

Hello everybody. It is the tenth, which means it is time to update the next Homage episode.

But first a sitrep: I am about a third of the way done ATP, and should be done the rest (since 2/3rds of the chapter is combat related) by the 16th or so (the combat portions are next and even with magic-based combat those bits are easier).

And now, for the reason why you're all here LOL.

In last place with only 72 votes was journey moves on, only to be halted at the gate. Someone has reported Henrietta's demise. (Henrietta being queen of the people, action) I thought this would be more popular, but whatever.

At 176 Others come to investigate the beam of power. It was indeed seen for hundreds of miles. (Early Karin introduction) came in third place. Probably a good thing, because I am not certain how I will play her when it comes to Ranma and Henrietta.

In second place was Ranma is turned over to the castle's doctor as Henrietta contemplates romance and the future (comedy, castle hijinks from the original) with 642. But since I decided this bit was too funny to not include, you're going to get it anyway here just not anywhere near as detailed or long (no chase scene or massive amounts of destruction.

And in first place, with 766, is Tabitha watches, having seen the battle now turning for the academy (Bits of other characters – explains segments of the castle hijinks). This is a good thing because otherwise I would have to use flashbacks.

Now without further ado, here is the Episode. As usual, thanks go to Kestral and the other Addventure writers.

Episode 7: Interesting Times Abound

High above the former battlefield there was a bird. Or rather, what looked like a bird to those far below. Instead it was the blue-scaled dragon familiar of Tabitha, with her master on her back. As the action had ended, Tabitha canceled the Farview Spell, an offshoot of her Ice Mirror spell that had allowed Tabitha to watch the action below as if she was hovering right over the battlefield. The spell, a mix of water and wind had hurt her eyes and taken a lot of Will to hold, being a very finicky kind of spell despite being technically a Line-level spell, which had forced Tabitha to wait a bit before asking her dragon familiar to return them to the academy.

This also had let her think about what she had seen and the implications. For Tabitha had a few secrets, or rather, more than a few. One of which was also a goal she always held in the back of her mind. Ranma's strength, speed, and power were well beyond anything she had ever seen. But could he be subtle, that was the question. Because if he could be... well. Tabitha's goal might well be reachable, instead of being more of a dream than something achievable from her own abilities.

"Kyuii, big sister, are we done watching the scary man now?" Sylphid asked, twisting her neck around to stare at her master.

"Scary man?" Tabitha cocked her head, staring back at the Wind Rhyme Dragon's face.

Tabitha had instantly understood the moment she had appeared that Sylphid was more than just a simple dragon. She was one of the supposedly extinct Rhyme Dragons, an intelligent subspecies, which could use magic on their own. So instead of simply being bound to Tabitha, the two of them had made a full contract between equals. Tabitha kept Sylphid's secret and let her see the world beyond the Dragon's Den, the place where she had been born, and in return, Sylphid helped her anyway she could, while acting like the near-mindless beast everyone else thought her as.

"Kyuii, yes! Sylphid saw his blast of life power that big sister helped to send into the sky. It was scary! Scary that he did it, scary that he didn't even seem to feel weak afterward. Kyuii, very scary," the Rhyme Dragon replied.

Now Tabitha was a bit confused. "Life Power?"

"Big sister doesn't know what that is!? It is the power of everything. People all have it, the power of life, of health. The healthier, the stronger. Kyuii, some dragons are able to learn how to use it, but seeing a human use it, and that weird red tone to it, that was scary!" Sylphid answered in her normal childish manner. For all her size, Tabitha knew the Rhyme Dragon was extremely young for her people, a bit younger for them than Tabitha was in human terms.

Thinking, Tabitha spoke in her normal slow, thoughtful manner. After all, it wouldn't do to have her two familiars be at odds. "Power can be scary. Do you think the man behind it is also scary?"

The dragon's head cocked this way and that as it turned back to look around them as she continued to fly in lazy circles. "Don't know. Haven't seen enough of him yet."

"Then reserve judgment, please," Tabitha requested, to which Sylphid trilled in response, which wasn't any kind of real response, but probably the best she was going to get at this point. With a sigh, and a gentle twitch of her legs, she sent Sylphid back to the academy.

After making certain Tabitha would get some food, she went in search of Louise and the professors. Oddly, she found them together, along with Montmorency, Guiche and Kirche, who greeted Tabitha in her over-the-top, if not unwelcome manner.

"Tabitha!" Kirche pulled the shorter into a hug, Tabitha's face almost disappearing into the taller girl's chest before the flame mage pulled back, smiling brightly at her shorter friend. "And did you have a nice flight~," she teased, having known that Tabitha was going to go search for the pigtailed oddity.

Tabitha nodded up at her, using a small spell to right her hair and clothing after the hug, looking around at the others in the headmaster's office. Montmorency informed her they had been talking about the earlier explosion of magic that Ranma had released, the group of students having been the closest when Ranma gathered his magical power and shot it up into the sky.

"Is there a way to determine my second familiar's elemental properties?" Tabitha questioned in her normal, quiet tone. She was interested to see if any of the others knew what this life power was, or what magic it would be.

At that Louise turned to glare at Tabitha in anger. "What! **Your** Familiar?!"

"You did give your familiar to Tabitha," Kirche taunted, instantly backing up her friend and teasing the daughter of her family's old enemies in one stroke.

"What?!" yelled Louise before blinking, subsiding quickly as was her wont. Tabitha considered Louise a bit of a volcano like that, one which calmed down instantly after blowing its top. "Oh yeah."

"We were just talking about that actually," the headmaster, old Osmond said with a faint smile. "It was most intriguing in fact. It certainly is not wind, or earth. Water is not to be considered. The beam of energy had none of the properties of fire either, for all its superficial similarities. As for Void, Void magic still requires a wand or staff and has long evocation times. Ergo, that was not Void."

"It was almost as if it were not magic," Colbert mused. "Some other energy source entirely."

"But that's impossible, isn't it?" Guiche scoffed. "It looked like magic, it acted like magic, therefore it was magic."

"The fifth element is Void, as stated by the Founder Brimir. We've always thought that meant there was only five elements. But could there be a sixth?" asked Louise, showing the mind that always placed her at the top of the class along with Tabitha and Kirche, who, for all her flirty ways, was an accomplished student.

"There is no lore regarding this," agreed Colbert, looking at Tabitha. "But were you able to find him?"

Tabitha nodded. When asked for more information, Tabitha paused, wondering what to say. She did not want to encourage Louise to pursue the issue and she knew that the Valliere family was historically very close with the Tristainian royal line. If told that Ranma had been found by the princess, it would only take Louise a few moments to go after him and the princess would no doubt help the two reconcile. This was the last thing Tabitha wanted.

So instead, she simply said, "He is heading into the capital city. He ran into some bandits along the road but dealt with them." The headmaster nodded thoughtfully, whereby Tabitha asked, "is there a process I need to follow to register my second familiar?"

As Louise, once more seeming to forget the fact she had given Ranma away, began to breathe in preparation for a shout, Colbert and the headmaster spoke as one, "No."

As the five students looked at him, the headmaster went on, smiling slightly as his little friend appeared from under his desk and slowly skittered underneath Kirche's legs. "For one thing, the Familiar summoning is a sacred rite of passage. One cannot simply trade or give away your familiars like they were clothes you had grown out of." He chortled then, seeing what his familiar was seeing. *Ooh black lace, Zerbst you naughty girl. Good to know that some family traditions continue.*

"Hehehe, as if Louise has had to worry about that problem for years," Kirche giggled, causing Louise's subtle look of relief to segue into anger. But before Louise could reply, Kirche stepped back sharply and her foot kicked out, smacking the tiny mouse which had just been hiding itself around her feet. "And I'll thank you to keep your eyes to yourself, headmaster!"

"Ah, my poor Chuchu!" Osmond whimpered, racing over to the tiny creature.

"Serves the pest right," Montmorency muttered.

"Ahem, to get back to the topic at hand, familiars cannot be transferred like that," interjected Colbert, sweatdropping at the headmaster's actions. "There are no spells, no ceremonies, no anything of the sort."

"A pity," Tabitha murmured quietly, ignoring the headmaster's continued whimpers about the injury to his familiar. "Yet it remains that Louise relinquished her familiar to me."

"This is a nightmare," muttered Louise.

"That you have a familiar with greater magical powers than you do?" Kirche taunted, ignoring the headmaster as well.

Louise growled something impolite-sounding as she stared up at the taller, bustier student.

"Regardless, this is an odd set of circumstances even without your attempts to trade away your familiar, Miss Valliere."

"Odd? Odd how?" Louis asked, her glare at Kirche receding.

Sighing, Osmond moved over to his table laying the still unconscious Choo-Choo on one side before picking up a crystal ball. "As you know, every student here must register their magical signature to be allowed to use magic within the academies environs. And as you were taking part in the ceremony, Colbert was recording the event."

In the crystal ball a series of waves lines of red and gold appeared, then they were interspersed with a series of green lines. "The red-gold is Miss Valliere's normal magical signature."

That made Tabitha frown, wondering why Louise had a signature that consisted of two colors, when she knew most only had one. But then the implications of the green lines hit her as Louise gasped. "It's not my fault!"

"Indeed. There was some kind of exterior interference."

"Yes! By Brimir's blessing, it's not my fault!" said Louise, hands clasped in front of her, head bowed, apparently giving thanks.

As intriguing as that mystery was, Tabitha wished to remain concentrated on the more important things. "That implies that Ranma was not Louise's destined Familiar. In which case there should be nothing wrong with her giving me Ranma as a second familiar."

Kirche looked a little amused at how many words Tabitha was saying aloud, but still had to say something at this point. "Hey, can I have him? I thought he had a nicely toned body previously, and now we know he's a mage, well..."

"Denied," Louise declared firmly.

"Agreed," Tabitha added, in her lower voice.

"I can always keep you company, dear Kirche," said Guiche.

"Ahem," Montmorency interjected, a scowl appearing on her face as she stared at her boyfriend, annoyed with his wandering eyes, something that had truly begun to be a problem in the past few weeks. *If he keeps on making eyes at other girls, I might have to take steps.* Montmorency was easily the best student when it came to potions and she had a formula that

was just begging to be made. "Control yourself Guiche, or else..." she warned, not saying what would happen if he didn't.

"Still, who could be so reckless and yet so powerful that they would interfere with such things?" mused Colbert.

OOOOOOO

"WHA CHOO!" Setsuna sneezed, before giggling wildly as she stared at the Gate of Time. A stray thought wandered through her head wondering who was talking about her but Setsuna was feeling way too good to care about old superstitions. Instead she was staring at the Gate of Time, wondering what other issues that could eventually grow to be a threat to Crystal Tokyo she could get rid of. "I never realized how good this could feel, oooh that's a pretty purple..."

If Haruka, Sailor Uranus, was there, she might have recognized the look in Setsuna's eyes, if not the cause. Because at the moment Setsuna was high as a kite. But she wasn't high because she had imbibed in illegal narcotics on her recent trip to Monte Carlo. No, what she was feeling was positive reinforcement from a spell that Princess Serenity had put on her millennia before.

That spell didn't just shut down Setsuna's emotions when Crystal Tokyo was in danger, allowing her to concentrate to an inhuman degree. When Setsuna did something to make Crystal Tokyo's creation closer to reality, her mind was flooded with an amount of pleasure commensurate with the threat removed.

Ranma had been a problem, and in Setsuna's initial attempt to remove it, she had instead first made it worse. Correcting that and getting rid of the problem at last caused the spell almost overload Setsuna's mind with pleasure and good feeling. Thus Setsuna's mind was drugged to the gills. Of course, the impact of this on her ability to actually think was something that Serenity hadn't really thought about when she had so casually bound Setsuna via the Moon Crystal to make certain Crystal Tokyo came into being.

"Hmmm, yes, let's get rid of that! No one but me should have access to time travel!" Setsuna exclaimed, her mind fuzzy but eager to keep this feeling of euphoria going.

OOOOOOO

"The Bone Eaters Well isn't working!" Kagome shrieked as she stomped into the shack where Inuyasha and young Shippo were just about to go to sleep. "It just shut down just as I was about to enter it!"

"Good! that just means we can spend more time looking for the shards. Why the hell you keep on going back to your future is beyond me anyway," Inuyasha muttered.

"Sit Boy!"

OOOOOOO

"Hoooohhh that's the stuff," Setsuna warbled, feeling the euphoric feeling spread through her mind again as the chance of Crystal Tokyo coming into being went up by eight percent. No more Bone Well, and with the various other changes Setsuna made, there was no way anyone would be travelling into the past.

"Now, where did I put that recipe for the super-hot wing sauce?" she mumbled, wobbly on her feet as she got to her feet. "I gotta get me some snacks first, but there's gotta be a few other places where I can prune the timelines down. If only I could figure out a way to cut off every other dimension from this one, that'd be the best thing I think... but first munchies."

OOOOOOO

To Ranma's secret surprise, the rest of the trip to the castle proved to be uneventful. The crest on the carriage seemed to garner some shouts as they passed through the city, but most of those shouts were positive sounding, and they didn't stop either. When they arrived at the castle, Henrietta turned Ranma over to a maid who she called Constance, asking the maid to show Ranma to the castle's doctor. Henrietta had initially planned to go with him, but the matter of the prisoners and their current patron weighed heavily on her mind.

"I am sorry for this Ranma, but we need to follow this up," Henrietta apologized.

Ranma waved that off. "Don't worry about it. I'll take whatever help I can to get my memory back. I'll see you later, okay?"

"Certainly. Oh, and I will also be sending you to a haberdasher. Your clothes look a little... damaged," Henrietta delicately pointed out.

Looking down at himself Ranma winced, seeing the truth of the princess's words. His shirt had a few holes in it, and one side and his sleeve from the hand up had been seared off at some point without him noticing. His pants too were looking a little torn. "Erm, sure. Hadn't even noticed really."

"In that at least you are a typical man then," Henrietta teased watching as Ranma smiled sheepishly before waving Ranma and Constance off with a sigh as Agnes coughed loudly to gain her attention. "But as I said Ranma we will talk later."

As the two walked off, Henrietta cocked her head thoughtfully. "I'm trying to remember something that my mother told me about Doctor Squele..." she scowled, shaking her head. "Nope, it's gone again. Well, it must not have been important if I can't remember it."

Constance led Ranma through the castle, eventually bowing him into a room at one corner of the main keep, overlooking the back garden. In the room was a doctor's office, complete with several beds, all of them empty, a few books on a shelf and numerous vials and bottles. A woman sat at a desk at the far end, looking up as they entered. She was a middle-aged woman with pale white skin and long red hair done up in a ponytail, with a somewhat boyish figure underneath a striped blouse who was currently wearing small, square-rimmed glasses. "Yes, Constance, who is this?"

"This is Mister Ranma. The princess says he is suffering from some form of memory loss and was hoping you could make certain that he isn't suffering from any physical malady. The princess thinks it's magical in origin, but would like to make certain, Doctor Squele," Constance said curtsying to the doctor.

One eyebrow rising behind her glasses the doctor nodded and gestured Ranma to sit on the side of the nearest bed. As he did, Constance bowed her way out, leaving the two of them alone. "Well, memory loss can only come from some kind of brain damage or, as Henrietta said, magic. However, it also looks as if you've been wounded since the last time you changed your cloths. So first I would like to give you a full checkup."

"I don't think I need one," Ranma protested.

Squele stood up, and only now did Ranma realize that she was quite tall, being at least a foot or more taller than him. "I'll be the judge of that thank you very much," she practically hissed, the light from the windows glinting off her glasses. "If there is one thing I cannot stand, it is people self-diagnosing themselves! You have any idea how many people hurt themselves or don't report something serious because they think that they are too strong to be hurt or know better than the doctors!?"

For some reason, despite having somewhat acclimatized to his new abilities and knowing the woman was no threat, Ranma felt a bit intimidated. "Okay, okay I'm sorry I said anything!" Ranma then slowly pulled off his shirt, tossing it to one side.

Doing so, he missed the look in Squele's eyes changing from a dangerous one to something else entirely. "My word, you don't have any extra weight on you at all and good muscles too. Well I suppose we can rule out you being out of shape then. You'd be amused to know the sheer number of people among the nobility who believe that simply staying thin equates to being in good shape."

She held out her hands to either side of Ranma's spit, and rivulets of water began to appear there, slowly creating a disk of water. "This might feel strange but try not to move."

Ranma crossed his arms over his now bare chest, staring at Squele as the disk of water moved up and down his head. "Evidence of old injuries, you are hit on the back of the head, I would estimate at least six years ago, with enough force to leave a tiny dent back there. Another old, tiny scar over that one eye, almost invisible to anyone looking in your face," Squele murmured. "But you said you are suffering from memory loss now, so beyond that I can't see anything wrong in your head. Your eyes are tracking well, you certainly don't seem to be dizzy, so no concussion symptoms beyond the memory loss. Now, let us test for your reflexes."

"Considering I can catch musket balls before they can hit me, I don't think..." Again Squele glared and again Ranma gave way. But, when she tested his reflexes, the kick his leg let loose at almost upon the instant the little hammer touched his knee sent Squele's chair through the open window. She stared after it, then looked back at Ranma one eyebrow rising again. "You're going to have to pay for that you know."

"Now, tell me if anything hurts," Squele ordered as she poked and prodded at Ranma's sides and chest, as well as his knees.

Ranma took this stoically only realizing something was wrong when the prodding began to become caressing. "Er, doctor what're you doing?"

"I'm examining you, what did you think I was doing?" Squele inquired. But her tone of voice had changed, becoming deeper, huskier as her hands trailed down Ranma's chest towards where he was still wearing his pants. "Now, let's see how... responsive you are in other areas."

Elsewhere in the castle, Henrietta had just told Cardinal Mazarin, the Tristanian Prime Minister about the attack on the road and Ranma's aid with it, and the fact that it had been Ranma who had created that massive attack which had been seen from so far away. Mazarin had seen Ranma's magical blast for himself from the castle and was happy to know that Henrietta had taken steps to secure this new, monstrously powerful mage's friendship, if not allegiance, for the royal house.

However, the aged cardinal's expression changed when Henrietta explained how she had sent Ranma to see the castle's doctor to one that showed he was barely holding back a chuckle, and failing. "Well, heheh, even if there isn't anything physically wrong with him, this young fellow will certainly enjoy that experience. And I say that last with feeling, although as a man of the cloth I should probably not be so amused by it a suppose."

Henrietta stared at him in confusion. "Whatever are you talking about, Cardinal?"

"Doctor Squele has a bit of a, fetish shall we say, for young men. Especially handsome, well-built young men. If they are innocent, that makes them all the more enticing to her. I daresay by this point, she will be giving your Ranma a most thorough examinNNN!"

Mazarin bit his tongue as he was interrupted by the castle shaking and a shout of "**I need an adult!**" reached them. This was followed by a crash and then, in the distance, the sound of tumbling masonry.

"Oh dear," Henrietta murmured as she leaped to her feet. "Agnes, if you could come with me please!"

Wincing and feeling at his tongue, Mazarin stared after Henrietta for a moment, a frown appearing on his face. *Hmmm, apparently young Henrietta wasn't underplaying his strength. Although I fear she might not have been quite as honest as I could hope about her intensions with the young man.* "Oh dear," he said aloud in unconscious emulation of the princess. "That could be very bad in the long term."

Racing through the corridors, Henrietta reached the hallway leading to the doctor's office as Ranma was running up through it. He skidded to a halt, his eyes wide as he stared at her, his shirt clutched in one hand.

Henrietta's eyes widened slightly at seeing Ranma without a shirt, a faint blush suffusing her features as behind her, Agnes whistled and the two other musketeers with them blushed rosily. She had seen her former lover Wales without a shirt of course, but Wales had the build of a fencer and a nobleman, light, quick, fast but thin rather than well-muscled. Ranma, despite being, she suspected, far faster than Wales, had far more in terms of musculature. His shoulders were wider, his waist thinner, and every muscle was sharply defined, as if sculpted out of stone.

But this is no time to ogle her new friend, and Henrietta quickly shook her head of such thoughts, turning her attention up over Ranma's shoulder as she asked, "Ranma, what happened?"

"That Doctors, she's got," Ranma paused, and seemed to collect himself, pulling his shirt back over his body before pointing back the way he had come. "That Doc of yours has got wandering hands!"

“And you defended yourself? Perfectly understandable,” Henrietta replied nodding, causing Ranma to blink. He had thought she might have been angry at his overreaction, but it seemed as if she was fine with it. “And what did you do?”

“Er, kind of embedded her in the far wall,” Ranma admitted.

Blinking, Henrietta gestured him to one side, walking past him and into the doctor’s office. There, she found Squele embedded into the wall as Ranma had said. Literally. She was about a foot off her feet, embedded in the wall as if it was clay rather than stone. The cracks, crumbling bits of masonry falling all around her however gave that a lie. Seeing it Agnes whistled again but for an entirely different reason, looking at Ranma, then grimacing as she remembered their own run-in. If Ranma had the muscle to do that, he could really have hurt her and the other musketeers if he wanted to.

Henrietta realize the same thing, and thanked Ranma for back against them then, causing Ranma to wave it off. “I told you, I don’t hurt people unless I have to. Heck, she’s not even dead, just unconscious. And she won’t be able to get out of there on her own,” he added as an afterthought.

Henrietta chuckled at that, then waved Agnes and the two musketeers forward asking her to remove the doctor for a moment. “I will make my displeasure with her actions today clearer later on.”

This left the wall, which slowly began to crack and crumble as Henrietta watched. But she waved her scepter, reaching into the rock, and using a repair spell, molding the stone of the castle back together. It wasn’t as good as new, there was still a large portion of the wall that was simply now flat stone rather than the joined stone it had previously been, but that actually would make it all the stronger.

Finishing with that work, Henrietta caught Ranma’s look of admiration, and flushed a little looking away. “Well, I sent for a clothes-maker for you. But unfortunately, the castle’s male clothes designer is out at the moment. As is the chief librarian, who I had hoped to ask for an opinion on your memory loss. Both of them should return tonight, though. Is there anything you want to do to while away the time while I’m busy with other matters? I feel as if I should be doing more for you at present, but as I told you before, I want to follow up on those prisoners before the trail gets cold.”

“You’re trying to help, that matters a lot to me,” Ranma said warmly, then glanced out the window. “But in terms of something to occupy my time, would you mind if I take over your smithy for a bit?” Ranma asked, gesturing toward where he could see a man working at an anvil set to along the outer wall of the palace on the other side of the garden at the back of the keep.

Henrietta blinked in surprise. “Whatever for?”

"Training. I remember this old story about martial arts masters able to work metal with their hands alone. I want to give it a try."

"In that case, of course you may. Margaret, could you go with Ranma and inform the smith he should let Ranma use his spare anvil? Although you might have to get a few people to help you move..." Henrietta broke off, laughing at herself and the expression on Ranma's face. "I was being rather silly there for a moment, wasn't I?"

"Kinda yeah," Ranma teased, before thanking Henrietta and moving towards the smithy with the assigned Musketeer trailing behind him.

OOOOOOO

It was decided that Louise would be allowed to attempt her Summoning Ritual again, but Colbert and Osmond wished to research more about outside interferences first, in particular how to stop them. This had released the students to seek out their evening meal.

As she sat down next to Kirche and the others, Tabitha was still wondering how to get Ranma away from the princess and the royal court. She knew there was no chance someone as smart as Henrietta was supposed to be would let a person as strong as Ranma go free. So, Tabitha would have to try to get him away quickly. But she was running into the problem that, unless Ranma was stated as being her second familiar, she had no lever to use on him to bring Ranma to work with her. Indeed, as Tabitha thought about it, she barely had anything to explain away her interest in him.

Louise was dealing with similar issues. She had seen Ranma's strength and ability, and now was wondering how to bring him to heel. The idea that she might get another familiar soon was an interesting one, but why bother with that if she could force Ranma to obey her? *Still, before that, I'll need to figure out where he went.*

Luckily for both ladies, they were about to get their wishes granted, in a way. Because the only thing that travels faster than a racing horse was rumor.

"By the way, did you hear the rumor Mister Brant passed on as he dropped off tonight's bread?" One of the serving maids asked another. "The one about the peasant familiar?"

"Oh, yes, that's **so** amazing," squealed another serving maid.

Not being horses, Louise and Tabitha's ears could not actually twitch but both gave the impression such was indeed going on as Louise put her spoon back in the bowl of soup and

Tabitha looked up from her habitual book. Both of them, Guiche, and even Montmorency looked at the two serving maids but were too prideful to ask mere servants to share their gossip.

Kirche, on the other hand, was quite direct and she grinned over at the two serving maids, gesturing them nearer.

"Did you want your bowl refilled, madam?" one of them asked.

"No, no, I was just wondering what you two were talking about."

"Oh, I'm sorry, my lady," said the servant with an apologetic gesture curtsy. "I'm so sorry we interrupted your meal with our loose gossip."

"That's fine, interrupt as much as you want," Kirche answered with a laugh, getting both maids to giggle. Despite her somewhat sordid reputation when it came to the male students, Kirche had a good relationship with the academy's servants. "So long as you share the details..." she trilled.

"Oh, well, according to Mister Brant, he does the bread for the academy and his wife is in service at the palace. According to him, the boy showed up at the castle with the queen, after he and the Musketeers apparently beat off an assassination attempt!" the maid said in a sly manner and a stage whisper that had everyone leaning in.

"An assassination attempt!" Louise nearly shouted, staring first at the maid, then Tabitha. But Tabitha merely shrugged her shoulders, as if to indicate she hadn't seen anything like that. Since it was Tabitha doing it, all save Kirche took that shrug at face value. Kirche, on the other hand, looked at her, one eyebrow raised but not saying anything.

"I know. The princess was apparently coming here, but after the assassination attempt, they turned around. And according to Brant, his wife said that if not for Ranma, the princess might well have gotten hurt or worse!" the second maid added, shaking her head.

The first maid nodded in agreement. "Regardless, the rumor is that Princess Henrietta has taken him in and she is **quite** taken with him."

"Princess Henrietta and that thug?" Montmorency scoffed. "It would be a scandal of the first order."

"And yet enviable, too, on his part." As Guiche spoke, Montmorency twisted around to glare at him, but Guiche missed it entirely, staring off into a dream world of his own.

"It's certainly juicy," Kirche giggled. "No wonder you couldn't help but remark on it."

"Hrrrrrrrr," growled Louise for no apparent reason, both her hands gripping the spoon as it began to bend under the strength of her anger. Why she was so angry, Louise couldn't say but the very idea of Ranma and her childhood friend being involved like that angered her beyond measure.

Seeing this, Kirche allowed a small smile to appear. "It absolutely couldn't be true though," she waited to see a flash of relief on Louise's face, before closing in for the kill. "Oh, I admit the young man in question could probably go all night and into the morning. I would guess he's **immensely**~ capable of answering all sorts of carnal desire requirements. But Henrietta is a princess. There's no chance she would set the needs of her family's line to one side just for a moment of pleasure."

Again, there was a flash of relief on Louise's face. Again, Kirche crushed it with a gleeful ruthlessness. "Oh, but I forget! Ranma **is** a mage of some kind, isn't he? And a powerful one, too. At least Square Class, maybe even Pentagram. So the princess could perhaps swing it as being a good idea politically too."

That Louise was not only growling but shaking and staring into her soup as if it had committed some unspeakably heinous act was quite easily noted by the serving maids, who fled. It was noted much more sanguinely by Kirche, who smiled as she leaned back, mission accomplished. Then she twitched as Tabitha declared that she had business elsewhere and excused herself, with Louise just stomping off after her. *Hmm, two for the price of one. How interesting. Still, there's only one place they could both be going to.*

OOOOOOO

Elsewhere, others were getting reports on the massive beam of power Ranma had released, which had been seen for hundreds of miles. "Our spies have informed us of what the blast was," a spymaster murmured to a moonlit room, his eyes locked on the floor as he knelt on one knee.

"And that being?" asked a woman, her gaze focused out the window she was standing in front of.

"Tristainia's magical academy seems to have developed a new magical weapon known as a 'Ranma' - which I am told is very strong, Lady Sheffield," the spymaster reported. "The blast itself was sufficiently high that we can't accurately gauge its power."

"Its power is not in dispute," Sheffield snarled. "It is powerful enough that we must advance our plans. The coup is already underway. After that, we will unite the country by declaring a war against Tristain."

"How will we justify it?" asked the spymaster. " We were planning on framing Tristain for the assassination of the royal family but we have nothing in place for such yet. We still haven't found Wales for one thing."

"We have an appropriate method," said Sheffield. "Your task however is to find where this 'Ranma' weapon is and to destroy it. That is of the highest priority for you. The search for Wales... that will be given over to some of our other servants."

"As you wish," said the spymaster.

"Wait," said Sheffield, her head cocked as if she was listening to something only she could hear. "If this weapon is portable enough, acquire it for our use instead. A weapon doesn't care who uses it after all, only that it is used."

OOOOOOO

That evening in the palace, Ranma stood in new clothing across from the chief librarian of the castle. An elderly mage, he sat tugging on his beard as he examined the youth in front of him. "According to the princess, I am to help you regain your memories. Do you know what spell it was that brought you here?"

"That little kid, er, Louise, said something about me being a familiar though I ain't one whatever she said," Ranma replied. "And my memory problems came from something else..."

Explaining once again what he had gone through, Ranma noticed the Librarian's eyes light up. "Ahh, a ritual of some kind for greater Will! Yes, there was a time those kinds of rituals were the only way we humans could fight against the Elves. They are outlawed in every nation now since it is something like a one in ten chance of succeeding, and even then, it only multiplies what is already there. If you were involved in something of that sort... would you say this 'father' of yours would be so reckless as to force you into such a ritual without finding out about the consequences?"

Ranma stared at him blankly, then snorted, "Uh, yeah dude, you can take that to the bank. I mean, if my old man thought it would make me a better martial artist he'd try to cut my liver out with a spoon."

The librarian sweatdropped. "Ah, um I see. I'll begin research immediately, my lord, on those rituals and see if any of them match your current abilities. If not, then I am afraid I may not be able to help you overmuch. Your land would after all, have developed different rituals than mine."

"Yeah, I get it's a longshot, but its worth a try. And I ain't no lordship, just call me Ranma, man." Ranma answered, waving off the idea of being so formal.

"It may be easier for you to be seen as a member of foreign nobility, sir," pointed out the Librarian. "Best to use the system as much as possible, after all. Besides, as you yourself said, you are an heir to a 'martial arts school.' Perhaps where you come from that is some manner of nobility."

"What, like the samurai? Eh, it's a thought, but back home samurai weren't treated as nobility any longer," Ranma protested.

"And might I say the clothes suit you, sir," the librarian went on, stroking his little beard as he filed away the term samurai in his head. It did seem as if Henrietta's idea that this young man was nobility was on the money, regardless of if his home country still had such things. "I saw you when you arrived. You appeared quite the rascalion."

"Yeah, it was the bullet holes and tears which did it," Ranma drawled, plucking at his shirt self-consciously. The shirt was cream-colored, and stood out against his tanned skin and black hair, matching his black pants. Pants, not pantaloons. He had been very clear on that when the seamstress, a guy, had fitted him for them. "I guess it's okay. Comfortable. Moving around it is easy."

"I believe it's spellweave, from Romalia," said the Librarian. "Quite a gift," he added, to make certain the young man understood his point.

"Huh," said Ranma, flushing a bit at the idea of Henrietta going to such an expense on his account. Ranma wasn't a clotheshorse or anything, but he did like clothes that moved and breathed well and seemed durable. If they made him look better, that was great. These did, and they didn't have any frills or lace like a lot of guy's clothing he'd seen around here. And now he learned it was probably expensive too. *Whatever she thinks, I think Henrietta's helping me way more than I have her.*

The Librarian saw that faint blush and smiled internally. It appeared as if the rumors about Princess Henrietta showing interest in a young man her own age might be spot on. Not that he was going to comment on it. It was not his place to do so after all. "Now, first question: have you noticed any runes on your person? And what about your appetite? Has that been impacted by this possible ritual?"

0000000

"Damn familiar making me do this," grumbled Louise as she walked through the front gates of the castle. For Louise, getting in was no problem. The guardsmen knew her from the years when she came here to play with the princess, so all Louise got was a nod from two of the guards at the main entry.

She also knew there was a hidden gunport on one wall, and if a mage had come in with spells blazing - one of the Musketeer Squad would have put a bullet in that worthy's head. Louise wasn't coming in with spells blazing. She was stalking in angrily, but there was no hostility towards princess or castle involved, as her mutters showed. Instead, her hostility was directed towards a very specific target. "That, that, that, DOG!"

Walking across the palace lawn, her muttered invective cut off as she spotted Kirche talking to a maid by the servant's entrance. *What is Kirche doing here in the castle? And how in the world did she beat me here anyway!?* She decided sneaking closer was the best approach.

"-his own room? How nice," Kirche was saying to the maid as Louise got close enough to hear.

"Indeed, my lady," said the maid. "He was working with cold iron earlier and was quite happy when a hot bath was prepared for him."

"What's 'cold iron'?" asked Kirche, for which Louise, now standing behind the taller woman, was grateful for as she didn't recognize the term immediately.

"Iron that has been forged without heat, folded and beaten, and then forced into a shape. It's very noisy, but Sir Ranma appeared to enjoy the work. He said something about it being easier to beat iron than deal with the doctor," she giggled, as did Kirche.

Behind Kirche, Louise frowned. It was evident that she had missed something there.

But before she could interject, the fire mage frowned. But wait, without heat, how do you get the impurities out?"

The maid shrugged. "By pounding the metal a lot apparently. I must say that his physical strength is staggering. He was able to lift an anvil and toss it around like a jester with a toy ball. Just remembering is enough to make me think of other ways he could use that strength, if you understand what I mean, milady."

The two women exchanged another laugh, but before Louise could announce her presence, Kirche asked, "What would you use 'cold iron' for anyway?"

"Well, if you ask Sir Saotome he'll say 'training'. But Princess Henrietta's reason for allowing it was to attempt to accurately gauge his strength. Though the blacksmith said that cold iron pounded like that was reputed to have magical properties."

"Magic?" Kirche blinked. "How could that be?"

The maid reached into her pocket and withdrew an iron nail with another nail clinging to it at ninety degrees without any apparent glue or string to hold it in place.

Kirche nodded. "Ah, a lodestone. They're rare and expensive."

"Not so rare in the palace anymore," the maid demurred, tucking her treasure back away in the pocket. "I'll sell mine when the price goes back up."

"An excellent idea. Don't sell it until the price is at or above eighty gold coins," Kirche advised, making the maid's eyes widen. "Those lodestones are used in compasses, and they are the most expensive part of it. If you sell it to a jeweler or fine metalsmith, then they will give you that amount without blinking."

As the maid thanked her, Kirche hummed, tapping her full lips as she glanced out of the corner of her eye to Louise. She had heard the tiny pink-haired girl coming up behind her, and now wondered if she should keep searching for Ranma, or tease Louise for a bit before resuming her search. *Hah, who am I kidding. There's no reason why I can't do both.*

"So the ex-familiar of Zero has that much power, does he? I wonder why he could possibly have been chosen to be the familiar of a pint-sized... oh hell Louise," she cut off, turning to look at Louise, sending her a sly smirk. "I didn't see you there."

Louise' hand was gripping her wand so tightly that if she had not been a proper refined lady of a noble house, her knuckles would have popped. As it was, the maid decided the look on her face was enough to warrant a quick, if polite exit. "What are you doing here, Zerbst?"

"The same thing I suppose you are doing, looking for Ranma. After all, if he's not obeying your commands, then there is room for...negotiation~," she teased, leaning down toward Louise, deliberately bringing attention to her chest.

Louise quietly simmered for a moment, before pushing Kirche to the side and entering the palace via the servant's entrance. Kirche shook her head, and followed her, humming happily to herself. Really, this day had been altogether very fun and interesting. *I wonder what will happen when she or Tabitha notice Ranma's hands*, the redhead thought.

Though most thought Kirche Augusta Frederica von Anhalt-Zerbst somewhat flighty, she was extremely observant at times. This time it had taken a few hours to sink in, but eventually, Kirche realized what she had seen, or rather hadn't seen. She hadn't seen any runes of

subservience on Ranma's hands, where they should have been, since the hand, or hand equivalent, was where all such runes appeared. So Ranma was not, in fact, anyone's familiar, least of all Louise's.

Ooooh, when she and Tabby discover that, it will make for an interesting time indeed! At that point the two of them had come to one of the castle's main hallways. Louise went one way without looking behind her or asking directions, and Kirche, rolling her eyes, moved in the other direction towards a maid who was replacing candles on a candelabra. Huh, I wonder where Tabitha is anyway? We split off after her little dragon deposited us by the stables.

Around the two academy students the castle was quiet. The guards on the wall shouted out the midnight hour while...

1. Agnes questions the prisoners, discovering who their employer was before launching a quick, nighttime raid to take him into custody, not realizing that this leaves Princess Henrietta with only two guards. **(world building/action a dash of romance)**
2. Henrietta and Ranma find they are both unable to sleep, and have a heart to heart talk, but are rudely interrupted **(romance/action/comedy bits expanded from the original)**
3. The Viscount Wardes arrives at the academy to see his fiancé, only to be told she is visiting the castle. **(bit of world-building then action)**
4. Kirche and then Louise find Ranma in his room. **(comedy, lots of comedy)**

End Episode 7