

A Ranma 1/2 Fanfic Series: "Ranma Gets A Clue"
Written by Robert "Asayogure" McAdams
Stories Archived at: <http://www.asayogure.com/rgac>
First Draft (2/25/2000)
Last modified (6/17/2000)

Chapter 8, "Revelations From The Past"

They were lost. The wind screamed in empty fury as it tugged at their clothing - whipping it around as if it were fighting an unseen battle, slicing through the many layers as if they weren't even there, to chill their occupants to their mortal bones.

The clouds in the angry sky broiled in ominous fury, barely containing the awful storm fast approaching. Lightning struck in the distance, and thunder rolled across the mountains. The wind kicked up little dust motes along the dry rocky mountain trail as it dove through the pass on its relentless passage through time, forcing the slender shrubbery that grew along the mountain pass to bend to its terrible will. The world was coming to an end.

With their strength fast waning they stumbled through the mountain pass, tripping over each other's feet and the smallest obstacles, that normally they could have skipped over.

The Captain of the guard grabbed the Princess about her waist as she started to stumble again, his chain mail armor making swishing sounds with the speed of his motion.

"Just a little further your highness, once we reach the valley in the Bayankala range we will be safe," he shouted above the winds. The Princess locked eyes with her Captain briefly, and gave a brief, brave, nod.

Straightening her back, she set off down the rocky mountain trail once more, her long, silky black, hair shimmering as the wind blew it all about her head and her hands pushed deep into the tattered sleeves that had once been a beautiful royal gown.

The Captain looked over his shoulder as the rear guard crested the ridge they had just crossed. Only twenty men left, but they were his best men, ten in the rear and the other ten taking position at the vanguard.

All of them were combat veterans, many of them having fought beside him in wars in the service of their king. The enemy would come, there could be no doubt of that. They were relentless. But he and his men would put up one hell of a fight to protect their Princess, to the last man, to the last ounce of strength, to the last drop of blood. That was the oath they had sworn above her cradle on the day of her birth, and so it would come to pass.

So on they trekked. The minutes turned into hours and the meters turned into kilometers, and they pressed on. The men of the royal guard were fierce indeed, and those of the Princess' personal guard even more so. Clad in their battle armor, they were not wearing the best of choices to be in this sort of weather; yet to the eyes of the Princess, they seemed almost oblivious to the cold. Their muscles tensed and ready, eyes roving back and forth across the barren landscape and hands clenching chain mail gauntlet clad fists tightly around sword hilts. This day was not going to end well.

These men, these loyal men of hers, would scare the Princess to death with just the sight of them, had she not known them since she was a child. They had been her personal guards since the day she was born. She had played with all of them at some time or another as she grew up. As a little girl the Princess had subjected them to the wiles of a young girl's fancy, dressing them in strange hats and making them play pretend and other such nonsense.

But if truth be told, she had not ever had to order any of them to do anything for her. They would gladly suffer any embarrassment for her, any pain. They loved her as if she was their own daughter. Fiercely loyal to her, and only her, they would follow her into hell itself without even looking back.

Having a hundred men thinking they are your father though could be rather annoying though. That many people thinking they know what's best for you can be a bit of a drag when you are a teenage girl ... at least she used to have a hundred fathers ... the pain of her loss hit her again and she made herself choke back the tears as she stumbled down the mountain trail. At least they were going downhill now, she didn't know if she could go uphill anymore.

The Captain of the guard kept one step behind his Princess to her left, keeping his piercing blue eyes scanning the road ahead of her, on the look out for any danger. Unlike the other soldiers in this weary band, the Captain was not carrying his full gear, just his armor and his weapon. His servant, whom he had been training in the ways of war, was with them, and he was carrying the heavy pack filled with both his and the Princess's gear.

The boy was a strapping youth of sixteen summers. His muscles strained and he grit his teeth with the burden, but he did not complain and his step did not falter. This one would grow up into quite a man. If he grew up.

Risking a backward glance, the Captain took stock of the rear guard and nodded approvingly at their efficient formation. The Princess would not be ambushed from behind with them on duty. Nodding to the boy, the Captain went back to scanning the trail. Just a little further and he was pretty sure they would come into the Jusenkyo valley. The General had always maintained that that was the fall back point should the castle ever come under siege. The Captain hoped at least some of the troops had survived the attack. The attack. Involuntarily he shuddered and in a flash he was replaying the awful event over again in his mind's eye.

They stormed the imperial palace in the middle of the night. Their number uncertain, but even with a conservative guess, the enemy's number was an easy five to one over those of the castle defenders, that and the element of surprise gave them the upper hand. Bristling with malice and flashing weapons, clad in black leather and crimson battle mail, they came to destroy.

Even with seasoned troops manning the walls, their numbers were just too great. With their terrible cries for blood, the savages poured into then over the outer walls, forcing the defending troops to fall back to the secondary wall. The enemies' minor war mages blew holes through several points in the wall for easier entry. And the call went through the castle to rise in arms for battle. Although the counter offensive had been quickly organized, they had still managed to push the invading forces back through the walls, when **he** had appeared.

A hush had swept over the bloody battle field as he strode towards the wall. Comrade and enemy alike froze in their tracks at his appearance. Only one mage in the entire world would dare to wear that symbol and carry that staff. Only one man was evil enough and had the audacity to spit in the creator's face with such a brazen display of disloyalty to the ways of the creator. Huàide Púrén - the servant of evil, had come.

The symbol of death itself was etched in black upon his blood red robe, a circle with four smaller circles each touching a part of the outside circle and two of their brethren. From the center of the circle sprang four spires, each standing for one of the major elements of life, barbed at their ends to take life instead of give, and dripping from the bottom of this awful inscription was the blood of all mankind. The symbol of Siwang - death in it's most awful form. His blackened staff, said to be carved from the charred bones of a thousand children killed to appease his demon masters, bore the same symbol atop its knobby crest.

Many of his own men fled from his presence as he strode toward the castle walls. Terrified and desperate, the castle archers let loose a furious barrage of missiles. All of them aimed at the most evil man in all the world. To their chagrin, all of them dissolved on the mage's invisible shielding. Mortal weapons could not touch this man. Panicked, the defending linesmen sent out a call for the castle wizards, *all of them*.

They came on feet enchanted with spells of speed and muscles strengthened by fear. Their ancient wizened eyes beheld their darkest enemy, and even as he began to chant their doom, they resolved to try their best.

Simple spells were tried first, just in case the dark one had forgotten to shield against them. Each mage took a turn at trying simple spells such as stopping his heart, or freezing his breath, encasing him in solid air. Their hands would glow red or white casting haunting

shadows upon their faces, and the winds would come to their call and sparkles and odd noises sprang up around them as they practiced their art in desperation. Anything to stop him. It was no use. Their spells bounced off the dark one's impressive shielding.

Elemental attacks came next. Depending on the strength of the attack, any elemental creature could break through any shield a mage might cast. The first and strongest wizard, the *High Wizard*, called deep into the earth for his saving champion. On bent knees he chanted raising his torso up and down in sweeping motions as if a snake possessed him.

His hands glowed a subtle green and the glow began to spread to his arms then beyond with a rising pitch in his voice the *High Wizard* demanded his champion from the earth, and the earth split in the semi-distant hills accompanied by the screaming of the heavens, a creature made entirely of living rock and molten metal broke free to the surface.

It was broken and craggy just as the earth was, and betwixt those cracks one could see molten metal surging just under the surface of it's awesome body. Just surfacing, the creature killed a good thousand of the enemy. Scrambling, the enemy fell back. But the defenders did not rejoice. They were too awestruck to even move.

A second wizard called to the heavens danced around in concentric circles, arms outstretched and head thrown back almost as if he were celebrating in joyous laughter. The jumbled words not of this earth escaping his throat dispelled any notion of that though. Louder and louder the mage called, his hands began to glow white and sparks of white hot energy began to dance with him as he called, and down from the cloud swept sky came a creature of tightly packed wind and air, its landing also killed a great many of the enemy soldiers. It looked to be almost invisible. You could see right through it, but it held the stature of a giant, and every now and then it's body would swirl with the unpredictable patterns of the wind.

The last wizard, a junior wizard at that, called to the water from which life sprang, it came from the springs and the air, from the breath of his people and even the enemy. Standing as if a rock unmoving in a mountain stream he chanted. His hands glowed blue and his hair whipped about his face atop currents of unnatural power.

In addition to the elemental powers he was summoning this wizard also gave his spell some of his own life energy, draining him of years he knew he would never see anyway. In the hopes that it just might make his champion a little stronger. Flowing together in the air above the battle field, the water creature settled on the land behind the dark one.

It was a solid object, yet if one cared to look, one could see the currents and eddies of water alive within the creature. The servant of evil stood his ground surrounded by three of the most powerful elemental creatures ever created by mankind, and he showed no concern.

The dark one thrust his staff into the ground as he finished his chant, and the very world seemed to bend and twist in sickening waves of motion. Out of nothing, a rip in the very fabric of reality formed and tearing through it with an awful roar that shook all who witnessed it right down to their bones, came a creature still talked about to this day. They called it a *Draegun* -- a creature talked about for centuries and millennium to come.

The elemental creatures abode their master's wishes and struck with the fury of the gods. Running or flowing towards their mutual enemy they looked almost comical with their disproportional bodies, if the gravity of the situation hadn't been so serious many would have laughed out loud. At the same time, the three wizards started to chant a bond spell, bonding their life energy as one, for a final desperate blow.

The Dragon fought with incredible power and speed, using its tail, wings and talons. But it took as well as it gave. The earth creature cleaved its tail with a mighty swipe of his unnatural hand. The air creature blinded the beast with blasts of enchanted winds sharp as real daggers. The water creature encased its legs in a liquid gone solid, so that it could not walk. Roaring as they fought the elemental creatures made it sound like the earth itself was breaking apart.

Their battle rolled on, and thankfully away from the castle. But to the horror of the defenders, the Dragon proved the superior fighter. Slaying first the water creature it blasted the ground with fires from its maw more terrible than anything mankind could imagine, charring its own legs in the process. But also dispersing the water creature back to where it came from. Using its wings as scythes it cleft the air creature in twain. Then it joined battle with the creature born of earth and fire. Wrestling with it in a contest of pure strength. The earth creature was as hard as the hardest rock, and fire would only make it stronger. The earth creature might even have the upper hand!

Their fighting was terrible. Even from the distance the observers were, they could hear the terrible screams, and see the destruction as the two monoliths crushed everything in their path, villages, trees and even entire mountains! Eventually getting the upper hand, the Dragon rolled the earth creature into a mighty grapple. Squeezing with all its might the Dragon finally forced enough pressure into the creature to crush it into broken fragments. The sound of the implosion carried across the land. Then the Dragon rose and started to walk back towards the battle.

Finishing their life bonding chant, the two lesser wizards locked eyes with their senior. With tears in their eyes, they saluted him with staff to brow. Then each of them lay their hands atop his head and with a single whispered word, let their life energy and power flow into him. Once done, their now empty mortal shells slumped to the ground and were still.

The *High Wizard* grieved for their loss, but was resolute in the knowledge that soon he would be joining them in the next plane of existence.

Turning on his heel with the awful strength of three to an exponential level raging inside him, the wizard called the dark one by name in a voice amplified by magical means loud enough to shake the very earth.

"Huàide púrén, I command you, cease that which thou hath wrought!" The dark mage did not even look up from the next spell he was casting. Fire sprang into the old man's eyes then. With righteous fury he called upon the gods to give him the strength he desired.

He knelt in prayer right there on the bloody battlements with arms outstretched to the heavens, beseeching deliverance from this evil. With tears streaming down his face and soaking his beard, a miracle happened. The heavens opened up and a beam of the purest white light struck the enchanter through the heart. With an in drawn gasp he toppled and lay still.

A great cry of anguish swept through the ranks of the defenders, surely now all was lost. But, as they nocked their bows and drew their swords in preparation for one last mad attempt to defend their home, they beheld a miracle. The earth stilled and the air crackled and the wizard slowly began to rise from the ground on unnatural flows of power, it was literally streaming from him in sheets of energy.

About him sprang an aura of the most blinding white light, tinged at the edges with a haunting blueish glow. Those who dared to look upon him hurriedly looked away with stars flashing across their vision.

With a great call for vengeance, the wizard thrust his cupped hands before him as his mortal form cleared the crumbling battlements of the castle, and from those hands struck a beam of pure fury and vengeance. The powers of justice and protection raged in him, and he drew on them hungrily. His heart beat quickened and his breath slowed. He knew this would be his final act upon this plane, and he prayed it would be enough.

The energy struck the dark one in mid-chant and dropped him to his knees. Snarling, he looked up with new respect for this wizard who dared to oppose him. Staggering under the might of the life wizard's attack, he held up a hand through the pain and caught the beam upon it. Then, whispering to the minions of darkness he served, met the wizard's attacks with his own. A stream of black tinged with ribbons of blood red sprang from his palm, the dark one's eye flashed quicksilver and crimson.

Slowly the dark energy began to push the light back. The two powers meeting caused the world to cry out in protest. The earth shook and the seas raged. The winds tore through the

lands, and the people cowered in fear.

With a roar of fury and final resolve, the wizard threw his life energy into the attack, a final assault. Damning the dark one to eternal suffering, he poured his very soul into the beam, and slowly, then with increasing speed, he began to push back the dark energy.

With a look of surprise and a cry of outrage, the dark one's attack fizzled and now unchecked, the light slammed into him with a mighty thunder clap. The force of it threw the dark one deep into the ground. The *High Wizard's* spell tearing a hole the size of a tree trunk through the dark one's torso as it did so. Muttering one final curse the dark one's grip on his staff slacked and with it, thankfully, the Dragon vanished.

His task done and the dark one banished to the realm he sold his soul to, the wizard turned and beheld his people, all of them cheering their perceived victory. Outstretching his hands he cast one final spell, a spell of the true heart. With it he strengthened their resolve and cast away their fears. And then bowing his head, the wizard whispered his final words and with a brilliant flash disappeared from their plain.

The enemy soldiers' ranks had been decimated by the wizard's battle, and now the odds were uncertain in the confusion set upon them, but there were still a great deal more of them than defending troops. But the invading force, broken and bloodied, were not about to stop now, not with the royal palace before them. Gathering their wits and their strength, they resumed their siege.

As the remaining defending troops crashed into the wall of the oncoming horde, the Princess' personal guards created a human wall before the entrance to her room. It would not be long now, and this would be where they held their final stand.

Half of them were on the outside, and the other half on the inside, with the door securely barred, by both magical and physical means. The enemy wanted the throne, and they could only have it if the immediate family line was gone. With the *High Wizard* gone, his daughter, the Princess, was next in line to the throne. The enemy would be coming for her next.

Inside her room the Princess railed against the walls and cried out in a mixture of both pure fury and anguish. In the depths of her misery, she even struck out at her beloved guards. They did not even flinch. She demanded to be let out so that she could avenge her father's death. She might be a minor mage still, but she would take a great number of them with her. They would not move. She ordered them to move, she begged them to move. They would not. The Captain of the guard stood behind her at all times, his weapon drawn, and ready to leap in from of her to shield her with his own body.

Frustrated, she turned on him and slugged him in the face, hard. The Captain's vassal, a young man who had just happened to be in the Princess' wing when the attackers had struck, drew a surprised breath in. *No one* had ever hit the Captain. Ever. The Captain looked down at his beautiful Princess with tears in his eyes.

"My life is yours your highness, if you so desire. But I cannot allow you to risk your life for this foolish revenge. You are too important. Your people need you, we need you." He added softly, choking on the words as emotion threatened to take his control from him, the Captain bowed to her awaiting her next command.

Slumping in defeat, the Princess sank slowly to the floor. She would not cry. She would **not**. The Captain stooped down and scooped her into his arms as if she weighed nothing at all. He knew that despite their best efforts they were about to be over run. The men on the outside of the door were all going to die, and the men inside were also going to die. And so was the Princess. But not by their filthy hands. When the moment came, he would do it himself, quickly and painlessly, with her unaware of what had happened. He would not allow her to be subjected to whatever cruelties their depraved minds would come up with if they managed to capture her.

It was only a matter of time until the enemy came, and the Captain's heart was breaking. Duty, was heavier than a mountain, death was lighter than a feather. Oh how he longed for his feather. The enemy would come, and then he would do his accursed duty, but not before he made some of them pay for what he would have to do.

And the enemy did come. Despite their enchanted hearts and their fearless attacks, the defenders just didn't have the numbers in their favor. But they made the enemy pay for every step of ground they gained. Boiling oil and trap doors in the courtyard slowed a great many of the oncoming ranks, and the archers would then decimate those not quick enough to scramble for cover. Daring attacks and retreats by the infantry cost the enemy a great number of men, yet they still came.

They poured into the imperial palace destroying anything and anyone in their path. Each room was searched, and slowly they made their way upward. When they finally entered the wing that lead to the Princess, they encountered the first of the real resistance. Soldiers and servants alike manned the halls leading to her tower. They loved their Princess, and even the lowliest peasant would fight to the death for her. They had barricaded themselves behind overturned tables and chairs, archers and pike men at the ready. The surprise of the viciousness of their defense and poor organization cost the enemy dearly, the defenders managed to wipe out three waves of the advancing enemy.

But that was not enough. The enemy centered their force on the resistance's location, believing they had found her at last. A battle wedge was formed, and, with the shield bearers surrounding them, the pike men and archers allowed their shock troops to make short work of the rag tag groups of defenders.

The Captain of the guard cocked his head as the first sounds of close combat reached them from downstairs, as he sat the Princess down upon her bed. Steeling himself for what was to come next he shouted an encouragement to the troops about to die.

"For the Princess!" He cried and was promptly answered from outside with the same call. Then, stamping their feet and smashing shield to sword hilt, they began to sing.

*"We shall not fail.
We shall not stop.
We'll shed our blood to the last drop!
For the Princess!
For the Princess!
We fear naught but failure.
Press on to death if thou desire.
To the last we'll stand, marching towards the fire.
For the Princess!
For the Princess!
Come meet us on the battle field!
We'll not surrender! There's no defeat!
No mercy nor quarter shall thou meet!
For the Princess!
For the Princess!"*

That was the sound that met the enemy as they made their way up the tower, where they were promptly slaughtered by the personal guard of the Princess -- the most elite guards in the entire Kingdom. The guards sang as they hacked and stabbed. They fought in teams and accepted no surrender, gave no mercy. The first wave defeated, they sang louder still, and the guards on the inside sang with them.

Yet on they came, the enemy seemed mindless in their advance. For every guard they managed to kill they lost one hundred or more of their number. With each defending guard slain, the Princess' guards would simply close ranks and continue singing. When an invading wave was over, the guards stacked the bodies of their fallen comrades, and the enemy alike, as a barrier down the hall way. The next wave had to clear it to get to them, and the rear rank of the guards would reward them with showers of arrows for their efforts. Yet still they sang.

The minutes stretched into hours and the battle outside her door raged on. The Princess was losing her mind. Her guards. Her fathers! Were dying for her, and there was nothing she could do. This was all **his** fault. If the dark one had just left them alone none of this would be happening. Clenching her hands into fists she wondered how the enemy had managed to get so close to the castle walls without an alarm going up in the first place. Giving her mind something to think about helped her keep her sanity as the battle raged outside her door.

On they came, the enemy, if they had any brains, only had to barricade themselves around the tower and wait. They were not equipped to withstand a war of attrition. But with simple minded efficiency, they pressed on up the tower, stepping on the broken bodies of friend and foe alike in their mad quest to be the one to capture or kill the Princess.

Then they came. The Blood Snake troops. Members of the enemies' elite vanguard. Each man wearing a silver tunic under a crimson chain mail shirt, black leather and silver gauntlets. Each man had a circle with the four barbed spires tattooed on his left forearm, to proclaim his allegiance. Not the full symbol the dark one had worn, for even these men did not wish the wrath of the creator upon them.

Charging up the tower, they screamed for battle. And the defending guards knew this would be their last stand. So they sang louder, and smiled in the face of death.

These were no ordinary troops. They did not break rank and scramble upon clashing with the royal guardsmen. Efficient and disciplined, they fought in close quarters. Two to a man if possible. And the royal guardsmen started to fall. But they took a great many of the enemy with them.

Then after a long while, the singing stopped and all was quiet for a short while. Then the resounding clang of a battering ram sounded through the door. The room's magical defenses were activated. With a whooshing sound the hallway directly outside the door blossomed into scorching flames that burned hotter than the hottest fire upon human flesh, yet left the hall untouched. Thus the end of this contingent of Blood Snakes came about.

A temporary quiet settled over the castle. But it only lasted for a few minutes. From down the hallway they heard the chanting of mages in concert. Obviously at least one or two of the minor war mages had survived the great elemental creatures and wizard's battle, and they had been summoned to breach the magical barriers upon the Princess' door. After a long while the chanting stopped and footsteps could be heard approaching the chamber. A single tap was heard through the door, then the tapper called the all clear.

The crashing of the battering ram started soon again outside the door. Apparently the minor war mages were better than most thought. This was it. It was almost over. The enemy would win, but this last group would not survive. Each guard swore that to himself as they drew their swords and nocked their bows. They began to stamp their feet and slam their hilts to shields, and they began to sing.

The enemy would pay dearly to gain entrance to this room. The Captain picked the Princess up and carried her to the room's furthest corner. With her safely behind him, backed against the walls, he stood ready to do his duty.

The crystal! Clarity flooded the Princess' mind as she remembered. Her father had given it to her at the age of six, and bade her wear it at all times.

"Use this crystal my darling if ever you are in danger and need to get away fast. It will take you to someplace safe."

He had then told her the magical words to use to activate the crystal's hidden powers, and made her practice them daily until he was satisfied she remembered them.

The door started to crack. The enemy added to the destruction with battle axes and war hammers. Desperate, the Princess kicked the Captain's knees out from behind him and lunged for her dresser. Scrambling, the Captain was up in an instant.

"My Princess, you must stay behind me ..." He began to shout, and then all hell broke loose. With a groan of splintered wood, the door caved inward and the enemy poured in, blood lust in their eyes and hatred in their veins. Reaching her dresser, the Princess threw the topmost drawer open and clutched the hand sized crystal to her. Then began the chant. Mad with fear for his Princess, the Captain just barely reached her before an enemy soldier reached her.

The Captain slammed his fist into the man's throat and crushed his windpipe as he sent the man skittering across the floor writhing in agony and choking on his own blood and bile. The Captain then took up station in front of her again. Somehow four more men broke through the defending lines, and rushed him. The Captain took two of their heads off with a single sword swipe, then got tackled. Dropping his sword, he grabbed both their necks and dropped into a roll going with their momentum, and twisted as he kicked them up and over himself. Their necks made sickening crunching sounds as they snapped.

Dazed but resolute, the Captain gathered his wits and weapon and cried out to his singing troops, "rally on the Princess! To the Princess! Rally on the Princess! Fall back!" The guardsmen closed ranks and fell back to the rear center of the room. Fighting shoulder to shoulder, the bloodshed was incredible. For every guardsman down a score of the enemy went with him. The guardsmen fought as men possessed. Fear for their Princess drove them on.

With his human shield in place, the Captain clutched his beloved Princess to him as she continued her chant. Tears streaming down his face, he allowed himself a few seconds to weep at the injustice of it all. To cry for his little girl. For innocence lost. Burying his face in the hair at the base of her neck, he drew his dagger from his belt. He whispered his apology to her as he tried to choke back the grief.

"I am sorry my Princess, we have failed you ..." As he began to bring the knife to bear at the base of her neck. 'Quick and painless...' He thought to himself just as a scream came

from the Princess as she shouted the final word of the incantation she had been chanting. Then the world froze in icy detail.

Blinding white light flashed out from the crystal. It permeated every living being in the room. The power of the crystal was incredible. Made with a father's love for his daughter for the purpose of protection, it did just that. The crystal judged each man's heart in a fraction of an instant and struck dead all those who would harm her. Then with a flash, the crystal exploded into what felt to the Princess like feathers. Swirling around the room, the powers of the crystal gathered up all those living who were loyal to the Princess and in the wink of an eye they were all standing in the mountains of the Bayankala range.

Trembling, the Captain pulled back his dagger and dropped it as if it were on fire. They had been saved. Delivered from the clutches of evil! Rejoicing, the Captain wept openly and fell back on the packed earth with his Princess in his arms and laughed as he clutched her to his breast. A great cheer went up from the remaining guards as they all gathered around to kiss their Princess and rest for a second. The party turned serious almost instantly though as the reality of their situation dawned on them.

From their vantage point, they could see the battle still raging in the castle far below them. They were not safe yet. Standing, the Captain picked up the Princess in his arms as if she were an infant. She smiled weakly from her perch.

The Captain Barked orders to the remaining guardsmen to take up marching positions, and they set off down to the Jusenkya valley, and hopefully the garrison of troops stationed there. The Captain left the dagger laying in the dirt. He had no intention of touching it ever again.

Snapping back to reality, the Captain's heart soared as they crested the next ridge. There it was, the Jusenkya valley. Safety. The Captain called for a double step and picked up the Princess again.

They stormed eagerly into the open of the valley, looking for friendly faces. They saw nothing. Crestfallen, the last of the royal guardsmen took up station around the Captain and the Princess.

This didn't feel right ... The wind smelled wrong and the earth was sending warning signals into the seasoned veins of the men. This felt like an ... ambush. The Captain was about to give the order to find cover when they stepped out from around them.

Imperial troops. At least a division. But they weren't smiling, and they did not salute the Captain as they should have. Laughing, a General made his way through their ranks.

Smirking, he sauntered over towards the band. Wisely he stopped out of weapons range as he regarded them. That they had made it this far despite all the odds was amazing. That they had the Princess with them was simply incredible. He would have to put them in for medals. Awarded posthumously of course.

"General ... I am glad to see your troops haven't suffered any losses. Would you like my help organizing a counter offensive against the enemy laying siege to the castle now, General?" The Captain glared as he set the Princess down behind him. She was no fool. She knew as well as the Captain did that this was no friendly welcome. Softly she started to chant a war spell.

"Ah Captain, I am afraid I cannot accept your offer. As you see, I am afraid you and I are not on the same side of this particular campaign. Mores to pity, you are certainly the best swordsman I have laid eyes on in decades ... No, I am sorry to say that I must place you all under arrest as prisoners of war. Kindly stand down and surrender your weapons, and I promise your executions will be quick and painless..." The General almost looked hopeful as he said this.

The Captain smiled as he drew his sword straight up in the air. Lightning struck then in the hills, and its brilliance flashed over the weapon's surface. With thunder rolling over the mountains, the Captain drew the hilt down so the cross guard was just below his eyes, in a salute to the General he had once known. The man that he had fought beside many times in days gone by. Not the traitorous bastard that stood before him now. The Captain screamed the battle call, "For the Princess!!" His men answered him with drawn blades of their own, ringing out in the soon-to-be night air. Even the Captain's vassal dropped his pack and unlimbered a rather wicked looking war hammer. Then they began to sing.

Nodding, the General signaled the attack. The traitorous troops, once loyal to the same *High Wizard* King, charged in from all directions. There would be no magic crystal this time, no magic walls or reinforced doors. Fate had caught up to them, and it was time to fight or die. They sang as they fought.

Her chant reaching a crescendo, the Princess suddenly shot up straight onto her tip-toes and stretched her arms heavenward, palms up and fingers spread, calling to the heavens for the power to save them. Lightning struck her outstretched hands, once, then twice, then over and over again. With each jolt the Princess swayed a little bit, but seemed to suck the energy into herself almost instantly.

Startled, the advancing troops slowed to a trot then a walk as the lightning continued to strike her. They had not signed up to fight a mage, even a minor one. Slowly their ranks stopped, and then started to back up, then showing their lack of discipline and true colors, they broke into a full out retreat, the guardsmen could almost see their tails betwixt their legs as they ran, and they laughed merrily. As the lightning continued to strike the Princess' outstretched hands. Her guards closed ranks about her, their backs to her. They didn't know what she was doing but whatever it was, it was causing the traitors to turn tail and run!

Then the Princess screamed a battle cry of fury and pent-up rage born of her grief. Lowering her hands to her sides, her head dipped and her shoulders slumped. She stood like that for a moment or two. Then she started to laugh, it was almost an insane laugh. She then violently raised her head and damned her traitorous Kingdom's soldiers to eternal suffering as she called for the release of her power.

Flinging her arms out from side to side like she was shaking out a rug that needed dusting, she sent streams of electrical energy into the ranks of her once loyal troops. The power rolled from her like the waves of the sea. It passed through her guards harmlessly, but on contact with the others, blasted them from their feet, hurling them meters back, and ripped their mortal shells to pieces.

The Princess continued to rant as she cast her terrible vengeance. Cursing these men and the greed that drove them, for the lives they had destroyed. After what seemed like an eternity, she slowed, then stopped. Suddenly the valley was silent. Slowly starting to relax, the men of her guard dared to think it was over, that they had been delivered yet again.

Then they heard an odd noise. Clapping? A short distance away a sinister looking man swathed in black strode out of a hidden cave's entrance, brushing back the vines that covered it as he clapped. Behind him marched members of the Blood Snake guard, and above them all shimmered a very powerful magical shield.

The man was tall and wore a traveling cloak askew over his left shoulder, clasped at his throat with a symbol of a silver dagger and on his forearm was burned the symbol of the dark one, minus the blood. Another dark mage in training? The man walked through the chill winds in his light clothing, yet did not shiver, nor did his cloak, though the wind was brisk. His hair was disheveled and his knee-high boots were muddy. He was smiling, but the smile made the Princess nervous. He stopped out of weapons range, but close enough so that she could smell him. He smelt of dried tree bark and looked to live a rough life, his muscular build and callused hands suggested he was adept in the fighting arts as well as the magical ones.

"Very good your majesty." The man sneered. "You wiped them out. You made my job a little easier. Traitors can never be trusted, they are only useful for so long ... then ..." The man trailed off as he ran a finger across his throat. The thought that she had done anything to help this man made shivers run down her spine.

"Now if you would be so kind as to order your guards to stand down, I would like to invite you to join me in the cave to discuss the terms of your surrender. I am being quite generous am I not?" The man smirked and turned on his heel, walking back towards the cave seeming quite pleased with himself.

"I will **not**." The Princess said quietly but firmly. The man in black stopped in mid-stride.

Sighing the man's shoulder seemed to slump a little. "Very well, we can do things the hard way too." The man said nonchalantly over his shoulder. "I am sure the Blood Snakes would like a chance to spar with your men. Rest assured your magic will not harm them, they are quite safe."

Scowling, the Princess started to chant an elemental spell she had heard her father practicing once. At the same time the man in black started to chant his own elemental spell, but before he did so he uttered a single command, "go."

The Blood Snakes leapt into action. And the royal guard began to sing again. They fought back to back and met the snakes on their own terms. They were outnumbered, but not out classed.

And so yet another battle was joined. The two magic users stood untouched in the center of the chaos, each intent on killing the other. Finishing her chant first, the Princess screamed the final word and clapped her hands together, then drew them apart as a brilliant sword of wind, fire and ice was formed. It looked the color of quicksilver, even the hilt looked to be made from the same material, yet it flashed from blue to crimson back to quicksilver in a most unnatural way. It was light as a feather and as sharp as an unbreakable razor blade. She tapped her Captain on the shoulder and gave it to him, and with tears running down her cheeks lifted herself up to her tiptoes and kissed him on the cheek.

"Do not fail me Captain." Was all she said. It was enough. Nodding, the Captain jerked his vassal back from the ranks and placed him squarely in front of the Princess, there would be no closed ranks this time. The vassal set his shoulders and waited.

Without another second lost, the Captain dashed through the fighting men. Holding the sword blade out and tip up as he charged, praying it harmed only those of evil intent, but without the luxury of being able to stop and find out, he charged through the lines, on a direct course for the man in black.

Thankfully his prayers were answered as he cut through the lines and Blood Snakes lost limbs and heads, and guardsmen suddenly found themselves without an opponent to fight. The Captain leapt over broken bodies and spun around clumsy sword swipes.

Screaming, he reached the man in black, and charged right through his shield, the sword ripping through it as if it were made of silk. At the same time, the dark mage finished his spell and clasped his forearms together, drawing them back he held a quarter staff that was blacker than black. It glowed with dark energy as evil as its owner, yet seemed to suck all available light into itself. And they clashed.

This mage was as good at the fighting arts as the Captain was. Or better. Each swipe of the Captain's sword met empty air or rang against the mage's staff. They circled each other viciously, and each of them took as well as they gave. The Captain managed to glancing blow to the mage's shoulder, but it cost him a cracked rib to do so. Round and round they went, with neither man seeming to be able to find an opening in the other's defenses.

With her final strength the Princess cast one more spell, a trick really. One that had fascinated her as a little girl. She cast a light butterfly spell in the dark wizard's face. Startled and temporarily blinded the dark mage lowered his guard for just an instant to disperse the spell. But it was an instant too long. With a hissing sound of that which is good meeting that which is evil, the Captain drove his sword through the mage's heart.

Looking down stunned, the dark mage cast one final spell, a spell of freezing breath. Surprise etched the Captain's face as he slowly started to sink to his knees with the dark mage, choking for breath. As he lay dying on the uncaring earth the clouds finally broke and let loose the rains of the damned. Seeing her Captain dying, the Princess pushed herself further than she knew she could go. Channeling her own life force into the spell she cast the life's breath spell on him. Then blacked out.

The Captain's vassal heard her hit the ground behind him, but was presently engaged with two rather cranky Blood Snakes, and could not turn to aide her.

As breath returned to his lips the Captain's head cleared, and slowly he rose as he managed to prop himself up on one elbow. To see the end of the world. There were only two guardsmen left. And at least twenty Blood Snakes left. Cackling their victory, the snakes closed in, two of them rushed his vassal, he fought valiantly but as another two crashed into him he fell. A quick scramble and he lay still on the valley floor. The valley that was supposed to have been their salvation. The irony was disgusting. This valley was nothing if not *cursed!*

The last two guardsmen didn't even have the strength left to sing as they fought. Back to back, they managed to hold them off a little longer, but in a short while the only ones left standing were Blood Snakes.

They leered at the Princess as they picked her up, the Captain knew what they had in mind for next, and the Captain went cold. It was over. He had to do **something!** Exhausted, he pulled himself up to his knees, and crawled forward. His fingertips brushed something cold and taught. Looking down briefly, he saw a bow with an arrow still slightly nocked laying in the earth fast turning to mud. Desperate, he lunged for it.

The Blood Snakes hauled the Princess to her feet and slapped her awake. She awoke instantly, and to her credit, she did not cry out. Nodding to themselves the snakes lowered

her back to her knees. They planned on enjoying this.

The Captain drew the shaft back tight against his cheek, and prayed his shot would be true. Begging the Princess' forgiveness he closed his eyes and let the arrow loose. At the same instant a gust of wind whisked through the valley and caught the arrow on a rising current.

It struck the Princess, just above her heart. Gasping, she looked to her Captain in surprise as her life started to bleed out of her.

Enraged snakes turned and rushed for the Captain. As they came for him he managed to rise to his knees, his torso straight in the air, he saluted his Princess. Then hardened his gaze as they came for him. He did not close his eyes this time.

As they slaughtered her Captain, the Princess' last vestige of control left her. Heartsick and enraged, she knelt in silent prayer for vengeance. Magic was to blame for this day, magic was to blame for all of it. Her father, her people, her guardsmen... they had all died this day due to magic, and she cursed it. Begging the heavens with her final strength, she pleaded for the destruction of magic in this world, to wrest the reins of magic out of the inept hands of irresponsible mortals. This world was not ready for magic yet... take it back ... take it **back** ... and slowly the Princess slumped into the ground. Surprisingly, she felt no pain, only a warm glowing feeling...

Then the heavens opened once again that fateful day, and a brilliant beam of the purest white did strike that young Princess through her heart. However she did not rise again like her father. The glow permeated her entire body, then with an awful sound, a howling screech sounded as terrible light left her, shooting out in rays as sharp as razors. They cut down the remaining Blood Snakes, then into the very walls of the valley itself, sealing it's trails and passes for centuries to come.

And as the blood of the Princess and her guardsmen slowly mixed with that of the rain waters, and gathered into the shallow puddles on the Jusenkya valley floor, the Princess' wish was granted, and all the magic in the world started to drain into those same puddles. Wiping all record of its existence from the face of the earth as it went.

Hours later as the rains died down, a single figure moaned on that bloody battlefield. The Captain's vassal, wounded but not dead, lifted himself up on arms strengthened with determination. Slowly he stood and surveyed the carnage, and he wept for the world and his Princess. Then, a great while later, he began the grisly task of burying their dead. The enemy he left to rot.

When that was finished he left the valley, and found himself a nice quiet cave far into the

mountains, and there he began to write, a record of what had come to pass, so that one day, if it should ever be needed, the knowledge of what had happened there on that day would be available. At his side in the candle light, as he wrote, gleamed the elemental sword wrought by the Princess' own hands.

With a crash of thunder Dr. Tofu snapped awake. Disoriented, he quickly scanned the room for the source of the danger. He opened his mouth to call for the guards ... then reality came crashing back to him, and he slumped back down on his futon, drained of all stamina.

Looking over his shoulder, he checked the rise and fall of Kasumi's breast. Her breathing was stable and her color looked fine. Glancing back around the room, the doctor's eyes settled on the window, and the furious storm sweeping across Nerima. The lightning flashed and the winds howled, and the thunder rumbled.

"What in the world..." The doctor muttered aloud. He had never had a dream so real before, so vivid. It was almost as if he was experiencing those events through the eyes of those whom had actually been there. But that was ... *impossible* ... wasn't it? The more the doctor thought about it, the colder he felt. This was not good, not good at all.