

Alright, guys, it's a day late, but RL has gotten to me this week – the elderly care facility has FINALLY allowed us to come over to see the granny, and I have been spending several hours a day over there. Seeing her after so many months is great. Seeing how she has declined in that time has not been. On top of that, a few conversations that need to happen in FILFy are making work on that story go sloooowly. I should still have it finished and off to the editor by Monday, though.

Anyway, on to happier things. Here are the results of the poll, and again it should come as no surprise:

In last place, Their moment is interrupted by the door banging open. The tsundere has found them! (comedy, some romantic comedy, Henrietta being angry) brought in 172. Once more, we see that tsundere just are not popular.

In third place with 234 is With the repairs done, Kirche decides she's had her fun and tells Tabby and Louise the big secret (comedy, Tabitha-centric world-building). Huh, I honestly thought Tabby would make this choice more popular.

Barely taking second place with 236 is News about the 'secret weapon' spreads and plans are made by various parties. (bits from the original, enemies view world-building). Apparently, no one wants to see the enemies POV. Since this isn't the first time that's been the case, I will stop offering that as a choice from now on, and if I have to, add bits like that into the winning episodes.

And of course in first place is, Their moment is ended by knocking on the door. Agnes is there, ending her fun. (bits from the original, Henrietta-centric world building) bringing in 1,328.

Another overwhelming victory for one choice over the others. I really do need to think about making this just a numbers poll going forward. But I will wait until after this episode's poll since the choice at the end of this episode will be very important in how this story continues to evolve...

Thanks go to **Kestral** and his fellows for the original story, and to Hiryō for editing.

Chapter 9: If At First You Don't Succeed?

Now, this entire situation wasn't anything Ranma could have ever imagined. How could he? His memory still made swiss cheese look like concrete with all the holes it had in it, but he was as positive now, with Henrietta in his arms and her lips moving against his, that this was well beyond anything Ranma had ever done before with a girl. If it didn't feel so darn good, Ranma would be panicking right now. And there was still a stubborn part of his brain telling him this wasn't a good thing.

The two of them had only known one another for less than a day. An insanely hectic one, but still, just a day. Weren't kisses supposed to be between loved ones? No way could they be in love this early. And wasn't Henrietta a princess? Didn't that mean she'd have to marry for the dynasty or whatever?

But the rest of his mind argued that Henrietta had initiated things. And she was easily the nicest person he had any memory of meeting. Indeed something told Ranma, just like he seemed to sense the shape of his memories, if not their actual vision, that she was by far the nicest person he had ever met. Maybe it wasn't anything serious. They had indeed only known one another for a day. But who cared? If she wanted some affection, who was Ranma to deny her? Especially, and this bore repeating since it felt sooo good.

While his mind was basically going around in circles about what he should do, Ranma's body was in the driver's seat. Part of the Anything Goes school was adaptation and he was enjoying it, so Ranma's body adapted without any input from his higher cognitive functions, kissing Henrietta back in a slightly different manner every few seconds until he found the one she seemed to like the most in terms of angle and firmness. He found his hands moving up and down her back and her neck, touching here and there, causing her to whimper in delight, the sound sending a shiver of pleasure down Ranma's spine.

Then Henrietta opened her mouth, her tongue flicking out, tapping against Ranma's closed lips. For a moment, Ranma didn't know what to do, then instincts, older and more primal than any he had ever felt before, had him opening his mouth in turn, letting Henrietta's tongue into his mouth, where Ranma's met it, twining around one another. Both of them moaned at that, and Ranma found his arms tightening around the Princess, nearly squishing Henrietta's chest against his own.

It was only when his danger sense went off that Ranma became aware of a pounding noise. This was followed by the door behind them banging open, and an instant later, he heard Agnes's voice behind him, managing to squeak and yell at the same time. "Pah-pah-pah-pah?!" said a familiar voice. "PRINCESS?!"

Hearing her head Musketeer's voice brought Henrietta from the pleasant hormonally induced fugue she had been in after Ranma started to respond to her kiss. Pulling herself away, she shook herself, then straightened her back. This, this was a moment of weakness but she

could not allow it to continue. Henrietta knew she had to be strong and shoulder her responsibilities. *Though I can't deny it was nice to just let go for a brief moment.* "Agnes?"

Agnes looked back and forth between Princess Henrietta and Ranma. The various knights behind her all simply stared, flushing save for one who managed a nervous-sounding giggle.

"Ah, ahem, mmm," Princess Henrietta muttered, recovering her dignity and bearing almost instantly, although she could still feel the sensations of their tongues rubbing against one another for several minutes. She could not let it continue to impact her priorities though. They had a lot to get done before she was too long absent from the palace, whatever the chaos of the fight, if it could honestly be called that, earlier. "Yes, well. Now that you've, um, caught up with us, Commander, I have orders for you."

"You want me to run him in and throw him in prison for assaulting you?" Agnes guessed, sounding not just hopeful but practically begging for an excuse.

Despite his earlier promise to Henrietta on trying to be civil to people even if they threatened him, Ranma just could not let that go. "Yeah, sh'right. You and what army, tomboy?" His glance took in Agnes, the Musketeers behind her and judged them all to be so small a threat as to be inconsequential.

"Ranma?" Henrietta raised an eyebrow warningly, and Ranma pouted but nodded and mimed closing his mouth and throwing away the key. That caused Henrietta to smile and blush for a second looking at his lips before she shook herself and turned to Agnes and the other Musketeers with her. "And Agnes, no, regardless of what you might think is going on here, you do not have the full picture. Now please, close that door."

"Yes, Princess," Agnes sighed, stepping back and closing the door, her entire body conveying the image of a kicked puppy coupled with an affronted matron somehow.

She closed the door behind her so quickly that Henrietta had to blink as she stared at the closed door. "Good grief."

"That wasn't what you wanted, was it?" Ranma asked, both intrigued and wary of continuing what they had been doing earlier.

Rolling her eyes at him, Henrietta moved around Ranma and cracked the door just open enough to address her guards. She didn't want her presence out in the city spread far and wide and tried to convey this in her low tones. "No, Agnes. I intended you to close the door behind you..."

Before she could continue, Agnes once more proved that she was, as Ranma had said, the reigning 'jumping to conclusions' champion, although thankfully, she did keep her voice down. "My lady! No. Absolutely not! I am NOT going to engage in a threesome!"

Blinking again at that, Henrietta sighed, facepalming. "I really need to get you some vacation time, don't I? What in the world about what I said implied I, I wanted that!?"

"Errr, nothing. Nothing at all," said Agnes, as she realized that she was still rattled by recent events.

"Good. Now, if you could have Wanda and Calliope stand guard, you and the rest should join us in this room before someone comes to see what all the noise is about." What the words almost seemed like a suggestion, Henrietta's tone made it an order, and Agnes hurried to obey, adding an order to the two named guards as to where they should station themselves dousing the lights in the hallway as they went, to hide better.

Once the door was closed behind the rest of her guards, Henrietta moved back to sit on the bed, gesturing with a hand for Ranma to stand by the small window, which had served as their original entrance to the room. He nodded back, realizing the Princess wanted to start responding to what they had heard and interested to see how she would go about doing so.

Henrietta sat up straight, suddenly conveying the impression that she was sitting on a throne instead of the side of a bed, projecting a kind of regal air that took Ranma aback for a moment. "I take it, Agnes, that the mages who attacked the palace with intent on my life were dealt with?"

"It depends on which group you mean, Your Highness," Agnes grouched, before becoming serious. "The students apologized for the confusion, and as all three were nobles, I didn't think I could get away with throwing them into the slammer for the night. I threatened to and ordered them all back to their Academy, under a guard of two of my musketeers. That was before Tabitha, the blue-haired one called a dragon to her. It took all them all back together, although to hear them, I don't think either the Germanian girl or Louise was at all happy about that state of affairs."

"That is an old issue between their families, I had hoped that both of them were intelligent enough to put it aside at the Academy, but I suppose that shared history merely exacerbates a personality issue between them." Henrietta shook her head. "And the other three?"

"Dead resisting capture. Louise blew apart their defenses like nothing and they died before my musketeers could stop our fire. The one survivor was able to answer our questions, and quite happy to do. He was quite badly wounded when this one," she jerked a finger towards Ranma, "kicked him off of the parapet and only our quickly getting him to a doctor kept him from losing something important to him as a man."

Ranma shrugged. "How was I supposed to know there was a pitchfork in that haystack?" Then he blinked. "Wait, those other two weren't..."

"No Ranma, they were not. There aren't that many mages who are willing to serve in the Royal guard as it is, since after all mages are most off almost entirely nobles by birth."

Ranma's eyes narrowed. "If I'd known that, I would've kicked the bastard the other way off the wall. It would be kind of interesting to see what kind of distance I could get with this new technique of mine."

Henrietta smirked at that, but then turned her attention back to Agnes wordlessly, urging her to continue her report.

"Apparently, they were compatriots of the group you and this one," Again, she jerked a finger towards Ranma, seemingly unwilling to use his name for some reason. "Captured earlier today. They had hoped to sneak in and reacted when they saw you and Ranma on the walls. It seemed a perfect opportunity to finish their job, and their loyalty was more to money than to their imprisoned comrades."

"Somehow, I do not believe that is all that was behind that attack. The assassins might well have believed it so, but I would like you to discreetly inquire with Colette and the Head Butler of any developments on the servant side of things, please? I would do it myself but..."

"But they couldn't help but be formal with you, Your Highness," Agnes replied with a nod. "I'll see to it when we get back."

"We will not be going back right away. I still have other things to set in motion." Henrietta breathed in deeply, then made a point of looking around the room, making eye contact with each of her musketeers in turn. "When Ranma and I absconded over the rooftops to give everyone back at the palace a chance to cool down, without this one adding more fuel to the fire," she added, looking at Ranma, but she was smiling as she did, causing him to smirk back at her.

The closeness of the two caused Agnes to grit her teeth, but that halted instantly as Henrietta went on. "Through some act of the Founder, the two of us were able to overhear a clandestine meeting between five people, two of whom I recognized."

From there, she described the discussion the two of them had overheard, looking to Ranma for any additional information occasionally, since his ears were much better than hers. Accordingly, he described the voice of the one who had silenced the others. "He sort of sounded like someone highborn, like that guy I fought back at the Academy almost, only nowhere near as foppish. It's hard to describe, he sounded like a nobleman, but a warrior too, someone you would have to take seriously, you know? He also had a bit of an accent, but

considering that you are only hearing me speak your language due to a spell on me, I have no idea what me thinking someone has an accent could mean.”

Henrietta nodded, internally remembering to make a point of mentioning that to someone, perhaps her chief librarian. Despite what she had said about the effect of Louise’s Silence doing the exact opposite of what she had wanted, it certainly was **not**. The ability to enspell someone’s speech to be heard in an entirely different language? That wasn’t any kind of wind or water spell or any combination of spells that could be used to affect the vocal cords that she knew of.

“Are you sure it was the Judge Magistrate, Your Highness?” Agnes questioned intently, though she wasn’t so much questioning Henrietta as she was eager to act upon Henrietta’s information. She gave Ranma the impression of a dog ready to be taken off the leash.

“I am more than certain. Baron Doucet and the Chief Speaker did quite a bit of the talking. I could identify both of them with ease. But it would just be our words against theirs, and as they are both nobles, that is not enough.”

“But it’s enough for an investigation, Your Highness!”

“It is, but we need to be very circumspect about this. At first, I had hoped to leave both men in place to feed them false information. However, upon reflection, I have decided that the Judge Magistrate is in too important a position to allow him to continue as he has.”

She then looked over at Ranma. “Before we go into any particulars on that, do you have anything else you wish to add about the five conspirators?”

Ranma frowned, thinking. “One of them was shorter than the others, one of the two silent ones. That might’ve been a woman. I can’t quite tell you for sure. The other one was tapping a cane, I could barely make it out over the rain, but it was there. And the short one was fidgeting, like a lot. But both stopped when the ‘noble soldier’ silenced the other two. He scared them, I think.”

Going over her own memory, Henrietta nodded agreement. “He certainly scared the Judge Magistrate and that I think is enough.”

“And you’re saying that they wanted us to break off discussions with Germania? That kind of pairs well with what we discovered talking to the prisoners we took yesterday,” Agnes mused.

While Ranma muttered, ‘what’s this ‘we’ thing Tomboy’ Henrietta cocked her head at Agnes quizzically. “What do you mean? Your reports on them said that they were Germanian.”

“Yes, Your Highness, I said they spoke with Germanian accents. A little too heavily, I think. And all of them having the same accent? A mercenary band specializing in assassinations and paid robberies? That kind of work attracts people from all over, and no group like that can be too picky about where they get their members,” Agnes scoffed.

“So everything is pointing to this group being connected, perhaps, to the assassination, or could this be a move to muddy the waters?”

Ranma spoke up then, reminding Henrietta of the beginning of the conversation they’d overheard. “Remember what they said? The attack on you was apparently launched by someone called Agent ‘W,’ who’s working for the Reconquest, something like that anyway.”

“The Reconquista, the group of nobles who are waging a civil war against the royal house in Albion. It would make sense that they are worried about Germania.”

Ranma looked at her quizzically, and she shrugged. “Germania is not just an industrial powerhouse, it is also a military one, with the best trained and best-equipped army on the continent. An alliance of all the other nations against them, especially Tristain with our history of producing powerful mages, and one of our greatest generals having one her station in the last war against them, makes sense.”

“Ah. That kinda matches with a country in my world called Germany. It was the bad guy, although in the first world war it really wasn’t so cut and dried until after the war began. Anyway, they started to world wars back to back, taking on the rest of the continent and nearly winning.” That was a very simplified version of the two world wars, but Ranma didn’t really want to go into it too much right now. Not until he had time to sift through those memories and figure them out for himself.

“World wars,” Henrietta murmured, shivering slightly and not from her still damp nightdress. “The very name is not pleasant.”

“Princess, you don’t know the half of it. I remember reading about it in class. Some of the things even my own country did, which I didn’t really learn about until I was in another country, were just wrong. Like pure evil,” Ranma muttered.

Seeing Ranma’s faraway look and scowl, Henrietta fought back a shiver, wondering what he saw in his fractured memory. Regardless, she set that to one side and gently turned the conversation back to what they were doing. “At any rate, we need to move against the Judge Magistrate but slowly. And we do want to leave the Head Speaker in place for now. He can be used to pass on false information. And his position isn’t nearly as dangerous or as deep in our council as Baron Doucet is.”

Everyone there recognized the use of the ‘Royal we’ save Ranma, who was still staring off to one side. She pointed at one of her musketeers, all of whom she knew by name.

“Samantha, we want you to head to judge Garibaldi’s house here in the city. This time of year, he is in residence there rather than at his modest estate. “He is known to be a staunch law-first individual and extremely well-educated and respected. Indeed, the choice for Judge Magistrate had been between him and Baron Doucet,” Henrietta grimaced. “Cardinal Mazarin and we chose Baron Doucet for his organizational qualities. It appears as if we should have looked closer into his politics and past associations as well. At any rate, we will need him to sign out a search warrant for the Judge Magistrate’s house.”

“Your Highness, he might not want to issue a warrant just on my words. What should I do if he doesn’t give me a warrant?” Samantha asked, bowing her head.

“Do any of you have a pen and parchment? And my royal seal?”

Since her musketeers also acted as her secretary on a rotation, Agnes did indeed have Henrietta’s royal seal, and a few of the others had pen and parchment. Henrietta quickly laid out on the ground, causing Ranma to flush and look away as she crouched there to use the floor of the room as a desk. Then she wrote out a message to judge Garibaldi. “What my musketeer tells you is the truth, as seen and witnessed by myself. So swear I, Henrietta de Tristain, on my own name and that of the Founder. By my order, you will release a warrant into the hand of Samantha to allow her and her fellow musketeers to search Baron Doucet’s house at any point over the next four days.”

Then she signed her name and used the royal purple wax to cap the parchment, placing her seal on the cap. Henrietta then stood up, looked over at Ranma to find him looking away again from her, only then realizing the position she’d been in as she wrote, flushing a little before she handed it over to Samantha. “That should do, I think.”

“Yes, your Majesty,” Samantha replied with some awe, taking the message and holding the rolled-up parchment as if it was a precious object.

“I’ll assign two other musketeers to go with her, Your Highness. Just in case,” Agnes interjected. Agnes pointed to other musketeers in the room, both of whom bowed and left the room with Samantha, moving on silent feet but very quickly about their business. They would have that warrant within their hands by morning, although Henrietta was going to wait just a bit before letting her musketeers loose on the man’s property. Specifically, she wanted to wait until she had him elsewhere and completely focused on something else.

She said this now, before going on, “Agnes, I think we need to make a big production about this assassination. Make it known that the entire episode tonight was an elaborate plot to trick any further assassins into acting on the perceived chaos. With that and the evidence of the assassins, we will let the Judge Magistrate and others think that we are completely focused on Albion and becoming leery of Germania.”

She thought for a moment, then smiled grimly. "It hurts to know that I'll be using a dear friend's ill fortune, but no doubt Louise will be redoing her summoning spell tomorrow. Afterward, there will be a party to celebrate the Familiar Summoning Rituals. While I'm sure that Louise will acquire a fine Servant, the party might represent an opportunity."

"I ain't so sure of that," muttered the boy from another world, drawing a few amused looks from the Musketeers.

"Are we going to attend the actual summoning?" Agnes inquired.

"Not necessary," Henrietta answered, glancing towards Ranma. If he vanished abruptly, it would indicate that the first Summon Servant had not been manipulated by his oddly dressed green-haired attacker. It would mean Ranma was meant to be Louise's partner, as strange as that sounded after last night. If not, then she could bestow some formal rank upon him perhaps, making Ranma her sword to dispense justice where it was needed, perhaps?

Yet that was for the future. For now, there was more political chicanery to plan out before Henrietta could return to the palace. To that end, Henrietta switched back to using the royal 'We.'

"We will meet Baroness Karin there. No doubt Karin will have already heard about Louise's first attempt, if not in great detail. And needing a second attempt is so unusual that she will no doubt be there to give her support. With Karin behind us, We will push to be crowned now, instead of upon my eighteenth birthday. That will be unprecedented, and the Judge Magistrate, who will be present, will argue against it, as no doubt will others. But by that point, Agnes, your musketeers will have raided his house, and no doubt will have come up with some evidence of wrongdoing. We honestly don't even need it to be the specific wrongdoing myself, and Ranma overheard, although knowing what plans he has for the palace would be most decidedly a good thing. But anything we can use to nail him to the wall would be good. So long as it doesn't also implicate the Chief Speaker."

"Are you certain that the Chief Speaker won't be able to organize the nobles against your plan, Your Highness?" Agnes asked critically. She didn't have a tremendous amount of respect for the nobles, even Karin, seeing the problems that the woman's daughter had created.

It wasn't even just Louise. One of the others was known to be a problem. Eleanore was known to be a problem child, despite being a teacher now, and how she had broken off her upcoming marriage with her fiancé was still talked about as one of the biggest scandals in the past few years. It was one thing to turn a man down. It was quite another for the man to call you a heartless shrew to your face and then be blasted across campus and given a permanent limp.

“Quite certain. As We said, Karin will be there, and with her on our side, We will have both the military faction and the Royal faction behind us.” Henrietta dropped the royal ‘we’ then with some relief. She normally disdained such, but some decisions, even in company like this, required that formality. “The merchants and their faction will remain neutral, I think.” At that point, she listed off the reasons why, all of whom went over Ranma’s head, followed by a series of names who would follow Karin’s lead or her own.

“I hate to bring it up, Your Highness, but what will Cardinal Mazarin think of all this?” queried Agnes hesitantly.

Henrietta smiled grimly. “Either he will think it grand, or he will fight it tooth and nail. He is a traditionalist, it’s true, but Mazarin is also the one who has been pushing me to take more duties on myself. It would be quite hypocritical for him to turn around and say that I shouldn’t be crowned when I am de-facto ruling as it is, if with his aide.”

Hearing all this, Ranma’s estimation of the Princess rose again. He didn’t understand everything, but the plan she was making seemed as if it would work. Her command authority was also really impressive, not that Ranma had anything to compare it to, really. And her memory for names and factions and everything else seemed equally impressive, even if he couldn’t make head or tails out of it.

Agnes nodded, then looked over at Ranma, who blinked coming out of his ruminations on the Princess, to look back at her one eyebrow raised. “All that works so far Your Highness, but what about this one? I hate to say it,” and she really did, Agnes did not like or approve of Ranma at all. “But that blast he released from the Academy is sure to have made the rounds. In fact, I’m kind of surprised that this group of conspirators didn’t mention it.”

“They mentioned the blast, but they didn’t mention me,” Ranma admitted. “Apparently, they don’t have anyone in the Academy passing on anything. They mentioned a Sheffield having had one of their spies assassinated before he could get into position there, but that was all they said about the Academy. There was a lot of worry about the blast, but since they didn’t know anything specific, they didn’t dwell on it.”

Henrietta blinked in surprise. “When did they mention that?”

“You were plotting at the time, I think. Well that, and shivering in your boots or not your boots, I mean,” Ranma replied, looking down at her bare feet.

Reminded that she was wearing her nightgown, Henrietta looked down at it with a scowl. Concentrating for a moment, she created a spell that slowly pulled the remaining water within the damp clothing, letting it drip down her legs to puddle on the floor. Done with her own clothing, Henrietta looked over at Ranma, holding up a hand, and he obligingly stepped forward. Henrietta placed a hand on his chest, feeling the muscles there for a moment, before shaking herself and performing the same minor spell.

Once Ranma was dry, she turned back to Agnes, she smiled faintly. "I don't suppose anyone thought of bringing a change of clothing for me? I can't exactly go around like this, and unless it isn't raining any longer, Ranma won't be able to get me back the palace dry using his rather fascinating mode of travel."

She then looked over at Ranma, cocking her head to one side. "You said you would be willing to help me. Can I hold you to that?" Henrietta asked, her voice not trembling in the least as she looked at him, although Henrietta knew her heart was in her eyes as she spoke.

Ranma simply grinned, giving her a thumbs-up, hoping that gesture was universal and not something rude. "Whatever you need me to do like I said. You're a friend, and friends help friends."

A few of the musketeers murmured to one another at that, thinking it was quite romantic, while Agnes grunted in annoyance. It appeared as if Ranma would be a permanent fixture around the Princess, much to her chagrin. *On the other hand, I suppose upgrading from the musketeers to Ranma is like upgrading from a bulldog to a Dragon, so I can't exactly say the Princess is wrong to keep him around.* Agnes was many things, but she was not stupid or arrogant. At least not after it was rubbed in her face.

"In that case, I will want you with me for a late working breakfast tomorrow and perhaps nearby someplace where you can be seen and alluded to when I hold court. Will that be all right with you?"

Ranma nodded firmly. "I don't have your training in politics, I don't have your training in this world, I want to learn more about this world for sure, regardless of what happens when my memory returns completely, and whatever I want to do then, that just seems like a good idea. But I also know I'm a little too blunt for politics anyway."

At that point the conversation ended. Ranma hopped out of the window to head to the carriage that the musketeers brought along, practically unseen from even the musketeer who had been left to guard it. He grabbed the princess' clothing, then raced back to the room. There he gave Henrietta her clothing, and then took up position outside the room, trying hard not to imagine the Princess behind that very flimsy door changing.

Moments later, the Princess was dressed in a new serviceable skirt and blouse combo as she came out of the room. She smiled at him and followed her musketeers down the stairs and out to the front of the inn. Thirty minutes later they said their good nights to one another, and Ranma found himself once more on the super-soft bed. And this time, he was tired enough to actually try to get some sleep.

OOOOOO

Guiche yawned, tired from the result of a late-night rendezvous. Yet even as he yawned, there was a bounce in his step at the night's events. Little Marie was such a sweetheart, and so innocent too, it had been immensely fun to play with her.

As he reached his room, Guiche felt a chill down his spine. Looking around wildly, he wondered where that had come from as, in the darkness, Montmorency's eyes narrowed angrily. So, the rumors were true. Guiche was two-timing her. Or more, perhaps. This, this bore some thinking on how she wanted to respond. *If you won't be loyal on your own, Guiche, perhaps a potion can help you with that little problem...*

OOOOOOO

Ranma was up near the crack of dawn, almost literally bursting with energy from only about five hours of sleep. Deciding to head out, Ranma used his window again to leap out into castle grounds, making his way over to where the blacksmith was. There, he found the blacksmith and two of his apprentices already up. He spent most of the morning with them, asking questions about metal, the proper mixture, the difference between armor and weapons and such. He didn't really need armor, but Ranma had really enjoyed working with the metal the day before. However, he didn't think that working with cold iron was the best way about it, so Ranma wanted to learn how to mix different metals and whether he could do something like that with the immense reserves of ki energy that Ranma had now.

At around 10:30 local time – the locals did have clocks, although they were expensive as heck – a maid approached them. “Sir Ranma, the princess requests your presence for breakfast.”

Nodding, Ranma slapped the blacksmith on the shoulder, thanking him for the discussion, to which the met blacksmith grinned at him through his black beard. Before Ranma turned back to the maid. “I'm new to all this noble stuff, but does that mean I need to change?”

“Yes, Sir Ranma, a change of clothing has been provided for you by the haberdasher. You will find it in your quarters.”

Moments later, dressed in clean clothing and bathed to boot, Ranma was ushered into a small, well-appointed dining room that was very obviously more for family get-togethers and business meetings than hosting large groups. Henrietta looked up at him and nodded, then gestured him to sit nearby, not quite at her right hand, but one step downwards on the other side of an elderly, white-haired gentleman. “Ranma, you know Agnes, but this is Marshall

Roberto and Cardinal Mazarin. The maids that you see and the butler are also all my trusted attendants if you understand my meaning.”

Ranma did as he looked around the room, realizing that Henrietta was telling him that this was her core of servants and advisors, people she trusted not just to follow orders but to be on her side regardless of what that might mean. “Please to meet you all,” he said, nodding to them, then looking over at Cardinal Mazarin. “Although, I’m getting a little weirded out at how much this world is like and yet unlike my own. There was a Cardinal Mazarin there too, I think.”

“The princess has told us that you came from some strange other world, although she has not mentioned that there were parallels between the two,” the man said. He was a kindly looking man in a white cassock, with pure white hair. “Was there truly a Cardinal there by my name?”

“Yeah. That Mazarin wasn’t as famous as his predecessor, but like Richelieu, he kind of ruled France since the king at the time was a bit of an idiot during what was called the Hundred Years War,” Ranma supplied from his memory before shaking his head. “Essh, I can remember that, but I can’t remember my old man’s first name!”

“A hundred years war?!” Mazarin gasped, as did the others.

“I don’t know much about it. We only learned a brief history of it. Although looking back, I think it kept on going because the people fighting it kept on changing, and most of it was fought in this kind of broken set of different countries and counties between the main antagonists, so the main fighters’ lands didn’t really suffer much. I might be wrong, though. My own country had nothing to do with it. We only learned about it because it was the last full-scale religious war in what we called Europe. After that, nations became more important than religion there and in most of the world.”

“And what was your country doing, Ranma?” Henrietta asked while Mazarin contemplated that and the uncaring way Ranma mentioned religion in general.

“Eh, we’d sort of devolved into lots of little civil wars. It was a kind of nasty, though I can’t remember much. Some of the tactics used in the battles were kind of cool. Not as cool as Oda Nobunaga’s, but he came out later.” With that, Ranma turned and moved over to the serving table, since apparently, they were all serving themselves this morning. The more difficult it would be for someone to poison anyone of them.

“Now, that was interesting,” Mazarin murmured. “He is quite a bit more intelligent than I had expected from the rumors about him, Your Highness.”

“Isn’t he just,” Henrietta smirked. “Ranma seems to have hidden depths of all sorts.” With that, she turned her attention back to her friend. “What we’re going to be doing after this

meeting is called the supplicant court. I will be seeing several dozen people and listen to their problems while you stand around looking menacing.”

“How menacing?” Ranma questioned quickly, gesturing to his eyes. He’d learned to shut the lights down last night doing his katas on the roof. Now they lit up as he stopped suppressing the energy within him letting them blaze red for a moment. Everyone there but Henrietta gasped, and he dimmed them back down. “Too much?”

“Save that for a special occasion, I think,” Henrietta replied, giggling slightly at the expression on Mazarin’s face. “The throne room has a set of windows to one side where advisors or bodyguards traditionally stand. You’ll be within sight, but not participating. I want to see how many people have realized that that blast you let loose was created by a person. If anyone connects that rumor to you personally, I will start to spread rumors to help that rumor along and tie you to the royal house. If not, we will try to keep the two facts separate for now to spring you and your abilities on our enemies later.”

“Hiding in plain sight kind of thing. It’s a good tactic,” Ranma said with a nod. In fact, one of the basic philosophies of the Anything Goes style was to never reveal all you could do unless you have to.

Ranma got to know Agnes and the others more over the next few moments, learning that the Marshall was her Special Inspector, a fancy title for the chief spy. The butler was also the head of the household, in charge of all of the palace’s servants.

But after that, as Henrietta had said, she got down to business.

From where he leaned against the wall, Ranma watched as the Princess dealt with several dozen merchants who wanted her opinions on this or that argument, this or that tax or law, or to intervene on their behalf with this or that noble. She always seemed on top of everything, poised, asking insightful questions, and quickly getting to the heart of the matter. She and Mazarin both seemed to divide the work equally, with Mazarin stepping in occasionally when it seemed as if this or that merchant or noble was getting too annoyed by the fact that Henrietta wasn’t doing what they wanted them to.

Ranma tried to follow everything that was going on... for about forty minutes. Then he decided that Henrietta seemed to have all this well in hand and turned his attention inward. He concentrated, on bringing out his ki again, not as an attack, but as an aura around one finger as he cupped it against his chest. Ranma didn’t want to create an attack right now. Ranma just wanted to see if he could heat up his ki and control it more.

By the time Henrietta was done with all the minor issues that as Princess she could deal with, which actually wasn’t nearly as much as Ranma thought in terms of the total work a reigning monarch would do, Ranma had been able to create an aura around his clenched fist,

hidden from view by his other palm, and had been experimenting with adding heat to it, successfully too.

In a break between dealing with the minor issues and calling in a few of her advisors including the Judge Magistrate, Henrietta looked over at him quizzically. "You've been standing like that with one hand hidden behind the other for a while now. Whatever are you doing?"

Ranma held up his hand, showing it glowing a little. Everyone there stiffened, the musketeers reaching for their weapons, then the aura disappeared. "Practicing with my ki."

"You mentioned that word before. Your people's version of magic, I believe?" Henrietta guessed, filing that away and adding to her 'Ranma is a prince' hypothesis.

"Not exactly... I don't think. I think it's a different kind of energy entirely. Before whatever I did to lose my memory, I didn't have nearly as much ki as I do now, so I'm just practicing getting a handle of using it in less destructive ways." He grinned, then his hand lit up again. "This is just heat. I'm using my aura to generate heat around my body. It will help me when I start working with metal, which I think is kinda cool and in case of colds too."

Henrietta tried womanfully not to react to that, shaking her head. "Well, at any rate, try to continue keeping a low profile, please. It appears as if the knowledge of that blast of power you let loose and your antics last night have not been connected together. I would like to keep it that way for now. There will come a time for fear tactics later, but right now is not the most opportune moment for it."

"Let me guess, the moment will be when someone objects violently to you becoming queen?" Ranma quipped.

"If that happens most certainly," Henrietta laughed. Then she waved Ranma off, turning her head back to the main door. Ranma watched as her face shifted from her normal happy open look to a sterner visage again and reflected that her self-control was pretty damn amazing.

The next man in was the Judge Magistrate himself, and despite knowing what she did about the man and his plotting, Henrietta greeted him warmly. "Ah, Baron Doucet, excellent. I'm glad to see you as I wanted to ask your opinion on a few matters."

Doucet, a middle-aged man with a florid face and white mustache, bowed fluidly, straightening up with a smile. "Of course, your Majesty, anything I can do to help."

The two of them talked back and forth, with Mazarin coming in occasionally. Eventually, the talk about the laws, which was something about taxes, Ranma understood, shifted to what had occurred the day before, as Doucet asked solicitously after Henrietta's health.

Henrietta replied, "Thank you for your concern, but I wasn't hurt at all. On top of that. We were able to trick the attackers into revealing themselves before they were ready. All in all, a good job, I think. Although the apparent paymaster of this attack bothers me quite a bit."

"That rumor has also gone around, I'm afraid, Your Majesty," the turncoat replied apologetically. "It seems as if all evidence points to Albion?"

Mazarin looked as if he had bitten on lemon, shaking his head. "I believe that any move in that direction is premature. We do not yet have all the facts, and money trails can be so easily laid after all. They could mean anything."

"The evidence beyond the money trail is irrefutable," Henrietta barked back, causing Doucet's eyes to go wide slightly as he realized the two of them were rehashing an old argument. "And if it does not point to Albion, then it points to..."

"Your Highness, I urge you to watch your words carefully. A lot of work has gone into... certain discussions. And even in a closed court like this, rumors have a habit of getting out," Mazarin interjected quickly, practically glaring at his young charge. "Whatever our personal feelings, we must think of the dynasty!"

Henrietta scowled at him before turning back to Doucet, whose eyes had widened, then narrowed back to their normal visage, smiling blandly instead of salivating as he wanted to at what seemed to be a harsh break between the Regent and the Princess. "We are still in the process of collecting data, but our suspects have shrunk dramatically. Whether or not those suspects still have agents among us is a task for my inspector and your office, perhaps."

The Judge Magistrate nodded firmly, and after a few empty platitudes, was ushered out the door by a respectful musketeer.

The moment the man was out of the door, Ranma began a slow clap, causing Henrietta and the others to look at him. "I don't know if you have awards for acting around here, Your Highness, but if you do, I think you just won first place."

"Yes, well, statecraft often requires it," Henrietta said, as the entire atmosphere of the courtroom changed to becoming more companionable. She grunted a little, as she moved her neck this way and that, moving her shoulders next, and muttering, "I don't care about tradition. This blasted throne is getting a darned pillow!"

She talked with Mazarin for a few moments but was still moving this way and that, trying to get comfortable on the throne when the man left. She then hopped to her feet and moved over to a doorway leading to her personal quarters, which was set along one side of the wall. Ranma and the musketeers followed her and watched as she flopped into another chair there, groaning in pain.

“You want some help? I er, don’t think it’d be a good idea if I helped ya with anything lower, but I can help with your shoulders and neck,” Ranma volunteered.

Henrietta nodded, looking at him curiously as he moved over to her. He then began to massage her neck and shoulders. And instantly, Henrietta felt the pain recede. “How do you know how to do this?”

“I’m a martial artist, remember? I know precisely how the body should move and be at rest. It’s easy to find the sore spots and work them out if you know what to look for.”

Smiling, Henrietta leaned back, letting Ranma work in her shoulders, as Agnes and the musketeers watched on. Looking around, Ranma realized that they were about as alone as they were going to get. None of the musketeers were within hearing range, although Agnes watched Ranma like a hawk, fingering her pistol meaningfully.

Ranma scoffed slightly at that site, rolled her eyes at her, and then turned back to the Princess, finishing up with her shoulders and moving away. “Feel better?”

Henrietta nodded, smiling at him. “Thank you for that.”

“No problem.” He then looked around at the musketeers again, then back to Henrietta. “Would um, well, would now be a good time to talk about, about the kiss?”

At that Henrietta also looked around, then after a moment, nodded. While her musketeers would never gossip, a few of the maids of the palace beyond Constance might, but thankfully none of the others were allowed into her quarters. “I suppose we can. I, does it bother you that we kissed?” she started hesitantly.

Ranma tentatively reached out to take Henrietta’s hands, finding her clasping them with her own quickly. “Not in the way you might think. I mean, erm, it was my first kiss, but I’m fine with that, since it was amazing,” Ranma replied, his words stumbling over one another, but still very earnest.

Henrietta blushed at the compliment, then blinked suddenly as his words registered. “Wait, that was your first kiss!?” That had been a very good kiss, one of the best she’d ever had, and it surprised her that Ranma could kiss so on a first try. Henrietta’s experience with kissing told her that it was hard to get right, but by the end, Ranma had been kissing her so well she had just assumed he was more experienced.

Ranma nodded, tapping the side of his head. “A lot of my personal memories are still missing, but I haven’t seen one of them that has anything to do with girls beyond this one memory of me fighting some girl on a challenge log. Well, that, and the women who attacked me the other day shouting about shampoo and whatever. Not exactly what you’d call romantic moments, you know?”

As Henrietta giggled, Ranma went on, gently kneading her hands. "I'm just, I mean, we've only known each other for a day and a half now, and you're a princess. So I'm just... was it that you needed some affection, you just needed to let go for a bit? Or..."

"Ranma, I'm not a blind woman, and I would be interested in you as a man," Henrietta interrupted him gently, if quite bluntly. Then she shook her head. "However you are right, I am a princess, and that adds a whole new caveat to any attempt at courtship. It does not need to stop a relationship between us, but we will have to take it slow. I fully agree that we need to get to know one another more, although I think I know you to be a good person already despite our admittedly short acquaintance."

Indeed, Henrietta found herself almost most startlingly eager to get to know this young man. She'd never let anyone quite like him, both mentally and physically and his abilities and mind intrigued the Princess both equally.

Then she smirked suddenly as a memory came to her. "But wait, you did receive a kiss from Louise, did you not?"

Ranma's expression twisted into a grimace as he leaned back from the previously intense discussion and massaging the bridge of his nose with finger and thumb, though one of his hands still held hers. "Ugh. Little girls pressing their lips on me to make me a slave or a pet don't count."

"...You do know she is our age, correct? She is even betrothed to a knight of the Griffin order."

"Whoa, really?" Ranma exclaimed in surprise, then went back to faint distaste. "Meh, even if she is sixteen, it would never count, no matter how many times she managed to tag me with her mouth. Not that I would let her near enough to try again."

Henrietta laughed, shaking her head. "Very well, we won't count it then. Still, we..."

She paused as Agnes entered her room, moving briskly through it to kneel in front of the chair Henrietta was currently sitting on. "Your Highness, if you want us to arrive at the academy for the celebration dinner, then you need to start being prepared for the journey now."

Sighing, Henrietta nodded. "Very well. Call for Constance, please. And Ranma, we **will** talk later. So long, that is, as you wish to get to know me as much as I wish to continue to get to know you?"

After a moment's thought, Ranma realized he did. He really did want to get to know this amazing woman more. With that, he smiled and bowed as he had when he introduced himself to her. "Your Majesty, I can think of nothing I would like better than to get to know the lady known as Henrietta."

Henrietta laughed gaily at that, and Ranma made for the balcony as Agnes grumbled behind him.

OOOOOOO

Later that day, as the Princess and her party came within sight of the Academy, in the Academy's summoning hall Kirche glanced at Louise, where she stood in the center of the auditorium, then decided perhaps a little more distance was in order. But then she looked at the audience, which consisted of both many of the Academy's professors, but Louise's family, or rather, most of them. One of whom was the scariest of all. *Darn it.* She glanced over at Tabby, who hadn't moved, but who gripped her staff tightly and scooted as close as she could to her friend. Two was better than one, after all.

Louise tried to put the distractions out of her mind. Kirche and the others watching, silent now, but waiting to ridicule her later. The watching teachers. Her Elf-cursed sister and her Brimir-blessed sister and mother. Everything. *This is going to work perfectly this time. No problem. Nothing I can control is going to go wrong today!*

The spell, Summon Servant, went off with a double circle of runes floating in midair. A line of energy shot up into the air and everyone held their breath.

OOOOOOO

Still high off the latest bit of timeline pruning she'd done, Sailor Pluto felt the tremor in the timestream as that weird 'fishing spell' she had used to send Ranma off reached into her world again. Being magic, it somehow was able to bypass the dimensional defense against interference, acting as if it was a pocket dimension like Beryl's prison.

Fortunately, she could twist time and therefore space enough that she would be able to control where it came out. And that in turn gave her an idea of how to remove another possible threat to Crystal Tokyo. Now I just have to make sure that the irritants go through along with the spell's original target. Don't take him from the corner of that computer store, but from the road outside...

OOOOOOO

To one side of the Summoning area, Colbert watched the spell being cast by Louise, but this time he had instrumentation prepared to look specifically for what he and the headmaster were both worried about.

The results indicated that, there was some odd interference in the Summon Servant spell. Something powerful enough to affect a gods-granted spell ability was doing so, but clumsily, almost as if some strange defensive spell was interfering. This wasn't quite the same thing as the last time, but both seemed to use the same source for their magical power. Whatever was doing it was powerful, more powerful than anything he had ever seen.

Gulping, he looked over to where Louise's family had gathered. He'd have to provide some of these details to determine if the interferer was doing so for political reasons in this world, since he couldn't figure out where the interference was coming from. Perhaps an old grudge? *But no, that much power would require a Pentagram mage at the least!* Colbert continued to take notes and watch the readings but his mind was already awl with the possibilities.

OOOOOOO

Sailor Pluto smirked and fired off a quick Dead Scream at a truck, sending it careening to her target, which had just walked around the corner sending him stumbling backwards. The plain boy who, strangely enough, would have been taken by the fishing spell had also just walked out of the store beside him. The fishing spell would now take them both, sweeping that little problem out of her life and the fishing spell's target, thus ending that world's interaction with her plan.

She grinned at the success of her plan, but then her eyes widened in shock, the euphoria her brain had been previously enjoying disappearing in an instant as:

1. Ami Mizuno, who had been coming out of the same computer store, tried to grab the unfortunate Saito out of the way. (More from the original)
2. Makoto Kino races forward, trying to push two boys out of the way of the incoming magical spell, only to be dragged into it with them. (Saito, Kazuma Kuwabara, possible three-way between Ranma/Henrietta/Makoto or just more comedy)

3. The boy who should have been sucked into the portal is knocked out of the way by another boy, who's heroic moment only serves to drag him into the magical circle instead, along with a sickly looking girl. (Yasutora Chad pre-Rukia rescue, Sailor Saturn)

4. Coming around the corner from seemingly nowhere, Ryoga Hibiki steps in front of the truck which knocks him off his feet into a whole crowd of people who then fall through the portal! (Yu From Persona, Saito, Makoto, again possible three-way)

End Episode 9

Yes, Makoto shows up twice there. I believe firmly that of the Senshi she is far and away the best match with Ranma and would like to play around with her a bit LOL.

FYI, Kazuma Kuwabara is from Yu Yu Hakusho. Chad is the is a companion of Ichigo Kurosaki from Bleach. Regardless, this story will start to lean more toward the comedy side of things for the next episode, maybe two, depending on which choice wins the next one.

This poll will end on the 28th or 29th, depending on work on FILFy and the Patron Only Story winner.

Ami Mizuno comes out of the store, trying to grab Saito away from the portal ([More from the original](#))

Makoto Kino trying to push two boys out of the way of the portal, but fails. (Saito, Kazuma Kuwabara, three-way or more comedy)

Another boy knocks Saito away, but is dragged in, along with a sickly girl. (Yasutora Chad pre-Rukia rescue, Sailor Saturn)

Ryoga bounces of the truck, cause a pile-up and fall through the portal! (Yu From Persona, Saito, Makoto, again possible three-way)