

Happy Hanukkah everybody! I figure even if you don't celebrate it, you wouldn't mind a gift regardless LOL.

As always, a sitrep on other projects: I am going to end the Patron only story poll on the heels of posting this. Tomon is still looking over **Death's Avenger** for me, but I will hopefully get that out by Christmas. **Fate Touched** is finished and off to Nad Destroyer, and I am hoping to get it out by the end of Hanukkah. Now it is on to Ranma. In that vein will end the Patron-Only poll, since that story will be the largest, tomorrow. If you haven't voted for the poll between **Making Waves** and **Bhaalson Remodel** head over there and do so now.

Once more, the choices here weren't very close:

The academy's gardener attacks Ranma the instant he sees Ranma's pigtail. (comedy, chase scene, ecchi humor before seriousness) got 4%. Would have thought more would vote for Ranma style comedy, but I suppose that you all know I'll include it anyway.

Henrietta holds meetings as Louise bump into Kazuma... uh oh. (comedy, action, a bit of drama, more from the original) 13%. Once more, people, I need to remind you Louise does need to be part of the story going forward. She won't be a main character, but she does need to have some character growth, hence why she will return in the choices following this episode.

Makoto bonds with the others, but a perverted lord ruins things, followed by a surprise reveal. (ecchi humor, comedy, Makoto centric action). Received only 14%. Huh. No love for Makoto, but once more, um, she is kind of central to the plot going forward even if she doesn't become a love interest for Ranma and Henrietta.

Judge Magistrate is punished, and Henrietta is crowned without issue... yeah right. (drama, Henrietta-centric, Ranma breaking people) was the winner with 70%. Here, I have to apologize. I would have used the term world-building instead of drama, but I try not to go overboard.

This has been edited by Hiryo and as always thanks go to the writers of the original story thread, Kestral and his fellows.

### **Episode 15: Verbal Smacking, Physical Contusions**

True to her word, Henrietta met with the gathered professor of the staff, barring the headmaster. Osmond, given his position and some requests, (read: firm orders) she had given him the night before for what she wanted today, was exempt from the lambasting Henrietta unleashed upon the rest of the faculty. While she began with Colbert and his insistence on

pushing for Louise to enslave Ranma and then Makoto via the Familiar spell, Henrietta waded into them on what they had been teaching the students here, the way they treated the servants and the feeling of entitlement that seemed rife within the student community.

Henrietta didn't mention Montmorency's actions, but hinted at further misdeeds the students had done through their learned arrogance and privileged attitude. That and the fact three of their students had felt it acceptable to break into the royal castle and start using magical attacks was more than enough to force the teachers to realize that they were doing something wrong.

Not that enough of them seemed to accept that for Henrietta's presence of mind, but she consoled herself that after the school year ended, she could force Osmond to fire the most arrogant and self-serving amongst them. *At least Colbert seemed properly apologetic this time around*, Henrietta consoled herself, as she left the teacher's office, leaving behind the tense, drawn and worried faculty for the much better sight of Ranma standing there waiting for her with a few more of her Musketeers, the sight of which caused Henrietta to blink, shifting her attention reluctantly away from her paramour. "Samantha? Alicia? Laura? Estelle?"

"Your Highness," the quartet of Musketeers intoned, bowed as one, while Samantha held out two more parcels of notes, her tone bland. "The information you requested." Samantha was a girl of Germanian descent, currently with a wry smirk on her lips as she glanced over at Ranma. "I understand you didn't anticipate our arriving so soon, but our passage was... facilitated by outside sources.

Knowing Ranma wouldn't have anything to contribute to that activity, she had asked him to race back to the castle to meet with Samantha and pick up any more evidence from her that the Musketeer had discovered in Doucet's estate. She already had personal evidence of how fast Ranma could be, so thought this was a task that would both help her, let Ranma have some more time to think about his ki abilities – something he had mentioned wanting – and would have him out of sight while Amie and a few of her other musketeers started spreading the various rumors she wanted, and Agnes delivered the various messages Henrietta had given her.

Ranma had done more than that though. He had carried Samantha and her Musketeers back to the academy, two at a time. Indeed, he had moved so quickly they'd had to take some time to redo their hair and uniforms before presenting themselves to Henrietta now, and Estelle, a short, somewhat willowy girl was still somewhat shaken by the experience.

Rolling her eyes at her lover, Henrietta let her hand touch his arm before looking at Agnes. "Is everything ready for the main event?"

"Yes Your Highness, I think that the past few hours have allowed the soup to boil nicely, and the stage is most certainly set," Agnes quipped, before becoming serious, although she did

not mention any specifics. "Lady Karin has offered her full support milady and will be waiting to throw her weight behind your main goal."

"Huh and here I thought that girls hated talking about their weight," Ranma quipped, causing Henrietta elbow him lightly in the side.

"Setting aside Ranma's concept of humor, I believe we are ready then." Henrietta smiled once more at her four previously missing Musketeers, then shifted to smiling at Ranma as he moved to walk beside her, his eyes never leaving her face. The sight of those shimmering blue eyes brought a thrill to her, but Henrietta knew she had to set thoughts of her new lover aside for now, mentally preparing herself for the trial to come, and... for what would happen after. *After all, this is going to be the first time I will be looking someone in the eye fully knowing that I will be ordering their execution all too soon.*

In Doucet's case, this was made more difficult than it would already be. Henrietta had actually liked the man. She had felt him something of an aged bon vivant, but no worse than any other elderly, somewhat misogynistic nobleman for all of that. And Henrietta had personally selected him among the group that Cardinal Mazarin had put together to become Judge Magistrate. Indeed, that and helping to choose some of the King's Council were the most important decisions she had been allowed to have input on.

To know that Doucet had betrayed her, and the country he had sworn to serve, was a harsh blow. Yet that was what had happened, and in trusting him, Henrietta had furthered the corruption in her country's government, weakening Tristain in a time when the country needed to be strong. *But that is what I am going to start correcting today,* she thought grimly. *There will be several roles to play here, but the end result will be putting a crown on my head by the time I leave this meeting. At least, Henrietta amended, in the minds of many of the most powerful nobles of the kingdom.* The actual crowning ceremony would have to wait until they got back to the castle.

But if Henrietta had Karin, Duke Largo, Baroness Cotre, Marquis DeLorean, and the others present here personally to congratulate their children, or rather those present who would remain free after this meeting was done. Henrietta would have a big enough hammer to make the so-called King's Council agree with pushing forward her coronation. *A chance to rule on my own, not through my husband, a chance to start changing things **NOW**, not two years from now. Oh, by the blessing of God and the Founder, that is worth any personal price, even the nightmares having Doucet executed will give me.*

As they descended through a flight of stairs, her musketeers fanning out before her, and Ranma standing beside her, smiling lackadaisically yet hit with his eyes flicking in every direction, Henrietta thought, *The only stumbling block is that despite what I've said to Agnes and Ranma, I can't quite predict how Mazarin will react.* It was true that the cardinal had been grooming Henrietta to rule instead of reign, but it was also a fact that he was very much a

conservative, socially speaking. So she had no way of knowing which aspect of his personality would control how he reacted to her plan.

Still, in the end, Henrietta felt that it was a seventy-percent chance that he would back her play for the crown. As much of a man of God and tradition he was, Mazarin was also Henrietta's teacher and he had always said that his greatest desire was to see a strong hand on the throne.

"So, what's my role exactly in this little play? You never said," Ranma's voice, jolted Henrietta out of her thoughts.

Henrietta was about to reply but just then they passed through junction in the academies halls where another corridor cut across the hall they were following. Down one corridor Henrietta noted one of the mages who worked at the academy as a regular worker walking towards them for a second before he stopped.

Turning back to Ranma, Henrietta blinked, while behind her, the Musketeers protecting her from the back just stared in bemusement. In the second she had looked away, Ranma had crouched, shifting his body so that his body profile was hidden from the direction Henrietta had just been looking. "Ranma?"

He shook his head, and remained there, moving along beside her almost like he was trying to hide in Henrietta's shadow, and succeeding to an extreme degree until they passed through the crossway, then he straightened up, shrugging sheepishly. "Don't ask."

"You do realize that will never work with me, correct?" Henrietta raised an eyebrow in question even as she laid a gentle hand on her lover's arm. His own arm other arm went around her slightly, squeezing briefly, before he seemed to get control of that arm again (Henrietta had her doubts about that ongoing issue, but certainly wasn't complaining), and removed it, with an amusing amount of muscle strain visible in the portion of his neck she could see. "Talk Ranma."

"Well, you know those flowers and that glass I used for the figurines? They weren't exactly paid for."

Henrietta paused for a moment. She dearly remembered the glass, oh yes. The blue lights from them had been, well it had been enchanting, literally. The shine of Ranma's ki embedded within them had helped to create magical environment, from a most magical man before he gave Henrietta the most magical night of her life. Indeed, it eclipsed the times she had been with Wales. Their times together had always been passionate and loving, but there was something to be said for having time to set the atmosphere for such trysts, which they had never had.

The flowers though? Henrietta could only vaguely remember their scent filling the air and then waking up to their smell once more, the smell of their own exertions having

disappeared thanks to Ranma's efforts to clean the room up as she slept. *But there were a lot of them, weren't there?* "You told me you got them from the gardens."

"I did. Er, from the academies flower garden. Er, I sort of stole, like, every flower they had."

At that, Henrietta paused and began to giggle. She didn't stop for some time, as Ranma smirked at her, a flash of teeth adding to her amusement. "Oh, what am I going to do with you?" Henrietta said at last.

"Shouldn't that be a question I should be asking you? It's a mutual thing, right?" Ranma quipped, his face going from cheerfully teasing to loving as he reached out with a finger, and gently brushed it down her cheek.

Henrietta shivered, licking her lips unconsciously. "Yes," she whispered. "Yes it is."

"Wow, that is so cute! You two are really into one another aren't ya?"

A new voice intruded on to their moment, one that didn't come from her musketeers. Blinking, Henrietta turned, and saw that Makoto had somehow appeared in one of the small windows to one side of the second story hallway they were walking along. The tall brunette was grinning cheerfully at them, a faint blush on her face showing how much the moment she didn't interrupt had affected her. So you two really are together then, hehehe, the Queen and her Knight. The fact that Ranma's come from another world just makes it even better.

One of the musketeers raced up, coming from behind them and had her gun out and trained on the intruder in a second, her finger cocking back. But Henrietta quickly held up a hand, stopping her. "I trust that I can trust you to be discreet?" Henrietta asked, looking at Makoto, while Samantha glared at the intruder.

When Ranma translated this, Makoto nodded her head, earnestly staring into Henrietta's eyes as she moved forward, unmindful of the tenseness of the musketeers behind them as she took Henrietta's hands squeezing them in her own. "Heck yes. I mean, look at it from my perspective. I've got no family at home, I'm not exactly well-liked, I don't have very many friends. Lots of acquaintances, but no friends. And here I am, with the chance to learn martial arts." She went towards Ranma, then whirled around throwing her arms out as she went on, Ranma translating this as quickly as he could. "And to learn magic! Hell yes! For that, I'd be willing to do a lot more than just being friends with you and keeping this a secret. If you want me to join your guard? I'll do it. You want me to be a student? I'll do that too. All I requesting return is the chance to learn, and..." she paused, blushing a bit, "maybe practice my cooking."

When that last bit was translated, Henrietta blinked, cocking her head to one side. "Cooking?"

After Ranma asked, Makoto smiled, nodding her head. "I like to cook, and I think I'm pretty good at it, although I'd like to get a wider audience." She stood back, clicking her fingers together. "Hey, I've got an idea! Why don't I make up a basket of food for us all, you, Ranma, me, and um, well, a few others like Chad, I guess. That way, when we all leave for the palace. We can take a break on the way and get to know one another?"

Henrietta clapped her hands. "My, that sounds lovely. I think I will need such a break after the rest of this day's business. But do you think your fellows will also wish to come with us back to the palace?"

Having waited once more for Ranma to translate this, Makoto shrugged, her lips twisting into a moue. "I haven't seen Kazuma yet today. Apparently he likes to sleep in. The fact that it was nearly afternoon made everyone there roll their eyes at her understatement. "Chad probably would, but I think of all of us it's Kazuma who most wants to get home. He spoke a lot about his sister and the two of them needing one another and stuff like that."

"Reversing the summoning spell is not going to be a quick operation," Henrietta sighed, frowning after Ranma told her what Makoto had said. "Still, I agreed that we would do so, and it will happen. I have asked Colbert to look into that for now. But right now, my concentration is on something else entirely. Something that you would need at least an hour of background information to understand, I'm afraid."

When he translated this, Ranma added, "She's right. I've been here for a few days and I barely understand all that's going on. And I'm not going to be the best one to explain it all."

"Is there going to be a fight?" Makoto asked, cocking her head thoughtfully.

"I hope so..." "No..." Ranma and Henrietta said as one, and Henrietta looked at her lover in amusement. "Ranma..." she drawled.

"Sorry," Ranma chuckled. "I just think you are underestimating how quickly someone is going to want to try to fight what you're doing."

Henrietta thought for a moment, then sighed. "Perhaps. But only the most insane would try anything with my musketeers there, you and Karin. Your own abilities were after all bruited about this morning at my instigation, so hopefully no one will be foolish to start anything physical."

"Just as long as they don't threaten ya, I won't have to hurt them. They do, I am not going to be nice," Ranma warned. "Samantha filled me in on some of what these assholes have been up to, and I think a lot of them need a beatdown."

Having heard Ranma's side of things in Japanese, Makoto frowned thoughtfully, cutting in before Ranma could try to translate what Henrietta had said. "Okay, I don't think I'll be able

to follow along what's going to happen considering I don't even know what you just said Your Highness. But, I suppose I'll head back to grab Siesta. Since Chad was still in the baths, I asked her to start to try to wake up Kazuma."

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In point of fact, Siesta was doing that very thing at the moment Makoto was talking to Henrietta and Ranma. Entering the room that Kazuma had been given with Chad, Siesta found him asleep, sprawled out half on and half off of the bed, one arm around a pillow and nuzzling into it like it was a teddy bear. At that sight the busty maid giggled wildly, before clapping her hands to her mouth, shaking her head. That was oddly adorable, completely destroying the tough guy image that Kazuma had tried to project since his arrival in the academy. The fact that his hair was also down, flat against his head rather than in that strange jutting forward style only added to the effect.

She moved over to him, gently shaking him. But he ignored her. She shook him again, and he rolled away, flopping fully onto the bed once more. Siesta shook him again, and Kazuma continued to ignore her, even as she practically started to shout his name. "Okay, this is no longer cute. Time to get the water."

Seconds later, Kazuma woke up shouting as cold water was dumped on his head. "Damn it Sis, I told you I hate that!"

He looked around angrily but did not find his sister. Instead, an angel stood by his bed. Black hair cut into a formal bob-cut, a kindly expression on her face centered around kissable lips and deep, sparkling blue eyes. Below that was a bust that would have set any of the girls back home to keening in jealousy, clad in a maid's outfit. "U, u... wo, wow, er, I mean... who, um..." he stammered, flushing so hard his freckles appeared almost scarlet.

"Mister Kazuma? You've almost missed lunch. Would you like to come down to the cafeteria?" Siesta asked. "Miss Makoto asked me to wake you up."

"Er, sure. Um, wait, you're speaking Japanese!?" Kazuma gaped, hopping to his feet, tossing off the sheet he'd been wearing and stumbling in his effort to address Siesta more formally. He had, however, forgotten that he had taken off his shirt and pants last night before falling asleep. His boxers, Dragon-ball Z boxers in fact, currently had a bit of morning issue.

A second later a shrill scream echoed through the area, as Siesta raced out of the room and Kazuma idly wondered if it was perhaps to die of embarrassment. *Great first impressions Kazuma. Damn it!* Yet even so, he wondered who that angel was and when he could meet her again.

OOOOOO

“That probably is the best use of your time for now,” Henrietta apologized, with Ranma dutifully translating, not stopping when his enhanced hearing brought to him the sound of a shriek of embarrassment in the distance. “I am sorry I can’t devote more time today to you and the others with you, but this needs to be seen to quickly.”

Makoto nodded with an accepting smile, punched Ranma in the arm, and tried to curtsy to the princess, to much giggling from both of them, nodded to the musketeers, and then wound her way through their group to the stairwell, heading down ahead of them. “I’ll see you all later then. And if you have any food requests, find me after whatever you’re doing is done.”

“She’s quite pleasant, I like Makoto, I think,” Henrietta smiled.

Yet even as she said this, Henrietta was somewhat confused. There had been something in Makoto’s eyes when she looked at Ranma and, if Henrietta wasn’t reading too much into it, when she looked at the princess too. *Not jealousy, interest perhaps?* What kind of interest was up in the air, but Henrietta was beginning to realize that beyond her bubbly exterior, Makoto might well have an extremely observant mind. *Along with a tendency to go her own way, if the way she somehow got up into a second-story window is any indication.*

*Thank goodness though that the potion has been entirely expunged* she thought, turning to look at Ranma affectionately once more, before gesturing him to start walking again as she strolled beside him. When she had laid eyes on Makoto there had been no flash of anything except surprise at the time, then amusement. That would have made it awfully hard to become Makoto’s friend with that kind of thing hanging between them.

“So, um, we were kind of interrupted there twice over,” Ranma snorted. “Seriously, um what is my role in this? Do you want me to play it like I did with Montmorency? Or do you want me to play the stupid foreigner?” Here Ranma allowed his shoulders to hunch, and jutted his chin forward, while scratching at it, looking for all the world like a muscle-bound dullard for a second before straightening back up.

“...Are you sure you didn’t learn how to act from your father Ranma?” Henrietta giggled.

“Psychological warfare is still a kind of combat,” Ranma answered with a shrug. “Fooling people into thinking you’re a foreign fool is easy. It’s convincing them that you’re too strong to mess with after you taking their money from beating their champion that’s the trouble.”

“Ahaha, that is rather funny, but no Ranma, I think we will play it somewhat straight. You will be my tough, immensely capable guardian. I have no doubt by the end of this meeting however, of that certain aspects of your abilities will become common knowledge. But try to



keep most of your skills a secret for now," Henrietta hummed in thought. "They have no doubt learned your connection to the attack you tried on your first day here. Beyond that, your speed and strength were part of the rumors. What else you use is up to you."

Ranma shrugged. "I haven't seen anyone here yet that would make me break out the big stuff anyway, so that's fine."

"You haven't actually talked much to Karin have you," Henrietta chortled. "Or Duke Largo. He is another old war horse, and as for the Baroness... she is the quintessential irascible old bitty, but she runs her lands very well, has no truck with much of what she calls pomp and nonsense, and..." Henrietta sighed, her humor disappearing. "Not one of my allies. She doesn't like youth really, but I think she will come around."

"So long as she doesn't outright insult you in my presence, that's fine I guess," Ranma said, shrugging uncomfortably. "...Er, I'm not at all certain how I'd react if someone badmouthed you to be honest. This whole caring for another person, relationship thing is still new to me, remember, Henrietta?"

"I do want you to be my knight, my shining guardian, Ranma. But never think that that is the only thing I value you for," Henrietta whispered, leaning up to kiss him tenderly.

For a second Ranma looked around wildly, but Henrietta had been using her magic through her scepter to sense if anyone was nearby occasionally as they continued to walk, a sort of warm up exercise for her magical muscles, just in case. The only people within sight were her musketeers. The rest of this floor had no one on it but the people within the room Osmond had prepared for this meeting at the end of the hall.

After a moment, Henrietta pulled away and the two continued on. At the door, Henrietta paused again, closing her eyes, and to Ranma's frank astonishment, centered herself as he had helped her do before. *Holy crap she really is a natural with the meditation, isn't she? Makes me feel really slow given how I still can't meditate and stand still. Eesh.*

As Ranma watched, Henrietta nodded to her two musketeers in the lead, and with Agnes leading them, the group entered the room. Within, they found fifteen of the twenty-five most powerful nobles within the kingdom gathered.

Not the majority of nobles, of course. There were in point of fact at least five-hundred and twenty-nine noble houses within Tristain, depending on how you meant the word noble. If you counted the knights and those landed gentry with magic and naught else, that number went up to within the nine-hundred range. However, that was neither here or there. Regardless of how you went about codifying the term the people in this room represented a large swath of the real power of Tristain.

*And I didn't have to arrange for them all to be here* Henrietta thought with an internal chuckle. And all of them, were looking both interested, confused, worried, and wary. *Excellent.*

The only one whose expression she couldn't read was Karin, but that was normal. Except in familial circumstances, Karin wore what Henrietta now would term a battle face, much like the one Ranma was no doubt wearing behind her, if the sudden stiffening of the faces in front of her were any indication. *Ah, I see they are now far more wary. Even more excellent.*

The room holding this meeting had been set up perfectly as well, Henrietta felt, giving a mental nod to Old Osmond for his help. Gone was the auditorium's levels. In their place, a wide flat area had been constructed, centered around a central table set on a raised dais. This chair was V-shaped with the chairs subtly twisted to center on the top of the V. And even better, Amie had performed her task well, making certain the nobles were set in a seemingly random fashion but which was in fact organized to separate districts and possible allies from one another. In particular the four nobles who might be leaving here in irons.

Henrietta moved into the room like she owned it, pausing momentarily at the dais' edge, allowing the crowd of nobles to get a look at her, her dress, severe of cut but still very pretty, her tiara on her head gleaming golden and silver and the scepter of the royal family in her hand. She saw the concern of Ranma's appearance being replaced by stiff anger, understood it and laughed internally. *Oh yes, you idiots. My scepter! I claimed it before I hit puberty. None of you, not even Karin have ever liked that, but you could not gainsay it then and you cannot ignore its symbology now!*

Ranma moved ahead and pulled out her chair for her, and Henrietta nodded to him, keeping a smile off her face with a surprising amount of difficulty as she did. This was because as his head had turned away from the nobles, Ranma's expression had flashed from his game face to a tender look, as he whispered something so low now one else could possibly have heard it. "You got this princess."

Smiling somewhat more widely at that, Henrietta sat down at the head of the table. She lightly tapped the desk in front of her, the scepter using it to activate a few spells set into the room last night by Osmond, a weaker version of the privacy wards on her suite.

"Ladies and gentlemen. I realize that my calling this meeting is highly unusual. Not only does it seem random, but only a few of you are representative of the King's Council at present." She waited a tick, allowing the words 'at present' to sink into a few minds, then went on quickly. "However, what you do represent is the true power within the kingdom. And as such, have information I wish to pass on to you and then, I wish for you all of us, to come to an understanding of what this information means for the future of Tristain."

"All of you have no doubt heard rumors." She watched as their eyes flicked to Ranma, but did not address that. "Rumors about what is going on in Albion and the Reconquista, their

stated goals. However, I doubt that any of you have access to the same resources. Through my familial connections, I understand far more about what is going on there than is commonly understood or bruited about. I also know of a few other plots from Germania, from Gallia, from Romalia. What is worse, perhaps, is our own internal troubles.”

What followed after that, was to Ranma’s mind the verbal equivalent of turning a mob of enemies into itself. Henrietta adroitly addressed one point or another of foreign troubles, followed by still further internal issues, this or that long-standing feud, this or that noble causing trouble with their neighbors, who should have already been brought to heel. The Baroness Cotre twitched a little at that, knowing that some of those remarks could well have been aimed at her while others looked uncomfortable, trying to interrupt her, but Henrietta did not allow it, simply continuing to speak in a commanding manner as the nobles, bar Karin started to become more and more concerned. None had put all the issues facing Tristain together all at once before for any of them, and the sheer number of internal issues, let alone the hints of foreign influence, were worrisome.

Yet even so, the assembled nobleman started to speak over Henrietta, unwilling to allow her to browbeat them into admitting that any of them had ties with foreign nations, not when Henrietta herself was descended from a King of Albion who had been given the crown by his wife upon her marriage to him. And then, Henrietta spang her trap.

Throughout this discussion, Doucet, who, as a member of the King’s Council, should have been on the princess’s side, had begun to show his true colors, wanting to undercut the princess, in her bid for the crown. He was subtle about it, undercutting her words with a, ‘Well, that is hearsay,’ or, ‘The sources for that bit of information are not available’ and so forth. Moreover, Doucet started to mention that Henrietta seemed too concerned with the Albion issue that she was setting aside news about the more militant Germania.

But Henrietta still was able to command the meeting, her voice cutting through the heated diatribes or self-defense of the majority of nobles in front of her to lay out her goal. “Our kingdom stands on a precipice ladies and gentlemen, and we are leaderless.”

Several of them protested instantly, but she held up her scepter, and a ball of air appeared only to burst with a loud clap of sound, silencing all there. “Leaderless!”

“Cardinal Mazarin is an amazing administrator, a fantastic first counselor. He is **not** a king. He cannot call upon your military power, he cannot institute new laws or even correct old ones without a majority of the Council, and through them, the conclaves of Noble Houses. This, ladies and gentlemen, is no way to run a kingdom that is faced with the troubles we are faced with. And I refuse to allow this kingdom to go forward rudderless. As such I am here to demand your backing in being crowned now, instead of in two years.”

“Surely these things can wait a few years, your Majesty.” Duke Largo countered instantly, and his was not the only back that had stiffened at the word ‘demand.’ “There is

precedent and law, not to mention the word of the Founder, to consider. You look to overthrow precedent with this move.”

“You’re too young,” Baroness Cotre spat out her voice gravelly with the age, but sharp for all of that. “Far too young, far too flighty.”

“Flighty!? Perhaps you should look the term ‘flighty’ Madam, before you hurl it at my feet,” Henrietta argued back sharply. “Name one time you have ever heard rumor refer to me as flighty. And pray back it up with actual fact rather than rumor and hearsay. You will be entirely unable to do so. This is not a youthful whim of mine, this is a necessity to combat the internal disfunction of Tristain, and, even more importantly, the foreign elements, like Albion or Gallia.”

“There I believe you are showing Cardinal Mazarin’s preferences, and in so doing, your own youth Your Highness,” he said, shaking his head dolefully as he seemed to have. “Yes, the Albion issue with the Reconquista is a problem and I agree they must be punished for their assault on you. But alone, Albion lacks the manpower to conquer a foreign nation, even Tristain. Germania has that manpower, and if you are going to be going through with the Cardinal’s plans to marry yourself to the Emperor of Germania, then we have no need of breaking with precedent.”

“I have never said I would go through with that plan, Baron Doucet. I believe that any issue with Germania is years in the future, if ever, so long as we show ourselves strong now. And I notice that you did not mention the information I have about Gallian or Romalian spies and rabble-rousers. Although perhaps, some among you think those elements are not so detrimental to our country so long as they line your personal pockets,” Henrietta argued back, coming to the point of her trap now that it had come to it.

“That is a grave accusation Your Highness,” Doucet intoned, frowning. “My judges and other agents of the law have certainly not seen anything of that nature.” As Judge Magistrate, the judges who settled disputes in both the upper and lower courts answered to Doucet. So too did the various sheriffs and criminal investigators, a different branch of government than the spies and crown agents, who answered, currently, to Mazarin.

“They would not,” Henrietta said as she sprang her trap, while nearby Ranma allowed himself a brief flicker of internal amusement at how she had the entire conversation to get to this point. “After all, why would you wish to report on your fellow conspirators?”

For a moment, the room was silent, then Doucet made to rise to his feet, a shout on his lips. But before he could even shift his rear off his chair, Ranma had moved.

Henrietta had been expecting it, and still had barely been able to see a blur. The only few in the room who could track Ranma’s movements were combat veterans like Karin and Duke Largo, her former suitor. Even then Largo had to blink to make sure he wasn’t seeing

things. Karin. on the other hand. simply tightened her hands, where they rested in her lap, her eyes narrowing as she watched Ranma suddenly shift from where he had been standing beside the wall behind Henrietta, to behind Doucet's seat.

A hand thumped down on his shoulder, pressing him hard into his chair while Ranma's thumb hit a point on his neck, before retreating, the move so quick even Karin only saw a blur. "The princess is talking," Ranma ground out coldly. "You will be respectful and let her talk, or else."

"How dare..." Doucet began to bellow, only to freeze in horror as he realized he hadn't been able to turn his head to glare up at Ranma. "I can't... I can't move my body!" he exclaimed, trying to command his hands or feet to move. "How did you, what did you, there was no spell, how..."

"That is curious," Henrietta mused, as she looked at Ranma, a serene but cool smile on her lips as if this was nothing of great import. "Ranma?"

"Just a little trick Your Highness. He will recover in time," Ranma replied. He had used his rapidly expanding ki sense to find a shiatsu technique on the man where all the ki in his body traveled through from the neck down. Hitting it and thus closing the point had cut off the signals from Doucet's head to the rest of his body.

"That's good up to here. After all, the nobles of my land are not nearly as durable as the ones you are used to dealing with," Henrietta reproved Ranma very gently. Not because she was really doing so, but simply to add another bit of color to the rumors going around about Ranma. "But thank you for keeping him civil."

Ranma's hand slammed into his chest, with enough force to shatter a stone, causing a loud \*thump\* sound to reverberate through the room. "By your leave, Your Majesty."

Henrietta allowed her smile to widen briefly, then shifted around to look at the other nobles. But Baroness Cotre shook her head as she glared at Ranma. "And is this one supposed to be some kind of threat? Go along with your idea, allow you to take power before you are ready for it, or else you'll sic your foreign warrior on us?"

"Not at all," Henrietta laughed. "I was quite serious a moment ago when I accused Doucet of treason." With that the purple-haired woman's eyes shifted like a gun turret back to the Judge Advocate.

He was grimacing as he tried to overpower whatever Ranma had done to him but was still able to muster enough will to try to defend himself despite the surprising power of the princess's glare. "H, how dare you accuse me! I have been a loyal to your house and you personally since you appointed me as Judge Advocate!"

"I did." Henrietta shook her head sadly, her entire air almost that of a parent saddened by the acts of a child. "Cardinal Mazarin and I both felt that you had the correct organizational abilities to revamp our legal system. Imagine my horror when I realized that instead of doing so, you were undermining that very project and committing gross treason against the crown and the people of Tristain."

"On what evidence do you make that accusation!" the frozen nobleman shouted.

"By your own words fool!" Henrietta's words had gone from thoughtful and calm to a hiss a snake would have been proud of in an instant as she glared at the man. "Do you recall the evening before last, when you met with a group of individuals in an out of the way alleyway? Where you discussed me and the attempts on my life? You made certain comments, about how it had no doubts been launched by an agent of Albion and were informed..."

From there Henrietta explained the meeting that she and Ranma had overheard, watching not just Doucet, but the faces of the other nobles. All of them looked shocked and appalled to learn that one of the most powerful of the governmental officials had been secretly in the pocket of another nation, even if that nation had yet to be determined.

"With all this in mind, I decided on my own cognizance to launch an examination of your house, with a warrant signed by judge Garibaldi."

At the name of the older, very obstreperous and law-abiding judge, Doucet hissed, but he also paled at the news.

"My musketeers are quite good investigators. Imagine my shock when they discovered that you had basically been writing exceptions to the laws of our land for this or that noble for years. I've barely begun to read through all the evidence they discovered, but it is clear that corruption is rampant throughout **my** nation. Henrietta waited a tick, and then went on, her voice turning from hissing and wrathful to iron cold.

As this happened Ranma realized that Henrietta's voice was another weapon. Like her clothing, or her ability to seemed calm in any circumstances. This really was like a martial arts match, just with weapons and styles that Ranma knew he would never be able to master.

"Baron Garvey, Count Darius, would you like to speak now?" Her eyes flicked to those worthies, implicitly giving them the right to turn King's evidence, or rather Queen's evidence. "We have enough evidence of your wrong doing already to put you behind bars at the very least." She did not mention one other noble the raid on Doucet's mansion had implicated. He was more of a libertine than traitor, and she could always make an example of him later. Until then, like the Chief Speaker, who was not here, he could be useful.

However, instead of doing the smart thing, both men tried to rise to their feet despite Ranma's earlier example. One of them even had a spring-loaded wand in his wrist, which popped out as he moved.

The other man froze instantly as Karin simply waved her hand. That youngster had the misfortune of sitting next to her. The air around him suddenly solidified into a tornado, pressing him down, containing him and very deliberately crushing his arms against his body.

He was lucky. Ranma dealt with the one with the spring-loaded wand, moving from behind Doucet so fast that once more few could follow him. And he wasn't nearly as kind this time. Ranma's fist crashed down onto the man's wand hand, and there was a sound like a watermelon being squished, as every bone in his hand was pulped. Another jab to the throat followed. This time two chakra points were struck, so fast that only Karin could make out Ranma's moves. The man slumped backwards, keening in agony from his hand, his voice silenced and his body stilled by Ranma's strikes to his neck.

Henrietta shook her head, acting drolly amused while once more simply astonished at how much physical strength Ranma contained. Yet the fact he had been so gentle with her offset that. "Ranma, what did I just say about my nobles not being as durable as yours?"

"He pointed a wand at you," Ranma growled. "I don't like when my friends are threatened. Besides, I bet some of your Water Mages could put him right. With time."

As interesting as this is been, you seem to imply that there were larger issues than corruption at stake," Cotre said, scowling. At the three nobles who had been implicated. Were these two the ones that Doucet met with, or...?"

"Larger issues than corruption!" Henrietta exclaimed. "How about malfeasance, abuse of peasants, abuse of the laws of the land, selling our citizens into slavery!" she growled picking up the beat pieces of paper that had been found in Doucet's mansion. "Selling his influence in court. Perhaps even undermining our defense in preparation for war." With that, she turned to one of the other two, tapping that last paper as she set it down.

"Your own actions made me certain of that one my Lord. Have no fear, within a day, I will have judge Garibaldi, General Gramont and a team of his best heading to your lands, to oversee whether or not the defenses you are by right of your position supposed to maintain against an incursion from Gallia are being properly maintained. I wonder what they will find?"

"And as for you Doucet," Henrietta looked at him, her fingers tensed around her scepter almost unnoticeable to anyone but Ranma, who was watching her very closely, as her tone shifted to the ultra-formal royal 'we'. "Your crimes carry the death penalty. You will have time to make your peace, but Our first action when We take the crown will be to order your executions on grounds of treason. Whether your family will learn of your disgrace and will be

punished in turn will be determined by what aid you give Our investigators when they question you about your dealings with foreign agents.”

For a moment, the other nobles were silent, not so much stunned as simply taking this in, while examining Henrietta’s face.

Then Cotre spoke, beating Karin by an instant judging by her open mouth. “I withdraw my objections. You’ve got steel in you girl and guile to boot. You set up Doucet and the rest of us like he was a prime fish, on the line and then manipulated the rest of us like dolls on a string.”

Henrietta shrugged, her tone changing back to normal. “Coming here to the Academy was not something I had planned for in the long term. But when I understood the depths of the danger to Tristain and how high the corruption went in my government, I decided to make use of this impromptu meeting as best I could.”

“A true leader knows when to manipulate luck. You made a tactical decision, and secured a strategic goal,” Karin nodded, although she had kept watching Ranma with interest as the others watched Henrietta. “I, of course, approve as well.”

She looked over at Largo, who nodded briskly glaring daggers at one of the other men. Duke Largo didn’t have any land that directly abutted any of Tristain’s borders but they were just inside of such from Gallia. Hearing that the border had not been seeded with the number of defensive Earth Magic spells that it should’ve been was deeply concerning.

“You realize though, that he did have a point,” one of the other nobles said, having kept quiet for most of the discussion simply watching everything around them. He was Marquis DeLorean and was perhaps the richest man in the room. He had bought his noble title, with money gained by running the country’s biggest metal factories, while his wife ran the largest bank.

“I do. But I am not going to solve the Germania ‘problem’ by marrying the Emperor. I have made a study of the Reconquista leadership, such as it is. Cromwell is a... simple, if horrible, man in many ways. We are the weakest of the land-based nations, and therefore, he will attack us. But if Reconquista wins in Albion and attacks and we can beat them, Germania will not expand in our lifetime. When the next Emperor takes the throne, who can say? That is not exactly a simple or straightforward thing after all.”

Twice in the recent past, the Emperor of Germania had been decided via internal civil wars, short, insanely sharp wars that pitted this or that heir and his noble allies against one another. Most of the time those wars hadn’t actually devolved into all-out brawls, simply bloody affairs between the nobles. But it was a weakness of how Germania was run that their line of succession was so self-destructive. *Then again, they aren’t the only country like that,* Henrietta thought with an internal snort.



“You realize though, that you will have to marry and soon, to secure the succession once you become King Queen.” Stability was what the marquis was interested in, although the prospect of there almost certainly being a war to come against Albion was off-putting. Still, he was willing to accept the evidence placed before him about that, if nothing else.

“I know. But that is a problem for the future, after I am crowned,” Henrietta replied, her eyes fighting to strain to Ranma despite her willpower. But she would not allow that thought to take root just yet. Not after only three days of knowing him. *A few months from now though...* “And in no way will I marry someone from Germania or any of the other countries, no matter the dowry they offer.

Of course there were still objections. One of the other nobles even accused Henrietta of setting all this up as a feint, calling into question the evidence before them. He was roundly denounced by Karin and Cotre in a rare - i.e. almost impossible – almost impossible to contemplate, show of unanimity of unanimity.

The others Henrietta beat down, cutting their arguments to ribbons until they simply could not defend their positions logically. The only one that wasn't misogynistic, self-serving, or just plain arrogant was the idea that they were against Henrietta taking the throne because she had little to no combat experience, let alone war asked time experience. However, Henrietta simply sidestepped the issue, pointing to Karin. “There is my warlord.”

That ended that argument with an abruptness like a guillotine dropping and without pause Karin nodded seriously. “You wish me to take that position on your counsel Your Highness? I had offered your lady mother but...”

“I am not my mother,” Henrietta drawled. “I would've thought that for this discussion my actions and my abilities would have proven that.”

There was some chuckling at that, and Ranma internally whistled as once more the atmosphere in the room turned further pro-Henrietta. A lot of these nobles had come in here looking down on Henrietta at best. Others had been outright enemies, not ones like Doucet, simply self-serving nobles wishing to bolster their own positions and uncaring of the nation as whole. In a single conversation, and with three examples of what would happen if they continued to challenge her, she had changed them all into allies, if not friends. That was damn impressive.

The conversation continued for a few more hours, but eventually, all remaining twelve mighty nobles would back Henrietta in pressing to be crowned now as Queen. They still had some misgivings about her youth but there were no more misgivings about her intelligence or competence. And although many of them still harbored extreme wishes to not see a queen or any kind of strong centralized authority, they couldn't be open about such any longer. Not with the threats facing the nation.

As everyone was leaving the meeting Henrietta asked that Karin and her family take an early dinner with her. "I wish to at least have some time with my dear friend Louise before heading back to the castle and more work."

Karin nodded agreement of course, although she was still eyeing Ranma speculatively.

As they were walking away, Ranma leaned down, whispering, "Amazing job, my princess love. I might not have followed everything, but I followed enough. I think you're going to be a natural at some of the soft styles. Misdirection, reapplication of force, using your enemies against one another."

"And knowing when to strike," Henrietta agreed with a weary giggle. **Then knowing the two of them were once more alone with her musketeers, Henrietta leaned up to give Ranma a kiss, to which Ranma replied eagerly, before they were interrupted by...**

Agnes interrupting them, to meet with Chad, and the others, computer in tow {comedy, boy bonding, computer online, secrets exposed}

Louise coming down the hallway just in time to see the kiss. Uh-oh! {chaos, comedy, heart-to-heart talks, a bit of religious world building}

lightning in the distance. Makoto vs a local noble slob {Makoto-centric, Makoto secrets, combat, noble smacked down}

Wardes arrives to see Louise, finding her chasing Kazuma. {Comedy, violence, Wardes challenging the wrong people... many times.}

### **End Chapter**

I suppose I could have gone into detail on the political talk but as good as I am in world building, I loathe politics. So there we go. As for the choices this time, 1 and 3 will move my own plot forward in very different manners. 2 will start the process of rehabilitating the wild tsundere and show a bit more of the Founder's religion and will move more of the Familiar of Zero plot forward. 4 is a straight up comedy choice, which I feel after this chapter is something I should offer.

Hope you all enjoyed this, and once more, Happy Hanukkah.