nation as a whole and Southport in particular."

"Can we trust their information?" Elen questioned quickly. "The last one we met with wasn't exactly subtle in showing that approved of Thenardier rather than Tigre and his association with me."

"I don't approve of your association, although I will admit that approving of Thenardier is a bit beyond me," Ludmila quipped, shaking her head and turning back to the Queen. "Before anything else is discussed, I need to address an assumption you just made. I regret to inform Your Highness that my troops and I will be leaving as soon as my men and horses are rested. My orders were to help Brune and Vanadis Viltaria against Muozinel. I have no orders to help in your civil war, and unfortunately, family honor requires that at the very least I do not take up arms against an old family ally."

"You mean the other half of the Nemetacum's domination of the iron and steel trade," Regin replied tartly, causing Ludmila to flush a little. But she didn't look away from the accusing glare Regin was sending her way.

It was no secret that her family and that of Thenardier controlled the lands, which provided Brune and Zhcted with much of their iron and steel production. Indeed, even Asvarre and, to a lesser extent, Muozinel and Sachstein depended on those two areas for their iron ore. Not nearly as much as their own countries, admittedly. Sachstein and Muozinel both had sources of iron themselves, although not as easily worked.

Still, the mix of foreign and domestic trade had made both families very rich. And generations ago, the Thenardier and Lurie Houses had forged an alliance between them to dominate that trade.

"To put it bluntly, highness, yes. In the past, our families have worked closely together for our mutual self-interest. I do not personally approve of Thenardier, nor how he interprets his family's motto of the Rule of Iron. But it is a consideration. So too is the fact that, unlike Viltaria, I do not have any existing reason to convince me to sacrifice my troops in this war."

Ludmila held up a hand when both Elen and Regin made to speak, going on firmly. "And I say again that I do not have orders to take part in your domestic affairs. Indeed, judging by the King's tone and wording when he gave me my orders, I rather think he would heartily disapprove of my doing so."

"Even if staying out of it means that your country will be conquered by Thenardier and a horde of dragons in the future?" asked one of the Knightly Orders commanders, the dapper gentleman Emil. "If you'll forgive me, Milady Lurie, that seems somewhat shortsighted."

"Perhaps in your opinion. But should dragons ever invade Zhcted, there will be more Vanadis to combat them. And it's up to the King to make policy. I can question, but I cannot refuse," Elen replied firmly. And in this case, as she had already pointed out, she had every reason to obey his unvoiced orders. Despite her growing approval of Tigre, she had no reason to get involved in this.

"Ah, let her go," Elen said, waving her hand airily. "She didn't bring enough troops in the first place, so their absence won't matter much, and if Ludmila is too scared to find out how she'd fare against the enemies our weapons were supposedly created to defeat, it's no skin off my back."

"I'm almost tempted to stay just to show you up, but I got enough of that having ridden to your rescue once already," Ludmila retorted with a smirk. Her shot hit home far more than Elen's had in the first place, and Elen bolted upright her chair, glaring angrily at the other Vanadis who simply smiled back, gripping her weapon tightly where it lay next to her chair.

"As much as I would like you here to help us against the dragons, I can understand your position, Ludmila," Tigre said, smiling over the table at Ludmila and efforts to defuse the tension between the two women, while the other men at the table simply exchanged sparks, enjoying the show and not entirely because watching two enemies of their nation argue like this was amusing. After all, what man didn't like a good catfight? These men were knights, not Saints. "Do your men need horseshoes or other supplies? We don't have much metal at the moment, but if you are under some kind of timetable..."

"Hmm... your generosity and understanding do you credit, Tigre, three points. I'm not under any type of timetable, but I do need to leave soon," Ludmila replied with a smile at Tigre before looking towards the open doorway leading out to the rest of the keep. "I would prefer to wait until Ranma is on the mend. He has proven himself an able comrade, much like you have, Tigre, and I wish to see for my own eyes that he is on the road to recovery."

She looked over at Elen, who was sitting across from her on the other side of Tigre from the Princess. "And with me gone, Elen will need Ranma's help against Thenardier's dragons."

Before Elen could retort, the Princess clapped her hands once. "Are you willing to continue to sit in on these meetings and offer advice, or would you like to recess yourself now?"

"I can offer advice, Your Highness. But this far removed, I don't think making any kind of set plan would be in your best interests," Ludmila warned. "You said it yourself earlier."

"Perhaps not, but an overall campaign objective might," Tigre objected. "And any help you can offer on the logistics side of things would be a help."

From then the meeting moved on to more serious topics, and after the logistics of the recuperating army was discussed, the objective of their overall campaign against Duke Thenardier was set. Several of the Knightly Order commanders advocated for another campaign of maneuver and misdirection. Others argued for a quick march to Nemetacum to capture the city and Duke Thenardier's wife.

However, this idea was shot down for the simple reason that none of the people who had met the Duke personally believed that doing so would matter. Even Regin didn't. "She might be my Aunt and the two of them might love one another, but the Rule of Iron doesn't have any room in it for sentimentality. He would simply come on, daring us to kill our hostage. No, it is the Duke himself we must attack."

That was the strategy they would follow going forward. To bring the Duke to battle, kill his dragons, and destroy his army, the Duke's true power base. After the war, the Duchess could be dealt with far more easily.

That was easier said than done, especially with Regin and a few of the noblemen who made up the Silver Meteor Army, including Hughes and Bertrand kept on repeating the fact that Brune could not support a long-term war. Too much of its lands had been ravaged. Further damage, especially to areas that had yet to feel the scourge of war, would harm Brune as a whole, something they had to avoid.

In turn, Tigre was adamant. "I understand your reasoning, and I even understand the point about thinking long-term. I fully agree that we cannot afford a campaign that isn't settled this year. But our army is vulnerable in a set-piece battle. Yes, we have the pikemen, and we have the Knightly Orders, but our horse archers are best used in hit-and-run actions, and our scouts, who surely proved their worth in this last campaign, are woefully overtrained for that kind of battle."

"And there's the report that Thenardier has **three** dragons to his name now," Elen repeated firmly, glaring over the table at Ludmila. "Without the budding potato with us, that means that even if Ranma and I can deal with one dragon apiece, another dragon could be free to ravage the army."

Ludmila exploded out of her seat, slapping the table in front of her with both hands, releasing Lavi as she did. "Who are you calling a budding potato!?"

"Indeed, making comments on one's appearance like that is beneath you, Lady Elen," Regin said firmly. "And name-calling has no place at this table."

Elen smirked, glancing down at her own chest, then over at Regin, before looking over to Ludmila, then nodded her head, her tone falsely apologetic. "My apologies, Your Highness."

Gritting her teeth, Regin ignored that look, wondering idly if Elen ever let up with her teasing. *Drat her and her sinfully attractive body! You might have seduced Tigre to your cause, but I swear I will seduce him right back to mine!* "I accept your apology in precisely the same manner in which it was given," she replied.

Tigre looked around the room at the other men, who were looking back at him. One or two were smirking while the others simply saying with their eyes, 'This is your problem, deal with it, young man,' and he coughed delicately. "Perhaps we should get back on topic?"

Eventually, the two sides of the argument came to a few compromises. The Silver Meteor Army would move out in segments, far enough away to avoid being attacked all at once but close enough to provide some support if need be. The scouts would be sent out first to find the enemy army and any information on their plans or what happened at Southport.

Meanwhile, the majority of the Silver Meteor Army would prepare to move toward the capital once the army was fully recovered. In this manner, they would hopefully force Duke Thenardier to fight them on their terms. And when the army marched, Elen and Ranma, and Tigre would go with the scouts. Their objective would be to find the dragons and bring them to battle.

Tigre's inclusion was a surprise, and Regin made to protest, but Tigre held up a polite hand, explaining, "I will remind Your Highness that it wasn't just Ranma who helps to utterly destroy Muozinel Army. I still have no idea where it came from, or what manner of enchantments are placed upon it, but it is clear that my family's Black Bow is a weapon of power. And if I can use it, even if only in conjunction with lady Elen's Arifar, that gives us another means to combat dragons. We have to use it."

Soon after that, the meeting ended, and the leaders of the Knightly Orders and the other noblemen started to leave, talking in small groups about this or that issue facing the army as it recuperated. Elen was amused to note that one of those issues was finding enough metal to make stirrups and horseshoes to replace those damaged or lost in the campaign. That and buttons, knives and other things.

Gerard had done such a good job of keeping the supply of arrows coming that they had gone through a lot of the metal in the area. And of course, the largest source of steel in Brune was not about to give them any. Nemetacum had stopped selling iron and steel to the rest of Brune from the moment that Zion Thenardier had returned from the debacle on the Dinant Plains. And it was starting to become troublesome throughout the nation, much like food had been in the past winter.

Luckily food at least wasn't an issue at this point, nor was leatherwork. And the... debris... from the Muozinel Army would give them enough resources once it was collected. That process had barely begun, given how exhausted the Silver Meteor Army was, but Lord Mashas and the other lords supplying the manpower now, Elen knew it wouldn't be a problem for much longer.

"By the way," Edmund asked as he made to exit the room. "You should know that rumors of how we defeated Muozinel have begun to spread through the common folk. Just as fast as any other rumor, alas." The man's face indicated that he wasn't all that sad about it. Ranma's attitude towards the faith of the ten gods had annoyed him, and using Ranma's own abilities to continue to spread the idea that he was some kind of angel, amused the man greatly.

Tigre nodded seriously. "I was actually going to bring that up myself. I don't know how Ranma will react when he hears those rumors or when someone calls him an archangel to his face. Laugh, at first, but after that, I have no idea."

The others who knew Ranma well enough, including Regin, also looked both amused and worried. "Just as long as he decides that desecrating sanctified temples is the best idea to finally kill that rumor among the troops and the priesthood, I think we can live with Ranma's displeasure," Regin stated hesitantly. "Still, I hope he doesn't resent it too much. I was actually tempted to try to take that rumor and run with it in an effort to erode popular support for Duke Thenardier among the peasants around here and within his own lands."

While Tigre shook his head rapidly to indicate his opinion on that idea, Elen and Ludmila both blinked in surprise at that and spoke over one another as they exclaimed, "Wait, Thenardier has popular support!" They then turned to one another, growling out, "Don't copy me!/What was with that, you budding potato!?"

As Edmund snorted and left, Regin brought their attention back to her as she stepped around the Vanadis to take Tigre's arm in her own, heading towards the doorway. "Unfortunately, he does, at least according to a few men I've had sounding out the surviving local population and news I've gotten from the Prime Minister since I began to meet with the Knightly Orders. During his war against Ganelon many of the common folk and even much of the merchant class came to believe that he was the better option. Now with Ganelon gone, many of those selfsame people believe him a strong, capable ruler, far better than an untried Princess."

"Ugh. I was about to make a joke about being better than Ganelon being a very low bar to clear, but this goes back to that whole 'no woman can rule' concept you Brune people have huh?" Elen grumbled, shaking her head, while Ludmila scowled once more agreeing with her fellow Vanadis.

"Exactly. Here in Brune that is not just a random societal rule, but one that the temples have long supported along with the nobility, so making any headway against it is going to be difficult. However, I **didn't** help that rumor about him spread, so when Ranma learns that the rumor of his angelic origins has gained strength since the events in the Gap, please tell him that," Regin said, shaking her head. "I would dislike being the target of Ranma's annoyance, regardless of the fact that he probably wouldn't do anything physical to me."

At Ludmila's confused look, Elen snorted. "Heh, that just means Ranma would prank her, probably in an extremely embarrassing way."

"Exactly," Regin agreed, shivering. "I've seen enough of his pranks over the winter, thank you."

"Don't worry," Tigre soothed, walking beside the Queen even as Elen growled and grabbed his other hand pulling his arm into her chest, the feeling of it causing him to flush a bit. "Given Edmund's comments earlier, I can think of no other person who would better serve as a target for Ranma's annoyance about that if it comes to his attention."

"I rather think that doing so would give him another reason to recover," Elen snickered.

OOOOOO

Two days passed as Ludmila's troops prepared to leave, gathering spare horses for themselves from those which had somehow survived the Muozinel Army's destruction, as the rest of the Silver Meteor Army recuperated and scavenged their own supplies from the wreckage of the battlefield. There were also, of course, large-scale burial details still going on even now, more than a week after the final battle. Funeral pyres were set up, with the enemy's dead simply dumped on them to burn away, but there were so many it was harsh duty and even the heartiest of soldiers couldn't work at such things for very long.

However, by this point, Elen had had enough. That evening, as she nestled into Tigre's side, Elen decided, "I think that Ranma's recovered as much as he's going to with our hand-off approach. It's time for some tough love."

Scratching his chin with his free hand, Tigre nodded thoughtfully, then leaned down and kissed her on the cheek. They weren't in public at the moment, instead having retired to Elen's quarters for a private dinner, so he was fine with showing Elen some affection. "That's not a bad idea, frankly. It's evident Ranma's not going to be able to deal with his grief on his own. But how to do it?"

"You leave that to me. Just talk to the locals and get me some alcohol."

Confused, Tigre nodded at that, and their meal continued. Thankfully it didn't take him long to find a local who ran his own distillery, and soon, Elen had a jug of the man's finest in hand.

That very night, Elen headed to Ranma's quarters, finding the door closed. Titta had just left Ranma about an hour ago and had reported he had eaten and changed under his own power but had not responded to any of her attempts to start a conversation.

Raising a delicate foot, Elen lashed out with a kick, shattering the door off its hinges and sending it flying into the room.

At the noise, Ranma sat up abruptly in bed, only for his eyes to widen at the sight of the door flying towards him. Hopping up and off the bed, he landed lightly on the flying door, stopping its spin before kicking it to the side, landing crouched on the bed as he glared at Elen. "What the hell, Elen!"

"Oh please, as if one measly door would hurt you," Elen scoffed as she strode forward, plopping herself to one side of Ranma, waving the large clay jug she held in his face. "I see you're actually able to interact with the world around us again. Good. Now, drink up."

Ranma glared at her, but seeing the smirk on Elen's face and knowing it about as well as he knew his own, Ranma knew she wouldn't give up. So he held out a hand, and took the jug from her, taking an incautious gulp. Liquid fire moved down his gullet, and he gasped, nearly tossing the jug aside, only for it to be grabbed out of his hand by Elen.

She downed a pull of it quickly, licking her lips. "That's actually pretty good."

Gasping, Ranma shook his head, thumping his chest with one hand. "Pretty good?! It tasted of cinnamon but feels like I just ate a torch or something!"

"I know, it's quite tasty. I might want to convince the farmer who distilled this brew to come to Leitmeritz. Or Alsace at least," Elen said with a laugh.

"What do you want, Elen?" Ranma grumbled.

"I want you to get out of your funk!" Elen declared, poking Ranma in the nose, then the cheek, and then near the eye before Ranma batted her hand away. "I understand why you have been depressed. I even respect you for feeling so much guilt about what we had to do in the Gap because you should. It was horrible. But it was also something we **had** to do, and now you need to get over it. We've still got Thenardier to deal with after all."

"How would you know..." Ranma growled out before pausing, looking at Arifar where it hung at Elen's side.

She smirked at him, nodding her head once. "Yeah, of anyone, one of us Vanadis would know what you're going through, Ranma. It's very different, making war like we do, killing like we occasionally do. But look at it from the other side of things: Muozinel wanted to enslave, conquer and kill. Our enemies want always conquer Zhcted's land, take the Vanadis and make us whores or worse. Never embrace using your power like that but always realize that if we have to, we need to shoulder the burden of doing so. Understand?"

Honestly, Elen felt Sasha or Sofy would do a better job at explaining this, but she hoped her words got through to Ranma right now. They couldn't afford to send him off to Legnica, and who knew where Sofy was right now?

Ranma heard all this, and while it really wasn't all that different from what Elen, Milly and Tigre had tried to tell him before, now Ranma finally admitted he needed help. "How do you deal with the nightmares?"

"I picture the faces of the men under my command, the citizens I protect. And I know that if I don't use all of my power to defend them or if I don't use just enough power to defend them, I do those men and women a disservice. For you, Ranma? I suppose in your case, just think about right and wrong." Elen shrugged her shoulders. "Like I just said, Muozinel started that war, and for every person in that army, a dozen slaves would've been sent back into Muozinel. So, while what you did was horrible, it really was the lesser of two evils."

"I don't think that's going to help my nightmares much," Ranma grumbled, although he did nod in reply. "Still, I understand your point of least."

"Good. Because Ludmila's going home leaving us in the lurch, so I'll need your help against the dragons," Elen answered, thrusting the jug out towards Ranma again.

Ranma took a long draft of it, causing Elen's eyes to widen, and when he handed it back, his face was noticeably a little bit redder than it had been. *I guess he can't hold his liquor?*

Frowning now in puzzlement, Ranma let loose a tiny hiccup before pointing at Elen. "Dragons, right? That's the main problem."

"Right. I think in terms of quality, the Silver Meteor Army can match any other army in the world and overmatches Thenardier's, at least in terms of the regular troops. I have no idea about his organization or officer's core. But dragons are another matter entirely."

"Cool." Now was Elen's turn to frown in puzzlement, not understanding the use of that word, but Ranma went on before she could question it. "That sounds great, just awesome." He

thumped a hand against the nearby wall of the keep, and tiny cracks appeared on the stone. "I get one dragon entirely to myself, got it?"

"I'd normally get angry at that tone, and you trying to demand something from me," Elen huffed, pushing Ranma hard in the shoulder just as he removed his hand from the wall and reached with his other hand to take the jug again. This sent Ranma falling backward onto the bed, and she went on. "But since Thenardier has three dragons to his name from the latest rumors, I'm perfectly happy with you taking one on your own."

"Good. The idea of pounding on something that can really take it and dish it out sounds great to me right now. I'm done killing people that can't fight back," Ranma grumbled, rolling onto his side to glare at her.

"I think a lot of soldiers would really hate the fact you think they can't fight good enough to matter to you," Elen chuckled. "Now come on, get up, let's go see Tigre."

Ranma allowed Elen to pull him to his feet, but this appeared to be a ruse as Elen next felt his hand sneak around her body to grab at the jug again, dancing out of her reach even as she tried to grab at him. She watched in shock as Ranma several more gulps from the jug, his throat working visibly before he pulled it away from his mouth. His face was now heavily flushed, his eyes had closed partway, and he seemed almost to sway on his feet. "Dammit, Ranma, drinking your nightmares away is not what I had in mind!"

"Hadn't even thought of that, *hiccup*," Ranma hiccuped, holding one hand over his mouth. 'Scuse me. Just, my old man always liked to get drunk, but I never saw the point to it, kind of hated the idea, really. The whole loss of control thing. But it is kind of nice to deaden things up a bit."

Before Elen could respond, Ranma was moving towards the doorway, calling over his shoulder, "By the way, wha's this about Ludmila leaving?"

"She is not really part of the Silver Meteor Army Ranma. Ludmila wasn't sent to join us, she was sent to fight Muozinel. And, in case you haven't noticed, she and I have this whole rivalry thing going on," Elen answered dryly, moving to follow him.

"Rivals, ha!" Ranma turned, turning in place a few times, almost as balanced as a ballerina for all the fact that he was twirling in place like a top before he looked back at Elen. "You don't know the meaning of the word! At least Ludmila's never tried to ambush you in the shower, attacked you while you were sleeping, or used her curse form to spy on you and get between you and the girl you might've thought you liked."

Blinking, Elen opened her mouth, then shut it, shaking her head. There really was no simple response she could make to that statement, or rather, statements. "I don't suppose she

ever has, no. But Ludmila doesn't have orders to help us against Thenardier and her family has long-standing ties to his."

"Why should that matter? It's an alliance between people, right? Hard Ass is an ass, sho Milly shouldn't feel bad," Ranma quipped. "Have you asked her to stay?"

Elen stiffened, and Ranma laughed, shaking the jug in front of her. "Come on! You just said this Thenardier has three dragons. So unless Tigre has gotten to the point where he can use the power of that freaky bow of his, we need a third person to come to them riiiiight?"

Grabbing the jug out of Ranma's hand, Elen downed the rest of it, shaking it back at him in a mockery of what he had been doing a second ago. "It's not that simple, and you know it. I'm not about to bend to the point of asking her for help, not now, not ever. And there are her troops to consider too. Ludmila would have to create the same deal I've got going with Tigre, but I doubt Regin has anything to offer her." *Well, except ownership of the Nemetacum mines, but I doubt Regin would go for that.*

"But yer not denying that we could use the help?" Ranma asked, then blinked. "And Tigre hasn't gotten to the point where he can use that freaky bow regularly, right? Because that would be freaky too."

"No he hasn't, although I still have questions about that Black Bow too. Where it came from, for one thing. And where it gets its power from for a more important second point. But no, he and I have been practicing recently, and while we're able to draw out the power of the Black Bow together almost on-demand now, he can't do it on his own," Elen grumbled.

And most of the time, it seems as if the Black Bow just leeches Arifar's wind power. It might multiply it and then shoot it way further than I can alone, but that's a much different thing than having its own power as it did back in the Battle of Molsheim and against the Muozinel army. Really, it just seems as if the Black Bow's only interested in helping when it's serious, which is odd on many levels.

Shaking her head, Elen turned her attention back to Ranma. "Anyway, Ludmila is many things, but she isn't flexible, and she's already determined that fighting Thenardier isn't her duty. From her perspective, she's right, and for Milly, *snicker*," Elen snorted, "duty always comes first."

Frowning in thought, Ranma waved a finger in the air as he walked down the hallway, ignoring the looks he was getting from other people he passed by. "You got a point, I suppose. Still, if she's going to bail on us, that means I get to take a heck a lot of fun out of her."

Elen snorted, debating within herself whether or not to stop her friend, then shrugged, following after. *I wonder what he means by 'take a lot of fun out of her'?*

Outside, they found Ludmila leaning on Laviyas as she stood by a group of horses. She seemed to be talking to the farrier as a few of his aides went over the horse's hooves by torchlight. She looked up as Elen approached, her eyes widening slightly at the sight of Ranma next to her before Ludmila smiled. "Ranma, it's good to see you up and about..." Her voice trailed off as she noticed the red color on Ranma's face, and then her eyes twitched over to Elen. "You didn't!"

"How was I supposed to know he couldn't hold his alcohol, and besides, he seems to be a pretty functional drunk anyway."

That was as far as Elen got before Ranma crossed the intervening distance and tried to grab Laviyas out of Ludmila's hand. She tightened her own grip, but that only served Ranma's real objective perfectly. She soon found herself being tossed through to crash down nearby.

"I hear you're running away, running away, running away like a little girl!" Ranma trilled, his tone even drunker than it had been when he and Elen had been talking in the hallway. They had finished off the jug between the two of them as they walked, but Ranma had taken the lion's share.

Before Ranma had spoken, Ludmila had been glaring at Elen as a sailor would upon learning someone had started an open fire aboard a ship to cook with. But as she pushed herself to her feet, Ludmilla's glare changed targets to Ranma, only for her eyes to widen as Ranma dashed forward. She tried to leap backward, but she wasn't quite fast enough to get away from him as he played with her cheeks, grinning cheerfully. "Well, don't worry, little girl, I'm sure we won't be needing ya here, just run home and play with yer dollies."

Growling angrily, Ludmila raised the butt end of Laviyas, aiming for Ranma's chest, or perhaps a little lower down. But Ranma seemed to fall backward onto his back of his own accord. "Eh, eh!?" Ludmilla gasped, then gasped again as she felt Ranma kicking up at her chest, hurling her backwards a bit.

In response Laviyas' business end came around in a series of sweeps and jabs as she shouted, "How dare you! I have done my duty as my King dictated. Not all of us can fight for friendship's sake alone, Ranma! I have a duty to my King and to my men, not to lead them into a fight from which we would gain nothing."

Ranma didn't seem to hear her, instead swaying around her blows like he was made of parchment. He also seemed to be dodging under and around her blows a lot more than she was used to seeing. At one point he even seemed to lay down. But when Laviyas came down in a sharp strike toward his head, Ranma's feet came up and over, grabbing the staff before the tip could hit his head.

The next second, Ludmila found herself flying through the air to crash into Elen, who went down with an oof, her laughter cutting off abruptly as her back slammed onto the ground. "Does the little girl want to play? I suppose we can play once before you have to run away."

"Get off," Elen growled, pushing Ludmila off her, standing up as well, Arifar in her hand now, watching as Ranma casually tossed several of Ludmila's troops away, their swords having been torn from their hands, now stabbed to their quillons in the ground. *Morons, should've known not to interfere. I hope their bruises teach them a lesson.* "Ranma, you're drunk. Why don't you go sit down somewhere and wait for it to pass?"

"Nooooope. not sitting, too much laying down. Hasn't helped, and everything's a littllllle not great now, buuuutttt..." Ranma paused, drawing out the word, then giving both of the Vanadis a grin, as he spread his hands, and then bent backward, so much so that both women were afraid they would hear a crack from his back, until he was doing a handstand without any hands. Instead he was using his head, swiveling around on the ground like a top to look at them, something that both women felt was strangely disturbing. "One thing that always made me feel better was a good fight."

With that, Ranma pushed off the ground with his head and performed several cartwheels towards the two Vanadis, lashing out, a foot flashing out towards both Vanadis. Both of them blocked the kick aimed towards them but were still sent skidding backward. Elen recovered first, and growling sent a cut towards Ranma's chest, then fainted towards his face before stabbing again towards his leg.

He can just heal whatever I do to him anyway, and Ranma might be right. This might be the best way to really get him over his funk. Although I gotta say drunk Ranma's taunting kind of sucks in comparison to his normal stuff.

Even though he seemed to bite on the feint, Ranma dodged the follow-up strike to his leg by going down onto his back once more. Seeing this, Elen was kind of confused. She had fought him more than often enough to know Ranma's preferred style, and this wasn't it. *Ranma should've taken to the air just then. Instead, he's going to the groundDDD!!!*

That was all she could think before Elen was forced to use her forearm to block a punch. The blow sent a tingle of pain up and down her arm, but she ignored it, wrenching her arm back out of Ranma's grip before it could close on the hand holding Arifar. *And he normally doesn't go for grapples!*

Once more, Elen's thoughts were interrupted as instead of grabbing at her wrist, Ranma's hands wrapped around her thigh. She's found herself flipped up and through the air as Ranma shouted, "Heheheh heave-ho!"

While Elen used Arifar's magic to stop her flight and then dive down towards Ranma, Ludmila had begun her own attack, a series of stabs from Lavias' ice-enhanced spearhead,

followed by a roundhouse blow from the butt end of it. She had seen Elen use her own magical weapon and assumed that Ranma's skin would be proof against its edge.

This proved a moot point because none of her strikes landed. Once more, Ranma dodged around them as if he was made out of parchment rather than flesh and bones, falling backwards onto his back and then rolling this way and that before suddenly his hand grabbed at Lavias right between her own. "Not again!" Ludmila shouted as she was hurled to one side.

Unlike with Elen, Ranma didn't let up on Ludmila, racing after her. She rolled with the impact to the ground, thrusting out back towards him, but Ranma contorted underneath the blow and then kicked out upward, striking the same point he had previously grabbed, halfway between Ludmila's hands where they held Lavias' shaft. The weapon flew out of her hands, her grip overcome by Ranma's strength, and then Ludmila found herself tripped by Ranma's other leg, landing on her stomach.

Above them, Elen had to break off her own attack, dodging to one side of the tumbling flying spear of Lavias, which had reverted to its normal form after leaving its owner's hand. A quick gust of wind from Arifar caught the other Viralt and sent it down towards the ground, but before attacking once more, Elen paused, a grin appearing on her face. "You know what, I think I'm done with this now. Have fun, Ranma."

The cause of Elen's sudden pacifism was the fact that Ranma had sat on Ludmila's back. Now as Elen watched, he proceeded to tickle her, behind the neck, over the shoulders, and to the sides. "Little girls get tickled!"

"Unhand me youaaaahha, you oaf! How, ahahaha, how dare you! When I gettahaha free..." Ludmila tried to cast out between laughing, trying to free herself, and getting nowhere. She was able to look past Ranma up into the sky, though, and seeing the gleam of silver hair hanging in the nighttime sky, shouted. "What arehahahah, you waiting for, Eleonora! Give meeehehehe a hand."

"All right." With that, Elen began clapping slowly.

"Curse you, Viltaria!" Ludmila shrieked before succumbing again to Ranma's tickle torture.

Watching this, none of the surrounding troopers who Ranma had tossed away wanted to get involved, although they were quite angry at Ranma's treatment of their lady. Even so, self-preservation meant they stayed where Ranma had tossed them.

Salvation instead came from Tigre. He had heard the commotion and come out of the keep and now quickly put an arrow to the black bow, firing it towards Ranma.

Ranma rolled off of Ludmila, dodging the arrow easily. The next few made him back away rapidly as he drawled, "Whadja do that for? I was just having fun."

His friend's tone of voice caused Tigre's eyebrows to twitch, and he looked at Ludmila. But she rapidly shook her head, pointing to where Elen had just landed. "Don't blame me. It was all Eleonora's fault."

"I just wanted to give him a bit of a drink, get him out of his funk bit, not get him drunk! How was I supposed to know he was a lightweight and would do all this!" Elen tried to defend herself. "Besides, you all seem to be forgetting it seems to have worked too!"

Tigre already had another arrow to his string and pulled back, feeling the black bow's spirit or whatever it was rousing itself, a sense of laughter coming from the bow. And for a moment, his thoughts mirrored Elen's earlier thoughts on this point. *So you only get involved when things interest you, huh? Better than nothing, I guess.*

"Ranma, you're drunk. I thought you said that was something your father did that you never wanted to do," Tigre spoke calmly, despite the strain on his arm.

"Meh, it made the pain a bit more bearable, for a time anyway. After that, it was just an excuse, I guess," Ranma grumbled, although everyone within earshot could hear a difference in his voice now. It was almost back to normal. Then Ranma sighed, raising his hands up from his waist to his neck, breathing out deeply. Blue light flashed from within his mouth for a second as Ranma used his ki to speed up his metabolism, burning through the alcohol in seconds.

When he spoke again, his voice was back to normal. "As for the rest, that was a mix of needing something physical to help me over my funk and wanting to tease Ludmila for leaving us in the lurch."

"I was never with you in the first place," Ludmila muttered, shaking her head and promising herself to get some revenge on both Viltaria and Ranma in the future. What form that revenge would take, she didn't know. But it would be humiliating in some fashion that she was certain of. "And I have explained my reasoning until I am blue in the face, to you, Tigre and Viltaria. I do not need to do so further."

Ranma grumbled something under his breath that sounded like, "Well then, don't expect me to apologize", causing Ludmila's glare to strengthen it to the point where, if she had the magical ability, Ranma would've been turned to ash on the spot.

Seeing the battle, if such it could be called, was over, the men Ranma had smacked around got to their feet, grumbling as Ludmila turned to Tigre. "Thank you for your help, Lord Vorn. Unlike some people I could name, I can see that you can at least see when a maiden is in distress rather than focus on the comedy of the moment. Five points."

Elen ignored that, moving over to Ranma and smacking him on the back, then pulling him into a one-armed chokehold. "So the next time you're in a funk, I should just kick your door in down and drag you out for a spar then? Sounds like fun."

Ranma chuckled, broke out of her grip, and got Elen into a one-arm hug as he whispered, "Thank you," before moving over to Tigre. Elen smirked behind him, then moved over to Tigre as well. "But what was that, Ranma? Your entire combat style changed."

"That is the drunken fist. It's a kind of martial arts based upon the feeling of bonelessness you get if you're really drunk, that and grappling." He smirked at Ludmila, shaking his head with a chuckle. "You're lucky. The guy I fought who used that technique was a pervert. He'd have done a lot more than tickle you."

Ludmila's face turned apple red for a moment, and not just because of embarrassment. Before Ranma could set himself, Ludmila thumped him hard on the chest with a punch, causing him to release a gasp of air, as Ludmila turned in a huff, but Tigre stopped her with a hand on her shoulder. "Now, now, let's not separate angry. While Elen might not have gone about this correctly, she at least has gotten Ranma out of his room. And you're going to be leaving tomorrow in any event, correct?"

"That's right, I intend to head directly towards the Knightly Orders territory, then through it to my own. It's the easiest and fastest route back to Olmutz. That's why it's been used as an invasion point so often," Ludmila answered wryly. "I don't doubt this is the first time a force from Olmutz has actually marched into Zhcted and back out peacefully."

Then Ludmila frowned, shaking her head. "Honestly, I might not even be staying there for very long. When I left, there was news that implied the Horse Lords might be preparing to invade. I've never fought them, so I don't know how serious that rumor is, but the life of a Vanadis is never dull, so who knows how long I will be staying at home?"

The four of them reentered the keep, heading up to Elen's room, which was not at all coincidentally across from Tigre's room. They found Titta waiting for them, placing a large tray of food and drinks on the table. Turning, she wagged a finger at Ranma, admonishing him, "You need to eat! You've barely been touching your food for the past few days, and what you've eaten, you threw up after."

"Yes, yes, oh great and powerful maid," Ranma retorted, rolling her off his eyes at her. He then backed away rapidly when she grabbed up a flask of cold water. "I'll be good!"

Ranma really, **really** didn't want to deal with being a woman right now. He knew as a woman that he was a little more emotional, and after the roller-coaster emotions of the last few days, Ranma didn't think he could deal with that on top of it. *Let me get my nightmares under control, then maybe.*

Titta huffed but then wrapped Ranma up in a hug. "Don't make me worry about you so, you big oaf! I know what you did was horrible, but I also know what those people would've done to Brune and women like me, let alone the children. I'm sorry you had to do it, but I'm not sorry that it happened."

Ranma nodded, patting her on the back, looking a little awkward only to be rescued by Elen, gesturing Ranma to sit across from her and Tigre and to dig into the food. Ranma did so with a will, as banter and teasing went around the room. All of the others were happy to see Ranma slowly returning to himself, and knew he needed this, so for once, Eleanor and Ludmila set aside their normal badinage, which gave the night a more pleasant, laid-back feel.

However, the next day, Ludmila still left with the dawn. The only one of the others awake was Tigre. He walked Ludmila out to her horse, helping her into her saddle and then smiling ruefully up at her. "I hope you don't feel too poorly about after last night."

"The only ones I feel poorly about from last night are Elen for causing it and Ranma for his assault upon my person," Ludmila answered tartly. But then she smiled and reached down to shake Tigre's hand. "You comported yourself quite well both last night and throughout the campaign. I believe Lord from that you get a full fifty points from me for our interactions. See that you keep it up next time we meet."

"I'll try to," Tigre said, nodding farewell and stepping back as Ludmila turned her horse to join her men. Soon enough, the column was out of the cave and moving out of sight, down the road and towards the lands of the Knightly Orders.

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It took Lim several weeks to travel to the edge of Brest. At that point, the rumor of war with the Horse Lords had been replaced with the reality of refugees fleeing deeper into Zhcted territory. She stopped a few of the better-dressed or organized refugees, asking where they had come from, what had been happening, and, more importantly, where the Horse Lords were supposed to be and where Valentina's army was. Most of the time, Lim didn't get the answers she wanted, but eventually, Lim discovered that Valentina and her army were indeed in the field, having marched from her own territory and into what was supposedly Lim's. There were some rumors of battles but nothing decisive.

After that, it took her another ten days – due to bad weather and her horse coming up lame, to find the other Vanadis and her army. When she did, the men of Osterode were setting up camp. And while they had purportedly been in the field for nearly the entire summer so far,

they still were well-organized and alert, something Lim nodded approval of even as the patrols moving around the camp spotted her coming. "Halt, who goes there!"

"I am Limalisha of Brest, wielder of Muma, and I have come to make common cause with Lady Valentina. Take me to her," Lim ordered. With that, she held up Muma and watched with well-hidden amusement when the mens' eyes widened. Moments later, that response repeated as she was quickly ushered into the camp by the captain of the watch.

As she was ushered through the camp, Lim looked around and interest, remembering what the King had told her. Whether or not to report anything to King Victor was a different matter, but she was interested to see what was behind the rumors that seemed to worry him. *I know she gleaned quite a lot from her conversation, but what she has made of them is a mystery.*

At first, all she saw were pikemen. Their heavy chest plates and lack of vambraces or shields made them distinctive even without their large pikes. There were several hundred crossbowmen and several dozen men whose purpose she couldn't quite figure out. They were armored in brigandine suits like the crossbowmen but didn't have visible weapons. All told, she felt there were about two thousand men. A small army, but seemingly well-trained.

There also seemed to be a group of field engineers, fifteen or perhaps more, men who were in charge of setting up camp, directing soldiers to create a barricade around it. That was quite a bit more than most armies would have done, and Lim wondered why. *For that matter, Lim thought, looking up at the sun, why is the army stopping here in the first place?*

She voiced that question to the lieutenant who was guiding her through the camp, and he scowled. "We fought one pitched battle with the Horse Lords early on in the campaign milady. But ever since, they haven't really tried to challenge our pike. Instead, they've been attacking us at night trying to perform hit and run attacks or just avoiding us entirely using their greater mobility. We've tried to bring them to battle a few times, but this time, the Horse Lords aren't playing by the old rules."

He then smirked slightly, looking over to the side to where a large group of carts was arrayed in lines. Each of them was separated by a certain amount of distance, and there were marks around the cards, along with guards. "Then again, neither are we."

Lim's brows furrowed at that, and she stared at the carts but then turned away, finding that they were already at Valentina's tent. A tent that, Lim was interested to note, wasn't any different than any of the others. There was a small black flag outside, but that was the only marker that this tent held anyone more important than the soldiers around them.

Inside the tent, Valentina was scowling down at a map, if it could be called that. After her interaction with Ranma and the concept of topography and other skills that Ranma had brought to mapmaking, Valentina wouldn't call this more than a painting, really, and not a very

good one. *Thank Eris the Horse Lords have never developed horse archery like Tigre was when I was in Brune! They would've shot my army to pieces by now, gunpowder or no.*

At first, Valentina's army had surprised the Horse Lords with their speed. The use of smaller mule-pulled carts allowed them to move faster than they had in the past, even though the amount of baggage they had to move had increased thanks to her sling-throwers and their special ammunition.

But from the start, it became apparent that this Horse Lord Warmaster was smarter than the last clans she had dealt with. First, he had sent what amounted to a spoiling raid into her territory, forcing her to respond. She destroyed that force swiftly, bringing it to battle as they had been able to in the past and crushing it without any need to use her new weapons.

But after that, the Horse Lords' tactics drastically. Before, bringing the enemy to battle would be as simple as marching into view of their main army. Then the Horse Lords, feeling challenged and having quite a bit of disdain for infantry, would charge. And, after Valentina had instituted her pike companies, that meant they would be butchered. Obviously.

Before that, their charges had been terrifying things, the speed and dexterity of the Horse Lords and the slashing power of their sabers proving dangerous to even armored knights. Their javelins could also puncture heavy armor or knock a man off a horse, which, at a full gallop, was just as deadly. But Ezendeis' attacks and field fortifications could defend against such, and Valentina had developed a tactic that armed the third row of a pike company armed with large tower shields. When the enemy entered javelin range, they would shift forward, protecting themselves and their fellows, then, as the javelin storm subsided, would fade back, letting the pike-armed lines set themselves for the charge.

Now, the Horse Lords weren't doing any such thing.

Instead, the horsemen circled away after hurling javelins at her men. They hit and ran in small groups or avoided combat entirely. Indeed, judging by what the few locals her army had met could tell her, the Horse Lords didn't seem to be congregating in any large force, instead being broken into several dozen small bands. It was almost as if the Warmaster had known that he couldn't face her pikes.

Which is possible, Valentina admitted, biting at one of her fingers as she stared at the map. I need a place where they will have to bunch up, or maybe a place I could get ahead of them, but no, that wouldn't work drat it, given how diffused they are. "So perhaps fortify a target that they can't ignore, one they have to gather together to destroy?"

"Having trouble, Lady Estes?" a well-known if an entirely unexpected voice spoke up from behind Valentina, and she turned quickly from her map table, staring at Lim in shock.

The man who had brought Lim through the Army camp out towards his lady. "Lady Valentina, Lady Lim here says that she is..."

He was interrupted as Valentina began to laugh, shaking her head from side to side as giggles erupted from her, staring at Lim's face and then the weapon on her back. "Well, this is a reunion I had not expected! Welcome, sister."

Lim smiled, some tension in her shoulder she hadn't even been aware of before disappearing. "I've been hearing about the invasion of the Horse Lords for several days now. How can I help? I regret that Brest doesn't have any forces available to send, not yet, at least. Give me a few years to work with the locals, and that will change. But for now, I'm afraid all I can offer is my own mind and Muma."

"That should be enough," Valentina answered, still smiling brightly. *Of all of the possible candidates for Muma I could have thought of, Lim wasn't among them. Still, perhaps she should have been.*

It was not because both of them were interested in Ranma. That was a secondary consideration to Valentina's mind. Although, the fact that Lim was here meant that Valentina's odds of seeing Ranma sometime this year rose dramatically, which set the black-haired woman's pulse racing a bit. But no, it was Lim's ability to organize and lead that made Valentina so happy to see her.

"Lawrence, could you ask the cooks to prepare something for the two of us? And a bottle of the mulled cider? I think Lim and I have much to discuss. My first question, however, is perhaps the most important." Valentina motioned to the map behind her. "How good are you at sneaking about, and how good are you at map making? I need a place where we can force the Horse Lords either to come to us or attack them when they bunch up."

Lim frowned, stepping up to the map as Lawrence left. "Lawrence told me something about how the Horse Lords are fighting now. I can understand your frustrations. But I think that attempting to plan out a fight like that is going to take too long. Certainly too long for my new subjects. And I think you might be going about this the wrong way."

"Have I mentioned how happy I am that someone responsible is wielding Muma now?" Valentina asked, giggling again. "Having a weak county directly next to mine has been a nightmare more often than not."

"Especially given the King refused to allow you to conquer the whole thing?" Lim teased gently, to which Valentina held up a finger, indicating a touch.

Then she turned back to the map frowning thoughtfully at it as she pulled out her satchel from behind her. Setting it down, she pulled out some of the royal maps that she had been given of Brest. But few of them had much more to tell than the painting that Valentina

was using currently. "First thing I do, I'm going to make a much better map of Brest than this. Honestly, these are just pathetic."

"Tell me about it," Valentina groaned, flopping into a chair, causing her chest to jiggle in a way that grabbed Lim's attention for a second before she looked away, shaking her head. "I began that work in Osterode at the same time I began... to follow up on my conversations with Ranma in other ways. But you said something about me going about this the wrong way?"

"I didn't mean to offend you. But I think that finding a place where the Horse Lords would have to attack you is not going to happen unless you allow them to travel much deeper into my territory than we should."

"The town of Cindwar," Valentina agreed with a nod, indicating the one well-marked area on the map. "That is a thought. But I take it you have a better idea?"

"I do indeed. Instead of using an existing target, why not see if you can trick the invaders into attacking one that doesn't exist? They are running around in small groups here and there correct? Then why don't we do the same, or at the very least, appear to?"

Valentina frowned, staring at the useless map for a moment, biting her finger again as she thought things through. "Appear to break up to chase down the various raiding parties, say thirty or forty pikemen and crossbowmen each, enough force to seem too small, but to actually be able to deal with those raiding parties. Then, continue my march deeper into Brest with half of my army, small enough at that point to perhaps be enticing enough to bring the main force of the Horse Lords to battle? That could work. If the Horse Lords don't think about simply defeating my smaller bands in detail. I'm not willing to send my men to their deaths like that."

Although if I break up my slingers too, they could see off any attacker. But... but would they really be that effective? Especially if I can't use them on a large scale? I don't want the enemy to become aware of them until I can use them to deliver a decisive blow. Since the gunpowder weapons were so new, Valentina was still groping her way towards a true combat doctrine despite having drained Ranma's brain on that kind of thing as best she could.

"Then leave the main army under someone else's command, and change the composition of some of these smaller forces. You lead one, I'll lead another, and then you can triple down on a third in terms of crossbowmen."

"That could work, although..."

The two of them kept talking as the meal arrived, hammering out a plan, which hopefully would see off the Horse Lords invasion. Eventually, they had a full plan, and Valentina smiled, ringing a bell to summon Lawrence back. "I think we're done for tonight. If you could find Lim a tent, please? Set it up next to my own for now. We'll be changing the order of march tomorrow morning, so inform the captains there will be a meeting early tomorrow."

Lawrence bowed quickly, and as he left, Lim turned back to Valentina. "You didn't seem worried by the way that about the Horse Lords attacking your main army while you are away."

"I didn't, did I?" Valentina chuckled. "For one thing. I trust my captains in terms of their leadership skills. I've been working with them on our new tactics for months now, and before that for years. Surely you could name officers among Elen's troops that you would trust so much."

"I can, but it is your faith in your new tactics that I'm questioning. You've been awfully cagey about what those are, after all," Lim hinted. "Do they have anything to do with those carts out there?"

Valentina chuckled, setting her chest to bouncing in a way that would've been incredibly distracting to any man in the tent and which caused Lim to once more shake her head. *Good grief, I know that Valentina is nearly as large as Sofya, but being subjected to it once more is somewhat annoying.*

Unaware of the other woman's thoughts, Valentina brought her finger up to her mouth. "That, you will have to see. I think you'll get quite a surprise out of it."

OOOOOO

Ranma's recovery wasn't as quick as his sudden turnaround after Elen had gotten him to drink and talk would have made people believe. He still had nightmares about the battle in the gap and wasn't sleeping well at night. At times, he was also quieter, introspective almost, or rather just out of it, staring out into the distance. Yet as a few more days passed, there was a marked difference from one day to another.

However, on the fourth day after his recovery began, news came from the scouts they had sent out to find Duke hard cases army that caused a jolt to go through the entire Silver Meteor Army. "What do you mean, they've passed us by?" Regin asked, shaking her head in some confusion.

"My lady, we went straight south towards Southport, but when we started to hear rumors from the peasants about the army, we tried to cross its trail. But Thenardier's army isn't making straight for us as we thought he would. Instead, they're looking to cut us off from our territory across the Resia," Asher reported.

While the other Lords and commanders all began to mutter in shock at this development, Tigre leaned back, thumping a hand down on the armrest of his chair. "They stole

a march on us. We all thought they would be slower to move and would then come straight at us. That we had all the time in the world to recover."

"Instead, they've taken the strategic initiative away from us," Elen agreed, tugging at her hair furiously.

She stopped, a hint of red appearing on her face as Tigre gently took her hand away from her hair, holding it with his own for several moments before letting it go. "Your hair is far too pretty to tug on like that, my lady," he whispered before saying in a louder voice, "Besides, we can beat ourselves up over something that's already happened. We need to move on."

Regin frowned, shaking her head. "I'm sorry, but I don't understand."

"With this move, Duke Thenardier has given himself the opportunity to choose how our confrontation goes, Your Highness. He can either march into the Knightly Orders lands, doubtful admittedly, or can march to the capital," Lord August said.

"Both of those are doubtful, admittedly. If Thenardier tries to march on the capital, we can attempt to cut the angle on him and catch up, although he will still be able to decide the location of our confrontation. Never a good thing," Emil opined.

"He can come directly after us, having cut our supply lines, and force us back into the Gap ourselves," Gerard muttered. "That's what I would try. Keep us penned in, let us just die on the vine, or better yet, send in the dragons to finish us off."

"Or, he can cross the river into Silver Meteor Army territory, leaving a token force at the river to hold us up while he ravages our lands from one end to the other coming back to finish us off," Tigre said grimly.

Ranma shook his head. "No way. I wager he knows how fast we can move, with using me like a mule and actual mules for our baggage train. He might get across the river, sure, but we'd be on him fast. The dragons are the issue, but over the river, we could use our knowledge of the terrain to starve his whole army. I don't care what kind of training they have, that'll make the dragons go crazy.

"Maybe. But we'd be gutting our own lands. No, our best bet is to go after him now, use our greater speed to surprise him, prick him a bit, then force him to come to us," Elen scowled, slapping the table for emphasis.

"We don't really have a choice," Tigre admitted. "We have to move the army to at least look as if they are going to try to attack him in turn, but I don't think he has any idea about our scouts. Maybe not even the horse archers."

“I would not countenance acting upon that belief, Tigre,” Regin shook her head. “As I said a few days ago, Thenardier has quite a lot of popular support. His peasant and middle-class supporters aren’t willing to take the field with Thenardier, but they are more than willing to pass on information. The use of our horse archers and Ranma’s... action in the Charles Gap have no doubt reached his ears.” Regin then paused, thinking. “Your scouts, I am uncertain about.”

“Her Highness is correct. So long as his spies aren’t part of our own command staff, I don’t think the importance of those scouts will be obvious to anyone who has not faced them in battle,” Emil agreed. “We didn’t understand it until we talked it over with you all and took part in the first battle of the Gap where we saw the impact your scouts had on the invasion’s organization.”

The Silver Meteor Army members wisely kept their mouth shut. That battle was actually nowhere near the first battle of the Gap, just the first one the Knightly Orders had participated in. To call it the first battle seemed to denigrate their sacrifices up to that point. But right now, it was more important they keep projecting a united front. With that in mind, Tigre turned the conversation to how quickly the army could get moving. Nobles and Knight Commandants began to leave the conference table one after another to start the march.

Ranma was the first one out the door. To hurry the rest of the army along, he had volunteered to use his ki space once more to carry most of their equipment, barring food and boots. That would let the rest of the army move at almost the same speed the Silver Meteor Army had done to get to the Charles Gap in time to stop the Muozinel Army. Without the Silver Meteor Army’s baggage to see to, the rest of the allied forces supplies would be spread out, lightening the workload of the mules and making them move faster in turn.

Within an hour, Tigre, Elen, Ranma and the horse archers and scouts were on their way, ranging far ahead of the rest of the Silver Meteor Army.

OOOOOO

The Silver Meteor Army’s use of horse archers was indeed known to Duke Thenardier, and as the Silver Meteor Army became aware of his own army’s movements, Thenardier and Steid were talking about it. “Hit-and-run attacks, feints, long-term campaigns,” Steid frowned, staring after Duke Thenardier’s spymaster as he left the tent, counting out the things that a horse archer unit could be used for. “Screening enemy movements for certain. I think we need to be aware that once our scouts start to come into contact with the enemy, these horse archers will quickly blind our army.”

“True. Trust Tigre Vorn to come up with a unit that makes use of archery,” Thenardier snorted, shaking his head. Like many a noble in Brune, he disdained archery as being beneath a noble’s honor to use. Killing your enemies should be done up close and personal, after all, to say nothing of what the gods said about such coward’s weapons.

However, he wasn’t stupid enough to overlook how dangerous archers could be. “And they have access to the Knightly Orders as well. That is quite a dangerous punch if only one they can use once.”

“I will instantly start to train the Army in anti-archer tactics and shield maneuver,” Steid answered.

Thenardier scoffed. “Our shields will not stop the crossbows that the Knightly Orders use. We will lose quite a bit of our front-line to them if we cannot bring our dragons to bear. Slow the army’s march. We will spend half the day working on maneuvers. I want the army to be able to strengthen or weaken segments of the line at need.”

“You do not intend to cross the river?” Drekavac asked questioningly. “I thought that was the entire point of our current operation.”

“No,” Thenardier answered coldly. But then, seeing that Drekavac needed more explanation, gave it, “As ravaged as Ganelon’s lands and the lands around Southport are, we will need that land intact, especially the people there, the original peasants and those who fled there last year. I will not further weaken Brune by devastating another large territory like that.”

He smiled thinly. “Examples may be made in the future if the Lords and people of that land do not capitulate to my rule after I defeat the Silver Meteor Army. But, we will continue to march in that direction, to make it seem as if we will do just that.”

Steid nodded, looking down at the map and already trying to decide their future tactics against the enemy army. “Should we use our dragons right away or put them in a position to attack the Silver Meteor Army from several different sites?”

“That will be determined on where we allow the Silver Meteor Army to catch us up,” Thenardier laughed. “They will quickly learn that catching a dragon is a very foolish thing to do.”

True to Steid’s prediction, however, and far faster than Steid or Thenardier had ever expected, the army’s outriders and scouts, although in Silver Meteor Army parlance, they didn’t deserve that term, began to take crippling losses within two days of information on the horse archers reaching them. It became so bad that Steid was forced to take personal command of a company of the outriders just to make certain that the enemy wasn’t setting up the ambushes ahead of the army, let alone shadowing their march. Within a week, he sprang two such, taking some casualties from the horse archers and gaining experience fighting them.

“They are deadly, my Lord,” Steid admitted that evening, as once more, the main army set up camp well before the sun went down. “I lost fully half of my command. They have little to no armor, can travel far faster than we can, and simply kept their distance, buffeting us from every angle with archery.”

“Yet you were able to break off?”

“Eventually. I ordered my men into a copse of trees and then tried to ambush them in turn. It didn’t work, but it at least allowed me to break contact by sacrificing several more squads as the rest of us fled,” Steid admitted before steeling himself, looking down at the ground from his position on one knee in front of his Duke. “I regret to report that I saw Vorn leading them. But I could not bring him to battle. I apologize for my mistake, my Lord.”

Thenardier’s mouth firmed into a grim line, and he grabbed the armrests of his camp chair, his hands causing the wood underneath them to creak alarmingly. He had not forgotten that it had been Earl Vorn who had slain his only son, and of the entire Silver Meteor Army, it could be said he hated Vorn the most, even as he respected him. “If you were anyone else, Steid, I would have you flogged for such a failure! You will make that up in battle, I trust?”

The blond man nodded his head once. That was enough, and Thenardier turned to other things gesturing his general to rise. “With the horse archers now fully engaged with our own outriders, how far behind do you think the Silver Meteor Army is?”

“I have no idea, my Lord. They could have split off a small portion of their force and sent these horse archers ahead with multiple horses to cover greater ground. But even with that, I’m astonished they were able to catch us up so quickly,” Steid admitted. “Let alone done as much manage to our own outriders as they have.”

Thenardier grunted, frowning as he stared down at a map. “There is a little hill nearby. We will move the main army there. The dragons will be separated into a separate camp several miles away from the main army. One of them, the Suro, will stay within the army camp, hidden.”

Steid blinked, then looking down at the map, his brows knit in concentration. “You mean to offer a seeming mistake to draw the Silver Meteor Army into attacking. If the Vanadis and this Ranma warrior are with Vorn, they will attempt to attack our camp.”

“Exactly. But when the Vanadis and Ranma do attack, they will learn that the third dragon is within our camp, and we are prepared for them.” Thenardier smiled grimly.

Nodding thoughtfully, Steid made a suggestion. “My Lord, this is a good idea, but it will take some time to set up. We will need to be more aggressive in our own outriders so the Silver Meteor army’s men cannot get close enough to see the missing dragon. And I think we might also have another opportunity here if we are sneaky about it.”

Thenardier listened as Steid outlined his idea and eventually nodded. "Yes, it is always good to have a backup plan. See to it, Steid. Do so well, and you will redeem yourself in my eyes."

OOOOOOO

Tigre's men did indeed see the two dragons moving out and away from the enemy army. "I don't trust it, but they certainly are seeming to split off the dragons from the rest of their army," Tigre shivered a little as he spoke, shaking his head. "Where did Thenardier come up with that double-headed monster! Those dragons are the strongest in the world and should be death to any human who comes close to them, no matter their age."

"Ask better, how the hell Thenardier's able to get those dragons to do anything in the first place," Elen grumbled. "We really should have emphasized that more when I wrote my reports to my king. Maybe Ludmila would still be here if so."

"Who cares? Two heads, one head, it'll still fall eventually," Ranma said with a smirk, cracking his knuckles. His nightmares still hadn't gone away over the past week, although they had lessened somewhat in severity. But he was still looking forward to fighting something that could really fight back.

"So, you think we should attack their main camp?" Tigre asked quizzically.

Instantly the martial artist shook his head. "Attack, no. Sneak in, yeah. You're right about them sending those dragons away being a little weird. But if they think we're going to attack either the dragons or the army, they won't be ready for something subtler, and me and our scouts specialize in that. If we're lucky, maybe I can even find Thenardier and end this, drag him before the Queen."

Ranma fervently hoped so. *I don't think I have it in me to take part in a big fight again. Or, or to kill anyone for a good long while, anyway.* The very idea made him want to throw up.

"Don't count your dragons before they hatch, Ranma. Thenardier might not be as famous as Roland, but he is still one of the strongest knights that Brune has produced in the last fifty years. He might even give you a run for your money."

"All the better!" came the obvious reply, and Elen laughed, rolling her eyes. But she agreed with Ranma. This was a job for the scouts, not the horse archers.

As evening turned into night, Tigre led the horse archers through the very diffuse line of scouts Thenardier's army had posted around the army. The two sides had been sparring all day, the losses piling up on Thenardier's side in ones and twos. This was evident now in how few outriders were left to patrol the area, letting the horse archers close to the enemy camp. Close enough to provide aid if need be.

Once they were hidden away, Tigre and Ranma led the scouts forward, leaving behind a grumbling Elen tugging at her hair. The silver of her hair was quite distinctive, and unlike the two men, Elen had no training in sneaking around unseen. *Ugh, the moment this campaign's over, I'm getting Tigre to teach me how to hunt. Huh... wait a second, that sounds like it could be really romantic too. Yes!*

Shaking her thoughts of sharing a tiny tent with her man and what they might have to do to keep warm, Elen moved to a nearby tree, climbing up it as stealthily as she could. Hidden in its boughs, her hair now covered by a cloak, she perched there, watching the camp through beady eyes. If her two friends needed her, Elen wanted to be ready.

The added light from the moon made it harder for the scouts to cross the relatively open terrain around Thenardier's camp. There were no broken rocks or crevices to cover, and the moon was so bright that any movement could be spotted at any time.

The Duke had chosen an area where several large farms met. The farms' separating fences had been knocked down, and his army's camp, some eighteen thousand strong, spread out over the area.

The farmhouses, though, had been left up, and they were an obvious target. But men stationed on the rooftops of those houses, coupled with the patrols moving around the camp, made it much tougher to get close.

Yet with Ranma in the lead and Tigre following after, the group of twenty men eventually crossed the open ground in small groups, meeting up after. After putting a few tents between them and the outside of the camp, Tigre gestured, separating his men into groups of three or four, with one group of four staying where they were, hidden. These men would prepare fire swingers to cover the group's escape if need be. One of Elen's ideas, fire swingers were rope bolas, the ends of which were wrapped around small clay jars containing vegetable oil. With the rope being further soaked in a scentless oil, fire swingers could be lit and burn quickly.

Tigre led two of the other scouts forward toward the nearest farmhouse. Ranma leading another two, although he didn't make for one of the farmhouses. Instead, he made his way around the camp, wanting to get a feel for it. The other group spread out, their mission to find and ruin any supplies they could without giving their presence away.

Meanwhile, Ranma would hunt for some of the command tents, and Tigre would look around for anything unusual. Elen wasn't the only one wondering about the whole dragon-controlling thing, after all.

But almost as soon as he had broken away, Tigre realized that the enemy army was, while not waiting for the scouts per se, were prepared for trouble.

Sticking his head out around a tent, Tigre ducked back, flattening himself on the ground, one hand moving in a hand sign to send his men to the ground likewise. They hid themselves away just in time as a patrol of ten men carrying torches moved past them.

But almost as soon as that patrol had passed by, one of his men signaled that they needed to move quickly. Skirting around the tent and passing directly behind the patrol, they passed just out of the torchlight. Moments later, a second patrol went across the same area where they had just been hiding, crosswise from the first.

"Do they know about us, do you think?" one of his men whispered in Tigre's ear.

"I don't think so. Any enemy would rather keep us out of the camp in the first place." *Unless this was a trap for Ranma specifically? They can't know I'm here, I've only worked with the scouts once before. But no, if they know about his abilities, they wouldn't have sent the dragons away.* "But there are still far too many people awake at the time of night." Tigre shook his head. "We're going to have to be very cautious here."

The next moment, Tigre nearly bit his lip off as he saw Steid. The Thenardier ducal house's general was famous in Brune for his unwavering loyalty and skills with sword and army both.

He was just at the edge of Tigre's sight through the camp visible, for as he went from one of the farmhouses to another through some torchlight. But he moves too quickly for even Tigre to get a shot off, entering another tent and disappearing out of sight within a nearby tent. Tigre waited a few minutes, then scowled. *Would it be too much to ask for there to have been torch in there! Just a silhouette would've been enough!* Steid was well known as Thenardier's right-hand man, and removing him would have been important enough to take a chance.

"Lord," one of the men whispered, pointing in the opposite direction of Steid. A slightly larger patrol sat there, squatter than the others and marked with some kind of darker mark around the top. In front of the tent were several men working on various equipment, talking quietly around a campfire. But, there didn't seem to be any torches near the back of the tent, which could be a supply tent of some kind.

Tigre took this all in with a single glance and nodded at the man who he spotted it, indicating he should lead them off through the bustle of the camp. *I suppose Steid will have to*

wait. I'm certainly not going to try and enter the tent to remove him. Even with his strength training from Ranma, Tigre knew his limitations.

Other scouts were having no better luck, retreating often, hiding even more often, and becoming kind of frustrated. But they persevered, and after far longer than it should have taken, they started to find their targets. Most weren't marked as the one Tigre found, which turned out to be tent assigned to the camp's water reserves. Only the fact their mules were kept nearby gave the game away.

For his part, Ranma had not run into any of the problems the others did, having stayed to the outer edge of the camp. But like the others, he had seen how many people were still up and about despite it being well past the middle of the night. *Still, they're making the same mistake so many people make: thinking that carrying a torch will let you see in the dark better. It really, really doesn't,* Ranma reflected as he reached what had to be the paddocks.

But looking at the number of horse-shaped shadows there, Ranma frowned. He looked at one of his companions, gesturing the man near, intending to whisper in his ear. Unfortunately, that worthy was Goru, the same scout who always tried to joke around with Ranma about his curse. Now he twitched, miming a whimper as he pushed Ranma away slightly. "The only way I'd let you whisper sweet nothings to me is if you were in your female form, Ranma."

Ranma quickly got the man in a chokehold and continued to whisper into his ear. "Like the comment is pretty darn funny, but not the time for it!" he growled. "Now, have we been all the way around the camp? We didn't double back or anything? If so, where are the rest of this army's horses? There's only a few hundred here."

The man nodded, as did their third companion, Samuel, who whispered, "Yes, my Lord, we doubled back a few times, I'm not certain how often. But we certainly haven't seen any other horses or heard them either. Unless... could they be mixed in with the rest of the camp? Or kept in the center?"

Depending on the size of army, horses would normally be separated into paddocks or tethered in the same area since that made caring for them easier and kept the camp cleaner as well. Keeping them in the center of the camp made more sense, though.

Looking in that direction, Ranma frowned. Most of that area of the camp was out of sight from here, but he hadn't seen any sign of more horses or any other animals there. *Still, they could be nearer the center of the camp regardless. That would be weird, but Thenardier doesn't organize his camp like the Muozineli or we do, so maybe? Still, that's a minor mystery. It doesn't matter compared to what I'm really after.*

"All right. You two concentrate on running off these horses slowly. Don't be seen. I'm going to see if I can pay Thenardier a visit."

The two men made to protest, but Ranma glared them into silence. As good as the scouts were, Ranma was still better simply because he could take the air and jump over tents or people and land silently. *And as much as I don't want to kill anyone again, I could also easily fight my way out of the camp.*

Reluctantly, the two men nodded and began to move towards the horses.

Moving silently through the camp, Ranma avoided a few of the patrols, sometimes by jumping left or right so far that he put several dozen tents between him and them. Sometimes he entered a tent quickly, knocking those within out silently with pressure points before moving on. Doing so, he soon came to the protected area at the center of the camp, where he found several supply tents and, to Ranma's shock, one of the dragons. *What the fuck!? I thought they moved them all ou... oh you sneaky asshole! You thought our horse archers or me and Elen would attack, and wanted this dragon here to combat us, maybe?*

The beast in question was the Suro, the same kind of dragon that Elen had killed in the Battle of Mosheim. It had been made to crouch down, sleeping on his stomach, and so wasn't visible from a distance save by the large tent covering it. But the monster's head was sticking out of the tent, and though its eyes were closed, it still exuded a certain monstrous menace.

Grimacing, Ranma retraced his steps making certain to make even less noise than normal. He then moved around the dragon's rear, searching out a tent that looked opulent enough to belong to a Duke. *He's got to be somewhere near his overgrown guard dog, right?*

Soon Ranma spotted a tent that was different than the others. It was larger, painted black, with a dragon's face painted on a flag outside of it. There was even a light still on within.

Smiling grimly, Ranma made his way towards it, only to pause, as suddenly, the alarm was sounded nearby. Three of the scouts had been found, unable to get away from one of the patrols. They'd killed several of the patrolmen, but the damage was done. At the same time in the distance, the sound of battle also rang out through the night.

Near the edge of the camp, the three men with the fire swingers heard that noise and saw the camp rousing itself quickly. Far quicker than they had thought it could. "Damn, that's torn it. Come on," the leader of the fire-starting scouts, a man name Parsu muttered, lighting up his fire swinger and hurling it away through the camp. Given the weight of the rope bola, it flew quite a way, and when it struck, fire quickly spread as the small clay bottles within the balls burst.

Elsewhere, two more teams of the scouts did much the same thing, attacking people nearby, then fading into the darkness. No matter how many torches there were, there was still more darkness than light in the camp, giving the scouts the chance to break contact. But that didn't mean all of them were able to do so.

Tigre raced out of the tent where he had lit a fire among some of the food supplies. As he came out of the tent, he found his companions fighting a group of five men, as more men bearing torches raced toward them between the tents. Instantly the Black Bow was off his back and arrows flying. Two men fighting his own died before torches fell to the ground, their owners struck in the stomach or neck by his arrows. "Time we left!" he hissed, another arrow on his bow, and his men obeyed with alacrity.

Where they had been slowly releasing the horses from their ties, Goru looked at his companion, who looked back, shrugging his shoulders. "Well, there's all these horses, aye? Be a shame not to."

Goru grinned, and both men pulled the stakes holding the horses to their position, then pulled themselves up onto their backs. A smack to the ass, and the horses, already spooked by the smell of smoke and the fires, were moving, with the rest of the horses fleeing with them out into the night.

In contrast, Ranma didn't run. Instead, he moved towards Thenardier's tent as silently as he could. *Take him out, and this war is over!*

Yet somehow, the older man must have sensed the movement in the dark behind them because he turned, bringing up his massive sword faster than Ranma would've thought he could. The sword's flat side took the blow, shattering, but Thenardier was already falling backward, grabbing at a nearby brazier and hurling it at Ranma. "To me, to me! Intruders, assassin!"

Men all around charged to defend their Lord. At the same time, the Suro roused itself instantly, turning in place, tossing the tent, which had hidden it off as it roared, filling the night with sound.

That roar was so loud, it was like a physical force, causing many of the men nearby to stumble backward. One of the scouts had been trying to keep to the shadows nearby and stumbled into the tent, where several men had been grabbing at weapons and trying to strap on armor before rushing outside. Now, as their tent collapsed, they stabbed at the figure of the scout, who stabbed back. Blood flew, drenching canvas, and both men fell.

Men raced between Ranma and his target as the dragon turned, snarling and bellowing, moving forward like a slow avalanche, crushing men and tents as the dragon moved. But Ranma dodged to one side, then leaped over two intervening tents, landing in front of Thenardier again, ignoring the dragon, which was far too slow to matter.

Thenardier grabbed a blade from one of his men, holding it in an expert grip as he snarled, waiting for Ranma's charge. "Come on then!"

Ranma launched himself forward, batting aside the blade, his other hand crashing into Thenardier's chest. But the man somehow took the blow, stumbling backward instead of being bent double, and had pulled his sword back fast as well. The next second, he lashed out with a kick of all things, then stabbed at Ranma when Ranma leaped up over the blow. Two more men nearby thrust up at him with spears, and Ranma was forced to dodge away.

Nearby, Asher had ducked down into a tent, his blade out and stabbing as one of his men followed him in. Within seconds all of the men, slower to rouse than the others in the camp, were dead, and Asher was passing through. HE took one glance outside, taking everything in while staying hidden as more men raced towards Ranma. And to one side, Asher could see the dragon smashing through men and tents towards Ranma.

But he could also see Thenardier, and for a moment, Asher's thoughts paralleled Ranma's earlier ones. "Kill the Duke, this war's over..." He exchanged a glance with his man, who, after a moment's hesitation, nodded.

For her part, Elen and the horse archers with her, a small band of fifty admittedly, had found themselves utterly surprised. As the conflict within the camp began, Elen leaped down, about to bark out orders, when a sudden noise from behind caused her to turn.

Out of the darkness, a dozen riders rode, their blades gleaming. Elen's eyes widened, and she raised Arifar, blocking a strike meant to take her head off, riposting swiftly, taking the man in the leg and dumping him from his saddle with a cry of agony.

Her men weren't as lucky. Several died as they found themselves on the ground against the cavalry. Still in their saddles, others wheeled but only had time for a single arrow at best before the light cavalry hit them. Men on both sides fell, and everything was chaos and carnage as Elen desperately fought back, Arifar running red with blood as she shouted, "Northeast and southwest, break out and circle back in!"

Some of her men obeyed. Others found themselves unable to break off, too sharply pressed. More men fell, but Elen's own horse flashed through the night, his white color making the stallion stand out sharply. Two enemy horses found themselves smashed aside, then it reared, hooves crashing into the head of one of the enemy before Elen leaped for her saddle. Then her sword was flashing out in a flat arc, wind scintillating around it. A flat blade of cutting wind-lashed into the woods, slicing men and trees alike, as she targeted the next group of enemies moving through the copse towards the embittered company. Trees toppled, and men fell in pieces to the ground, and then Elen turned, stabbing out, doing her best to help what few of her men still lived in the melee.

Suddenly, an arrow flew overhead, smacking into the eye of one of the attackers. A moment later, Elen saw Tigre and seven of their men raced out of the camp, narrowly dodging a hail of arrows of their own. Taking a glance at the camp, she could see that the men on the rooftops of the farmhouses were no longer there, and two of the patrols had also been swept

aside. The horse archers who had broken out of the copse earlier at her orders hadn't returned. Instead, knowing they would have trouble discerning friend from foe, they had targeted the easier targets of the infantry patrolling the edge of the enemy camp.

"Thank the gods for smart soldiers!" she cried in delight, Arifar flicking out to one side as her horse bucked, his back hooves smashing into the side of another horse, breaking its rider's leg. Three more men died in quick succession, and then she was out of the copse, leading the survivors of the assault in the woods out to join their fellows.

Back in the camp, Ranma backed away as the men with spears pressed towards him, grabbing up a nearby brazier and kicking it in their way before leaping into one of the roving patrols. Men flew backward, still alive but out of action, while others went down, their limbs locking together or just spasming in pain from pressure points. He then reached down, grabbing up the torches the men had been using, hurling them out to slap into a few supply tents nearby.

Then the dragon was on him, and Ranma leaped up, his fist flashing out to slam into the dragon's jaw. The blow rocked the dragon's head to one side but did little damage as the dragon continued to barrel forward slowly. A claw reached up for him, but Ranma dodged away. Then the dragon was snapping at him again. But once more, Ranma was able to dodge, returning a blow to the side of the head once more. Once more undaunted, the dragon continued to attack him, pushing him further away from Thenardier. *Stone and sword, damn it. I can't hurt it, but it can't hit me, so stalemate.*

Behind the dragon, Thenardier took this in at a glance and scowled angrily, both at the sight and the fact that there was so much fire around to let him do so. Thanks to the fire swingers and the scout's works, fires had spread all throughout the camp by this point, lighting the area almost as much as it would have been in the daytime, if in a very different manner. Shadows danced and moved, and chaos had spread from one side of the camp to the other. From where he stood, Thenardier could see two of the farmhouses were burning, and dozens of tents, some random, most not, were alight. The braying of mules and shouts of men filled the night with noise.

Thenardier knew that both his army and his life were in danger now. The enemy had attacked him in a way he had not expected, and he needed to both defend himself and bring some order to the camp before his men started to panic. "Bring up archers! Use spears to drive him back," he ordered an officer nearby, then pointed at another, one of his scribes, who had stumbled out of a nearby tent, "You, find Steid. I..."

The man's widening eyes were the only warning Thenardier had or needed. A veteran of a dozen wars, he was moving even as the fact he was in danger registered. The sword stabbing into the area at his side where two pieces of his armor met skittered along its edge, and he finished the twist, a gauntleted fist catching his attacker in the side of the head. Another man lunged, and Thenardier met him, sword to sword, pushing him back. The attacker was good,

deflecting Thenardier's blows with the sword he'd picked up after his family's blade had shattered. Yet he was no sword master, and within seconds, Thenardier ran him through.

Kicking the body off his blade, Thenardier bellowed, "CALM! I will have calm damn you. Split into squads, put out the fires and obey your officers."

Men nearby heard his words, and resolve filled them even as Ranma continued hurling men left and right, dodging around the dragon to do so. The dragon showed no care for its allies if such a term could be used, and more than one enemy Ranma knocked down found himself crushed by the dragon's paws. Then Ranma froze, staring past the dragon, toward where Thenardier stood. Stood over two bodies that Ranma knew. "Asher, Lars!"

Ranma's inattention cost him, and the Suro's bite took him in the shoulder and side. Ranma's endurance training, which he had recreated from the Bakusai Tenketsu training Ryoga had gone through saved him. Although not by much, as bones in his shoulder and arm shattered under the bite's strength, and the dragon lifted Ranma into the air, shaking him like a dog with a small toy.

Ranma roared aloud in pain, his free hand coming up, blasting a Moko Takabisha into the dragon's closest eye as the hand in the beast's mouth tried to lash out with another ki blast inside the thing's mouth. It didn't break the crystal substance over that large orb, but the blow to the inside of its mouth evidently hurt, and the dragon wrenched its head sideways, squalling in pain.

Bone and ligament tore, and Ranma screamed as his arm was almost torn from his socket, the bones in his shoulder breaking the skin, blood flowing in rivulets. Unable to concentrate through the pain, Ranma didn't control his descent as he normally would. He crashed into several men in the dark, knocking them off his feet as he rolled to a halt nearby, only slowly pushing himself to his feet.

His ki healing had been trying all along to heal his wounds, and now it went to work quickly. But with his entire arm mangled from his wrist back, and as golden ki flared around his wounds, he slowly pushed himself to his feet, barely dodging a spear thrust. But he kept his eyes on the area around Thenardier through the chaos, and his pain-filled eyes widened at what he saw there.

Asher tried to push himself to his knees, all sense having been smashed out of him. A shadow fell over him, and he looked up. Duke Thenardier stood above him, sword poised.

Thenardier stared through the smoke and chaos toward the pigtailed warrior, watching as his arm healed itself through some sorcerous means Thenardier had never seen the like of before. But the dragon was already trundling towards him, and nearby, Steid was restoring order, aided by Thenardier's earlier bellow. Locking eyes with Ranma, Thenardier smiled cruelly and then stabbed down.

“NO!!!” Ranma screamed, then had to dodge away as the dragon once more attempted to stomp on him. Arrows began to arch out of the night towards him, and all around, the army was contracting like a great muscle almost, trying to crush him. All the while, Thenardier was smiling towards him, the fires all around lighting his face like the devil in the pit.

And elsewhere, two more roars were heard. The dragons camped a distance away had reacted to the fires, Drekvac driving them now towards the battle. **“FUCCCCCKKKKKK!!!”** Ranma howled like a wounded beast. Then he was gone, leaping up and away, out into the fires. No longer hesitating, men who got in Ranma’s way died, their armor exploding from his blows or sent flying, broken. Soon he was out of the camp, racing towards Elen and the other survivors as they gathered, the horse archers slaying any target they could even as they pulled back.

OOOOOOO

While small in terms of numbers, the final tally was quite horrible for Ranma, Tigre, and Elen. These men, the horse archers and scouts, were men they had trained for months, known as individuals in the case of the scouts and many of the cavalymen. And in one horrible night of surprises, they had lost many of them. **“We’re down to ten horse archers,”** Elen said softly as they rode through the night. **“One or two more might show up at the rally point, but not many. That’s more than thirty men at least dead. I can’t believe those light cavalymen were able to sneak up on us!”**

“We were complacent, I think. We thought we had their measure, but Thenardier and Steid, at least, are deadly opponents,” Tigre admitted. **“Our losses were just as bad in the scouts. I think I saw Klien, Lefton and Samuel fighting surrounded by men. I did my best, but I don’t know if they were able to escape.”**

“Klein and Baker are dead. I saw them go down,” Arthur reported sadly, shaking his head.

“I saw Asher and both his men die,” Ranma growled, his hands clenching and unclenching as he rode one of the horses which had followed the others, its previous rider dead behind them.

“Dammit!” Tigre grunted, Asher’s name a blow to his gut. A young man who Tigre had thought of as much a friend as a vassal ever since their days in Alsace. *How am I going to tell his brothers, hell, his parents that Asher is dead?*

“If it’s any comfort, I think we did a lot of damage to their supplies,” Goru said, his tone somber for once. “And it will take them a while to put those fires out, let alone take a tally of what they’ve lost.”

“It isn’t, but thank you for the attempt, Goru,” Tigre answered, shaking his head with a sigh.

Ranma breathed out, his anger leaving him slowly. Now he remembered what he had done in escaping the camp, the men he had killed. But most of all, he remembered Asher being run through by Thenardier and his inability to save the blacksmith’s son from Alsace. *Elen was right. If we don’t do all we can to protect our own, we aren’t worthy of leading them. I can’t afford to hesitate.*

It wasn’t his hesitation or anything that Ranma had done which had led to Asher dying, of course, just the vagaries of battle and Thenardier’s skill. But the thought at least helped Ranma push further past the horror of his actions in the gap. “What should we do now?”

“Retreat,” Elen replied seriously. “The rest of the army needs to be brought into action. We need to keep on blinding Thenardier and prepare to use the Knightly Orders and the rest of our army as best we can.”

Both her listeners nodded, and they all fell silent, wrestling with grief and anger at how the night had gone.

The group pushed on through the night, reaching the rest of the army early the next day. Thanks to its mules and Ranma having taken so much of their supplies head to dump them here, and the good maps, which allowed them to choose a suitable place, the army had made very good time. Soon they would be within range to strike at the enemy or pull back as need be.

But, as Regin pointed out, all this still left the dragons.

“The dragons will be sent after us first and on their own,” Ranma said, shaking his head. “Those things are not good working with others. The Suro killed dozens of men in the camp debacle. They’ll be sent at the army first to soften us up, and then Thenardier will throw in the rest of his forces. That means me and Elen can deal with them.”

“I would’ve thought that would be the opposite way around,” Scheie argued. “Or perhaps Thenardier would use them to attack from one direction and the army to attack from the other?”

“I doubt it. When it comes to the dragons, I don’t think they have enough control to do that kind of thing. Besides, this wasn’t a total loss, as one of our scouts pointed out,” Tigre

answered. "Thenardier's army lost a lot of its supplies. and what do you think will happen if those dragons go unfed for a long time?"

OOOOOO

This was indeed a problem, which Thenardier and Steid were discussing the afternoon after the nighttime battle. "They destroyed the vast majority of our foodstuffs, my Lord, and unfortunately, this area has also been fought over this past year. These fields lie fallow, and there is no hunting to be found. I am sorry, my Lord, we did not think of infiltrators, only the horse archers, Ranma and Viltaria's combat abilities when we made up our plan."

Thenardier grunted, shaking his head. "The ambush went well enough, and the rest of your plan worked. The majority of our light cavalry were able to get away in the night and are now available to us for whatever we wish them to do."

That had been part of Steid's plan. While many of their fellows fought and died against the enemy horse archers and the dragons grabbed Vorn's attention, more men pulled out west, moving somewhat towards the center of the country, staying out of sight as much as possible. Some of those men had turned back to further obfuscate things during the night, which was where the attack on the horse archers had come from. But even with most of those men dead, a little over two thousand men were now out there, waiting for Steid to join them and be a dagger in Regin's back when the time came.

"Agreed, but the rations issues are a serious one, especially after events in the campaign against Ganelon. My Lord, our men's ability to keep fit is more fragile than I would like, despite our having been able to rest them for a time after that campaign ended. Even a short-term disruption in food is going to have a major impact now." He smiled wintrily. "Thankfully, the dead horses and men from the other night have left us with sufficient food to feed the dragons, at least."

"We could push on and over the Resia," Steid suggested. "I could lead the cavalry on a screening attack while you reached and crossed the river."

"No." Thenardier shook his head. "We will attack instead and use those men as you initially suggested."

"You have such faith in my dragons then?" Drekvac chuckled. "Excellent."

Thenardier snorted. "I have faith in their strength, wizard, although I also saw that Ranma warrior heal what wounds the Suro was able to do to him within seconds. I wonder if indeed the dragons can deal with him at all, let alone Viltaria."

Drekavac smirked. "All you have to do is give the order."

"Hmmm..." Thenardier stared at him for a time, then shrugged. "The dragons will be useful in defeating Viltaria and Ranma. We will send them forward, with the rest of the army behind. Well behind them. The Suro ate seven of my men last night after things settled down, apparently in just a fit of pique for not being able to bite Ranma in half," Thenardier chuckled at that before sobering. "You will leave now, Steid. I trust you to know what to do."

Steid bowed and left the tent quickly, leaving Drekavac and Thenardier alone. The Duke looked over to one side of his tent, where the shattered remains of his sword lay, before glaring over at Drekavac. "You best hope your dragons succeed killing the Vanadis and Ranma. Or else you will pay for their weakness."

Drekavac bowed his head but did not bother replying further, turning aside and leaving the tent quickly. Outside, he fought back a sneer, his features shifting to a distinctly inhuman configuration for just a moment before the demon disguised as a dragon tamer recovered his self-control. *Thenardier should learn where the power in our relationship really lies! Still, I too want Ranma dead. An anomaly like him is worrisome. And then there is the user of the Black Bow... So I will continue to help Thenardier's position, come what may.*

Inside, Thenardier's thoughts ran somewhat parallel to Drekavac on that score as he stared at his sword once more. His legacy, not just the sword, but his son, who he had lost similarly.

"I will have your head for this," Thenardier hissed. "You and Vorn. You will both pay! Pay for the effrontery to my house and the death of my son! It's been a long time coming, Vorn, but justice is at hand. I hope you like these last two nights on this earth!"

OOOOOO

The morning of the sixth day after Ranma and Tigre's aborted attempt to infiltrate the enemy camp, Tigre stared across the field at the enemy army, marching towards them. He and the Silver Meteor Army had fallen back, trying to tire the enemy out. It had worked too, as the enemy's own outriders had fallen back almost entirely, and Tigre had seen the exhaustion and fear on the faces of Thenardier's men from a distance.

But Thenardier's hold on his army wasn't going to break just because of that, and eventually the enemy army had turned back towards the Resia and the way across it into the Silver Meteor Army's allied territory. The threat from that had forced the Silver Meteor Army to close the distance, dragging Thenardier's attention back to them and to court a full-scale battle.

In front of the enemy army, as Ranma and Elen had predicted, the three dragons moved in a very loose triangle formation. The Suro was on the right and forward of the Gara Dova at the back of the triangle. Across from the Suro was a fire-breathing dragon, the one, according to rumor, which had torched Ganelon's city of Lutetia.

"They're trying to make us decide which dragon to go after. They're so far apart we can only attack one, while the other has a free run at the army," Elen murmured.

"While the rest of Thenardier's forces wait behind the dragons. We could swing wide, my Kinghts and those of my fellows," mused Emil. "A sharp attack to the flank, while they are concentrating on your fights with the dragon. And I would stack my Perche Knights against any ten of Thenardier's."

"Remember that his army still outnumbers us. He could use the dragons and the threat from a portion of his army to pin us in place, then turned the rest of his army to face you. Do you think you could win despite that?" Tigre asked, generally interested in the answer.

"Perhaps. But we could pull back at any time as well. It's worth a try anyway."

"We'll think about it once those three dragons are pinned in place. Do you think Thenardier will push any of his own and forward to help them if Ranma or I go forward?" Regin asked, unwilling to let the Knightly Orders loose just yet, fear roiling within her, although anyone looking at her would not have been able to tell that. Once more, Regin wore the same armor that she had worn during the last days of the campaign in the Gap, portraying herself as a warrior Princess, staring down the hated enemy. But inside, Regin was still the same scared, scarred young woman Tigre had met in the refugee camp the year before.

Astride his own horse nearby Tigre, could see that Regin's hands clenched on the reins so hard her knuckles had turned white and knew what acting so composed in the face of this battle was costing her. He gently reached out a hand, taking one of her own in his squeezing. "I don't believe so. As Ranma said days ago, no matter how disciplined an army, they won't be able to withstand the sight of their own dragons killing their own people."

Elen saw this act and rolled her eyes. *Bah, Tigre's too nice for his own good. But if he wasn't, he wouldn't be my Tigre, would he?* And given the nice make-out session that she and Tigre had that morning and late last night, Elen was feeling quite magnanimous right now. She smirked at Ranma, gesturing to the two dragons. "Which of them do you want?"

Scratching his chin thoughtfully, Ranma debated. "I don't know. My head's saying, I should take out the fire-breather. I took this Phoenix pill thing, old world, which might make me immune to fire, although I've never really tested it on an actual fire, just scalding hot water and steam. On the other hand, my heart is saying go for the Suro. I owe that beast a beating."

He suddenly snapped his fingers, then looked around at the others inquisitively. "How good are a dragon's other senses? Their hearing or smell, I mean."

"It depends on the type. From what I know, Suros have very good hearing, whereas aerial dragons have an insanely good sense of sight but no sense of smell. Fire dragons can't taste or smell anything but have better hearing than the others according to the books I've read about them anyway," Tigre responded, causing the others to look at him in surprise. "What, I've read a lot of books about hunting. A few had stuff about dragons in them. Mostly about how to get away from them if you have to."

"Makes sense, I guess," Ranma grunted, turning back to the dragons. "The problem is, thanks to that triangle formation, if Elen and I concentrate on the two dragons to the sides, the Gara Dova can just barrel straight across and smash into our army."

"It might, but we can retreat faster than it can move, I think," Edmund declared.

"Our cavalry can, our infantry, though? Besides, the rest of his army can just follow the dragon, move around it, and attack faster than we can run, pinning us in place for it. No, we have to take out all three dragons," Elen sighed, then looked at Ranma. "You've got an idea, I take it?"

"Yep. After all, leading one dragon to another should be simple enough, and I'd wager once the Suro tries to take a bite out of the two-headed one, their orders are going to go by the wayside, right?"

"That still bothers me," Elen grumbled. "The air that Dragon Pimple Face had, that made some sense. A Suro being trained since it's hatching, that's a little believable if someone found a dragon egg and could get it away from the mother. But where did Thenardier gain three dragons at once, all of them trained so well that they don't need riders to tell them what to do?"

"Something to discover after the war is over. Although, I think I've heard tell of some kind of wizard or mage being employed by Duke Thenardier's family in the past," Regin frowned thoughtfully, her hand still in Tigre's own, feeling the warmth of his gentle touch.

"And why are they in a triangle formation? Putting some distance I can understand, but that much distance and that formation too? And look how far their armies' disparate companies are spread out as well. It's a very loose formation for any kind of battle," Mashas muttered.

Elen hesitated, then looked over at Ranma again. "They probably are worried about a certain tornado attack. I don't doubt they've heard about what happened in the gap, probably long since."

Hearing that, Ranma grimaced. "They've got a kind of point, but I'm..." He shuddered, shaking his head. "There is no way I'm ever doing that again. Not to people who can be just torn apart in..." He shuddered, then resolutely pointed towards the dragon, remembering what had happened to Asher his face firming. "That, that is what I want. A challenge. So let's get this party started."

On the other side of the battlefield, on a raised dais that had been set up hastily by his men, Thenardier snarled happily as he saw the distinctive silver hair of the Vanadis racing in one direction and another individual racing on foot towards the Suro. Turning his spyglass in that direction, he saw Ranma, remembering his features easily from the battle several nights ago. "Yes, that is him."

He turned to several of his senior commanders. "You all are in charge here. I will be countering the moves of the Knightly Orders. They will certainly try to flank us."

"What if they split up and attack us from two sides, sir?"

"Doubtful. The Knightly Orders would lose much of their striking power if they did that, with the Calvados Knights guarding the Gap."

"And how do you know, which direction they'll be coming from?"

Rolling his eyes and wishing he had two Steids, Thenardier turned back to Drekavac, pointing at the Gara Dova. "Turn that creature on Ranma the moment he is engaged with the Suro."

"My Lord, if both dragons are fighting in the same area of the battlefield, they might accidentally attack one another, and it will take only one incident to turn them against one another entirely. Ignoring the actual target," Drekavac warned, having no idea of what Ranma's initial plan might have been but knowing his control of the dragons had a weakness.

Thenardier scowled. "Very well, wait until one of the other dragons is injured then and send it forward. But keep it where it is for now. Simply being there, the Gara Dova will protect the front of my army, allowing me to concentrate on the flank attack."

With all his trained outriders having been swept aside in the days since the night assault, even with Thenardier predicting it would be coming, the flank attack of the Knightly Order's present heavy cavalry crashed in unopposed against Thenardier's left flank. This wasn't a pulse charge like the Knights had used against the slave country army in the Gap. Instead, the Knightly Orders had spread out in two wedges, charging different positions on the left flank.

Crossbows twanged, downing the men who had hastily formed up a line to face them. Shields came up in response to that hail of crossbow bolts, but even a small crossbow like the ones the Knights used from horseback were able to punch through most of the infantry's shields.

Then the cavalry of the Knightly Orders was crashing into the enemy line, scattering its first, second and even third rows. The companies on the left flank of Thenardier's army shattered like glass, and the knights rode on, crashing into the second group.

There discipline prevailed, holding, giving ground and dying, but still retaining their formation, unlike the first company. And as they did, infantry units behind them charged forward. Two lines of infantry moved to support their fellows directly, while two more lines spread out to either side.

Hoarded archers, fully four thousand, began to fire at the Knights as well. Although their armor was proof against most arrows, their horses' barding was a different story, and the poor beasts began to die quickly.

Soon enough, another bugle called, and Thenardier led his own heavy cavalry units around the back of his formation, intent on hitting the flank of this attack in turn.

Behind the charge, Emil had pulled back and away to get some distance and try to figure out what was going on in the battle. Instead of crashing entirely through the enemy army, the separated army formation had worked for Thenardier. Although the first few companies they had struck were utterly destroyed, the second had only been mauled, absorbing the impact with their own bodies most of the time. His sword ran red with blood from the first portion of the impact, and he knew he had killed at least twelve men. *But the enemies discipline has held, curse it! And we've lost our momentum.*

Seeing the enemy's own horsemen beginning to shift around to the orders flank, he sounded the recall, once, twice, thrice.

Disciplined beyond any other unit which could be found within Brune or nearly any other country, the Knights instantly obeyed, pulling away as best they could. Men who could get free moved to help their fellows, cutting down anyone who got in their way. A small reserve of two hundred from his own Perche Knights came forward at another retort of Emil's horn. These men fired their crossbows then kept their distance, reloading with some difficulty shooting once more instead of joining the tumult.

The Knights soon pulled back and away from the infantry, putting some distance from them and even dressing their lines before Thenardier and his heavy cavalry hit them. Horses whinnied, and men fell and died, but even so, the Knightly Orders were just simply **better** than the majority of Thenardier's people. He lost more men than they did, and he had no local commander who was willing to use his own initiative without Steid. His infantry couldn't come up in support and fast enough, and Thenardier was forced to pull back his own troops, lest the

better armored and better-trained knights overwhelm his cavalry without that support. The knights didn't pursue, falling back as a unit, their pennants flying unbowed in the wind.

Thus the flank attack was beaten off, although not as decisively as Thenardier would've hoped. And in the center of the battlefield, things were also not going the way he had hoped.

OOOOOOO

Ranma charged towards the Suro, bellowing a battle cry of a sort. "Come on, you overgrown turtle, let's get it on!"

The Suro undoubtedly did not understand what Ranma was saying. But even a stupid animal would know a challenge when it heard it, and the dragon's white eyes locked on to Ranma as it continued its ponderous way forward, roaring its own battle cry in return.

And then, Ranma's scent wafted to the dragon. Instantly it knew this little creature in front of it was one that had gotten away a few nights ago and that had hurt the dragon's mouth. The wound had healed since, but the memory had not gone away, and it bellowed again, rumbling forward even faster than before

Instead of crashing together like two opposing forces, Ranma ducked underneath the claw grabbed from the dragon, a fist rocketing up into its neck. The blow didn't do any damage, despite actually lifting the front of the dragon up a few inches and creating a sound like a ballista bolt crashing into a castle's wall, Ranma pouring his ki into his physical strength. Not his speed at this point, against the Suro that certainly wasn't needed. Ranma then rolled out from underneath it, dodging an attempt to step on him and leaped up onto its back.

The dragon whipped its head around, trying to bite him out of the air as it had during their last battle, but this time Ranma wasn't distracted. Ranma grabbed its jaws, holding them open for a moment. "Moko Takabisha Barrage!"

Releasing the jaws, Ranma thrust his fingers into the dragon's mouth for a brief second. Over a dozen small golden spheres flashed out, crashing into the inside of the dragon's mouth, bruising it in numerous places before Ranma pulled his hands back, flipping away through the air.

The dragon snarled in agony but didn't relent, charging forward, trying to bring its forward paws to bear on Ranma, although its shoulders didn't allow it to reach up far enough. As long as he was more than ten feet off the ground, the only way the Suro could hurt Ranma was with his mouth, which he had just shown was vulnerable in turn.

Sliding around an attempt to ram him with its snout, Ranma grabbed at a ridge of scales on the dragon's face. The dragon instantly twitched its head, trying to throw him off and

succeeding before Ranma could attack its eye. Hitting the ground feet first, Ranma rolled backward, then kicked off the ground into the air over the dragon, intent on landing on its back.

The dragon tried to rear backward, but its body was indeed like a turtle: it didn't have enough flexibility to do so.

Ranma landed on its back, then slid down to its neck, slamming blows into the back of the Suro's head. The dragon groaned, those blows finally getting through its armor as once more Ranma concentrated on using his ki to further heighten his strength. Not very well, but it was somewhat painful, like someone tapping you in a sensitive place just a bit too hard.

In response, the dragon twitched and tried to toss off this annoying creature like Ranma was a fly. But it couldn't. It then tried to turn its head again to reach back and bite Ranma off its shoulder, but that only brought one of its eyes in range. "Kachu Tenshin Amaguriken Blinding Barrage!"

Ranma's fists hammered into the eye several hundred times in a second. Those eyes were covered by crystal, hardened against anything man had ever made thus far in this world. The ballista bolt would've shattered on impact, a battering ram would have been ignored. Even many of the guns in Ranma's own world wouldn't have been able to do anything to those eyes. Ranma's own hands broke under the repeated blows, the bones first breaking then shattering throughout his fingers and hands as he continued his assault, blood flying.

But Ranma ignored the pain, and several seconds later, the eye's crystal shell shattered, followed quickly by the eye underneath it. Ranma's hands were both bloody up to the elbow, and not just from the dragon's blood either, but Ranma ignored that, leaped away from the dragon, which bellowed and screamed in pain, bucking hard its whole body spasming.

As the dragon screamed, Ranma's injuries began to heal, golden fire flashing across his hands as he smirked evilly at the creature. Now it was slowly backing away, angry and nearly mad with pain. But half of its world had just suddenly gone black, and very suddenly, the Suro, whose armor was proof against all but another dragon's claws and fangs, understood that perhaps its race wasn't alone at the top of the food chain.

Ranma didn't give it time to recover, darting forward again. Coming in at its blindside. The dragon smelled him coming, twisting around its neck and lunging forward as fast as it could to bite him, its mouth opens to bite once more. But the Suro just was too slow. It had learned, though, and kept shifting its head randomly, spraying blood from its ruined eye all around as it tried to keep Ranma from targeting its remaining eye.

It took him more than ten minutes, but eventually, Ranma was once more perched on the back of its head again, the dragon still twisting this way and that beneath him, desperate to get him off, knowing that the little creature could hurt it. Again, a sound almost like a machine

gun thrummed over the medieval battlefield, and Ranma grimaced as his hands once again were torn and broken by the impacts.

Yet his grimace was next to nothing to the dragon's scream of pain and terror as its whole world went dark.

Once more, Ranma leaped clear, the glow of his ki again appearing all over his hands, healing the wounds quickly even as he was in the air. Ranma rolled away from the dragon for a few seconds, then popped to his feet. "Now you're blind, you slow-ass turtle with delusions of grandeur! You coulda been something, you coulda been a contender. Now you're just a walking target," he taunted.

EEsh, that was horrible. My old man would slap me on general principle for such a bad example of Anything Goes Taunting. Ranma really didn't have a lot to taunt a dragon, though. And besides, from what Tigre had told him, his tone of voice was what would matter, that and his smell, of course. *I might as well be singing to the beast.*

Not that Ranma was about to try, instead he shouted, "Over here, over here you, you overgrown iguana! I fart in your general direction!"

The Suro, completely blind, could smell Ranma and began to move in his direction. Ranma kept a certain distance between them, always just ahead of the dragon, leading it towards the Gara Dova that had made up the point of the draconic triangle.

It was only as he turned to make certain nothing else had changed on the battlefield that Ranma realized the Gara Dova was no longer there. Instead, it had shifted to the other side of the battlefield and was fighting Elen. *Well, crap!*

At the other tip of the triangle, Elen had an easier time of it than Ranma, at least to start. Charging forward on her stallion, a ball of wind appeared around her, letting the two of them shoot forward even faster than Ranma could run as Arifar's gem glowed with his magic. The Prani set itself and breathed in before releasing a gout of flame.

But as the fires hit Elen's wall of air, the fires of the Prani were redirected all around her. And while Ranma had trouble hurting his dragon, Elen did not. Covered by a near inviolate bubble of air, she charged forward as the dragon attempted again to lash out at her with her fire. Then, as Elen came close, she jumped off her horse, which instantly twisted away and raced back toward the Silver Meteor Army, showing once more the intelligence of the breed.

The air bubble around Elen burst, taking the last vestiges of the last fire attack from her, and she twisted around, using another standing to one side of the dragon as it turned, lashing out with claws and then another fire attack. This time, Arifar's air magic became not a circle, but a wall, pushing back the fire Dragon blast backward into its mouth.

This didn't do the fire Dragon any damage. After all, its stomach and throat were proof against the dragon's own fire. But the blowback left the Prani unable to breathe fire for a moment due to blowback. The next second, Arifar's attack enveloped the Prani, as Elen shouted, "Ley Adimos!"

Like the Suro back in the Battle of Mosheim, the Prani soon found itself torn apart.

As dragon bits fell all around her, Elen's horse turned back and was soon nuzzling into her back. "I know, that was rather quick, wasn't it," she murmured, turning to her horse and pulling herself up into the saddle, shaking her head. "Unfortunately, the next one isn't going to be as easy."

With that, Elen turned to look toward the Gara Dova. But the largest of the three dragons had already started toward her, covering the distance faster than she had expected. "Crap. When I tell you, run, alright?"

Her horse whinnied even as it shifted from a near-standing start into a full charge. Not a minute later, Elen barked out, "Now!" the horse instantly turned, and she launched herself from the saddle, intercepting a much thinner, much weaker ball of fire cutting through it with a slice from Arifar.

But to her shock, Elen's return shot was absorbed by the Gara Dova's armor. Before this, the armor on the dragons had seemed an affectation, something to show Thenardier's troops that they were tame. No matter how thick the armor, it was next to nothing to the dragon's scales. But this time, the armor seemed to suck in Elen's magic in a way she had never seen before, and Elen gaped at it, her eyes wide. "That's impossible!"

Then the Gara Dova lunged forward faster than the other dragon had moved. One of its long necks reached for her while its other head swept in from the side. Shaking herself out of her momentary shock, Elen leaped into the air, using Arifar's power to fly upwards, then lash out with an attack at the head of the dragon, which wasn't covered by armor.

But while the air slash did strike the dragon on the side of the head, the attack didn't do anything but annoy it, and she was nearly bitten in half for her troubles. This dragon was not only faster but had a far faster reaction time than either of the others Elen had fought. "No wonder these Gara Dovas are the Kings of the dragon," she muttered subdued, flipping herself through the air but not fast enough to avoid the other head coming in from the side.

Elen found herself smacked out of the air like a child's ball, crashing into the ground with bone-numbing force. The next second she was sent flying backward, her clothing in tatters as arcs of pain spread across her body from a blow delivered by the dragon's front paw. Landing heavily on her back, it was all Elen could do to roll away from an attempt to stomp her into the mud of the battlefield.

“Thank god for the toughness training Ranma put me through this past winter. And here I thought he was just a sadist!” Arifar came up, stabbing forward into the side of the dragon’s stomach, but the metal of the armor there robbed the attack of its force, and Elen quickly

Again and again, Elen attacked only to find her strikes doing nothing. Only once, when she struck the dragon’s tail, did the dragon even seem to feel it. The strike seemed to enrage the dragon further, and the Gara Dova’s attacks became more frenzied, harder to predict. Elen was sent flying more than once by the dragon’s strikes, only Arifar’s wind-based shield and her toughness training keeping her in the fight.

But as she wearily pushed herself to her feet once more, Elen saw Ranma’s ploy and smirked, seeing his plan was working. *So I’ve got to keep the Gara Dova’s attention on me.* Once more, Arifar’s gem glowed, and Elen rose into the air, darting forward.

OOOOOOO

Behind the battle, Drekvac too saw what was going on and had been trying to grab the attention of the plodding Suro as it was led slowly towards the other dragon. But it wasn’t responding to his mental pressure and Drekvac dared not let his demonic aura out, surrounded by so many humans and with a Vanadis nearby. *The Vanadis must not learn that my race still exists, not until we are ready. But damn it, that means the dragons will soon turn on one another. I cannot stop it!*

Still, he reflected, looking closer at the battle between the Gara Dova and the wilder of Arifar. *The Gara Dova is proving more than a match for the Vanadis. Even better, its armor is performing very well too. That is excellent to know, whatever happens today.*

OOOOOOO

No longer interested in actually attacking the creature, Elen zipped in and out, using Arifar’s power to stay in the air and move fast. In and out and around she went. Not needing to bother with attacking and not worried about defense let her use Arifar’s magic to move much faster than before.

For many of the watching soldiers, it was like watching a small sparrow trying to worry at a bear. The bear couldn’t hit the sparrow thanks to its speed. But, neither could the sparrow hurt the bear. Instead, it simply bothered the bear, causing the bear to concentrate solely on taking it out.

Of course, the soldiers on either side of the battle didn’t have much time to worry about this. By this point, they had their own concerns.

For his part, the sight made Ranma jealous the instant he saw it. “Oh, now that just ain’t fair. How come Elen gets to fly, but I haven’t figured out a ki technique to do that yet?”

Elen heard this and laughed. "Oh, don't be like that. I'm sure you'll figure out something eventually." Even as Elen spoke, she turned her attack slightly around the Gara Dova, leading it to the side toward the Suro.

The two dragons crashed together, and instantly the Suro tried to bite at the other one, gnawing at one of its legs as its front claws sliced long gashes into one of the Gara Dova's legs.

At the same time, one of the Gara Dova's heads darted down, biting deep into the armor of the Suro's back, the armor not stopping the attack much, although the larger dragon was unable to get at the more vulnerable neck or head. Claws gouged, blood spurted, and Elen laughed again as she landed on the top of one of the heads, trying to stab Arifar's down into its I again.

This time it worked, and the second head lost one of its eyes, although she was flung clear, so quickly and so fast that she couldn't then dodge away from the thin stream of fire the dragon sent her way. Elen defended herself with Arifar but still found herself falling, only to be grabbed out of the air by Ranma. Ranma flipped the two of them and landed, setting Elen on her feet and the two of them looked at one another.

Ranma looked at the Vanadis in his arms, blushing brightly as he noticed that Elen was covered more by bruises than clothing at this point, the dragon's attacks having done a number on her combat uniform. Hastily he set her down, then pulled out a shirt from his ki space. "Here."

Rolling her eyes, Elen pulled the borrowed shirt, one of Ranma's silk shirts, over herself. "It's not like the dragon cares, Ranma. Or is it that hard for you to ignore it yourself," she teased.

"Bah, more like I don't want ya flashing yer boobs at two whole armies. Heh, where's your dignity as a Vanadis!?" Ranma asked, trying to pitch his voice to sound like Ludmilla.

Elene burst out laughing as she finished pulling down the shirt, hefting Arifar up from where she had stabbed the blade into the dirt below them. She then looked back at the two monsters fighting nearby. "So, she would we just retreat and let them..."

That was as far as she got before one of the legs on that side of the Gara Dova was able to dislodge the Suro's bite from his leg. A large chunk of flesh came with it, but the dragon was freed once more, and now both heads darted down. They grabbed at either side of the Suro's neck and tore.

The sound this made was like the noises of shattering stone and warping metal mixed in a rather unholy union. A second later, the Suro's head came entirely off, flopping to the ground at the Gara Dova's feet.

“Yeah, so much for that idea,” Ranma grumbled, crouching down as his eyes flitted over the Gara Dova, looking for weaknesses besides the eyes.

“It’s entirely immune to my powers. I tried to attack it dozens of times before I saw what you were up to, but nothing worked. That armor it’s wearing sucks up my attacks somehow,” Elen admitted, working out the kinks in her shoulders and neck as the Gara Dova turned its attention on the two warriors once more.

“Is it just the armor?” Ranma asked as the two of them darted forward. The Gara Dova lowered its heads to meet them, one had darting towards Ranma, the other towards Elen. Both attackers leaped up and over it, but unlike the Suro, this one could follow that movement, standing upright again and lashing out with fire towards them.

Ranma grunted in pain as the flames hit him, and yet the heat of them didn’t bother him. *Okay, so that’s been proven. Good to know for the future. That is if I survive long enough to make use of it anyway.* Landing on the ground, Ranma kicked off quickly, racing upwards again. His blow caught the dragon on the snout, doing no real harm, but snapping his neck upright

Elen darted in with a whoop, slashing at its neck. Arifar’s edge, made to be unnaturally sharp even without his wind power, still did nothing, the magic of it being sucked away by the armor. And as sharp as Arifar’s was normally, magically honed that edge to an impossible degree like all the edges of the holy weapons.

Yet it did nothing to the scales of the dragon. Instead, her attack did nothing, and she was flung away the next second. Stopping her fall in midair made Elen completely open for another blast from the other head. Only Ranma’s hasty Moko Takabisha crashing into the head, sending the head sideways from its initial angle caused it to hit Elen in her side, hurling her down into the ground rather than biting her in half.

The blow was still hard, though, one of the worst she’d had yet and Elen crashed into the ground, wincing at the pain, even as she rolled with it. “Damn, that’s gonna leave a mark.”

Meanwhile, Ranma had landed on the dragon’s back, his fists pummeling into metal and scale alike. His hands started to hurt once more, skin fraying away, under the multiple impacts just like before. However, the metal of the creature's armor was dented by his assault before he was shaken off.

Yet like Elen before him, Ranma wasn’t able to dodge the next attack, the whiplike tail slamming into his side, and he grunted as he was hurled through the air. “Holy crap!” he shouted at the top of his lungs before he slammed into the ground nearby, rolling as he did. “That’s about as hard as I’ve ever been hit.”

Elen raced to them, a tight grin on her face. “Welcome to my world, Ranma.”

The two of them looked back at the dragon as both heads roared, sending out fire towards them, which Elen dealt with by a wave of her sword. "This isn't going to be easy."

"No, but I think I know a way through. That thing's armor isn't up to stopping my fists, whatever its anti-magic properties. If I remove it..."

"You remove its anti-magical properties. That'll do," Elen nodded, and the two of them stood up again, charged forwards as one towards the dragon.

OOOOOOO

Having fallen back to his observation tower after he attempted to flank the Knightly Order's own such assault, Duke Thenardier stared at the battlefield. In particular, he scanned behind the Silver Meteor Army as much as he could and to the side just at the edge of his vision where the Knightly Order's mounted contingents were reorganizing themselves again.

Behind him, his men on the left flank were doing much the same, restoring order on the left flank from the battle there. Unmolested thus far, the right flank still stood firm, and the center too shifted away once more from where it had bunched up against the left flank.

The knights had cost him something like three thousand to four thousand men, Thenardier estimated, but he had beaten them off, and he had cost them in turn, at least five hundred knights, likely more lay dead along with his soldiers.

He had already taken in the battle around the Gara Dova at a glance. One way or the other, he couldn't do anything there. Feeding troops into that kind of maelstrom would serve no purpose.

But with the two other dragons dead and the Gara Dova keeping Ranma from performing whatever had decimated the armies of Muozinel, that allowed him to assault the main rebel army. He turned his spyglass in that direction, seeing the flash of the princess's armor once more, smirking slightly. *Regin styles herself a commander of soldiers now? After the debacle on the Dinant Planes? That is bad comedy. She and Vorn will learn what a true warlord can do.*

He turned his head to gaze at his own army thinking, then deciding within an instant. His left flank had been badly mauled, but it was reforming. And while his center had taken casualties, he still outnumbered the enemy. "Signal the army. Heavy cavalry will form to the left flank between it and the Knightly Orders. I will join them soon. The infantry will advance in two wide columns, moving around the battle in the center. I want this understood. You are not to become within arrow's reach of that fight. Steer clear of it but attack the enemy as best you can.

All of his present subordinates and Thenardier missed Steid. This would have been a much smoother operation if he were here instead of off leading the light cavalry attack. As it was, it caused a minor delay, shifting into two columns moving forward.

With that done, Thenardier turned his attention to the knights once more, leaving the platform. It was time for this battle to end.

OOOOOO

Tigre watched the battle unfolding, worried for all that he seemed calm. Watching his two friends fight it out with the dragons was nerve-wracking. And seeing an opportunity to snipe Thenardier pass him by on the flank was frustrating. But he thought Thenardier would stay well away from the flank, controlling the army from his observation platform as Steid dealt with the assault.

Unfortunately, while he could see the observation platform, it was only in the range of his bow if the Black Bow's spirit was willing to cooperate. And at the moment, it didn't seem to be.

Seeing the enemy army reforming and moving towards them was actually a bit of a relief, and he turned in his saddle, shouting out commands to the buglers there, ordering not only the Silver Meteor Army's regular units but the men of the nobles who had joined them since the Gap campaign and the infantry from the Perche, Lutece and the Order of the Holy Rose.

Given their disparate ranks, Regin should have been the one doing this, even if the orders themselves came from Tigre. Tigre was, after all, a mere Earl. But seeing Regin nodding her head to every order he gave, and keeping her horse directly next to his, none of the various lords were going to argue. Instead, they too smiled to themselves as they moved to obey the low-ranked Earl as if he too was a Duke. It looked as if he might be bypassing that rank for an even more illustrious one in the future. If they won the battle, that is.

Soon, the Silver Meteor Army was prepared. The Pike companies moved from the center of the front line to either side of their position as the horse archers raced forward to engage the incoming enemy in a swirling dance of hit and run type combat. The heavy infantry formed up in a line between the two pike companies, bolstered by the infantry companies from the Knightly Orders, who moved forward with the assurance of trained, experienced veterans going about their business. In the center around Tigre and Regin on their horses were the remaining archers of the Silver Meteor Army, a force several thousand strong, bolstered by the archers the various nobles had retained to their control rather than releasing them for service in the army.

Behind them and to the flanks were the men-at-arms the nobles had brought with them, the men who had only been trained with the rest of the Silver Meteor army in fits and

starts throughout the winter. Many had been elevated to Knighthood by Regin, and Tigre knew they would fight courageously but would lack the discipline of the real Silver Meteor Army troops.

The movements bar the movement of the noble's troops was done quickly and efficiently, but seeing Regin wearing a conflicted expression, Tigre smiled, reaching over to take Regin's hand, squeezing it once more. "Don't worry. Thenardier might have more men, but he is not ever going to outfight this army. With the dragons out of the way, it will come down to willpower, and people fighting for the rightful Queen will always outfight people fighting for someone who rules through fear and oppression."

"Thank you, Tigre," Regin smiled at his attempt to bolster her spirits. "It is just, we are all, well for the most part anyway, people of Brune. We shouldn't be fighting one another. This isn't like the fight against Muozinel. This is the first time I see Brunemen fighting one another through my actions. I know that is only half the tale, yet, even so, I can't say I am not looking forward to this."

Tigre might have corrected her at any other time, considering that he blamed Thenardier and Ganelon for all the troubles besetting Brune in the past year and even before that. But right now, he had to concentrate on the battle, as their allied heavy cavalry reformed once more, coming close to fire their crossbows before wheeling away when Thenardier's heavy cavalry tried to close. "They won't win the battle there. Thenardier's there himself, drat it. And he has a large advantage in numbers, three to one at least. But they've pinned the heavy calvary in place, so we won't be flanked ourselves. That's good."

He stopped speaking for a moment as he spotted what looked like an officer, an infantryman wearing better armor than his fellows at the front of the battle. An instant later, when the horse archers once more pulled back, the Black Bow was in Tigre's hand, and he was aiming towards the officer. For any other man in the world, perhaps even Ranma, the enemy officer would still have been several hundred yards out of range. To Tigre, it was a difficult shot, but...

A second later, that man fell, Tigre's arrow having taken him through the narrow eye slit.

A moment later, as that portion of the attacking formation faltered a bit, several other men fell to the horse archers' arrows. But the enemy had archers also, so the cavalry troops were taking fire in turn. Saddles were starting to empty, even though the horse archers, trained by Tigre and now led by Rurick, had adopted the same kind swirl in, retreat and attack again style of warfare that had so flummoxed the Muozineli.

Three more arrows flew from Tigre as the enemy army advanced, but then, with a scream Regin tugged at his arm, shouting, "Behind us, the camp!"

Tigre turned, twisting in the saddle, staring down the slight slope towards the distant camp.

OOOOOO

Ever since they had left the main army, Steid and Duke Thenardier's light cavalry had done everything they could to move out of the area where the Silver Meteor Army troops were operating against their fellows. Nearly two thousand strong, they had moved directly west, then down south and around, moving mainly at night even after Steid was certain they had gotten away undetected.

With no subcommanders he could trust or maps to aid in creating a regroup point, Steid had been forced to do it this way, keeping his troops together entirely. However, thanks to a full moon, none of them had lost their way, and he had only lost fourteen men and horses to mishaps along the way. And even better, the Silver Meteor Army had grown complacent. They only had a paltry screen out around them, and as it became clear that Thenardier was courting a full-scale battle, that too had faded out.

The day of the battle had proven quite frenetic for Steid and his men, a hard march the night before followed by Steid himself leading the men forward in small groups to a copse of trees behind the Silver Meteor Army's camp. Which itself was only a few hundred yards away from this side of the battlefield. The work was slow and had only begun when the Silver Meteor Army had drawn into combat formation, though it had sped up a bit after the sound of the dragons roaring reached him.

Now, as the sounds of combat grew louder over the slight hill on which the Silver Meteor Army was situated, Steid climbed back down from the tree he had been using to observe events. "Form up in groups of twenty. Be ready to spread out the instant we get out of the tree line. We'll wash over the camp first, then hit the back of the false princess's lines like a boar through glass."

It wouldn't be that simple, of course, but after days in the saddle, moving at night and little rations, Steid was aware he had to keep his men's spirits up. Indeed, he was rather worried that the lack of food, coming once more after the events in the campaign against Ganelon, would have a detrimental impact on their combat ability. Yet there was nothing for it now.

Several men grinned avariciously, one of them even going so far as rubbing his hands together, but he stopped as Steid glared at him. "We will kill everyone we come across. We will

not stop to loot, simply kill and move through their camp to attack the army from behind. Is that understood?"

"Just the people or the animals as well, sir?" said one of the more serious of the officers.

Steid thought about it for a second, then shook his head. "Just the people. We cannot afford to let the main Silver Meteor Army have any time to prepare for our charge. But we can use torches," he ordered, pointing at a group of his troops, all of whom quickly made up some quick torches from scattered foliage. What they couldn't kill, they would destroy.

Quickly, the light cavalry was on its way. The instant they were out of the woods, Steid bellowed the command, the group moving at a quick trot, then charging the last hundred yards as the enemy camp roused itself to its peril.

A second later, they were hitting the few pickets left behind, cutting them down. One of them tried to fight back, holding up two of Steid's men with a but he was quickly slain, and then the light cavalry was in and among the man behind in camp. They sliced this way and that at the camp followers, nobles who had remained in the camp, and various servants and cooks.

OOOOOOO

Tigre stared, horrified, but not at the implications of this assault. That barely registered in the face of the personal cost it might extract. "Titta! No!"

Putting spurs to his force, Tigre tried to push his way through the archers and other men around him as they too became aware of what was going on. Discipline broke for some of the men, who raced back themselves in an attempt to defend their lords or friends among the camp workers.

But even as he did so, he knew that he would be too late. *No! No! Titta!*

A voice spoke in his head, then, a voice he knew came from his Black Bow, the timbre of it the same as the laughter he had heard from it and the few words he could remember from the Battle of Molsheim. ***"Would you save her if you could? What would you give to do so?"***

"Anything," came the instant reply from Tigre, as he paused, frustrated in his attempt to push through the men around him to race to the camp's defense. Even now, the flanks of the enemy light cavalry assault had turned inwards and were racing up the slight hill to the army's back. The archers around him were taking them under fire, but the attack from the front had just reached their range as well, and the archers were forced to split their fire.

“Swear it. Swear it on your blood.”

“I swear it. Take for me what you will. I will pay the price, so I swear on the name of Vorn.”

The voice laughed, a tone of good-humored yet perhaps somewhat nasty delight, and yet, when it spoke, the voice was serious. **“The contract has been made Tigre of the house of Vorn.”**

Instantly, the Black Bow began to gleam with dark cobalt and black light. **“Use it. Use my power now, and save your girl.”**

At any other time, Tigre would have protested using the words ‘your girl’ to describe Titta. But now, he simply nodded, put an arrow to his string, and pulled back, staring into the wreckage of the camp. Instantly he picked out Steid, but he wasn’t Tigre’s target. Instead, he was looking for Titta.

A moment later saw her, racing away from two men chasing her on horseback, while the others were starting to reform, having slain everyone they could, moving to join their fellows in the assault on the army’s rear. Men there were already dying, but that too didn’t matter to Tigre. **“Titta, duck!”**

Tigre didn't know how his voice carried over the growing tumult around the army and the carnage around Titta. Perhaps it was another sign of the favor of whatever deity had blessed his weapon? Who knew? But somehow, Titta had looked up at just the right time to hear him.

Now she dove forward, her hands over her head. The next second, the arrow lashed over her head at around chest height to a man on a horse.

The energy of the arrow had been scintillating black and dark blue as it flew, and then when it struck one of the men chasing Titta, the arrow seemed to explode, hurling men and horses alike in every direction, their bodies riven. The man who had been the target of the arrow had simply disappeared.

Steid had seen the blinking black and blue lights on the hill and leaped off his horse, shouting out for his men to get off their horses, to get out of the way. Many had obeyed, but more than half had not, and died in that instant, horses and men alike torn to pieces by the magical assault. Most of the others lost control of their mounts and were hurled from the saddle to land with neck-breaking force on the ground. Others still were just simply unhorsed instead of being slain.

Looking around, Steid took stock of what he could see of the battle quickly from his position just on the other side of the enemy’s former camp. Much of the destruction of that

camp had ended with the deaths of the men who had been doing it, the wind of the magical assault having also put out the few fires they had already begun. He had lost several hundred men in that attack, and most of the rest of his men were unhorsed now. Yet they still were behind the enemy's rear and still armed. "CHARGE! For Duke Thenardier and Brune's true ruler!"

While Tigre had been going desperate at the danger to Titta – who, being no fool, was hiding among the camp's wreckage now - Mashas had begun to reform the army as best he could to face this new attack. But Steid had timed his assault perfectly. The horse archers had given away, shifting to the sides, their quivers empty and were now peeling out and away from the battle. The two columns of Thenardier's army had charged the last few hundred yards, crashing into the front line to either flank, spreading towards one another and putting pressure on the center and sides.

The pikemen couldn't pull back. Trying to maneuver the pikes like this was next to impossible once they were engaged on one front. Elen's men held the pike company's flanks, curling back slightly. The front, too, was holding strong. But all of this meant that the men-at-arms of the allied nobles and the relatively inexperienced but well-trained skirmishers to fighting the light cavalry. Men began to die

The archers of the Silver Meteor Army were still killing men in droves, but the damage was done.

Worse was the impact Tigre's attack took out of him. As soon as the arrow had left his bow, Tigre gasped, shuddering as something was torn out of him. *Is that my life energy that Ranma's always talking about! By the gods, I feel like I just tried to run a marathon after fasting for a month!* He slumped in his saddle, nearly dropping his bow, and might well have done so if not for Regin grabbing it and his arm, stopping his slump and moving her horse against his, pulling Tigre against her.

The Silver Meteor Army was now beset on nearly all sides, with its leader unable to effectively command for now. The back of the Silver Meteor Army, which had never formed into an actual line, began to buckle as men died. The more disciplined units held their ground together, but the men-at-arms holding the rear started to break, falling back into the army's formation, stumbling into the archers and ruining their formations in turn. They even pushed them back into their fellows at the front, a cascade of disorganization.

Across from them, Duke Thenardier saw this and bellowed in triumph and was about to order his heavy cavalry in before his shout of triumph turned to one of anger. The Knightly Orders had reformed and were now coming in again, having pulled so far back they had circled around behind his heavy cavalry, almost to his infantry. And this wasn't a spoiling assault like the last one. Their crossbows were slung this time, and their lances couched.

“Dammit!” he bellowed out commands, and his own heavy cavalry pulled from the flank and around. The two cavalry forces crashed together with a sound that rang out over all the other sounds of the battlefield, and Thenardier could no longer follow the main battle.

Without his cavalry to envelop the enemy line, the back of the Silver Meteor Army started to regroup against the dismounted light cavalry. For all their fury, none but Steid were armored in anything beyond brigandine armor, and few even had that. The harder they pushed forward, the more died.

Slowly, Tigre came back to himself. Surveying the battlefield, he saw how events were unfolding and how Lord Mashas had taken command at the back with a few other nobles, both Gerard and Hughes fighting alongside him, although he saw many other nobles lying on the field where they fell. Pushing away from Regin, he thanked her in a low voice.

Then he pulled another arrow out of his quiver with a shaky hand, looking around for Steid. He was attempting to reach Mashas, cutting men down with almost frightening ease as a force of forty men followed him, pushing deeper into the Silver Meteor Army’s formation. But Tigre refused to let that happen. “Not today, Steid.”

He began to bellow orders to his archers, shifting their attention entirely onto the light cavalry, letting the pike and the others fight it out for the front. “Aimed fire, not volley!”

The archers with that order started to snipe through or over their fellows using their higher position on the small hill. The light cavalry fell in groups of four or five, and then as they faltered, Tigre let fly.

Steid had just cut down the last armsmen between him and the old Knight Steid, but he didn’t even have time to gasp before the arrow impacted the side of his forehead. He was dead instantly, collapsing where he had been standing.

Without Steid to inspire them, the light cavalry either broke or died to a man within seconds. And finally, Tigre and the Silver Meteor Army had enough time to reform.

Tigre shouted orders, pulling the men back and further up the hill into an ever-tighter defensive formation. The two pike companies slowly shifted sideways towards one another, the men of the Knightly Orders pulling back in squads to bolster the sides, where many of Elen’s troopers had died, along with many of the armsmen and Silver Meteor Army irregular infantry. The depth of the front line wasn’t what he wanted, in no way, shape or form, but it was holding on that front, for now, letting Mashas and the few surviving nobles to reform the army’s rear.

Yet even as his archers went to work on the frontal assault once more, men were starting to break through that Pike line, attacking the men behind the pikes. Looking around, from his vantage point on the horse, even as he fired his bow so fast that he emptied two

quivers, and his fingers began to tingle, Tigre knew that they were in danger of being entirely enveloped. Once that happened, the enemy's numbers would wear them down.

Elsewhere, both Ranma and Elen had taken hits from the dragon. It was a lot faster than the others, and even with one eye gone, thanks to Elen, it still had three of them. But Ranma's plan to remove the armor finally worked as the battle elsewhere began to turn against the Silver Meteor Army. As Elen watched from above the dragon, the armor to the dragon finally broke in places. Soon those places became the majority as Ranma continued to tart in, pummeling the armor so hard it sounded like a group of children going mad on a church bell.

With a final resounding clang, the largest piece of armor fell off the dragon, and Elen raised Arifar above her head. "Ley Adimos!"

The dragon died, the slice from Elen's sword chopping through both heads at once, almost covering Ranma with blood. He glared at her, and she shrugged apologetically before turning her attention to the larger battle, her teeth clenching even as she ignored how battered and weary her body was at the moment. "We need to get involved quickly!"

Ranma looked around, then snarled as he saw Thenardier among the swirling chaos of the cavalry battle. "I have a date with Thenardier. You take his main army from behind."

Elen nodded firmly, whistled, and her horse appeared, having put some distance between itself and the conflict. Pulling herself wearily into the saddle, she patted the stallion's flanks as it whinnied at her worriedly. "Almost done. And then we can all rest."

With that, she charged towards the embattled silver meteor Army, hammering into the back of the attackers' lines, shouting out her fury. "Ley Adimos!"

Behind her, Ranma moved in the almost opposite direction, racing towards where Duke Thenardier had led his heavy cavalry against the Knights.

There, quantity was overwhelming quality, and Duke Thenardier cut down one knight before barreling his horse into that of another. The two of them exchanged blows, then Duke Thenardier ran him through, grabbing the man and flinging him in the path of another knight while turning to exchange blows with a man he recognized as Scheie, leader of the Lutece Knights. "You will pay for what you have done to our beloved country, Felix!"

"I have done nothing but remove the weakness rotting Brune from within, Scheie. After this turmoil passes and I am king, I will make Brune stronger than ever before! It is a pity you will not be alive to see it."

The man fought valiantly, but soon he was battered out of the saddle, unable to match Thenardier's strength. Thenardier was about to finish Scheie then he heard a shout from above him. "Death from above, bitch!"

Two feet slammed into Thenardier right between the shoulders with bone-numbing force, hurling Thenardier out of his saddle, and although he rolled with it, he felt his armor denting badly from the impact. Indeed, both shoulders now felt badly bruised, and he couldn't turn his neck without pain. Given Thenardier's insane levels of endurance to pain and injury, that was saying something.

When he looked up, he saw a Ranma, completely covered by dragon blood, perched in his saddle a second before the pigtailed warrior launched himself forward. "That was for Asher, Hard Ass."

"Am I supposed to know who that is?" Thenardier snarled. He then raised his weapon, slashing at Ranma. But Ranma ducked underneath it so fast that Thenardier couldn't do anything but raise the shield in his other hand, which shattered from a single blow.

Growling, Thenardier dropped the ruined remains at his feet, kicking it forward in an effort to halt Ranma in place. It worked, and Thenardier got his other hand on his sword, wielding it in both hands as he attempted to keep the other man away.

Within seconds, this attempt failed. A blow took Duke Thenardier in the side, his armor denting badly under the impact as he was sent stumbling back, his ribs shattering.

The next second, Ranma's blow smashed into Duke Thenardier's face, shattering bone and covering his face in blood, hurling him off his feet.

However, Duke Thenardier still retained his sword and thrust it up with all the strength of the desperate when Ranma charged him. *No, no, this blasted, gods cursed foreigner will not...*

But Ranma held out a hand, and the tip of the sword stabbed into his palm, penetrating straight through. Then Ranma wrenched his arm to one side as he kicked out, his foot hitting Thenardier's wrists. The sword, a blade he had made for this battle after Ranma had destroyed his family's blade, was wrenched out of his hand to land several feet away. And as Thenardier, defenseless now, watched, Ranma's hand glowed golden, healing before his eyes.

At that, Thenardier knew he had lost. Vorn and the princess had done a better job of gathering allies than Thenardier had servants, and it was over. Everything. He had rolled the dice for the game of thrones and lost the last throw. *But I will not go before that simpering bitch in chains!* "Finish it!" Thenardier growled.

Ranma grimaced but nodded, raising his foot and bring it down on Thenardier's head, crushing it beneath his heel.

Shaking his head, Ranma wiped his foot on the man's corpse, still dripping from dragon blood, then launched himself upwards, fists and feet flying in different directions, hurling three of Thenardier's men who had been pushing through the tumult to his aid from their saddles.

“Duke Thenardier is dead! Duke Thenardier is dead! Surrender, or join him. Surrender, or join him!”

Soon this call was taken up by the men of the Knightly Orders, and beyond them, the rest of the Silver Meteor Army. With nothing to fight for, few surviving nobles or officers among their ranks and facing Ranma and Elen, without dragons to hide behind, the fight instantly started to go out of the Duke’s army.

The battle was won, and the civil war of Brune was finally at an end.

OOOOOOO

The death toll after the battle was grim. Thanks to the charge from behind, several nobles and most of the retainers died. The armsmen who hadn’t trained full time with the new volunteers over the winter had died nearly to a man bar those belonging to Mashas and the lord of Territoire. And even their men had taken a pounding.

The Silver Meteor Army’s logistics corps had been wiped out bar Titta and two other survivors. Both cooks, they had hidden in their large pots as the attack began.

The horse archers had lost another four hundred men on top of the losses they had taken in the Gap. Elen’s troopers had also taken losses, as had the heavy infantry, down to half their pre-battle strength and in no position to fight another battle. The pike companies had been hammered, losing sixty men, although they were still combat-worthy. The irregular infantry who had seen battle in the mountains and then again at the end of the campaign, had been hammered worse than any other unit and were down to barely a fourth their original strength. The archers had lost forty-nine men dead, with several others wounded.

The Knightly Orders had also been mauled. They had killed at least two, maybe as much as three times their own number, but Thenardier’s swift response to their attacks had cost them heavily.

Their infantry forces had also taken a pounding, although not as bad.

All in all, it was clear the Silver Meteor Army had come within a hairsbreadth of losing the battle despite Ranma and Elen having sidelined the dragons.

“That charge from behind, that was masterful! And so was the fact that they were even abler to be there, let alone the fact we had no idea they were out there,” Tigre said, watching

as Ranma worked on the wounded, grateful that Ranma was willing to do so after such a hard days' fighting.

"True. I have to think that maneuver came from Steid. He is known as Thenardier's right-hand man for a reason," Elen muttered. "Or was, I should say, seeing as they are both dead."

"So what now?" Ranma asked, not turning from his work. Working his way through the wounded on both sides was making him smile, making him push aside the last vestiges of guilt from what he had done in the Gap. *So long as I can heal, can help instead of kill, I will be alright, I think. I just have to remember that.*

"Now? The civil war's over. Regin will send a small force under Hughes and Lord Mashas to arrest Duke Thenardier's mother. She will be offered a choice, execution or banishment to a temple to Mosha. Her lands and that of Thenardier will be turned over to someone else. Beyond that, we're going to head to the capital to meet with the Prime Minister and, hopefully, the king."

Yeah, no. I don't want to be anywhere near Minister Punchable, Ranma thought to himself, although he was smiling and nodding as he did. *So all that's left is the mopping up and rebuilding, huh? Which means,* Ranma thought, as he healed a gut wound that would have seen the man dying in agony, *I'm done with Brune for now.*

It took several days for the army to recover once more and, most of all, for Ranma to finish healing the wounded. With the medics of the Silver Meteor Army dead, he had to train Thenardier's men up to their standard, which was very hard for various reasons. One man was executed for refusing to help a common-born Silver Meteor Army trooper. Another was found stealing from the patients.

But eventually, the wounded were all cared for as best Ranma could do. Those who couldn't walk were placed in carts, loaned by a few local peasants. Others came forward to help, being paid from the pay chest of Thenardier's army. The princess herself paid them, and the peasants watched in shock as she pitched in to help wherever needed around the army. The rumors about this spread almost as fast as the tales of Regin's victory, and more help came in every day until finally, the army was ready to move on.

As for the prisoners, they had their armor and weapons stripped off and placed in a giant pile. Lord Emil assigned half his men to watch it until more carts could be organized to come and pick it up.

With all of that accomplished, the Silver Meteor Army, the few surviving nobles and the Knightly Orders marched on the capital. Word had already arrived from the Prime Minister, who formally acknowledged Regin as the princess, telling her that Nice would be open to her army.

Hearing about that one evening, as they set up camp, Ranma could only shake his head. "I still have an issue with that asshole, you know. And this whole on the fence stuff he's done, I don't like that at all."

"I understand your feelings, Ranma, But Badouin is kind of necessary to keep the country running, you know," Tigre drawled.

"Agreed," Regin said with a weary nod. "I realize that from your perspective, his actions seem cowardly, but..." she shook her head. "One thing that I learned long before I was sent to the Dinant Plains is that the honor of an individual cannot be the same as the honor of someone serving a throne or sitting on one. We must do what is best for the nation."

"That might've been profound sounding if we weren't talking about an asshole coward," Ranma grumbled.

Regin ignored this regally, going on with her explanation as if the pigtailed warrior hadn't interrupted her. "And his neutrality allowed the lands around the capital to rebuild, from the disaster I led our army into and the infighting that resulted around Nice afterward. Brune will need those lands, and Nice too, intact and producing goods as we go forwards into Autumn."

This became apparent as they came closer to the capital. For the first time in a while, the troopers saw people out in the fields. Dozens of farmers looked up as the army moved along the road towards Nice. As they came closer, Regin saw that Nice's outer walls were festooned with people cheering, throwing garlands, and shouting in triumph.

As they were about to enter the city, the army paused, with a carriage moving forward as the Silver Meteor Army units dressed their lines and moved into what could charitably be called parade formation. The open-top carriage had been sent to them by the Prime Minister the day before, and now Regin sat in it, resplendent in a white dress and tiara, as Tigre shifted uncomfortably as he sat beside her. "Are you sure that Elen can't join us?" he asked.

"Positive," the princess replied firmly. She is a foreign national and a Vanadis, a deadly enemy to Brune. Regardless of your agreements with her..." the princess ground out, "and be certain that I will be looking for any loopholes in that agreement Lord Tigre. I will have you freed of that woman's clutches."

Sitting next to her lord, Titta was dressed in her normal maid's outfit, although her hair had been done in a new style falling all around her head in loose ringlets. She nodded her head in firm agreement with the princess, and Tigre sighed, leaning back and looking down at his clothing uncomfortably. "I suppose the same can be said for this outfit. I feel somewhat ridiculous right now."

Then Regin smiled at him as they passed into the city proper, and a wall of noise hit them. Cheering, shouting, shouting for the Lord marksman, shouting for good princess Regin, for the victorious princess, and more were heard amongst the tumult, and for a few moments, Regin busies herself with waving at the crowd.

Then, Regin happened to look behind the carriage, only to have to stop herself from frowning. Instead, she employed a skill she had learned years ago, speaking without her mouth seeming to move from its faint, welcoming smile. "Tigre, I see Elen back there, Scheie, Emil, Mashas, and the others. But I don't see Ranma. Where has he gone off to? I realize Ranma has an independent streak but this is ridiculous!"

Tigre didn't even bother to look behind him, he simply kept on smiling the tiny smile and wave that Regin and Titta had drilled him on over the past few days. *I wonder how long I can do this before my arm starts to hurt. Will it be a longer or shorter time than if I was shooting my bow?* Aloud, Tigre said simply, "He's gone."

"What do you mean 'gone'? He, you and Elen to a lesser extent, are supposed to be given awards, riches. The gratitude of a nation. I am going to be knighting Ranma and giving him land," Regin nearly snarled, her self-control still in place, though somewhat fraying as she turned to look at Tigre.

"I understand why you want to," Tigre said, "but Ranma, well, he was fighting for friendship's sake alone, Your Highness. He made a kind of promise to me, Titta, and the rest of us. He would stay until Thenardier and Ganelon were dealt with. And then Muozinel invaded. So we just added them to our list of enemies. Now, Thenardier is dead, and Ganelon is gone. So Ranma is free to leave."

"He couldn't have waited?" Regin pouted a little. "A lot of people are going to ask questions, you know!"

"Ranma said goodbye to Elen and me last night. Or rather, he left a note on my bed that I found this morning," Tigre answered ruefully. The fact he had been in Elen's bed all night letting Ranma have the opportunity to leave that note was not something he was going to share with anyone, let alone Regin.

"And I rather think that all of this, the crowds, your desire to give him land, the questions, all of that is why Ranma isn't here. I told you, he doesn't care about accolades or money or power. Ranma fought for friendship's sake. And now that the fighting's done, he's gone."

Regin had to look away lest she start scowling, but even as she restarted waving at the crowd, she acknowledged the fact that matched with what she knew of the cursed warrior. But almost all her advisors had indicated that tying Ranma to the crown was something she had to do, much like with Tigre if on a less personal level. "Where would he go then?"

Tigre shrugged. "To Lim, Valentina, or Sofya, I suppose. Whichever Ranma can find first, or perhaps whichever he thinks is in danger."

At that, Regin sighed then went back to smiling at the crowd and waving. "In that case, I suppose his fate is out of our hands now. But don't you dare try to run away as well, Tigrervurmud Vorn. I have plans for you too..."

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By the time Regin and the others were entering Nice, Ranma was already crossing Resia, having traveled through the night nonstop. He thought that perhaps ignoring the fact the princess and told him he would be a part of the whole ceremony today might make the princess send people after him and Ranma really didn't want to humiliate anyone at the moment.

The nightmares had finally stopped after he had spent days healing those wounded in the final battle against Thenardier. That and the fight against the dragon had put everything into perspective for Ranma.

And now, he was free. If Tigre was ever in trouble, Ranma figured he would come back and help, but right now, being away from obligations, from even his friends, suited him just fine. *And besides, I've always wanted to see how it in passable those mountains really are*, he thought to himself, beginning to laugh as he sped up his pace, racing away towards the Voyes Mountains and perhaps his next adventure.

End Chapter

And there we have it! The end of the Brune arc of this story. Everyone who has seen the original or read the short novels, or even seen the manga will know that I played a bit with the spirit of Tir Na Fal embedded in the Black Bow. I made her more accessible and awake, and yet also perhaps a bit darker. At this moment, I have two ways to take that plot, so we'll see how it goes. Just know that it was deliberate.

The same can be said for Ludmila and how I have her acting about whether or not she will start to be interested in Ranma or Tigre. At this point, it's about 60/40 Tigre/Ranma but we'll see on that one.

And of course, as I have been saying for the past few months, I am now going to put this story on hiatus. **I will come back to it when Making Waves is finished.** I'm looking forward to playing with the demons further. Although honestly, I'll probably set up a vote for it at that point. Regardless, it is a good place to end this story for now, and it means that going forward, we will have one Harry story, one Ranma story and one mix. I think that's about as fair as I can humanly make it!

Until next time folks, I hope you all enjoyed this.