

Merry Christmas! For those of you who celebrate anyway, I already had my eight crazy nights LOL.

I had hoped to get the next chapter of GDWHOM out by Christmas, but that's not going to happen. The swimsuit competition is almost done (not happy with the character descriptions, all the swimsuits are too alike), but that's only about half the chapter, and I spent all of Wednesday on editing Death's Avenger after Tomon got it back to me. (I am not one of nature's editors,) so I will be shooting for a New Year's release. Making Waves is still being seen by Justloreadin' and I am not willing to share the chapter without his and Hiryō's insight on it.

This time, the choices were pretty close between two and three. Boy bonding apparently wasn't popular, nor was an early Wards intro.

Unfortunately, there was a reason why I had to split up the Makoto growth scene and the Louise discussion choices. They are both about 6,000 words long, and with everything else going on in RL and my work on everything else I couldn't afford the time to do both. Sorry guys, but hey, at least you'll be able to vote for it again after this.

This has been seen by Hiryō, but it's too darn late for me to go over it with Grammarly LOL. Thanks go to him and to the original writers.

Episode 16: Leaping to Conclusions Is Bad for Your Health

Despite her training as a Musketeer to appear bland and neutral in all situations, Amie, Samantha and several of the other Musketeers, who had remained behind when Agnes escorted the three prisoners off, were having trouble keeping smiles from their faces as they watched Henrietta and Ranma.

Natalie felt she was watching the beginning of a romance that would shape her countries in the near future. She had been one of the musketeers inside the room just now and was also one of the more politically astute Musketeers, being a daughter of a merchant. She had seen how her princess had basically eviscerated every argument many of the most powerful nobles in the country could produce to stop her from claiming the crown. Natalie saw Henrietta do perhaps one of the hardest things a leader could ever do: stare into the face of a man she was going to have executed and then lead him into a trap.

Couple that with Ranma and his abilities and you have an insane combination. Natalie was no fool. She understood easily how powerful Ranma was and what he could do on the field of battle. This was the kind of pairing, which legendary dynasties were made of.

In Samantha's case, she didn't care a fig for all of that. No, what stuck in her mind, was just well how these two meshed together. Henrietta was a princess, a woman born into privilege, who would normally have been trained in all the little mannerisms and abilities of a noblewoman to gain a husband, to be a pretty appendage for a King's arm. Instead, Henrietta had, at an age when most girls would be playing with dolls, stared hard at the future and decided she wanted to rule in her own right. Cardinal Mazarin had helped train her, but it had been the princess's drive and abilities which had carried her through, and beyond the whole issue with Wales, she had kept moving towards that goal, quietly gathering strength and training.

In normal times even that might not have been enough. Oh, Henrietta would probably have been crowned at eighteen, but with the troubles brewing those two years could well have seen disaster befalling Tristain. But then there was Ranma, his odd background and the chance his presence had created.

Samantha didn't know nearly as much about him as the princess did, but talking with the other Musketeers, she had picked up enough to know that, while he might have been from a noble house, he certainly hadn't been raised as such. Ranma was a physical monster and all his life and training had been to get him to that point.

But from what Samantha had seen personally and heard from Agnes, Amie and the others, their personalities meshed so well despite that. The two of them were immensely good foils for one another, the strengths of one aiding and abetting the strengths of the other, filling in the weaknesses of both. *Yes, she thought complacently, when they do marry, and I think they will, I think this to some is going to go down in history as perhaps the greatest king and queen combo to ever exist.*

The aforementioned Amie's thoughts were much more direct. She'd been here with the princess from the beginning and had seen the two of them coming closer all the time, and she knew even without the potion speeding things along, the two would have come to love one another. *That, and they're just so cute together!* The twenty-something girl practically squealed to herself.

Oh, a part of it was the of the night before, she knew. But Amie doubted sex alone could really explain the closeness she was seeing. Henrietta was not a young woman given to quick emotional entanglements. Her relationship with Wales had built up throughout her childhood and they had courted for several years before they had to break things off.

Amie, along with Agnes and Collette, had been Musketeers for long enough to have been serving as Henrietta's bodyguards when she was seeing the Albion prince.

No, Amie was certain, it was their lives to this point that were making them so desirous of one another's affections. *The phrase is touch starved,* she thought to herself. She had seen it in couples, when she was younger in the port of Amaan, when a man came home from war or

the ocean to his wife. Amie knew that Ranma had never had anyone he was close to, besides his father perhaps, and if Amie ever met the man, she would have stern words with him, probably accompanied by the kiss of her musket-butt.

But Henrietta too had lived a lonely life, although on the surface it would not seem so given her servants, acquaintances and her failed relationship with Wales. And yet, the servants were servants. There was very little that they could do in terms of comforting a young woman. Her acquaintances were all chosen by people he wanted to be close to her, with the only exception being Louise when they were very young. Her relationship with Wales... well, Amie had thoughts on that score that she wouldn't ever share with her young monarch.

Amie wasn't the only musketeer to look favorably on the twosome. Indeed, with Agnes gone to escort the prisoners to the academies jail, (more of a dank basement with a door that could be locked from the outside,) all of Henrietta's Musketeers were looking favorably on their princess and Ranma.

Perhaps that was why Louise was able to appear around the corner of the corridor they were walking through beyond Henrietta's water-sensing technique. She stood there by the corner, staring for a few seconds before anyone really noticed her.

Kissing as they were, the couples lack of attention to their surroundings could be explained away. The musketeers though... staring at the pink-haired girl, Samantha realized all of them had just earned quite a tongue lashing from Agnes later on. *Oh no...* "Um, Y, Your Highness..."

Their problems, alas, were just beginning.

Louise stopped, stared, then her face reddened in rage and she whipped out her wand and shouted, "You, you dog! How dare you k, kiss the princess!"

What flowed from her wand wasn't a spell per se. Louise wasn't really in a mental position to create a spell at that moment. But it was extremely well aimed, flashing through the air towards Ranma's face.

Ranma had already begun to pull away from Henrietta, a pout on his face at the interruption from Samantha. But hearing Louise's shout he turned rapidly. Seeing the spell heading toward his head, his hand flashed up to smash it out of the way almost negligently. Then another was coming towards them, and another, and Ranma's expression went from annoyed to somewhat impressed. "So," he said, as he batted them aside or simply clapped his hands, destroying the explosions, "how much magic to do you think she's putting into these spells?"

"If they are the equivalent of a line mages fireball, which from the size of the explosion I would assume they are, quite a lot," Henrietta mused, scowling a little, while she tried to tamp

down her body's response to both the earlier kiss and said kiss being interrupted. *I can't just drag Ranma back to our room and while the time away in his arms. Nor can I have whoever interrupts us executed, even if it wasn't my childhood friend. I am not that kind of monarch, or girl.*

And yet, as the explosions continued, Henrietta's self-control was aided by her growing intrigue by the magical power her childhood friend seems to have. "...Fifteen explosions in less than two minutes. Oh yes, I think it's high time we spoke to her, Ranma."

Ranma looked at her, and Henrietta twitched her fingers. "Fetch, please," she said simply, a sly smile on her face.

At that, Ranma's eyes narrowed. "You're going to pay for that, Princess Love."

"I eagerly await the moment," she said with a low laugh, a look in her eyes that caused Ranma's heart to beat even faster. He sent her a grin, and then Ranma was gone, disappearing to the eyes of everyone there, reappearing running right in front of Louise's body.

One hand grabbed Louise's wrist while the other snapped at her wand and pulled it out of her grip with a surprisingly amount of gentleness. "I think that's enough outta you, Oh, Mistress of Explosions." He shook Louise hand slightly, but it was like being shaken by a giant tiger. Yes, he was being all friendly now, but Louise suddenly realized that if Ranma wanted to, he could quite literally tear her apart.

The look in his eyes told her that was not a danger, though. Yet Louise still scowled angrily up at him, not backing down at all. "How dare you! How dare you try to, to bewitch Henrietta!"

"Henrietta, not the princess?" Ranma asked, some further approval for the girl entering his expression. If she was more worried for her childhood friend than for Ranma taking advantage of the princess, that was a good sign in his mind.

At that, Louise froze, realizing she had just committed a gross moment of lese-majesty that she had offered. But by this time, Henrietta had moved towards them by this time. She now interjected, her tone somewhat chilly, but cordial. "This is not a discussion that should happen out here in a corridor where anyone could come and overhear us." She frowned looking around, her expressions becoming somewhat more thunderous than it had been while Louise had been launching explosions. "In fact, I find myself somewhat perplexed that there haven't been a professor or five around to checking on the cause of the explosions."

Louise scowled, looking away and Henrietta made a little 'aha' kind of sound as her expression shifted to one of commiseration. "I take it that they are too used to such sounds occurring around school thanks to you, my friend?"

“You still consider me a friend, Your Highness?” Louise asked, taken aback.

“Yes. My only childhood friend as a matter of fact. And please, call me Henrietta.” Henrietta smiled. “You did call me that a moment ago when you were worried about my mental stability, after all.”

At that, Louise straightened up, while also looking a little sad at the news that Henrietta didn't have any others she would call childhood friends. Not that her own childhood been much better. Oh, she had friends among the servants and her big sister but servants were well peasants. They couldn't really be friends because they weren't equal. And as fantastic as Cattleya was, she was still a big sister, not a real playmate.

“And I think that we need to have a discussion,” Henrietta went on.

“With the healer Your, H, Henrietta? To break whatever spell this dog's put on you? The Henrietta I know you wouldn't be so quick as to kiss someone that she's barely known a few days!”

Henrietta chuckled. “You don't know me that well any longer Louise,” she rebuked the shorter girl very mildly. “But you're right. Normally I wouldn't have allowed our physical attraction to grow to this point in our courtship. But there have been extenuating circumstances.”

“I knew it” Louise exclaimed, trying to grab her wand out of Ranma's hand. She did manage to grab the end of it, but this only served to let Louise hang up from the wand, which remained in Ranma's hand for a moment before she fell back on her feet.

“It is not of Ranma's doing however,” Henrietta interjected, still calmly. *At least my friend's heart seems to be the right place, if not her common sense, Henrietta mused. Still, that is hardly her fault, given how short the academy's supply of common sense seems to be entirely lacking.*

“So, let us repair to my room. We have several hours before dinner is called, anyway. I had intended to broach the subject with you and your mother at the same time after dinner but...” Henrietta shrugged. “Needs must.”

Louise scowled, but then gestured up to her wand where Ranma was holding it at head height for him. “Fine. Now will you give me my wand back?”

“With the caveat that I will shoot you dead if you make a move towards it, I would have no problem with that Your Highness,” Samantha finally took part in the discussion, her voice quite chilly, as she tried to regain some measure of control of the situation. *Agnes is going to kill me!*

“There’s no need for that, Samantha. My friend here is acting under several misapprehensions and has been the butt of at least a year and a half worth of ridicule, teasing taunting and the various social pressures that a school of young people can create.”

Louise flinched at that and perhaps more at the pity in the princess’s point. But she was still scowling and holding out her hand.

There does seem to be some actual steel in the girl, Ranma thought, as he delicately handed her the wand.

She composed herself quickly, looking around the hallway for a moment, and breathing a sigh of relief as she noticed that none of the hallway had been damaged in her earlier attack. “At least I’m getting better at aiming,” she muttered, “that’s a plus.”

Ranma nodded, actually laughing. Her explosions hadn’t hurt him, after all and she hadn’t launched any of them at the princess or the Musketeers. “It is. Now all we need to work on is your choice of targets.”

“I thought I chose choose my target quite well thank you,” Louise grumped, staring between the princess and Ranma, before sighing and moving to follow Henrietta down the corridor, falling in behind her as befit her station.

Henrietta would have none of that. Instead, she grabbed Louise’s hand arm as the shorter girl made to move behind her, twisting around and walking purposefully along the corridor with her old friend practically captive along her arm. “So tell me, Louise, besides your academic endeavors, what are you doing with your life? Have you met with your fiancé Wardes, of late?”

Louise blushed hotly, shaking her head. “N, no Henrietta, I haven’t. My schoolwork comes first, and you know that he knows that better than most.”

“He hasn’t even come by to take you out on dates? That’s rather disappointing.”

“We met a few times since I started to attend the academy,” Louise replied hesitantly. “They didn’t last very long, and we always had one of the professors had come along as a chaperone of course. Despite his honor as a Gryphon Knight, there are proprieties to consider, after all.”

“Of course. So nothing tantalizingly juicy happened, but... are you satisfied with the match?” Henrietta pressed, sensing something in her friend’s tone. “I have to tell you that I was quite surprised that your mother arranged it, considering Wardes age in comparison to our own.”

“He’s a perfect gentleman,” Louise began, then caught the skeptical look on her old friend’s face and sighed. “...I would possibly have preferred someone younger,” she said delicately, “but I cannot fault Wardes as a man.”

“Ouch,” Ranma muttered, shaking his head. *I don’t know much about courtship or romance, although after last night I think I’m learning quickly. On the job as it were, heh. But even so the idea that someone who I was affianced to would say that she cannot fault me as a man would be harsh as hell.*

His mutter roused Louise to realize that there was a man present, and others along with Henrietta and she blushed hotly. Henrietta quickly put her at ease. “Do not mind Ranma or my Musketeers. No one will speak of or repeat what you tell us.”

“Well beyond that, I don’t that is,” Louise sighed, looking away and wordlessly gesturing down to herself with a hand. “He’s a grown man, with a grown man’s interests outside the academic, and I, I don’t have much going for my physically or beyond the walls of this academy, not really.”

“Your blossoming will come, never fear,” Henrietta chuckled. Mine started a few years ago and was quite a bit more trouble than it was worth... at the time anyway.” Henrietta sent Ranma a smile before going on. “We had offers of my hand in marriage before of course, but afterward, they came in several dozen a week.”

Ranma’s eyes narrowed and a growl rose from his throat, like an angry cat readying his claws.

Once more Henrietta smiled at him warmly, shaking her head. “Never fear my knight, they were simply offers,” she murmured, keeping her voice low as they passed through another intersection. “Cardinal Mazarin turned them all down. He was holding out for that marriage I already mentioned to you but it will not happen. Our country is strong enough, once united to stand on its own.”

“Yes Henrietta,” Ranma and Louise both said as one, which caused Henrietta to laugh and the two of them to stare at one another, before Louise huffed and turned away.

The talk continued from there, with Henrietta and Louise gossiping like schoolgirls for a few moments until they reached the hallway leading to the suite Henrietta had been given for her stay at the Academy. There they found Agnes and the musketeers she had brought with her to deliver the prisoners to their cells, minus two she had left there to guard those prisoners. With the prisoners given potions by the academy’s nurse to drain their Will, two Musketeers armed with muskets, pistols and swords would be enough.

She was tapping her foot on the stone in some annoyance, and she scowled upon seeing the Princess and the others. Her eyes narrowed at Louise, then looked over to Samantha’s

hangdog expression. "Why do I think that your being so slow has something to do with the midget," she growled, one hand patting her pistol-butt. "And the explosions I heard? No one else seems to make anything of them, so I didn't either but..."

"It has been handled," Henrietta cut in briskly. "For now, Agnes, please see to it that we are not disturbed. And then, remind us thirty minutes before dinner time."

"Yes Your Highness," Agnes growled. "I'll just be out here talking with Samantha for a bit."

Samantha whimpered a little, while Amie and the others had cheerful thoughts about being thankful none of them had ever been nominated as one of Agnes's lieutenants.

"Do be gentle with Samantha, Agnes dear. I realize, my dear captain, that you take your duties seriously, but nothing happened because of this incident, so I think you can afford to be lenient."

"Yes Your Highness. I will endeavor to be gentle in my remonstrance..." Agnes began before freezing. "Captain? I'm a commander. Heck, I only hold that rank for organizational purposes. There's only twenty-five of us, so there's no need for a higher rank. And I'm not a noble..."

"The phrase commander of the musketeers is the rank of my special guard as a princess, one created by Mazarin and myself. I will be Queen within the week, and will need a stronger, more visible guard. Which means that you Captain Agnes de Milan, will have a new rank, and will need to grow the musketeers accordingly. I want you to think about that, and which of your ladies you want to start training in...certain abilities soon." Henrietta smiled as she spoke, before letting her expression turn into iron. "And I have never cared over much about one's station, only competence. Despite recent events Agnes, you are someone I trust both in terms of competence and character. You will continue to be my strong shield going forward."

"Y, Your Majesty is too kind!" Agnes stumbled over the words, astonished. The difference between a commander and a captain was manifold, especially given Henrietta's own rise in status. Having a commoner as the head of her security would send a lot of messages, but to Agnes it just meant she still retained Henrietta's confidence, which after the past few days Agnes had come to question.

Although, what did she mean by training in certain abil...oh no... not that stuff Ranma was talking about? Ugh... Agnes suddenly wasn't feeling so good about her elevation. Still, I knew he was going to stick around, damn it, so I suppose I might as well get as much out of it as I can.

Nodding her head, Henrietta left Agnes to her musings, gesturing both Ranma and Louise into the suite in front of her before turning back to their guards. "Remember, I would

like to be notified thirty minutes prior to dinner. Unless Makoto or one of the other Earthers come by, then you can interrupt us.”

“Yes, Your Highness,” Agnes and the Musketeers intoned, before Agnes turned on Samantha like a wolf on her prey. “Samantha, front and center!”

Inside, Ranma moved over to prepare them some tea. He had seen how good an idea food at tense conversations was before this and felt this was a chance to put that into actions. Leading the way over to the table, Henrietta looked over at her lover in some amusement. “You know how to prepare tea? You haven’t mentioned that before.”

“Eh, not really, no,” Ranma admitted with a laugh. Oh, I can make camp tea and black coffee, and I think I could make some kind of odd sugary drink, though I can’t remember what it was for.” Ranma frowned for a moment before shrugging. “Whatever. Anyway, I watched Siesta make it. And it was a physical thing, so I was able to copy it.” He smirked at Henrietta, who instantly started to flush. “I have mentioned how quick I can learn anything related to the body before, right?”

“*Ahem*, yes, well, this should be interesting then,” Henrietta murmured, banishing her blush with difficulty. gesturing Louise to sit down. “Before that however, let me point out some things to you Louise. While I am pleased that you wanted to defend my person, your desires and actions were misplaced.”

At that point she proceeded to strip a small strip off of her friend, if far more gently than she had done with Osmond and Colbert before continuing with an explanation of what was going on between herself and Ranma, starting with the preface of, “With all that being said, before we begin, you cannot divulge this to anyone, not even your mother, or your sisters.”

At that, Louise shook her head, coming out of the shocked funk that she had slid into during Henrietta’s remonstrances with her. “As if I’d tell Eleanor anything!”

“And what about Cattleya?” Henrietta asked archly.

Louise nodded, sighing a little. “You have my word I will not share anything you tell me, Your Majesty. But if he is...”

“As I said it had nothing to do with him!” Henrietta shouted, raising her voice for the first time. “You really must stop looking for reasons to upbraid my paramour, Louise.”

“P, p, paramour!” Louise gasped. “But, but Henrietta, I, he’s only a...”

“Only a kind, gentle man despite having strength to tear apart castles and shatter mountains, only a young man who has become a friend, confidant and strong ally in the few days since I met him. A lonely man who merely wanted friendship in return for friendship,”

Henrietta growled, slapping her hands down on the table while Ranma's ears burned. "I will not hear any protest against Ranma, be it based on his so-called social standing or anything else. You do not have to like him, Louise, you merely have to realize I do, and stop antagonizing him. Is that clear?"

Gulping, Louise nodded, somewhat shocked at this protective side of Henrietta. "I um, er, yes Your Highness. I, I'll try. But, but you still haven't told me about why you are so suddenly close to one another."

"Indeed I have not. But I will do so now, so long as you remember that this... event was already handled, and I am, while unhappy at the speed with which this occurred, quite happy with the outcome, understood?"

Henrietta waited for Louise to nod before she explained about how she had been accidentally potion by Montmorency, which caused Louise to tremble in rage, and then shock at the knowledge of why the woman had done so. "That idiot! Seriously!?! She, she would endanger not only herself, but her families fortune and standing in order to ensnare Guiche?"

"I know right," Ranma shouted from where he was still preparing tea.

OOOOOO

While Ranma was preparing tea and Henrietta explaining things, elsewhere of events were unfolding far faster than Henrietta had thought they could be. This was because she didn't realize how several of the exterior problems facing Tristain were interconnected just yet. Because the Reconquista were not, in fact, a creation of power mad Albion nobles. Those nobles in turn were being manipulated from the shadows from someone else, who had access to all the Albion's spy network could tell them. And that spy network consisted of several mages who could pass on information much faster than Henrietta realized.

"You think Henrietta will actually be able to do it?" a man asked, looking at the woman beside him quizzically. His features were in shadow at present, but his voice was a deep, powerful bass, and there seemed to be a crown on his head judging by the glint of gold visible from the light of the sun outside this small, heavily shadowed room. It wouldn't do, after all, for anyone to be able to see this man meeting with his agent.

"I believe that Henrietta is proving to be strong in personality and as politician. I think she can and will consolidate power in Tristain," the woman, Sheffield, responded instantly. "How long it takes is a question, as is the nature of this Ranma weapon, and her new

bodyguard. But eventually we can see Tristain as fully united with a centralized authority once more.”

“Hmm... we will need to nip that in the bud. And the easiest way to do that is to use the Albion forces. My own country is not quite ready for war. Not when we have to watch our other borders.”

“Pushing forward the invasion now is risky,” Sheffield cautioned. “The Civil War in Britain is still going on. While the last survivor of the royal house, Wales, is no soldier, he is a popular figure among the peasantry and those few nobles that haven’t already bought into the Reconquista concept for their own ambitions. Further, without having first consolidated our hold in Albion, Cromwell will be hard pressed to come up with a reason to launch an attack now.”

The man in the shadows clenched his one, visible hand, but he had long since told Sheffield to speak her mind about things like that, so after a moment just nodded brusquely, the movement barely visible to the woman across from him. “Agreed. Hmmm.... who was it that passed this information to us?”

“Agent W, the chief Albion spy in Tristain. He has an agent of his own at the Academy. Apparently, she was able to overhear this discussion almost verbatim.”

“How? That seems too good to be true.”

She helped the individuals setting the room up for the meeting. I would assume she let a small hearing hole in the floor under the table or some such,” Sheffield shrugged. “I realize this is really second-hand information, but I think it’s important enough to act on as if it was already substantiated.”

“And do we have any idea who this spy is? She seems most perceptive and a fast thinker.”

“She is the thief Fouquet the Crumbling Dirt. She is active there under the alias Longueville,” the woman replied promptly. “We don’t have any real hold on her just yet other than threats to a . She is known to be orphanage in Albion she is known to be involved with in some fashion.”

“Use it. Manipulate her. She is about to become a murderer.”

“I do not think that she will succeed,” the woman said hesitantly.

“She doesn’t have to. All she needs to do, is disrupt things.”

The woman shook her head. "Our communication back to Tristain is slow, given W and most Albion spies don't know about who the Reconquista truly serve. I would have to go myself."

"Hmm... then do so. Sacrifice this Fouquet, a pawn for a queen is an excellent trade. But if that doesn't work, convince Cromwell to launch a full out assault on Tristania. You can sell it in such a way that it is seen as a preemptive strike, surely?"

Sheffield frowned but nodded. "That makes sense, I can use that, though it will still take weeks to bring together the military forces." She then smiled thinly. "Although, talking to Fouquet directly can give us some knowledge of the 'Ranma' weapon and Henrietta's new, immensely capable guard."

"Good. I mean to have that country, and I will have it one way or another." With that the man turned away, heading out of the room via a hidden panel in the wall.

The woman behind him grimaced at that, staring after him soulfully, before sighing and turning away, clasping a large bracelet on her arm. It buzzed for a moment, flashing with a kaleidoscope of colors, before disappearing, reappearing elsewhere.

OOOOOO

The tea was quite good Louise was surprised to find out and she made a point to remember Siesta's name. If she kept on working here at the Academy, something that Louise rather doubted given how fulsome in the tea's praise the princess was, Louise would cheerfully call on her again.

Deciding she had procrastinated enough, Louise looked at Ranma, her face twisting into a grimace. "All right. I understand what is going on now. I, I am, I ap, apol, apoli... I am sorry," she forced out almost between clenched teeth. "It seems as if I... overreacted."

With that onerous task done, Louise turned back to Henrietta. "But are you, that is your courtship will continue, you are happy with this? I know you said you didn't want to hear any further blandishments on Ranma's character, but he really is just a, a foreign peasant. That's not a blandishment, that's simple fact."

"He is much more than that," Henrietta said with a laugh knowing both that Louise was still speaking out of frustration (and perhaps jealousy) as well ignorance of Ranma's actual background, as the princess thought of it. But then she became serious smiling serenely at her old friend. "And I think that you are letting your own frustrations cloud your understanding of

both what Ranma is capable of, and what his summoning by you, and then your summoning of Makoto, Chad, and Kazuma could mean for you.”

“What do you mean, Henrietta?” Louise asked, frowning, then scowling and looking away. “I mean I’ve been told time and time again that just means I’m more of a Zero than ever!”

Henrietta sighed. “Nothing could be further than the truth. Tell me, Louise, can you name anyone else who had a human for familiar?”

“Brimir the Founder,” Louise responded instantly. “He used several human familiars against the elves in his war to push them back.”

“Indeed. And what was his magic?”

“The Void. The Holy Element, given to Brimir by God to fight the vile Elves, the element that no one else has had since,” Louise answered against instantly. “What is...”

“That is doubtful. Perhaps it could be better said that no one else has been primarily a Void Mage, although perhaps even that is questionable.”

“Henrietta!” Louise gasped. “It is Holy Scripture that the Founder was the only one to ever wield the Void. It is part of the strict Scripture that only the holiest of holies, in battle against the elves could use the Void summoning forth w, warriors to...”

She stumbled to a halt, and Ranma hid a smile. Once more it seemed as if Henrietta had been correct. While Ranma didn’t honestly like the little girl, he couldn’t deny there was nothing wrong with her brain.

“Are you saying that my summoning of the Earthers is a sign that I am a Void mage! That can’t be!” Louise shook her head frantically.

“I agree, alone that clue would only have been perhaps circumstantial. There is other evidence, however. Two points of interest, in point of fact. One, the inability of yourself to create any other spells. I have seen your records here at the Academy Louise. You place first or second in practically every class, with only young Tabitha in continual contention for the first place position. Spell Structure, analysis, understanding the elements, all of those classes you place highly in. And yet you are still unable to do a single spell? That supposes therefore that there is something either wrong with how you are casting, which is patently false given your aforementioned grades, or how you were being taught to cast.”

Henrietta took a sip of tea, smiling over Ranma, before looking back at Louise. “Furthermore, there is the spell you cast on Ranma.”

“The spell I cast on... the translation spell!” Louise too turned to stare at Ranma. “It’s still working. And working well!”

“Yeah, the silence spell you cast on me gave me the ability to understand and be understood by the people around me.”

Louise blushed, but nodded grudgingly minutes. “Yes. I tried to close your throat enough so that words cannot come out via a line level wind-wind spell. You should have been unable to form words in your throat, but you would have still been able to breathe. I understand, that what actually happened is the exact opposite, and...” She faltered, frowning. “and well beyond what any wind, fire or even water or earth spell could have accomplished. But surely there is another explanation than, than me being a Void mage!”

“If you have one, I would love to hear it.” Henrietta shook her head. “No Louise, I believe that you are a Void Mage. Which means that everything you have been taught here, is if not totally wrong in terms of teaching you how to work with your element so much so that it is counterproductive, that it is simply useless.”

“Henrietta,” Louise began softly, staring at her friend in shock and horror. “I am a faithful follower of the Founder. This is, I can’t... it is sacrilege to, if the Pope discovered...”

“I’m missing something here,” Ranma interjected as he sat down with them, twisting a chair around and placing his arms on the back of it as he stared between the two girls. “You mentioned there was religious aspects to this whole Void thing Henrietta but Louise looks as if she’s about to faint or bolt and find the nearest whole to hide in.”

Pausing and thinking how to describe it, Henrietta decided to see if she could compare the religion of the Founder to anything in Ranma’s still damaged memories. “Ranma, do you remember anything about the religion in your world? That could be a good starting point.”

After a few seconds, Ranma shook his head. “Eh, from what I remember my people aren’t really all that religious as you would probably understand the term. I remember monks, but they were Buddhists, which is a religion based around not a god, but a belief about karma, I think. Ugh, I spent a lot of time at their monasteries but I can’t remember a lot of their teachings, that’s... kind of harsh.” Ranma scowled, somewhat sad about that, since he could remember the monks as having been very nice to him.

Still, now wasn’t the time for that and he shrugged. “In Japan, I suppose you would call the Shinto religion a religion with a lot of different gods coupled with ancestor worship. Er, neither of them are as organized like I’m getting the impression your religion is.”

“And there goes any idea of comparing the two worlds to help you figure things out,” Henrietta pouted. “Very well.”

She gave a brief history of the world: how the founder had appeared when the elves had been basically conquering everything, pushing the humans to the brink of extinction. How the Founder had arrived, enslaved an elf with the Void magic and given every one magic. "Before that, magic was not nearly as known as it is today. The Founder's religion Brimirism, is the only religion in Halkeginia. It is controlled by the Pope in Romalia, who dictates holy scripture."

"It is by the Founders Will that nobles have magic," Louise chimed in. "Every royal house can trace itself back to Brimir, and every noble house to one of his students. It is by the Founder's words which we nobles are placed above the common folk."

Ranma and Henrietta explained exchanged a glance at that but said nothing. The revelation that Will was almost akin to ki, and that Ranma could probably teach his own abilities to use such to anyone, was something that Henrietta wanted to sit on, until her own guards could start showing evidence of his training.

A secret shared is a secret, which loses its potency, she thought, nodding her head to her childhood friend's words, while also noting fervor with which she spoke with a wince. Odd, I know Karin isn't nearly as enamored of the Faith as that. I am also not happy about the whole common folk line there, or how much she looks down on Ranma for ostensibly being a peasant. But I would say that is something she has learned here at the Academy. A word to her mother, and that issue can be solved quickly enough, I hope.

"I understand your concerns, Louise," she soothed. "It is a wrench to think that you could have anything in common with that most holy of men. And yet, I believe you will find that in the church's scripture, there is room for interpretation. Yes, the founder had Void magic, but it was not the Void magic itself that made him holy. It was his deeds and belief which made him holy, the ability to fight the elves, the moral fiber to unite all humanity against them. And there are other hints that void magic will return to us in times of great strife. Given what is happening in Albion and the monster who sits on the thrown in Gallia, perhaps this is such a time?"

"...Maybe, but I still don't know..."

"Do you have any other explanation for the evidence I've shared with you?" Henrietta asked gently.

Louise frowned, but didn't reply, just looking away.

"How many of those explosions do you think you could toss out? In a day estimated," Ranma requested deciding it was time for another angle of attack.

Looking back at him Louise asked, "Why?"

When Ranma just gestured her to answer Louise scowled, but after a few moments thought said, "Around the same size as the one I once I used earlier? Fifty or sixty before I used up my Will for the day."

"And after a day you'd be able to do it again?"

"Yes. I've never worn out my Will to the point that a night's rest wouldn't see me right, if that is what you're asking."

"Kind of but not really," Ranma looked over at the princess. "Henrietta, how many of those would you be able to do?"

"A purposeful explosion, the closest I could get would be a fireball, and I am not a fire mage by tendency or inclination. Still, I would estimate twenty-five, at most? I would wager a fire mage would be able to do forty at best, perhaps as many as sixty if they were truly powerful and well trained."

"So you are an immensely powerful mage, you're smart obviously, but you still can't use a single spell? That again that is a major sign you know that Henrietta's right about you being a Void mage."

"B, but all my spells backfire!" Louise exclaimed. "Even the one on you I meant it to do something entirely different."

"Which is why I was saying I think that learning how to use spells from other elements is actually hindering you. The truth will be in the pudding I think," Henrietta said with a chuckle, as Louise blushed, remembering a very sticky pudding moment from their youth. "If you are able to re-create that Translation spell, for the other three newcomers from Earth, I think that you will have proven your Element."

"Oh what a choice!" Louise scoffed, still looking distraught. "On the one hand, I could be considered a heretic, yet I would prove myself to be a powerful mage. On the other, I'd just be a Zero. One hell of a choice Henrietta."

"Life isn't always what we wish to be," Henrietta answered calmly. "That is true for everyone, regardless of station."

Scowling Louise nodded, looking thoughtful.

Ranma, in an attempt to be helpful, added, "I would try to think about what you were thinking and imagining when you cast the spell. Then before that, work yourself near to your limit, so that even if you accidentally overpower the spell, it'll still be small." Ranma also had another thought about why Louise couldn't quite create any spells, but it wasn't quite coming to the fore of his brain enough for him to give it voice.

Louise scowled some more, but eventually nodded. "I, I need to think on this."

"Talk to your mother," Henrietta suggested, lips twitching as Louise flinched. "I think she noticed something off about Ranma's description of the translation spell and she is a rock of good sense."

"I, I will think about it Your Highness. With your permission?" Louise asked, standing up and looking over towards the door. She needed some air, and some time to think about the revelations here.

The moment Louise was gone, Ranma was behind Henrietta, picking her up gently and then sitting down in the chair she had been in a moment ago, cuddling her into his chest, even as he ran one hand up under her skirt, pinching her thigh as he whispered, "Now, I believe I said you'd pay for that fetch joke."

Giggling, Henrietta began to kiss Ranma back, murmuring, "Just don't do anything to the dress, I'll be wearing it for dinner..."

As the two lovers enjoyed some cuddle time...

- 1.** A meeting occurs between a thoughtful Louise and an annoyed Kazuma, while Henrietta and Ranma, fresh off uninterrupted cuddle time have to deal with an angry gardener before dinner. (some romance comedy, stuff from the original)
- 2.** Tabitha has come looking for the computer, along with Makoto, Chad and Kazuma, wanting to talk about it before dinner. (Tabitha, Kirche, flirting, Henrietta meeting Tabby)
- 3.** Lightning in the distance. Makoto vs a local noble slob (Makoto-centric, Makoto secrets, combat, noble smacked down)
- 4.** Dinner goes off without a hitch. The trip back to the palace, not so much. (Comedy, a splash of romance, violence)

End Episode 16

Fun fact: Reconquista is a term that has little to do with Britain, the Earth version of Albion. It is in fact a term from the history of the Iberian Peninsula when they (This was pre-Spain and Portugal) fought to throw out the Arab-Berber Muslim conquerors. Isn't history fun?

Anyway, I wanted to world build a bit in this episode, but not extensively. These episodes don't lend themselves to that, thankfully. I figure I can split up the info-dump about religion into smaller nibble-sized chunks.

On the choices this time:

One is pure comedy with a dash of Kazuma and Louise getting to know one another and a bit more from the original Adventure thread.

Two lets me play with Tabitha and Kirche, maybe trying to shift them into real secondary characters.

Three as you all know is Makoto centric, and pushes my own plot forward and cuts off a Familiar of Zero subplot.

Four would push forward several more of the Familiar of Zero side plots.

But I am not going to even try to get out another episode by the end of the year. Sorry guys but family time is not time-on-fanfic time, LOL. I'll be hard pressed to get both **GDWHOM** and **Semblance** out, along with editing **MW**.