

Hey everybody, it is the sixteenth, which means it is time for the next episode of my Wonder About Zero Homage series.

Edited: 10/17. This has been edited previously by Hiryo and now by me with Grammarly. I hope it makes it both easier and more enjoyable to read.

In last place with only 32 votes was Viscount Wardes arrives at the Academy to see his fiancé, only to be told she is visiting the castle. (bit of worldbuilding then action). Apparently, everyone agrees with Razgriz0x and me in that he is a dick who deserves no screen-time whatsoever. I brief warning, I will have to write him into the story to kill him at some point...

Surprisingly in third place was Agnes launches a fast raid, leaving the Princess with only a few guards (worldbuilding/action, romance). It brought in 240 votes, and even that is more than I expected since I honestly don't see the appeal of Agnes as a character.

Kirche and then Louise find Ranma in his room. (comedy, lots of comedy) brought in 464, coming in second. I can see the appeal, on the comedy anyway, not the tsundere.

But in first place with a whopping 1324 votes was Unable to sleep, Ranma and Henrietta meet and have a heart-to-heart but are interrupted (romance/action/comedy expanded from original).

Honestly, at this point, I am thinking of making these simple number polls instead of weighted. It seems as if one choice just always runs away with it. Still, I'll wait on that until we reach November.

This episode is longer than the others I've posted, generally because, while the comedy from the original episodes it's based on was fun, there were several large plot-holes. Why did Henrietta react so powerfully to Tabitha being shown to be a spy? And there was nothing done about it either. How did she and Ranma become so close? I began to solve that one several episodes ago. And finally, why didn't Henrietta and Ranma just go back to the palace? Well, here is my way of solving those issues, which I hope you all like.

Again, thanks go to Kestra! and the others who began the Addventure.

Episode 8: Diverse Alarums and Nighttime Activities

Ranma stared up at the ceiling, scowling a little. Whatever had been done to him had enhanced his endurance and energy to an amazing degree. As such, despite his full day, Ranma actually wasn't all that tired. Moreover, the bed in the room given to him by the Princess was, well, it was huge. It was soft, lacy and frilly, and altogether comfortable to lay on and completely, unlike anything he'd ever experienced. Somehow his body knew that before his brain did, and he simply could not get to sleep.

Grumbling, he tossed the sheets to one side, flipping his legs out of bed. He looked between the door and the window, thinking about what he wanted to do, then shrugging, he headed to the window. *If I want to exercise a bit, the roof is the place to go.* For some reason, that brought back some other memories, being trained to balance himself, moving from one group to another like a chimpanzee in the trees, but with his arms tied behind his back, as he ran alongside his old man.

The memory brought a smile to his face, and he opened the window with a light heart, reaching up to grab the windowsill and flipped himself upwards. His legs wrapped around a gargoyle on the keep's roof, and with a limberness and speed, not to mention strength, that would've put any Olympic gymnast to shame, flipped himself up into the air doing two perfect rolls in midair before landing on the rooftop with his hands outstretched to thunderous silence.

Shrugging, he moved back away from the edge of the rooftop, already beginning to go over which katas he wanted to do.

Little did Ranma know that choosing to head out the window had saved him from quite a bit of an annoyance if not pain due to Ranma having eaten the tainted mermaid flesh. Indeed, one could almost say that he had dodged a fate worse than death if one of many a Ranma across the dimensions was all-too used to: having women fighting over him.

OOOOOOO

Louise Francoise Le Blanc de La Valliere frowned at the door in front of her as if it had personally offended her. The door didn't appear particularly repentant, alas.

It'd taken Louise several attempts to find which of the fifteen different guestrooms Ranma had been given. By this point, Louise honestly thought there might be some spell on her to give her bad luck because Ranma was in the very last one in the castle. Or at least, she thought Ranma was. Louise had checked every other room, and none of them had anyone in them, and the beds had all been made too. So, it stood to reason that Ranma had to be here.

The trouble she had gone through to find him again had raised Louise's ire to an entirely new level, but the fact that she was in the royal palace had forced Louise to rein in her temper up to this point. But now that she was faced with this door and knew that Ranma was behind it, Louise grinned, her knuckles whitening around her wand as she thought about what she was going to do.

Whatever Ranma thought, this could only end one way! He was Louise's familiar. No matter how strong Ranma was, he wasn't a noble. She **knew** that. He didn't have the mannerisms, he didn't have the clothing, and Ranma certainly wasn't from around here given how he talked and acted. Therefore as a noble **and** a mage, Louise knew better than Ranma what was best for him. That spell he'd cast was just proof that he was a magical being and, therefore, worthy of being Louise's familiar. Right? Right!

"And what do we have here?" A familiar voice declared from the other end of the hallway. "My my, Louise, one would almost think that you're used to rattling men's doorknobs at night."

"EEEEK!" squeaked Louise as she managed to leap backward and to her left without moving her legs.

The deeply shadowed hallway shifted slightly, a figure moving into the patch of moonlight from a nearby window to grab Louise's left arm before she could stumble. "Careful, that looks like a particularly sharp corner of that table your head was aiming for."

Louise looked back over her shoulder and did indeed see that her head had been aimed towards the corners of a small wooden desk that had been set there with a potted plant on top of it. She doubted it would have hurt much, but Louise nodded her head gratefully to her benefactor before remembering herself, standing upright and pulling her arm out of Kirche's grip. "What are you doing here, Zerst?" She asked huffily, trying to regain some of her poise.

"Just checking on Tabitha's second familiar," Kirche taunted, bouncing slightly from toe to heel to bounce her breasts. She enjoyed seeing the way Louise's face twisted up as the smaller girl's eyes tracked to the motion. She was just so much fun to tease. And honestly, the way that Louise's eyes tracked to her chest or indeed any chest larger than her own made Kirche wonder if she had some kind of older sister fixation to go along with her growing issues with casting magic.

"Bah, you heard Colbert-sensei. He's still my familiar, whatever I might have, have implied earlier today," Louise retorted huffily. Then she asked a question that had been bugging her since she'd first arrived at the palace. "How did you even beat me here, anyway?"

"Well, you did give Ranma to Tabitha. Is it any wonder that she would come to try and claim her second familiar? And I certainly wasn't going to allow her to have all the- I mean, I wasn't going to allow her out at night on her own," Kirche hastily change what she had been about to say, acting almost virtuous for a moment.

The pose was so unbelievable that Louise cracked a laugh, shaking her head before becoming serious. "That was just a slip of the tongue. And that doesn't explain how you gained entry to the palace."

"I don't know about that. It sounded fairly definite to me. Still, I suppose we will see what Ranma thinks about this. And as for how I gained entry to the palace, Tabitha dropped me off here before she had to leave to go feed her familiar. She didn't want to send Sylphid out alone though, she isn't intelligent enough to know a wild animal from an owned anima. I've no idea where Tabby is," Kirche frowned slightly at that before shaking her head. "Beyond that, I'm dressed like a noblewoman, I'm congenial, and I have been here before on state occasions. So the palace staff knows me."

"That makes sense, but I might have to talk with the palace security. It's one thing to let **you** in, I suppose. You might be out to seduce every nobleman in the country, but you certainly wouldn't be a danger to the Princess. But someone else shouldn't be able to access the castle as easily even if they've been here before." Louise then shook her head, deciding to focus on her own problems first and letting out a huff of indignation. "And who cares what that dog thinks? He's my familiar! Once I discipline him a bit, he will know his place!"

At that, Kirche scowled slightly, although Louise did not pick up on it. She knew that many nobles treated their servants like serfs, people tied to the land, which otherwise had no rights save those the noble in question gave him. Or perhaps more like chattel, to be sold, moved and used as their owner willed. But she hadn't thought that someone from the Valliere line would think like that.

Or is it just her sadomasochistic tendencies shining through? Deciding to see if that was the case, Kirche asked, "Oh, and how exactly would you discipline him? In his bedroom, in the deep of night, and is that a saddle whip you have there, Louise? I'm beginning to think that Tabitha was right on that score too! Do you have a collar ready for him? If he begs, what kind of treats would you give your dog? Or would he be the one giving you the treat?"

Louise blushed so red she would've put a rose to shame, which was visible to Kirche's delight thanks to the light streaming through from one of the hallway's windows. "I, you, how, how did you know about the collar?! I mean, you heard nothing! I mean, there was nothing to hear, I'm just, I'm just going to put him in this place that's all, nothing, nothing like what you're trying to imply you, you perverted, big-breasted slut!"

"Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me, especially coming from someone who is so obviously jealous of my proportions~." Even as she teased Louise further, Kirche became certain that her guess on that was right and set her concerns to one side, eagerly looking forward to the culmination of this night. *Pity Tabitha isn't here. I would've liked to see her face once she realizes that she doesn't have any hold on Ranma. Instead, Tabitha will have to appeal to him as a woman if she wants anything out of him, and for some reason, I think she does.*

Kirche had no idea what that could be, but she was looking forward eagerly to finding out. *And of course, as her loyal friend, I should do everything in my power to help Tabbie, up to and including using my own wiles to sway Ranma to her way of thinking. And if I enjoy myself doing it, and I rather think I would, who would care?*

For now, however, there was something else Kirche was eagerly looking forward to: seeing Louise's face when she realized that Ranma really wasn't her familiar. She reached for the door's latch, turning her head slightly to wink at Louise. "Setting aside your petty jealousies, let's see how that works out, shall we?" said Kirche, opening the door.

Kirche took one step into the room before Louise grabbed her arm, pushing her to one side with surprising strength for such a tiny body. The pinkette then entered first, marching huffily into the room. It was a single bedroom, with curtains separating a tiny sitting area from the bed.

However, neither Louise nor the quickly recovering Kirche got more than a few paces into the room before Tabitha announced her presence. She was standing near the bed, frowning as she looked around the room. "He's not here."

"What?!" Louise growled, moving to the bed herself, staring down at it then all around. "We were in the hallway, so my familiar couldn't have gotten past us. But where could he have gone then?! I checked all of the other guestrooms."

Tabitha didn't reply verbally, poking the window open with her staff before looking down at the grounds, frowning. Kirche moved to join her, leaning over the younger girl, smooshing the back of the blue-haired girl's head slightly with her chest. But Tabitha did not object verbally, simply bopping the taller girl in the head with her staff until she moved away. Then Tabitha hopped up onto the windowsill, and, with a wave of her staff, Tabitha summoned up a bit of air to slow her descent down to the ground below.

Shaking her head at Tabitha's one-track mind, Kirche turned to Louise, only to find her already gone, racing out into the corridor and beyond on surprisingly quiet feet. Staring at the empty room, Kirche shook her head, then turned to the window, hopping out after her friend, also using a mild wind spell to slow her descent, even though it wasn't her favored element. Like Tabitha, she was a Line Mage, a mage who could use more than the first element she had created an affinity with. *No way am I going to miss out on this.*

OOOOOOO

On the rooftop, Ranma had gone through a series of katas, moving across the room as lightly as a butterfly, even as he concentrated on the feeling of each kata in turn, moving from one kata taken from Aikido to another from Judo, then another from an obscure Taiwanese martial art, then Chinese Wing Chun staying with that for several katas as his smile grew. He realized now that the fluid nature of that Art had always drawn Ranma, remembering a few arguments with his old man about which basic style was better, the various Japanese styles or the Chinese. Then he moved on to three more extremely obscure styles, merging them into a whole.

Finally, he paused, holding a final stance, one hand thrust upwards from the waist, the other held back by the waist as his leg rose slightly off the ground to either block or kick. Still smiling, Ranma let his foot come to rest back on the rooftop.

Looking around, Ranma saw that he was near the edge of the roof again, although not the side he had started at. Instead, he was over the opposite side of the palace's main keep, the

side that overlooked the central area of the castle, the parade ground or whatever it was. A noise from below grabbed his attention for a moment, and he looked down from the edge to see that directly below him on the tenth story of the keep, a large balcony thrust out from another bedroom.

On that balcony stood Henrietta, clad in some kind of silky feminine nightdress kind. She was currently leaning against the balcony's entrance, staring out over the castle's outer wall and out to the city beyond, her face pensive.

As he looked down at her, Ranma realized suddenly that his eyesight had also been enhanced. Because of that and the surprisingly bright moonlight from where Ranma was standing, he could look directly down her dress to the white skin underneath, and as she breathed in, Ranma watched her chest move, somewhat mesmerized by the view of the forbidden. Henrietta's chest didn't seem as large as that redhead with the tan Ranma had seen at the Academy, but they looked a little firmer, and for some reason, the fact she wasn't putting them on display made the view matter more. Ranma wasn't certain why, but that was what he thought anyway.

The view was so commanding, Ranma had to shake his head quickly and stepped back away from the edge of the rooftop to control himself. Ranma knew he didn't have many memories of dealing with girls. Indeed, Ranma felt that the incident with the girl on the challenge log was about as close as he'd ever come to a girl. But he knew that girls didn't like being looked at like that without their say-so.

More importantly, the princess' face, which Ranma had also made out with startling clarity, had looked somewhat tired and worried. Breathing in deeply and lightly tapping his cheeks to get rid of his blush, Ranma spoke in a voice pitched to carry down to the Princess. "Couldn't sleep, princess?"

Startled so hard she nearly hit her head against the glass behind her, Princess Henrietta looked around wildly for whoever had spoken. But the balcony was bare of places someone could hide. Moving forward warily, she looked over the railing, then on noticing an odd shadow on the balcony, she looked up at the roof. There, a good distance above her balcony and balanced without apparent concern for the drop, was her guest, standing on the edge of the roof as if he had a special understanding with gravity. "I, I could say the same of you."

"Meh, I had a bit more energy I had to work off, so I came up here to do some katas, er, those are training stances and strikes that you use to learn a martial arts school," Ranma explained, looking down at her and then away. "Then I, er, I heard you come outside and thought I'd ask if you were okay. Seemed the friendly thing to do."

Her lips curling into a small smile, Henrietta smiled. "Well, thank you for your concern, Ranma."

Ranma shrugged, still looking away. "Eh, if I'm going to try this whole friend thing, I figure I should try to be good at it."

Looking directly at Henrietta right now from this angle just was too compelling. Ranma didn't understand much about hormones. He remembered a class for some reason that was boring as all get out, and in his opinion, just plain wrong. Who were these morons in the books to say that a young person's growth would be stunted if they started weightlifting? Who were they to say that women were naturally more flexible than men? That was as funny as those 'laws' of physics.

He also remembered wondering what these hormones and guys and girls stuff was supposed to be about. Why was it so interesting, and why were all the girls in the class looking at him and giggling? It was what one heck of a strange memory, but the education he had been given at that point hadn't really sunk into Ranma's mind at all, especially in comparison to the fact that his father was going to be teaching him a new martial arts technique later that day. Now, however, seeing the view from a moment ago, Ranma finally understood what hormones were.

As she wondered why Ranma spoke as if he had never had a friend before, Henrietta noticed him looking away, although she couldn't make out his blush by the moonlight thanks to the distance between the roof and her balcony. However, it didn't take the Princess long to deduce why Ranma would look away, and she looked down at herself, squeaking for a second before she quickly moved back into the safety of her room, whisper-shouting, an odd lingual feat, "Wait a moment," over her shoulder.

She came back quickly dressed in a longer nightie now, which, though made of the same material, covered quite a bit more than her previous chemise had. For a moment, the two of them looked at one another, and then Ranma muttered, "Er, sorry about that."

"It's quite all right. You acted as a gentleman should by looking away," Henrietta waved his apology away.

That caused Ranma to twitch, but again he was saved by the distance separating them and the fact he had just seen something that took his breath away in an entirely different manner peeking out from between the clouds above. "Two moons. That, that really brings it home to me how I ain't home or even on the same planet."

He then sweatdropped, thinking, *Um, how the heck did I miss that earlier? Heck, even the stars are different. There ain't even a North Star up there!* Thankfully for Ranma's ego, though, clouds began to block out his view again soon after.

Below him, thinking Ranma's words were a sign he was feeling melancholy, the Princess tried to commiserate with him. "You must miss your home very much."

"Um, I don't think I had a home, at least from what I can remember. All I can remember is traveling with my old man. I think I'd like to know what happened to him, but to miss my home, heck even my home country? Honestly, no. You can't miss what you never had." He then smiled down at her, his teeth gleaming in the light of the moons. "But you weren't thinking about little ole me earlier. You were thinking deep thoughts. Heck, I think I heard a phrase that perfectly fits the look you were wearing: Heavy is the head that wears the crown."

Princess Henrietta's head snapped back to look again at her guest. Most of the time, he sounded so unlettered, so rough around the edges. Then he'd offer some little phrase or piece of information, and she was forced to wonder about his education, above and beyond his training. "That's... actually that's very well put."

"So, what were you thinking about?"

Henrietta grimaced, shaking her head as she continued to look up at him, leaning back on the balcony. "Tristain is a rather small country, situated between 2 much larger ones. We have long had an alliance with a third, who own the best Air Navy in the world. With them and the power of several of our mages..." She smirked, suddenly shaking her head with a laugh. "Including Louise's mother, whose name is Karin the Heavy Wind, we have kept our independence. However, a lot of problems are coming home to roost of late, and I am being forced to deal with quite a lot of them."

She sighed. "The trip out to the Academy was meant to be a bit of a break. But that didn't happen."

Ranma frowned, crouching down so that they could talk a little bit more easily even though he wasn't about to jump down to join the Princess on the balcony. In Ranma's opinion, there was no way doing so could fail to lead Ranma into trouble of some kind. Not with the musketeers and Agnes still leery about him. Somehow, he just knew that his luck would not allow it.

"Don't you, like, have advisors or something? Or..." He frowned. "You said you had a lot of enemies. I thought you meant foreign enemies at the time."

"Indeed not. Most of my enemies are internal," Henrietta replied tartly. "My foreign enemies are certainly more powerful but not more numerous."

Ranma frown deepened at that. "What about, well, no offense, Princess, but you're my age right, sixteen. Shouldn't you have parents, the King and Queen, to deal with this stuff? Or are they weak, and are willing to let your ministers do all the ruling, even if they take away your own power?"

"Why did that example come to your mind?" Henrietta asked without answering his question, cocking her head and leaning further back against her railing to look up at Ranma. She

didn't notice the creaking coming from the railing, all of her attention was on Ranma, astonished once more at his odd bits of insight.

Ranma shrugged. Like I said, I've got some of my old education coming back now. Wish more of my own, you know, life was coming back, but I remember history and stuff. That scenario is just one I could think of to explain why you're facing so much trouble."

Princess Henrietta chuckled. The amount of education that Ranma seemed to have was well beyond what any wandering knight or warrior could ever accumulate. *Perhaps he really is a foreign noble, wrested cruelly from his own home. With the magical powers Ranma has manifested, that seem quite likely, even if he doesn't know enough of his own past to prove it. There are still holes in my theory, but...*

At that point, the railing behind her shifted under her weight.

Henrietta had just a moment to realize that the ornamental railing had shifted, and she was in the process of taking a painful fall to the carefully manicured lawn. Then suddenly, she was being cradled in warm, strong arms and landing on the lawn so gently she barely felt it at all.

"You okay, Henrietta?" asked Ranma, aware of how fragile princesses and such probably were.

Henrietta stared up at him for a brief moment, feeling his breath touch her face. She was aware of his arms, loose but holding her safe. She was aware of her clutching onto him in what a moment ago had been panic and now was... not.

Ranma gulped, feeling Henrietta's chest, despite now being clad in an extra layer pressing up against him. He felt her arms shift, it was a subtle thing, but he could feel her shifting from gripping him in fright to gripping him in an entirely different manner.

And he felt his body responding automatically. Ranma had previously thought that his body would only respond automatically to fights, so it came as something of a shock to feel his hands moving up her back to her shoulders, and Ranma's other hand gently moving up her inner thigh to her rear, and even stranger to feel his grip around Henrietta squeeze gently, holding her even tighter against his chest.

Even his voice had changed, becoming deeper, kind of throaty, Ranma realized as he heard himself ask, "Henrietta? Are you okay?"

Unfortunately, this moment was seen by several people.

Agnes had been on guard that evening outside Henrietta's quarters. After having been chewed out mightily by her Princess earlier that day, she had felt the need to make up for her

mishap and had decided to take the normally boring night rotation. She had heard Henrietta getting up heading out to the balcony and vice versa, and, being unable to make out any voices, hadn't thought anything of it until she heard the sharp crack of the wood breaking.

Now she stood above Ranma and Henrietta, staring down at them in utter astonishment. Her voice was almost a squeak as she stammered. "H-Henrietta-sama?!"

Nor was she alone. Tabitha and Kirche appeared from one end of the castle's grounds, followed by Louise, who had astonishingly caught up to them despite having had to go down to the lawn the non-magical way.

Kirche was in the lead, leading them back to the main keep from one of the outer buildings. "I'm telling you I heard a noise from this..." Kirche stopped, her eyes widening as she took in the tableau in front of her. The Germanian woman's eyes lit up with unholy delight at how much teasing of a princess, that would be a new high for her, she could wring from this.

Beside her, Tabitha was frowning, tapping her staff on the ground of the lawn as tiny unseen gusts of wind began to eddy around it.

The worst reaction was from Louise. Looking back on it, Kirche wondered why anyone could have thought it would be otherwise with that girl's temper.

"You, you, dog!!" Louise shrieked, her wand raised within an instant and launching some kind of spell his way.

"Oh, this can't end well," Ranma grumped, thinking about his earlier thoughts about being on the same balcony as Henrietta as some of the household staff showed up.

"The foreigner and the Princess are eloping! How romantic!" a maid on duty on the second floor of the keep said, looking out a window at the action below.

Now, Ranma knew he could have tanked the explosion Louis, or at least he thought he could with his newfound durability. But Ranma was still conscious of Henrietta in his arms (very conscious) and twisted around, leaping up over the spellfire. The spell struck the side of the keep and exploded, shattering some of the keep's wall.

"Get back here and accept your punishment!" declared Louise as she gave chase.

As she did, Ranma began to add to the chaos as he replied to this attack in a manner that would've brought a happy tear to his father's eye. "You call that an attack! You couldn't hit the broad side of a barn!"

Louise shrieked and lashed out with more spells, but Ranma, with Henrietta still in his arms, dodged this way and that as Louise charged forwards, shouting, "When I get my hands on you, you dog, I will show you your place!"

"Is it just me, or does that sound dirty to anyone else?" Ranma shouted, leaping up into the air and doing a backflip to an accompanying gasp of Henrietta before he landed on the roof of the castle.

Down below, Kirche had shouted out, "I know, right?!" and devolved into laughter, holding her stomach as she bent double.

Next to her, Louise lashed out again, and Ranma leaped sideways to dodge another spell while in his arms, Henrietta's eyes stared down at the drop in silent shock. "Now that one was better. If I'd actually stayed still like an idiot, it might've hit me."

While Kirche was still giggling at all this, Tabitha, cool calculating Tabitha, was still staring at Ranma and Henrietta, her eyes narrowed behind her glasses. The seeming-closeness with Henrietta meant that not only was Ranma not likely to follow her orders to help her against her uncle, but it was also likely that she would be ordered to do something about the Princess's powerful new defender.

Then she too launched an attack spell towards Ranma, more, it had to be said, for educational purposes than out of any anger. She watched as Ranma dodged it too, then leaped from the top of the castle down onto the grounds. Louise raced after him, cutting him off, and quickly launched a spell while musketeers began to appear everywhere as Agnes shouted, "He's trying to kidnap the princess!"

Hearing this over the loud explosions caused by Louise's attacks, Henrietta sighed, shaking her head where it was pressed into Ranma's chest. "Really? Really, Agnes? What did I tell you this evening about jumping to conclusions? Good grief."

"In her defense, it kind of does look as if I'm kidnapping you," Ranma answered as he raced towards the outer wall.

A small part of Henrietta wondered if she would actually fight that. Feeling Ranma's body against hers like this, especially when he was moving, was... Henrietta shook her head, grateful that Ranma was concentrating on dodging and not looking down at her at the moment, knowing that her face would probably be blushing. "Perhaps we should try to talk this over?"

Ranma ducked and rolled, still holding Henrietta, gripping her tighter against his chest as he did underneath dual attacks from Tabitha and the now chortling Kirche as well as a few musket balls from some musketeers. "I get the impression that Louise isn't in the mood to listen. I ain't certain what the other two are on about. And Agnes, well, she's your problem, no offense."

Henrietta took a glance at the trio of magic users, a faint moue on her face. "Von Zerbst is almost certainly just having fun, the lady Tabitha, I am uncertain about. I don't know much about her, to be perfectly honest. As for Louise..." Henrietta took a glance at her childhood friend's face, visible in the fires of Zerbst's latest spell and shivered a little. That look reminded her all too well of Karin at her angry worst. "Yes, I believe that you are correct Ranma, running seems to be an appropriate response to this, at least without my scepter. I'm certain that Agnes, once she gets over the shock of everything, will come to her senses. And she will in turn..."

Henrietta broke off as another mage on duty on the wall as part of the castle's defense also began to fire at Ranma, with literal fire this time instead of an explosion. Two more mages were nearby, and her eyes widened as she wondered why so many mages were on guard at night.

Not realizing this was somewhat unusual, Ranma leaped upwards over the attack, landing on the man with both feet with an impact that should have shattered his skull. Instead, Ranma rode him down to the ground like he was a plank. A swinging kick launched another mage off the parapet. Ranma had aimed for a pile of hay set by the stables, but he hadn't seen the pitchfork stuck in the side of it.

Luckily the pitchfork was stuck tines down, or else the mage's problem would have been terminal. As it was, it was merely excruciating as the mage crashed into the hay, and the top of the pitchfork caught the mage right in the fork. His dopplering scream rose into a falsetto's yowl of pure agony, and for a moment, Ranma and every other man there grimaced in sympathy.

"Sorry, dude, I so did not mean to do that!" Ranma shouted before attacks from the last mage on the wall, and still, more from the girls came at him from different angles.

With a laugh, Ranma kicked off the wall and out into the air beyond the castle's walls.

"GRAH! Wait till I find that dog!" Louise shouted.

Kirche laughed. Oh yes, this had been most amazingly fun. What other Germanian had ever had an excuse to help wreck another country's palace and would possibly not even be blamed for it? "You'll what? You've tried to blow him up how many times now?"

Blinking, Louise looked at her blankly. "Uhm, I was supposed to count? Besides, I'll only blow him up when he deserves it!"

"Yes, and I wager if you actually hit him, all you'll do is damage his clothing," Kirche pointed out. "Not to mention the Princess. Your Princess, I might remind you."

"What?" asked Louise, suddenly losing much of her anger.

Now, that just won't do at all. "I think maybe you'd just like to see Ranma in ragged clothing," teased Kirche.

"Why would I want to see that, that dog like **that**?!" Louise stammer-shrieked.

"Oh, maybe for the same reason Tabitha or I would want to see him with less clothing?" *Especially if he interests the Princess. There must be even more to him than meets the eye for that to be the case.*

She glanced at Tabitha, but she wasn't watching either of the other academy students. Instead, she was staring at the mages still on the wall. Frowning, Kirche turned her own attention in that direction. "What is it, Tabby?"

Nearby Agnes stared at the three female mages than the mages up on the wall. The sight of the obviously murderous attacks from the mages on the wall had launched towards Henrietta had finally shocked her brain into working order, and she set aside her concerns for Ranma (and her charge's innocence) to concentrate on the here and now. She put her fingers in her mouth and let loose a sharp whistle, and when her Musketeers looked at her, pointed commandingly toward the two mages on the wall. Every Musketeer in sight turned in that direction, racing to the wall or beginning to fire at them.

At that, the students, with Tabby in the lead, joined in. the two mages on the wall, even the one Ranma had already flattened, fought back, shields of water and wind blocking musket balls and fire with ease. They couldn't stop Louise's explosions, however, and when their shields collapsed, it was all over, resulting in the main with the crushed testicles being the only survivor of the unknown attackers. The cleanup, though, would take a while, as, above the castle, rain began to fall.

OOOOOOO

Now that spellfire was no longer being launched at them willy-nilly, Henrietta began to calm down and simply enjoy the experience of traveling this fast. "This is amazing! I never imagined someone could run so fast."

Ranma laughed. "Yeah, because you all don't have martial artists! This is just normal for me. Although," he said, and shifted Henrietta in his grip a little, so that she was a little higher up his chest, and thus had a fit of a better view, able to turn her head and look behind them and to the side, "it is always fun to roof-hop in a new place, see new things and everything."

For a moment, he slowed down slightly, although he was still going as fast as a normal running man. But the wind of their passage was no longer bothering Henrietta's hair or face so much. "So, is there a place you haven't seen before you want to see around here?"

Ranma then frowned, looking up at the sky. "Crud, it looks like it's going to rain."

Henrietta chuckled and held up a hand. "I am a primarily a water mage," she reminded Ranma dryly. Holding droplets away from me is a spell I can do even without a focus. Indeed, I used to dance among the raindrops for fun when I was younger."

Staring down at his handful of Princess Ranma tried to imagine this and flushed, looking away as the image of that came to them. "R, right, but you're not exactly dressed for dancing, are you?"

Henrietta giggled, leaning her head companionly against Ranma's shoulder, feeling the strength of his arms around her and knowing that he would not let her fall. That seemed very important all of a sudden as she remembered the unknown mages from the castle before she pushed that thought to the side to simply enjoy the moment. "No, but I don't have to dance to use that spell. I think we can just go around for a bit. Just stay to the rooftops for a time, and hopefully, Agnes and my guard will come after us when they are... finished back there."

She shivered then, realizing it was a little chilly out, and Ranma grimaced. "How about a few more rooftops, then we look for an Inn to stay until Agnes gets her act together, okay? I don't want you to catch a cold around them. Princesses are supposed to be weak to that kind of thing, right?"

"And what you mean by that?" Henrietta asked archly.

Hearing that tone, Ranma tried to verbally backpedal. "Well, you're a girl. And my old man said girls are supposed to be weaker than guys, so I figure..."

"I believe that would go down as a personal opinion of his, not reality. Or do you honestly think I'm weak?" Henrietta inquired, her tone still chilly but no longer directed at Ranma alone.

"Heck, no!" Ranma said, the fervor in his voice taking Henrietta by surprise and causing her to blush. "You had your first to the death kind of fight this afternoon, then you just well set it aside and got on with your princess work and everything else, and that's a kind of strength, isn't it?"

Ranma then paused, looking at her closely. "Is that the real reason why you're not trying to sleep earlier?"

Henrietta frowned at that, her blush slowly disappearing as she gave the question the deliberation it merited. "I do not believe so. I'm not happy that I had to kill, but I am a princess. Eventually, I will be Queen, and as such, I will have the power of life and death over my people in many different ways. That is a weighty thought, but one I must acknowledge, even if I will never embrace that power save in the gravest circumstances of justice or war."

Ranma blinked, then slowly nodded. "I like the way you put that what you said. It's coming from my history lessons again, but I think that's a good attitude for a leader, or at least it seems that way to me. My opinion probably doesn't matter much, of course."

"On the contrary, it matters to me," Henrietta replied, patting him companionably on the chest while rain began to patter down all around them.

Henrietta looked up at the sky, frowning as she began to concentrate on her magic, casting a spell over them both. It wasn't going to last long, not without a focus, but she could renew it if it did, so long as she could keep her concentration on it for the time needed to do so. Without her focus, concentration became far more important in terms of shaping her Will.

"Wow, that's kind of cool," Ranma murmured, seeing the rain just sort of drifting to either side of them right above his head.

Then she frowned and decided to change the subject to something that was bothering her a little at the moment. "Why in the world did you decide to taunt Louise earlier? I was still in shock from falling, and um, your jumping around. But I heard you doing so. At a time when she was already prepared to attack. I am not condoning the fact that she did attack you, but that does not mean that you are entirely off the hook for what happened back there, Ranma."

Chuckling sheepishly, Ranma paused on a rooftop, setting her down and shrugging his shoulders while he kept close to her, the rain beginning to come down all the harder. "You know about reflexes? My taunting Louise once she started to attack, that was a reflex, like my kicking the doc's chair out the window."

"It's a self-destructive one. You do realize that, yes?" Henrietta questioned, somewhat worried now.

To her dismay, Ranma shrugged his shoulders. "Not really. It's a tactic, the 'Make Them Mad, Make Them Stupid' technique. The angrier at you an opponent is, the less they are in control."

"Perhaps so, a but continually taunting someone will turn an individual from an angry and annoyed person with a single point of argument with you into an actual enemy."

Ranma's brows furrowed in honest confusion. "What's the difference? They attack me, they're my enemies."

"Or there could just be a misunderstanding," Henrietta countered. "Louise... I've had reports from the Academy, and I spent a bit of today going over them. I think Louise is dealing with the fact that her mother is so famous and her family so well-known for magic. Whereas Louise doesn't seem to be able to do anything but explosions."

Here Ranma interrupted, his eyes going wide. "You mean she's not supposed to be causing explosions?"

Henrietta frowned. "Of course not." Then she sighed, tapping her forehead lightly. "Of course, I forget, you do not have magic where you come from." At that point, she gave Ranma a brief overview of how magic was organized and taught in this world.

Ranma listened, then frowned. "Okay, I can sort of see how that could work, but then Pinky's explosions are what, some kind of out of control fire spell?"

"I don't know," she said with a shrug. "Nor does Louise alas. That's part of the problem." Then she waved it off. "But we're getting off-topic. The point is that Louise is lashing out at you because gaining a powerful familiar was perhaps her last chance at proving her worth."

"That's dumb," Ranma announced bluntly with a shake his head. "Those explosions of hers are pretty powerful. Pinky should try to harness them, and she did use that 'Silence' spell on me. She's got magic. It's just that the way she's trying to use it according to your rules that is screwing her up."

Henrietta laughed, shaking her head. "You have a very unique way of saying that centuries of tradition is wrong." Then she frowned, thinking. "But you mentioned the Silence spell before, didn't you? She was trying to Silence you, but the ability backfired, giving you the ability to understand our language and vice versa."

"That does kind of sounds like a complete opposite, doesn't it?" Ranma muttered, nodding his head as that thought occurred to her.

"It does, doesn't it," Henrietta murmured, tapping her mouth thoughtfully. "Thank you Ranma, you have given me some insights to pass on to my dear friend. For all her anger, Louise is one of the brightest children at the Academy. She routinely scores at the first or second position."

The other one being Tabitha, I believe, Henrietta thought, suddenly frowning as she realized that she should have noticed that before. Tabitha was a complete unknown and really shouldn't be given how bright and powerful she was.

Shaking her head, Henrietta mock-glared at Ranma. "But enough about that. Can I ask that you think before you taunt in the future? I would much rather talk and make friends than have more enemies, and I think that is a much more fulfilling way to live."

"But where's the fun in that?" Ranma mock-whined before acquiescing. "I get what you're saying. I'll try to rein in my tongue. I can only promise to try, though."

Henrietta smiled at that, but before she could say anything, Ranma's hand flashed up to her mouth, and he held a finger to her lips. She paused, then slowly nodded, wondering what was going on. But Ranma was getting used to having enhanced senses, and he had heard Henrietta's name from nearby. He then picked her up again, cradling her close once more to impart some of his own heat to her as the night became chillier around them thanks to the rain. *I gotta figure out more ways to use my ki soon. Now that I've got so much of it, the sky's the limit. But first, let's see what this is about.*

Holding Henrietta once more, Ranma hopped off the roof, landing lightly on a balcony that overlooked an alleyway. It was the kind of alleyway you could find anywhere, where a first-story building had been built next to a larger building, then that first story building had been built up, with a wider second story, almost an automatic overhang which hid the alleyway almost entirely from above and to one side.

Five men were meeting within it. Each of them wore hooded cloaks that covered them from head to toe, while the rain continued to come down, heavier now, above them.

As Ranma landed, Henrietta began to discern their voices. Her concentration on the spell wavered as she concentrated all she could on hearing what was going on below. Because the first words she could make out were ...attack failed."

"It matters not, that attack had nothing to do with us. The impetus for it came from Albion and their chief local operator. No, I don't know his name or appearance, only his name, W. The evidence will be indisputable. The Princess might not believe it, but her advisors certainly will especially once news of the Reconquista and the nobles of Albion turning against the royal houses reach Tristain officially."

Henrietta stiffened, and for the second time that day, while in Ranma's arms, she remembered her lost love Wales.

Wales was her cousin, a prince of Albion. He was not the first in line for the throne, but the second, and would normally have made a fine match for any princess, kind, handsome, brave and smart. Due to consanguinity, any relationship between them was doomed from the start. But they had been young and in love. Eventually, however, they had realized that their relationship was doomed and ended things. To know that he was in danger struck Henrietta harder than it should have a year after their breakup.

However, the men below were talking about problems much closer to home than that. "The Princess is too good at the game. She must be removed."

"I still say that is premature," said a voice that Henrietta recognized, and she breathed in to gasp, but Ranma clamped a hand over her mouth to stop her from gasping too loudly. He looked at her in concern, but Henrietta shook her head, as down below, the judge magistrate, the head of Tristain's judicial system below the reigning monarch, continued to speak.

“Henrietta is young, yet she can be molded. She can be married to someone of good standing that we can rely upon.”

“Not with Cardinal Mazarin poisoning her against our interests,” said a second man coldly. “She is coming ever closer to reaching out to Germania. Or do you not know what the Prime Minister is doing?”

“And you cannot control him?”

“Putting Tristain first ahead of any previous loyalties is part of the oath of the first counselor. The Queen might not have any will to speak of, but Karin the Heavy Wind chose Mazarin, not the Queen. And she chose his oath as well.”

For a moment, there was silent but down below as if the very name of Karin the Heavy Wind frightened these men. That sent a jolt of vindictive pleasure through Henrietta, even though she still felt her mother had been ludicrously stupid to not reach out to Karin further. Still, she put that thought aside for the millionth time to continue listening below, starting to shiver as the rain started to soak through her clothing.

“And regardless of your opinions, orders have come down.”

“From where,” her Judge magistrate snorted.

But one of the men who had heretofore been silent spoke up, causing him to fall silent. “Quiet. Plans are in motion to remove Henrietta. You will do nothing to draw attention to yourself until afterward, and then, you will point the people’s anger directly to Germania.”

I still do not believe that Henrietta will decide to marry the Germanian Emperor,” a second voice that Henrietta knew spoke. “It makes good dynastic sense true, but the girl is young as our compatriot said and full of flighty ideas. Removing her is not necessary. Rallying the nobles against her before she can take power is. We need to start pushing Mazarin, hard, to make concessions and to stop these ‘reforms’ she talks about occasionally.”

That conversation went on for several more moments, as Henrietta gritted her teeth, hearing the head of the speaker of the Noble House below. That was the body of nobles who advised the monarch on matters of policy, law and economy. He, too, sat on the council that was currently ruling in her mother’s stead. *I must move to place the crown on my own head as soon as possible, damn tradition! I cannot wait two years, or there will be no Tristain to speak of.*

Ranma didn’t understand why Henrietta was responding so much to what was being talked about below, but he understood that idiots were talking about plans to remove her and that Henrietta had started to shiver against him. With the hand still over her mouth, he tapped her on the nose.

This caused her to blink and look up at Ranma through bleary eyes, bleary not just because of the rain but also because of tears. She had trusted the judge magistrate! And she had thought the other man a likable, honorable fellow! To hear both of them plotting against her was a blow.

She then watched as Ranma mimed with his other hand leaping down and then a finger flicking out. Henrietta almost burst into a completely unwarranted giggle at that, remembering how Ranma had knocked out the assassins earlier today with simple finger flicks to the forehead.

But Henrietta shook her head, tapped the hand over her mouth, and when Ranma released her, leaned up to whisper into his ear. "I want the entirety, not just these bit players." Ranma's eyebrows rose, silently asking how she knew they were bit players, and she smiled mercilessly. "They're being given their walking orders," she went on, "they're not policymakers, regardless of how much they argue."

Ranma nodded at that but could still feel her shivering against him while above them, the rain began to become a torrent. And with her concentration on the conversation below, she couldn't use a spell to keep the water away from them. Ranma estimated that she had about another ten minutes before she started to really feel it.

Luckily, the conversation down below seemed to be wrapping up and had thoroughly confused Ranma when he turned back to it. Honestly, at this point, he couldn't figure out what nation they served, only that they wanted to remove Henrietta before she could become Princess, or the very least dry a wedge between her and Germania. The name Germania rang a bell in Ranma's mind. The memory of world wars, videos of them he had seen took his breath as all the memories of them returned in a rush.

As the men moved off, the Princess's shivering became acute. The instant the men were away through the rain, Ranma lifted Henrietta into his arms once more, cradling her like a wet kitten against his chest, as he hopped away all over the rooftops. As he moved, a scowl formed on his face, as Ranma suddenly realized that he didn't have any money, nor did the princess, given she was still dressed in a long nightgown.

"Right, we'll have to do this the old man's way then," he muttered.

Henrietta frowned at him at that, her teeth now starting to chatter. "O, old man's way?" she asked as she concentrated hard on her magic, willing the water of the rain away from her. The rain was no longer hitting them, but her clothing was still soaked, unfortunately, and her skin clammy.

Ranma shrugged. "On the road, sometimes you don't have money to pay for a roof over your head. Most times, we'd just rough it, but I'm not doing that with you, and I don't think we should go back to the castle just yet."

He looked at her, and she shook her head. "No. t, the judge magistrate w, will be returning there, and I want to organize some things before w, we return." *Agnes, I hope you find us before dawn, I truly do.*

That was good since Ranma felt Henrietta looked as if she couldn't take much more of the weather. Looking around, he quickly found an Inn, then balancing lightly on the second story window of one of its rooms, lifted the window a few free fingers even as Ranma continued to hold Henrietta to him with his other arm. Hopping in, he moved over to the bed, wrapping Henrietta up in the duvet.

Looking between her and the door, Ranma whispered, "I'll be right back," and Henrietta nodded, watching as he exited from the same window.

A moment of trepidation came to her then, thinking that if Ranma really was in cahoots with her enemies, now would be a perfect time to remove her. That thought lasted a bare distrust and shock-fueled millisecond before she had to bite back a bark of laughter. Ranma had had so many moments to finish her off, it wasn't even funny!

No, Ranma had proved trustworthy, strong, friendly and much more knowledgeable than she expected from someone who, in his own words, was simply a wandering warrior of some kind. *That whole Prince idea I had is definitely gaining evidence as we get to know one another,* she thought. *Although his attitude is very much not what I would expect. But if he was raised by a retainer perhaps, who got him out from before a coup of some kind...*

As these thoughts wound through Henrietta's mind, Ranma walked through the alleyways, looking for victims. Of course, they didn't know they were victims, but when a group of thugs attempted to encircle Ranma, they were astonished to see him pump a fist in the air. "Yes! Living off the land works even in another world!"

"What? Are you insane boy, give us all yourRRR!"

That was as far as their speaker got before a kick caught him right in the chest, hurling him out into one of the main streets.

Within seconds his companions joined him, although their journey into La-la-land was much kinder, single flicks to the forehead which embedded them in the cobblestones of the alleyway. There their dignity as thieves was ruined as Ranma searched each of them thoroughly, coming up with a few ill-gotten coins, daggers and some other things as well.

He then moved to the Inn and requested the room where he had put Henrietta, having memorized where it was in the building. Knocking on the door, he whispered, "Henrietta, um, are you decent?" When he heard the reply of 'come in Ranma,' Ranma did so, not expecting Henrietta to slam into him like a female missile. A crying female missile, who clung to him like a limpet.

While Ranma had recently realized that he could feel 'attraction' towards girls rather than martial arts techniques, this was not the same as understanding what to do with girls other than being polite to them. Even with his spotty memories, he was pretty sure his martial arts training had never addressed this issue. So, an emotional moment like this was completely beyond him.

Still, some things were clear. Henrietta didn't seem the type to want anyone to see her cry, so gently lifting her up, he moved into the room, softly closing the door behind him. Then, looking around, he realized that there was only a bed in the room, causing him to grimace. For some reason sitting down on that seemed a bit too...something. Dangerous maybe. Worrisome certainly.

So Ranma simply stood there in the middle of the room, at a loss of what to do beyond just pat Henrietta on the back of the head, stroking her still very wet hair as he tried to make out words from within the muddle. Words like, "I trusted him," and, "I chose the Judge magistrate for his position," and, "all his work, what, what has he been doing instead" and a few mumbled generalities about how much trouble was collapsing onto her shoulders at the moment.

Ranma just tried to look concerned-yet-befuddled (complete success), nod in all the right places (got most of those right, thankfully,) and keep breathing with his arms full of buxom Princess while attempting to stop his blood rush in dangerous places. Henrietta seemed to have forgotten that she was still dressed in her nightgown, but Ranma would probably never forget this moment, nor how much Henrietta's nightgown clung to her form. It still covered everything, but for sure gave Ranma's suddenly extremely active imagination a great starting point.

Eventually, after a series of deep breaths and concentrating on memories of his old man, Ranma controlled his body enough to start following more of what Henrietta was saying. He then began to respond – to her words, not her body - while still slowly stroking the princess' hair. "Are you sure you don't want me to hunt those guys down? I mean, the trail is cold, sure, but I figure if I take this Judge magistrate guy who's made you sad and just hang off the side of the castle's tallest tower, he'll give us some answers."

That caused a giggle from Henrietta as she started to fight back her tears, finally both warm and recovering from the shock of the betrayal of two men she had thought she could trust. Hearing this and seeing Henrietta start to come back to herself, Ranma loosened his arm from around her just a bit to let her move away if she wanted to. She didn't, and Ranma continued to speak, keeping his tone soothing or as much as he could anyway. "As for who you can trust, well, while she's probably world champion of jumping first, see what's never there. Agnes seems loyal to ya, her and the rest of your Musketeers. You've mentioned that Karin gal a time or two. And this Magistrate guy wasn't your only advisor, was he?"

Henrietta shook her head, taking a deep breath causing her chest to heave against Ranma's for a moment. He gulped audibly but kept speaking, his tone strained now as a certain blood flow issue reared its heads once more. "And I'd wager ya could find allies among the academy students. Lots of people would rather follow someone their own age over old fogies, so long as they ain't directly related to the fogies anyway."

That caused another giggle as Henrietta pulled back lightly from Ranma to look up into his eyes, which were once more shining with magic. That did nothing to take away from the impact of his lopsided smile, though, or the feel of his arms still holding her loosely, something Henrietta was now very aware of once again.

"And on top of that, you've got me." Ranma's smile became a lopsided grin for a second. "We're friends, heck, from my memory you're just about only the third friend I've ever had, and even that's a maybe. You promised to help me regain my memories, gave me someone to talk to, put a roof over my head. Even if I didn't think you were fighting the good fight, I'd be on your side. Whatever you want, I'll help as best I can. I promise."

That did it. Henrietta couldn't stop herself, not even if she had wanted to. A declaration like that, after a night like this, just stabbed right through Henrietta's remaining restraint and sense of propriety, with decorum having long vacated the premises. Stepping forward a tiny bit, Henrietta leaned up, kissing Ranma on the lips as her arms went around him.

Ranma's eyes widened, and for a moment, he thought about pushing Henrietta away, figuring this might be a spur of the moment thing she might regret. Princesses weren't supposed to kiss just anyone. He was sure of that. Then the feeling of Henrietta's lips against his registered. They were so soft those lips, slightly wet and full, and soft, softer than anything Ranma had any memory of before. Feeling that, Ranma couldn't stop from returning the kiss.

Henrietta had felt Ranma's stiffness, and that had made her regain some of her self-control. But then, Ranma's arms tightened around her, one hand going to the back of her head, mimicking Henrietta's own hand on his, as Ranma's other hand fell to the small of her back, gently pulling her still tighter against him while his lips began to move against her own. Henrietta felt the change and closed her eyes, shutting out all thoughts of the future to simply enjoy this.

How long they stood there kissing one another, neither knew. But...

1. Their moment is interrupted by the door banging open. The tsundere has found them! (comedy, some romantic comedy, Henrietta being angry)

2. Back at the palace, with the construction work finished, Kirche decides she's had her fun and tells Tabby and Louise the big 'secret' (comedy, shouting, Tabitha-centric world building)

3. Their moment is ended by a polite but insistent knocking on the door. Agnes has hunted her charge down once more, ending her fun. (more bits from the original, followed by Henrietta-centric world building)

4. News of the 'secret weapon' that fired the red beam spreads, and plans are made by various parties. (Bits from the original, worldbuilding from the enemy's view.)

End Episode 8

Hope you all enjoyed this! This poll will go to the 21st.