

Hello all. I realize I said I wouldn't have this out before the small story poll winner was announced, but I seriously needed a break after trying to get that ONE FUCKING SCENE to work. I've decided that half of it needs to just be discarded at this point. Argh. Regardless, this was a nice break, and only had me editing 7,000 words of the original and writing 5,000 words of my own. Then Hiryo got it back to me in the same day I sent it to him! Thank him guys, that was really quick work.

Now, while everyone could just go and look at the poll since it's now not a weighted poll, I figure I'll share it here too since I have done so in the past.

Agnes returns with Montmorency in tow and anger in her heart (more from the original) won easily with 61%. Everyone wants more Ranma/Henrietta romance... and the eventual lemons. Duh.

Makoto makes friends with Tabitha and discovers her magic courtesy of Siesta (lots of comedy, some violence, Kirche being Kirche) was in second place with 19%. I would have thought Makoto, Tabitha and Kirche combined would have done better, but romance and the promise of lemony goodness was too strong.

At 14% The Judge Magistrate's estate is being raided (combat, surprises, world-building) was the third place winner. World-building I suppose needs to happen regardless of choices but in moderation.

And in last place with only 7% Ami Mizuno and her new friends deal with a mystery while a certain cat/woman does the same (more Earth-style adventures). Here I think I will just take it as a given for a while that no one is interested in what is going on back on Earth and similar choices will no longer appear.

And now, for the episode! Thanks to **Kestrel** and the others for the Adventure thread and thank you Hiryo for editing. And Grammarly too, which I used LOL.

Episode 12: Potions and Postulations

As she marched her prisoner through the back halls of the Academy of Magic, Agnes fairly seethed with barely repressed fury. Her cape concealed the drawn pistol she had trained on her highborn captive. Although it might be redundant at this point, considering Agnes's threats when she had caught up to the girl had caused her floodgates to entirely open.

Anyone else in this situation might have had some sympathy. Agnes, whose charge had been enchanted by this bitch's potion, in her stupid personal plot, did not. *I was aiming to make her piss herself, damn it!*

It had not taken more than fifteen minutes to identify Montmorency de-la Agnes didn't-fucking-care as the only noble to visit the kitchens and take particular interest in the wine. That would have been fine, and indeed, her work keeping Cotre and Duke Largo as far away from Karin the Heavy Wind as possible and removing anything that could cause offense might well have won her a medal from Agnes's Princess. However, she was also a Water Mage, a budding Potions Mistress. That made the amount of time spent near the trays of wine suspicious. In addition to this, Montmorency was the only person who was seen to leave the Academy since the Princess had arrived at the school.

After that, it had taken Agnes and her Musketeers over two hours to track the silly bitch down, although honestly, as she thought of it, Agnes realized that was more due to the skills the Musketeers possessed. Or didn't possess in this case. Every Musketeer was a town-raised girl. None of them in the guard had any idea how to track someone in the forest. When Montmorency had abandoned the road to hide after some fright, the Musketeers had lost the trail.

They might have still been racing toward Tristania if they had not had the luck to encounter a post-rider coming the other way. When questioned, the man reported that he hadn't seen the noble girl. With that, they had backtracked and, using their lanterns, discovered a set of hoofmarks leading off the road. They followed the randomly winding trail until they found the hysterically crying female crouched in a bush, still holding the reins of her horse, who was placidly standing nearby, eating the grass.

Upon arriving in the antechamber of the Princess's suite, Agnes pushed Montmorency into an un-cushioned wooden chair. A series of hand gestures sent her Musketeers around the room, three of them pointing their guns near or at the girl, while the others moved back out into the hallway beyond to add to the guard there.

Agnes then knelt down so that she was looking up at Montmorency's tear-streaked face. "I am going to go to see my Princess. I will return. If you even try to leave, my Musketeers will kill you. If you breathe too hard, my Musketeers will kill you. And if you do not do anything in your power to help my Princess as she demands, I will kill you. Do you understand what I have said, or should I just kill you now? Just nod."

Gulping, Montmorency nodded her head quickly until Agnes, hiding a satisfied smirk, stood up. At a knock on the door, she to open it, and found Victoire there, holding a saddlebag marked by the same courier they had met on the road. "He dropped this off for the princess," she reported.

Seeing the mark of Judge Garibaldi, Agnes smirked. "Well, at least something might be going right." She nodded at the other woman and then, without even looking at Montmorency, who was trying to powder her face.

Entering Agnes was about to go to one knee and deliver her report only to pause, seeing the closed eyes and serenely smiling face of her liege. And behind her, the foreigner was slowly pulled faintly glowing fingertips from her face. Her eyes narrowed in suspicion, but her subordinates did not appear distressed, even as Agnes glared at them, demanding an explanation.

Before either of the Musketeers in the room could say anything, Ranma spoke up. "Give 'er a sec, Tomboy. She was just using a meditation technique to keep a hold of herself. That potion is messing her mind up the more time goes by."

Ignoring the sound of Agnes's teeth grinding at his little taunt, Ranma moved around the table, watching as Henrietta blinked a few times before opening fully. Her smile broadened as she straightened up in her chair, and Ranma smiled back. "You okay there, Henrietta?" he asked.

"Oh, thank you, yes, I rather think I am, Ranma." Henrietta smiled back, reaching up and entwining their fingers together, watching Ranma blush faintly even as he returned the gesture. "My mind is quite a bit clearer now and rather calm. Indeed, I managed to sort out a few things most distinctly," she concluded with an intent look in her eye.

That look caused Ranma's pulse to race for some reason he didn't quite understand. Instead, he concentrated on something much more important: the fact that Henrietta was a natural at meditation. "Well, you did one heck of a great job. Heck, I know Masters and monks who couldn't reach The Well of Peace so quick! I can't wait to teach you some more of my tricks. I think you'll pick up anything on the mental side of things really quickly."

"Thank you for the praise, however despite what occurred during that attack in the woods, I don't think I am suited to combat if I am, so I do not know if I would learn that well." The Princess's smile was now slightly apologetic.

"Hey, just because you haven't seen me use any of... oh right, no martial arts here." Ranma rolled his eyes then moved to sit down again, breaking their handclasp, something Agnes was happy about but which seemed to cause Henrietta to pout.

That pout disappeared as Ranma went on. "So, Martial Arts. They aren't just about punching and kicking. They are a way of life. The Art comes in two forms and two parts, depending on who you ask. One Physical, second spiritual, or Yin and Yang."

"Male energy and female energy?" Henrietta asked quizzically.

"Er, kind of. Darn Louise's translation spell is really cool when you get down to it. Um, getting into that aspect will take too long, I think, and I know my old man sort of looked down on the spiritual side of things. Huh... but then, why did he let me learn from all those monks?"

Henrietta chuckled under her breath and not just because of the comical look of confusion as Ranma crossed his eyes as he tried to examine his fractured memories. She also chuckled because once more, it seemed as if Ranma's father was more interested in getting him a rounded education than teaching him to follow their family's personal martial style. "You were saying something?"

"Oh, right!" Ranma shook his head quickly, coming back to the here and now to defend the Art. "Anyway, the various styles of martial arts can be broken into hard and soft styles. Soft styles are mostly defensive, primarily about merging the body and mind into one. Heck, one of my favorite styles is Wing Chun, and outside of combat, it is just insanely graceful and used to promote health. Beyond that, several schools are based around dancing. There's Tai Chi Chuan, Capoeira, oh, even Silat Tari, that's another really graceful style! Do you like to dance?"

"Oh, I love to dance!" Henrietta happily admitted.

"Yeah, I can see that looking at how you move, yer always light on your feet." Realizing what he'd just said, Ranma flushed and looked away, going on hurriedly as he tried not to notice Henrietta's happy smile. "Um, I once watched a kind of festival that featured a pair of Silat experts. Some say it's the most graceful Art of them, and I thought it was amazing to watch. Not quite as pure a martial style as Wing Chun, not to me but still just amazing to watch and do."

"That sounds wonderful!" The young royal beamed at her new friend. "Do you think you could teach me?"

"Sure. Oh, I don't think I could teach you to be among the best, not of that style, but I think you'd be a natural at it," Ranma said enthusiastically. He loved the Art and sharing it with his new friend sounded cool on multiple levels.

Agnes grimaced. On the one hand, she was happy her princess wanted to learn self-defense above and beyond using her magic, something she had been suggesting for years. On the other hand, the fact Ranma had talked her into it in barely a few days annoyed her no end. *Still, now isn't the time for this.* With that in mind, Agnes subtly cleared her throat. "Um, my lady..."

"Ah, *ahem*, yes, Agnes. What did you find?" Princess Henrietta asked, settling her face into the mien of the decisive leader that Agnes had long since come to hold in high esteem.

"Our investigation was extremely quick, your highness. We soon identified the potion could only have been administered by either a staff member or Montmorency Margarita La

Fere de Montmorency, a second-year student of this school. When we discovered Montmorency was also known to be a potions expert, we tried to find her, only to discover she had fled on horseback. Following her has highlighted a problem with my Musketeer's training that I hadn't figured out until today: all of us are next to useless in the woods." Agnes grimaced. "Still, we were eventually able to discover the girl, since she was even worse in the woods than us. Please accept my apologies for the amount of time that search required."

Henrietta blinked. "I... really? Truthfully, I had not registered a significant delay. What time is it now?"

"It is approaching nine of the clock, your Grace."

"Oh my! Sir Ranma, were you standing there all this time helping me? I am sorry." The Princess looked at her new friend and future paramour apologetically. The dinner had ended in its abrupt manner at seven.

Feh, it wasn't an issue, don't worry. I've been made to balance on poles on one finger for hours. Standing behind you was easy." Ranma leaned back, putting his hands behind his head as he smiled at Henrietta. "Besides, you were doing such a great job, I didn't want to jostle you out of it. And it also let me experiment with my ki sense." At that, his smile turned tender almost as he blushed, a lot of his insouciance disappearing. "Um, you, you have beautiful ki, you know that, Henrietta? I'd, um, I'd be fine helping you like that all day."

Henrietta took a moment to absorb that, then it was her turn to blush and lose her regal poise as she remembered that ki could be likened to the shape of one's soul. That was possibly the sweetest compliment anyone had given her. "Oh, we, well, thank you for that, Ranma."

The super-powered fighter's blush increased dramatically to the delight of Henrietta and the two more romantically inclined Musketeers, as he mumbled, "Sure. Not a problem. Never a problem."

Henrietta held her friend's gaze for another moment to make certain he understood how appreciative of that compliment she was before reluctantly turning back to her bodyguard. "Did the girl resist beyond running away? Did you discover any evidence something larger was planned or if she had additional accomplices? The Montmorency house is part of the Merchant Faction, for all they are a noble house, and they are somewhat hard to pin down in terms of how they see me."

"Wait a second," Ranma interrupted, his face scrunched up. "The girl's first name is the same as her family's last name? Do they just have no imagination, or is that normal around here?"

"I rather think that was an 'oops we wanted a boy' moment, from what my mother told me." Say what you will about the woman, she at least was always a good source for gossip,

Henrietta reflected before shaking her head. "Not that it stopped them from loving their daughter dearly, of course. At any rate, my questions, Agnes?"

"No, Your Highness. Montmorency did not do anything but run away. In my opinion, you were right to say this might have all been a mistake. Everything so far points to her just being a stupid girl, playing stupid love games and getting in over her head!" at this point, Agnes's contempt could not be more obvious. On a normal day, she had little patience for the antics of nobles. Things like this were even worse.

She then winced. "Um, there was a bit of an issue, however, after we returned. We were somehow spotted by headmaster Osmond on the way up here. Why he was wandering around the servant's area, I have no idea, but Michele was able to keep him distracted with a little bounce and sway as I lead the prisoner off. He has, however, requested to speak to you later."

"This headmaster guy's a pervert then?" Ranma asked, getting the idea of what a bounce and sway meant easily.

"Somewhat, yes. Nothing too untoward, Osmond would never dream of going past looking, but Osmond certainly enjoys doing that," Henrietta sighed, shaking her head.

"Huh. He uh, ever do that to you? I could punt him over the tree-line for ya if you want," Ranma offered. For some reason, the idea of some old fart looking at Henrietta that way bothered the heck out of him.

Agnes actually grinned at that, while Henrietta pretended to ponder the idea for a moment. "Tempting, but perhaps not just yet. Besides, we have something more important to do at the moment. Agnes, please bring the silly chit in. You know what demeanor is best for this. Ranma, this is one of those special occasions I mentioned in the throne room."

Ranma's smirk at that was positively evil as he gave her a thumb's up. "Got it. One terrified noble poisoner, coming right up!" With that, he put a stern expression on his face as his eyes started to light up once more. When they had been talking earlier, they had been a very gentle, alluring blue. Now they shifted into the red color they had been when they first met.

Smirking very briefly in approval of Ranma's response, Agnes opened the door and barked, "Right, get her in here!"

Two of the Princess's musketeers did so, marching her along in lockstep, gripping her elbows tightly. Not that Montmorency was struggling. She'd had time to compose herself, but the blonde woman knew she was in deep horse manure right now, with an added cow paddy for dessert. Trying to run again would only make it worse.

Yet the sight within the room was almost worse than her imaginations. First was the glare of the guard captain. Then there was the icy, aloof look on the Princess's face. And finally, there was mister 'I made a magical attack that looked as large as the academy.' Currently, he was standing next to the Princess, his arms crossed and his eyes ablaze with the same red energy he'd used then, paired with a grim, narrow-eyed stare. All told, it was enough to make even the strongest quail. And Montmorency wasn't that strong to begin with.

The two musketeers had to support her as Montmorency's legs gave out, depositing her in a quivering heap at the Princess's feet. Job done, they stepped back and trained weapons on her while Natalie and Rosamunde moved to secure the door, palming their guns meaningfully.

With Agnes and Ranma set to play the hard cases, it left Henrietta to be the voice of moderation, which she began now. "Now, now...I am certain there is no need for such treatment. Please, bring a chair over for our guest. Indeed, you may return her wand to her."

Ranma's chill look shifted slightly at that, a sneer on his face showing precisely why Montmorency with a wand wasn't exactly a threat.

The young Water Mage was quickly lowered into a sitting position and then released again. Montmorency's wand was placed on the side table within her reach, but Montmorency let it lay there. Indeed, she looked at it like someone would at a viper about to strike.

"Much better." The princess smile was, while distantly polite, was like being welcomed with open arms in comparison to the other two, and the hope which sprang from it meant the princess had Montmorency's full attention. "If you are comfortable, Miss Montmorency, I believe you were about to tell us everything about the incident earlier this evening? I trust your intent was not to enchant me into an uncontrollable desire to, *ahem*, romance one of my table-mates? Was this a prank gone wrong, perhaps? Or Something you were asked to do by someone else?"

"N, no, none of that, your highness!" Montmorency's words flowed out like water to perhaps get out of this night without being executed for treason. "I never meant for anything to happen to you, or to, to anyone at your table! I was trying to use that potion on Guiche!"

"Wait, what!?" You set up the Princess to get her into a relationship with pathetic, flower waving noodle-arms!?" Ranma hissed, genuine anger flashing out into his eyes whose glow grew like twin red dwarfs, although Ranma's actual emotion was closer to incredulity. "Quiche!? Seriously!? Why would anyone want to be with that guy, to say nothing of why you were trying to set up the Princess with him!"

Agnes drew her sword and loomed up on the other side of the prisoner moved so that her shadow fell over the prisoner, something made far more sinister in the red light dominating the room at the moment. "I knew noble brats were a pack of egotistical degenerates, but this takes the cake!"

"Gleep!" Montmorency cowered away from Ranma's glowing gaze, her eyes clenched tight, and her face turned toward the floor to escape the fearful red light blazing from his eyes. While this brought Montmorency closer to Agnes's naked blade, being stabbed looked to be the better option in the face of Ranma's blazing anger. "No-no," she screeched in panic, "Guiche was the one who was supposed to drink the potion, then he would look at me! I, I just wanted him to love only me!"

"God, that makes it even worse! Seriously, you're only sixteen, and you think it's okay to potion a guy up who would then have to stay with you for the rest of your life after you've seen he can't keep it in his pants!?! Really feeling the love, well, no, what I'm feeling is the stupid!" Ranma snarled. "I don't know if your just moronic or just too blind to live!"

"Ranma, Agnes, calm down," Henrietta called out, keeping her tone gentle with some difficulty as she saw how Ranma was letting his own thoughts out a bit too much in his tough-guy act. "I think now is not the time for any... untoward action." Agnes dutifully backed away, but Ranma still menaced the distressed blonde as she stuttered and sobbed on about Guiche's infidelities and her motivations. "Please, Ranma, come sit beside me."

"With a final growl, Ranma turned away from Montmorency, moving back to the Princess. As he did so, his face took on an abashed expression, the red leaving his eyes instantly, leaving behind faintly gold-glowing eyes which, Henrietta thought, were rather alluring, just like his normal blue ones. Hands hidden from Montmorency, Ranma held his palms together before moving them apart, asking without words if he had gone too far.

Her own hand body hidden behind Ranma's for a moment, Henrietta let a smile appear as she held a thumb and forefinger a little ways apart before shrugging slightly. In response, Ranma pressed his hands together in seeming prayer and mouthed an apology with a weebegone countenance, and Henrietta's smile widened, saying wordlessly there was no real harm done.

Their short communion finished, Ranma moved to sit beside her. Elbows braced on the arms of the chair, Ranma steeped his fingers in front of his face, just below his once more smoldering eyes their color now that of a banked fire rather than the gold or twin red dwarfs of before.

And Ranma still says he is but a simple martial artist? Henrietta thought in amusement, watching the way Ranma acted for a moment. *I don't recall that soldiers take up thespianism in their spare time.*

Turning away from Ranma, Henrietta once more took on the role of kindly, but somewhat put-upon ruler. "Lady Montmorency, please don't worry. Neither Sir Ranma nor Agnes will harm you. We all understand this was but a mistake, do we not?"

The now very jittery, nearly crying girl looked up at that and gave a sickly smile full of hope that this could be a light at the end of the tunnel. "Yes, Your Royal Highness, I am so terribly, terribly sorry about all of this!"

"Still, a mistake or not, a crime against the crown was committed. Even if it was not your intent to see me raped by a notorious lothario, had the potion taken full effect, there would have been no other recourse than your execution."

Montmorency flinched violently despite Henrietta's tone, which might have had something to do with Ranma's eyes flaring back to their full gleaming red. "Y-Yes, Your Highness!" she squeaked, swaying in her seat, concentrating her attention on Henrietta's face as it was her last lifeline.

"Also, what you truly intended is a crime as well. Honestly, I have to ask what were you thinking? You not only allowed your desire to make Guiche's heart yours lead you into breaking the law, but you never took into account what would happen if you were discovered. Not only would you be personally disgraced, but the punitive fines the Gramonts could demand would no doubt bankrupt your family or lead to two families that have had a long, stable association for several decades into open conflict! Which would harm the status of perhaps three entire districts. Thus, even if you had succeeded, this would have come to my negative attention!"

"Yes, Your Highness," Montmorency miserably agreed, looking down at her wand. *I wonder, if I drown myself now, would that help my shame?*

"Because of all the trouble this would cause should it come out, it would be better that this not come to **official** attention. I am willing to let that happen as long as I am assured of honest contrition on your part."

By this point, Montmorency was hanging on her Princess's every word, affected even more by this largesse than by Ranma and Agnes's fear tactics. "Wh, what would you have me do, your highness? I will do anything you ask!"

"First, you will set out for home with an appropriate escort tomorrow morning. Of course, you will leave a letter for the school explaining that a sudden family emergency required your presence there. After I have a chance to discuss things with Lord Montmorency, I will leave the details of your rehabilitation to him. I cannot stress enough that the decision to use a potion like this was so ill-thought as to be beyond the pale and I am certain your father will agree with me."

Montmorency gulped at that but nodded in miserable agreement.

Serves the blonde bimbo right, Ranma thought, internally snorting. *And here I thought her hairstyle was cool before, pity about the brain underneath it.* The very idea of love potions annoyed him. The idea of Quiche even touching Henrietta, much less doing anything else,

infuriated him. *Huh, best do a bit of meditation myself later on for that. The last thing you want to do is let that kind of fury out at a bad moment. Not that it isn't justified, but still...*

As Ranma was having his bit of introspection, Henrietta had continued to speak. "However, there will be two non-negotiable stipulations that you will need to abide by." The Princess waited for Montmorency to nod before explaining. "First, perhaps after your father decides you are ready to return to school, you will personally explain to the Lord Guiche of the house Gramont exactly what happened and what you tried to do." Montmorency recoiled a little but nodded agreement. "Secondly, and I expect you to do this immediately, I require you to supply the reagents for a potion to neutralize the one you accidentally administered to me."

At that, the second-year student's face blanched so white it looked to Ranma as if she had suffered a sudden attack of the vampires. However, her panic kept him from seeing any humor in it, and his expression darkened, as did that of Agnes behind the girl. "Y-your Royal Highness, I-I-I..."

Henrietta had realized this was a possibility and sighed internally. Now she merely needed Montmorency to speak the words aloud. "Take a deep, calming breath and simply tell me."

Closing her eyes and following this instruction, Montmorency calmed down a bit and replied formally, "Your Highness, I regret to say that I used a Tear of the Water Spirit of Lagdorian Lake to make the potion. I do not have another."

"Ah," Henrietta sighed, wincing. *That was honestly worse than I feared, oh, dear. Whatever is it with that spirit and that lake being involved in my love life.* "I understand how rare those tears are. Yet tell me what else you used."

The discussion of materials and techniques that followed went well above the heads of Ranma and the Musketeers, but Ranma figured all that mattered was that Henrietta knew what she was doing, so he decided to think about what more he could do in terms of training his ki. The mental side of things, how to use sensing ki or maybe even ki healing someone else, took up his time while the Princess made notes on two parchment pieces during the discussion.

He started paying attention again when Henrietta began speaking again. "Very well. I would have preferred to make your recompense fit the crime, but due to the Tear's nature, I will need to use royal resources to break the enchantment instead. I will take these listed ingredients and expect you to work for the crown commensurate to five times their value on the open market. As for the Tear, I will expect a replacement to be delivered at a later date. Do you agree?"

"I, it would be impossible for me to ask for better terms, Your Highness! Thank you, thank you so much for your mercy," Montmorency gushed her entire manner, having shifted during the discussion on potions and their ingredients.

Nodding, Henrietta wrote out a brief letter, sealing it with a spell via her scepter before looking over at Agnes. "Agnes, detail a team to accompany Miss Montmorency to her quarters and help her pack. Use our name to take one of the royal messenger carriages. The team will take this letter to Viscount Montmorency to be delivered immediately upon arrival. Be sure to pass on that this was written and sealed by my own hand."

Nodding quickly, Agnes directed Victoire and two more of her Musketeers from outside the suite to come in. The trio of young women instantly moved to stand beside Montmorency, who was looking even more relieved and thankful for the Princess's largess.

"Miss Montmorency, I hope we meet again under better circumstances and that you take this opportunity to reflect on the long-term impact of your actions." Henrietta smiled tiredly at the other girl, but also somewhat kindly. "I bid you a good journey, but lamentably, I have other tasks awaiting me tonight."

At this dismissal, Montmorency shot to her feet but then promptly kneeled her tone the most formal she could make it in her highly emotional state. "Your benevolent Highness, I thank you for your mercy and wisdom tonight. I promise to be worthy of both." Standing again, she backed her way out of the room, mixing bows with thanks and assurances all the, followed by the trio of Musketeers.

Once they were gone and the door closed again, Henrietta slumped slightly in her chair, her regal air leaving her in a single breath, leaving behind a rather annoyed and somewhat exhausted young woman. "That, idiot, moron of a girl. Honestly, what are they teaching them in this campus that she would ever think that strong a love potion was an acceptable idea!" A chorus of chuckles from her companions was her answer.

For his part, Ranma blew out a breath of his own, joining Henrietta in leaning back in his chair, shaking his head ruefully.

Agnes quirked an eyebrow at that. "Did your lantern-eye trick wear you out?"

"Lantern eye trick? Man, I was going for raging inferno," Ranma grumped. "And no, I can do that all day and not feel it a bit. I'm not really tired, physically, just mentally."

"It was a most imposing look, indeed. But if not that, why are you so tired?" Henrietta enquired.

"It was just straining my brain to stay mad like that." Waving a hand lazily about, he elaborated, "I'm not the kind to hold a grudge like that. Matter o' fact, I like to joke around and have fun even during fights as long as things aren't too serious, like I did last night. It was kind of a pain since I had to keep on acting angry without letting my mouth fly away with me." He lifted his head to grin at the Princess, who smiled back.

"Well, I deeply appreciate your efforts to curtail your natural inclinations," Henrietta teased. "And thank you for your help there. It set Montmorency so far on the back foot trying to prevaricate or lie never even occurred to her. Indeed..." She looked around at Agnes and the other Musketeers in the room. "Thank you all for your parts in this. Fine work from the Musketeer Corps, as usual, to go along with our new friend's impromptu acting."

While Ranma waved off the praise, the Musketeers all briefly took a knee to murmur their gratitude before moving back to their former positions. "It wasn't a problem really, just not something I'd thought of doing on my own. But on that point, is it okay if I ask a question?"

"By all means," Henrietta answered, wondering what her friend would ask.

"I got the part where ya wanted to scare her back on to the straight and narrow. But it seemed like there was more going on than that near the end. A lot of it flew over my head and I'm just wondering if it was something important." Ranma leaned toward his friend and looked at her in curiosity.

"You recall the consequences I described that might have happened if just Montmorency's intent became public knowledge?" Ranma nodded in reply. "Those were not exaggerated. In fact, I might have downplayed since I made no mention of the fact that Gramont's father is a general in the army with armed troops at his disposal."

"Wait, really? Quiche is the son of a general? Weird. That apple rolled really far away from the tree, didn't it?" Ranma quipped before shaking his head. "Sorry. Go on."

Giggling, Henrietta did so. "The Gramont family's position would require them to respond harshly if they wanted to maintain their prestige, even if they wanted to let it go, which I doubt the general would. In turn, the Montmorencys would have found themselves dishonored and distrusted by their fellow nobles."

Her lips twisted a bit in disgust. "They would also be poorer one marriageable daughter and a troublesome amount of wealth. Regardless of if, it was initially the fault of one of their own, they would come to resent the Gramonts, and possibly also the crown if I had to arbitrate a formal settlement. Both sides would want to strike back at one another in a myriad of ways, including halting the necessary commerce that has existed between the peoples of their lands and which generates a significant fraction of their district's taxable wealth. Open fighting would break out sooner or later, too. Thus instead of contented and prosperous districts, Tristain would have only sources of poverty and pain. In contrast to this, concealing this incident allows them to avoid all that in favor of settling things privately."

Henrietta shook herself, then smiled. "And personally, when Montmorency reports to her family, she will tell them that the heir apparent was personally strong enough to shrug off the effects of one of the most powerful potions I have ever heard of! They will then see justice

in my demands for recompense, and appreciate the mercy I showed despite being the victim, when I could have ruined them. Combined, these should incline the Montmorencys to become closer supporters of the crown. As a bonus, the Gramonts will also appreciate that they dodged the loss of good relations with long-time associates. I will follow up on that by suggesting to General Gramont, who is already my ally, that he applies some more stringent rules on his youngest son to avoid future problems. One side or both might even push for a marriage to settle the matter and strengthen the ties between the families."

Hearing all of that was like watching a Grand Master of the Art work and left Ranma in some awe. "You're amazing to come up with all that on the fly. It kind of reminds me of something Empress Cixi would have done."

"Oh, is that the ruler of your homeland, Sir Ranma?" Henrietta blinked.

"Ah, no. The empress died about a hundred years ago, and she was the Empress of China," Ranma explained. "That's the country across the Sea of Japan from my country where I was when I went through that last training or whatever. I remember reading a history book there that Cixi could get rid of enemies with mercy better than other rulers could with murder, usually because they would become her best friends. They got statues of her as, like, the form of the goddess of mercy. I saw one once, while waiting to take part in a tournament."

"That does sound like the way I would like to handle things," Henrietta mused, smiling faintly at the comparison. "Still, I take it your memories are continuing to return slowly?"

"Eh, sort of? I'm getting more side memories so-to-speak over time. Just not a lot of personal memories. Or at least, not the full brunt of them, it's weird," Ranma admitted before changing the subject. "But that was some good news there, huh?"

"Sorry, what do you mean?" Henrietta questioned, her brows furrowing in confusion, a look that Ranma felt was just too darn cute for some reason.

Shaking his head to get rid of that thought, Ranma answered. "Uh, that you ended up having the stuff to cure yourself once you knew what Blondie did. That um, that means we don't...have...to...rush..."

Ranma trailed off as Henrietta smiled bewitchingly at him, something in her face and her heavy-lidded gaze stopping his words. Looking deeply into Ranma's eyes, Henrietta retained that smile as she levered herself out of her chair, sliding smoothly into his lap, clasped her arms behind his neck, and pressed herself into his chest. All throughout the conversation with Montmorency, Henrietta felt the potion's arousal aspect hammering into her psyche. Henrietta needed some contact right now, or else she might go crazy. "Oh... my dear, sweet... slightly innocent friend. You are all the cure I need, Ranma," she breathed out huskily.

If Ranma had been frozen before the feel of Henrietta in his lap turned him to stone. The Princess's sweet breath on his lips was just cheating in his opinion and served to shut down his higher brain functions entirely even as other aspects of his anatomy started to respond. "Ubu, awah... ah... oohh..."

Giggling with delight at the effect she had caused, Henrietta pushed her desire back down and kissed the tip of Ranma's nose even as she shifted her rear to get a bit more comfortable. That was her story and she was sticking to it.

Her smile now more sly than seductive, Henrietta explained what she had done earlier. "I wanted to keep my means mysterious of breaking the hold of the potion's attraction, so I implied rather than stated anything outright. Thus, Montmorency gets the impression that the royal family has materials or artifacts on hand at all times to deal with problematic magic. Eventually, once she can put this night's events behind her, Montmorency will then spread that supposition around. It is easier to deal with potions and poisons if people never think they will work in the first place."

Blinking and concentrating on Henrietta's forehead – which was the least sexy part of her he could currently see - Ranma was able to bring together brain cells to understand that, likening it to bluffing in a martial arts match. "Heh, with that kind of thinking, you're gonna be great at the Art once you start learning it."

The sincere admiration in Ranma's voice and on his face smashed down some of Henrietta's mental defenses. "It would be nice if that turns out to be the case. However..." she slowly closed in to claim a real kiss this time, "what I most want right now is..."

"To have that meeting with the Headmaster, Your Highness?" Agnes interjected, keeping a scowl off her face with difficulty. She knew this was necessary, but something about Ranma just rubbed her the wrong way.

Henrietta halted with an adorable little growl at that. "Yes, I suppose we do need to do that before we can move on, do we not? No doubt the Headmaster is waiting for us all-too patiently too." But Henrietta did not pull back. Instead, her smile turned wry once more. "Before that, I think I will need another session of meditation to fortify myself. Would you please assist me again, Ranma?"

"Of course, anything you need, anytime you need it, Henrietta," Ranma promised, making certain his tone implied as much depth to that promise as he could. His new friend deserved and needed no less.

"Such splendid generosity! Well then... since I will need to be calmed down again anyway..." With that, Henrietta finished her quest for her prospective lover's lips.

Ranma, having felt his own desire rising, met Henrietta enthusiastically. Once more using his preternatural senses, Ranma began to kiss Henrietta exactly how she wanted to be kissed one moment to the next, experience making this kiss even better than the passionate lip-lock they had shared in the inn the night before. Although this time knowing they had a time limit Ranma kept his arms firmly around her shoulders rather than letting his hands wander, no matter how much they wanted to. Yet despite that lack, he had Henrietta moaning into their kiss, her body writhing in his lap, ignoring the now goggle-eyed and fidgeting audience of Musketeers.

With great reluctance, Henrietta pulled away, panting, "Oh my...! Oh my...!" Wriggling a bit more to feel out the extent of Ranma's response to her, her eyes widened before she smiled mischievously, a heady flush coming to her features. "Oh my, indeed..." *Good grief! He is most certainly, mmm, blessed in that area, isn't he?* "I, I do not regret that. Not at all. But I really should take that meditation time right now."

"Whew... right, heh, like I need some o' that too. You're kind of addictive, you know that?" Ranma replied, staring into her eyes.

This caused Henrietta to giggle in delight as she slowly lifted herself off Ranma. "Thank you for the compliments, Ranma," she said, emphasizing the plural there while trying womanfully to keep her eyes on Ranma's face rather than trailing down his body.

"Heh, you're worth it. Still, let's get to... gah!" Ranma stood up to move after Henrietta only to realize his arousal was making a very visible tent in his new pants. "Uhhh..." he dithered a moment noticing all the ladies in the room had their heads canted a little to the side in amused regard toward the inflated front of his pants. The Musketeers all looked somewhat shocked and impressed, while Henrietta looked distinctly smug.

"Y'know what, it'll go away eventually, and it ain't like I'll be showing any more than you've all just seen. " With that, Ranma decided to carry on with a firm grasp of his tattered dignity. He moved behind Henrietta, who had sat down back down in her chair once more. Once out of her view, he grimaced at the Musketeers and waved dismissively to try to get them to mind their own business. This only succeeded in gaining him several unrepentant grins, with a few blushes thrown in. Rolling his eyes, he laid fingertips on Henrietta's head and set about to talk her through the first steps of the meditation once more.

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"Will you be able to sneak in on your own later?" Henrietta whispered as Agnes went to open the door.

Ranma snorted. "Be serious. Your musketeers are good against normal people. I'm not exactly normal."

"In that case, I will see you tomorrow Sir Ranma," the Princess announced in a loud voice while Agnes grimaced but said nothing. Since Ranma wasn't needed for the meeting with Headmaster Osmond, Henrietta wanted to use this time to publicly bid one another goodnight. The fact this was seen by a few servants still moving around, the Headmaster's secretary, and Colbert through the open door, meant it was very successful.

"Have a nice night, your highness," Ranma answered equally loudly. With that, he left, quickly, his face shifting into a somewhat worried one. Now that his own hormones had receded, he was getting a little nervous. More than a little, if he was honest and Ranma didn't like the feeling.

While Henrietta and Agnes went to meet with the Headmaster, Ranma made his way outside and began to think about things, meditating in a way that only Ranma could. He had told Henrietta the truth when he said that his father had disdained meditation and the spiritual side of the Art in favor of the purely physical. However, Ranma had studied with monks and priests and even a few martial arts masters of the softer styles that emphasized meditation and had figured out how to meditate. Of course, that was through martial arts katas, letting his mind drift as his body moved through the katas.

So, while Ranma moved through katas taken from several different styles, merging them into a whole that would have made most martial artist Masters gasp, his mind slowly slid into the distant, disjointed nothingness that Henrietta had so easily achieved earlier with Ranma's help.

First, Ranma thought about his memories. He had been very open with Henrietta that he didn't have many memories about anything but the Art. Yet, he was still kind of downplaying that. Practically every memory he was getting back was of the Art, and those that weren't, those memories that didn't have that hard a physical element to them, were more like picture books that he was opening. There was little to no real emotional connection.

It was weird but also good in a way because it allowed him a bit more introspection about his life. Ranma knew that he was still missing quite many of his memories, but enough had come back to make it very clear that Ranma had nothing beyond the Art. His old man certainly didn't have anything to his name: Ranma was the heir to a martial arts style, not a dojo, and Ranma doubted the Old Man even owned more than a few of those dirty white training suits. He might have had some plans for the future, some reason for why he was training Ranma so hard. But if so, Ranma had no idea what it could have been. *Damn, I really was just a dumb wandering martial artist, wasn't I?* Ranma thought morosely.

But Henrietta thought the best of him. She thought Ranma was more than what he knew himself to be. That was strange and uplifting at the same time. She wanted him to be better, she saw him as better than that, and Henrietta deserved better than that. *Henrietta seemed to take a lot of interest in the things that I've told her about Earth's history, about the philosophy of martial arts and everything else. Maybe if I figure out more, I can help her more.*

So for a time, Ranma delved into his memories, trying to find any memories about history and anything else like it. If they could be a help to Henrietta, then Ranma wanted them back. *IF I want to help Henrietta, make a life here, I need those memories.*

However, as that mental exercise started to see limited returns, Ranma was also faced with the problem of what would happen later tonight. Even through the distance given to him by the Well of the Void, that thought made Ranma nervous. Ranma knew somehow that nights like this should be important. He wasn't certain about why it didn't seem associated with any specific memory, just a general knowledge like how belching at the table wasn't exactly a good thing, despite his old man having done it numerous times.

The problem was, Ranma had no idea what to do. He had literally no memories of girls at all. He'd said this several times to Henrietta, but he didn't think it had actually sunk into the Princess. The closest Ranma had ever gotten to a girl was that time when the Amazons attacked him right before he came to this world, and maybe the one challenge on the pole. Although having examined his memories more closely now, Ranma felt something weird about that memory. Indeed, Ranma could swear he was a girl in it! So Ranma was now putting that memory down as a strange dream/altered memory thing.

Regardless, not only didn't Ranma know anything about what he'd heard once called the birds and the bees, but he didn't know anything about romance at all. He wanted to, and he felt that he and Henrietta were making a good start to it but that was mostly because Henrietta seemed to understand what they were doing. And tonight, was going to take what was a strong three in terms of where they were in their relationship up to eleven, and Ranma had no idea how to make that jump enjoyable for either of them, let alone what to do after.

With some relief, Ranma heard a loud "Wow!" from nearby, causing him to drop out of his meditation.

He opened his eyes to see Makoto standing in front of him, her eyes shining, her breath heaving as if she had been running. This took Ranma's attention for a moment since she was wearing some kind of skintight clothing that she must've gotten from one of the others, which looked about a size too short for her. To say it hugged her body was to downplay it. Ranma blushed then locked his gaze on her forehead, using the same trick he'd used earlier with Henrietta.

Makoto had been out working off some of the really good but really fattening food they'd been given at dinner. The two boys had already gone to sleep, not worried about their figures, although Makoto figured Chad would probably have to eat at least three or four times as much as he, he had to bother worrying about his weight. The guy was just huge and dense to boot. He had taken being hit by a runaway truck as if it was an everyday occurrence, coming away without any visible bruising. Which was just crazy!

Makoto had asked him about it, but Chad had simply shrugged and said he'd always been durable, much to her annoyance. And Kazuma had then started to talk about how he bet his Ki sword would cut Chad down to the side, being all chuuni with it.

So she had gone running, only to spot Ranma starting some katas. She hadn't said anything at the time, simply going about her business running around the Academy outer wall. But when she came back and saw some of the katas he was doing, well, that was an eye-opener, to say the least.

Slowly Ranma lowered his back to the ground, bringing his hands together in front of him, to complete the technique, then breathed in deeply, his hands moving up his chest and outward again. "Hey, Makoto, what're you doing up to?"

"Running. Exercising just like you, only with nowhere near as much flare. You also looked as if you were thinking big thoughts." Makoto leaned forward, pushing a hand against Ranma's rock-hard chest, shivering a little and not from the cold as her fingers registered the yummy muscles underneath his shirt.

Ranma grimaced but said nothing to that, asking, "How was the dinner?" in a very obvious attempt to change the subject.

Luckily, Makoto went with it. Stepping back the brunette frowned at him dramatically, putting her hands on her hips. "You know whatever the Princess needed you for, she kind of left the three of us in the lurch. Without you around, we couldn't talk to anyone! Oh, they were nice about it, but not being able to talk with anyone but those two lugs wasn't fun."

"And let me guess Louise wasn't helping?"

"No, she wasn't, but Louise didn't actually bother us at all. Instead, she went with her big sister almost as soon as you all left. We wanted to ask Louise to try and put the same spell she used on you on us, but the two of them slipped out before we finished the meal."

Ranma nodded in relief at that, then blinked, smacking himself in the forehead. "Wait a minute, I remember something. I think one of the servants here speaks Japanese. Her grandfather or something came from Japan."

"Really? That's a weird coincidence," Makoto stated bluntly.

Ranma shrugged his shoulders and turned off away, heading back towards the Academy's main building. "Maybe, but let's see if I remembered correctly."

Despite it being past ten or so, Ranma found many of the cooking staff still in the kitchen, cleaning up after dinner. The chief cook looked up at him with a frown, then nodded. "Ranma, right? The princesses new Knight? What can I do for you?"

Wondering about the 'new Knight' bit, but reflecting that it was at least accurate, Ranma shrugged his shoulders and pointed at Makoto. "Siesta said something about being able to speak Japanese, right? When we were talking after she led me here for the first time."

The chef nodded, and, with a mutter about Siesta being off duty and there being no rest for servants, gave them directions to where Siesta's room was. The servants' quarters were all thin, narrow areas, but they were actually single quarters, a sharp change from most noble places, even if their segment of the castle was a bit of a warren.

Ranma knocked on the door, and after a second, Siesta called out, "J, just a moment!" Her voice sounded strange to Ranma's ears, almost breathy and ill-tempered, but she still opened the door with some alacrity. When she did, Ranma had to use his 'stare at the forehead' technique once more to avoid blushing too much, although he was certain it was still visible. The girl was wearing the same outfit the Princess had worn after changing when Ranma had first spotted her on her balcony, only this one was much thinner and much less well-made.

The black-haired woman blushed at Ranma's presence, stuttering, "S, Sir Ranma! What, what brings you to my door and at this hour of the night?" Then she noticed Makoto behind her Ranma, and the blush slowly receded. "C, can I help you two?"

"I know you're off duty at Siesta, but we were wondering if you could speak Japanese? I thought I remembered you mentioning that I came from Japan, and we need another translator."

Siesta blinked at that, then looked over at Makoto and moved back into her room, gesturing the two of them to follow. Ranma looked around, noting that the room didn't contain much, simply because there wasn't enough room. The bed was about a foot to one side of the doorway, and the door knocked back into a wall, which contained a series of small cubicles that apparently was supposed to hold everything that the nobles who had designed the Academy felt a servant should have.

On the bed was a small book, which made Ranma blink since he knew that reading was mostly a noble or church person kind of function before the printing press back home. But he didn't respond to that, instead looking over at Makoto and Siesta as the maid said, "I'm sorry, but I thought that you were doing the translating."

"Ah, no. I mean, I can, but having another person around that can do the translations is always a good idea."

"Hmmm... well, I haven't spoken that language in a long time but why were you called away? That was so abrupt it was startling. Does it have anything to do with the Musketeers questioning us servants about who had entered the kitchens before dinner?" Siesta questioned, eager for some gossip.

“Er, I don’t know anything about that,” Ranma answered quickly. At the look in Siesta’s eyes, Ranma knew he wasn’t fooling her and quickly looked around for something else to talk about. His eyes once more alighted on the book on Siesta’s bed, and he quickly reached over, picking it up. “This reminds me, I wonder if Louise’s spell allows me to read the books here just like it allows me to speak the language.”

“W, wait,” Siesta exclaimed, reaching for the book.

But she was too slow, Ranma was already reading, and, to Siesta’s mortification, reading aloud. “The Lord chuckled quietly, as he pried open the maid’s thighs. The girl was still attempting to show some token resistance, but he could tell from the blush of her features and the fact that she wasn’t screaming that it was indeed an act. This was proven a second later when his questing fingers found no sign of a panty. So, the Lord thought, as he flipped her skirt up and lowered his mouth to the moist flower within, giving the lady the Lord’s Kiss. I have been invited to play, and play I will...”

Ranma stopped, blushing as the words he was speaking caught up to him, and he tossed the book down like it had caught fire, looking at Siesta in shock. “Wh, what the heck did I just read!?”

Siesta looked away, blushing, and Makoto smacked Ranma on the top of the head. More because she wanted to get his attention than because she thought it would hurt him. “If that was this girl’s diary, I’m going to have to try to kick you in the privates on general principle.”

“It wasn’t! It was some kind of dirty book!”

“Oh, they make those here too then,” Makoto laughed, moving around Ranma to pick up the book. Flipping through it, Makoto found a few illustrations, more drawings than anything else really, but they were certainly suggestive enough.

“Can you understand me?” she enunciated, slowly looking over at Siesta.

Siesta’s brows had furrowed as the girl talked, and she slowly replied in Japanese. “I understand you. I am out of rack this. My grandfather spoke it, I not speak so good.”

“Well, it’s a start, and that would have been practice, not rack this.” Makoto clapped her hands together, taking Siesta’s hands in both of her own. Siesta smiled back, somewhat hesitantly, but still gripping the other girl’s hands firmly. “So, what is it called?” Makoto asked, gesturing to the book on the table.

Siesta blushed, then whispered in Japanese, “The Lord and the Chambermaid. It’s um, a... help, occasionally.”

“And girls need that stuff?” Ranma asked, rolling his eyes as the conversation switched entirely to Japanese.

“Oh yes,” Makoto and Siesta said as one then laughed. Makoto sat down on the bed, gesturing Siesta to sit next to her. This left Ranma with no place to sit, but that was fine by him. “In fact, I’d wager that even the Princess is something like that.”

“Really?” Ranma frowned. “That seems a little weird to me. I mean, aren’t guys supposed to be perverted?”

“Yeah, well, guys keep pictures and stuff, girls like words, romance and slow build-up. Besides, how many girls have you actually known Ranma?” Makoto retorted. She’d gotten the impression that Ranma was pretty much an innocent when it came to girls, which made her inner-self quite gleeful. That just meant that she could corrupt him to her tastes may be, and she was looking forward to doing so.

“None,” Ranma admitted with a shrug, seeing no problem in doing so. “I don’t, well, I don’t really anything about girls or romance or anything, except for vague impression, I guess? Things that are sort of embedded into my brain like good manners and stuff like that. Not actual memories so much as impressions and... and...”

Makoto thought about it for a moment then supplied, “Social instincts, maybe?”

Siesta nodded at that, her teachings from her grandfather coming back to her as she listened to the two of them. “Why do you ask about the book?” she asked, looking at Ranma.

“I’m just asking, I suppose. I just I’m just wondering what would, that is what would make a good date? Or like a good night. Not like in that book, the nobleman forcing himself on the maid,” he glared at Siesta.

She blushed a little but still responded. “It’s not so much that she resists. It’s that she enjoys the chase.”

“Yeah but what if you can’t have the chase? What if instead, all you get is you know a few hours, and then you have to er, do something...” Ranma was trying hard not to say the word ‘sex’ or ‘relationship’ which made trying to ask for details about those topics very hard.

Siesta still understood, though, whereas Makoto was looking at him quizzically. “Ah, you mean like an arranged marriage or something that was foisted off on you?”

“Yeah, that kind of thing! Is there any way you could well make it better for the girl?”

“Oh loads of ways,” Siesta laughed, blushing a little herself as she gazed at the handsome otherworldly Knight. “Are you talking romance or bedroom matters?”

Ranma's blush was now somewhat out of control, and Makoto and Siesta exchanged small smiles as he stammered out, "R, romance, please."

Both of them found themselves greatly enjoying teasing the boy, and right now, despite all with his strength and power, neither of them could think of him as anything but a boy. *Not*, Makoto admitted internally, *that I know anything about romance first hand*. "I've read a lot of shoujo mangas, but that's about it. Not many boys want to go out with a girl taller than them."

"That's weird," Ranma answered bluntly, shaking his head. "Why would height matter that much? Shouldn't like, if the person is nice or if you have similar interests matter than who's taller?"

Makoto laughed at that shaking her head. "Um, it should, but most boys feel intimidated by girls taller than them, y'know? It insults their masculinity or whatever."

"Again, that's weird." Rolling his eyes at the strangeness Makoto had just shared, he looked over at Siesta in question. She shrugged her shoulders, "I've gone on a few dates," she admitted, "nothing much. A woman's self is an important thing, after all."

Makoto nodded, understanding the point. But Ranma winced a little, although thankfully neither woman noticed, and Siesta continued. "First, I suppose there's setting the mood. There are a few ways to do this. Going to romantic places, to amazing natural views or expensive restaurants. Music is a favorite, and lighting can make a huge difference, although those are more a noble's thing than a peasant's."

After translating, Makoto nodded firmly, adding, "Music is major. Not only like, going to concerts, but having romantic music in the background can really set the mood. Chocolates and roses too. Do you have a special someone you want to take on a date, Ranma?" Makoto wiggled her eyebrows at Ranma, smirking at him, although internally, she really was wondering why Ranma was so interested in romance.

Ranma waved his hand, bringing all his ability to dissemble to the fore, only able to do so by thinking of this moment as a martial arts match: he had to not reveal the Princess's condition to anyone. It would be unconscionable to let her weakness become known like that. "No, it just seems as if it's something I should know in the future. What with how my memories are so concentrated on the martial arts, I think this kind of thing, I kind of missed out on, you know?"

"Well, if you ever want to... Broaden your horizons, I'm available," Makoto teased before yawning.

This caused a change reaction, with Siesta yawning next, followed Ranma, although he was faking that, while the blush on his face from Makoto's words was very real and very red.

“Well, I think it’s getting late. Siesta, you’ll be okay with translating for Makoto and the others at breakfast?”

Siesta nodded in the affirmative, and Ranma made his escape, followed by Makoto. The two of them said their own goodnights a moment later, as Makoto made to head up to the first floor, where she had been given a spare student’s room for the night, while Ranma made his way back outside.

Instead of going up the stairs, however, Makoto paused, thinking deeply. *Siesta might have bought the idea that Ranma was just asking about romance because of the book getting him on to that topic and wanting to know this kind of thing but I think there might be more to it...*

With that in mind, Makoto moved silently through the corridors, retracing their steps to the entrance that connected to the kitchen instead of the side door that Ranma had taken. There, she moved around the edge of the building, thinking about where Ranma might have gone.

Soon Makoto got lucky, spotting Ranma coming out of what looks like a small shed to one side, carrying what looked like sheets of glass under his arms. As Makoto watched, he moved to the main Academy building, and around to one side of it, looking up at it thoughtfully, before leaping up four stories. There he landed on a small balcony. There he sat down on the floor, barely visible from below, as he held up one piece of glass before him, staring at it intensely.

Below, Makoto watched for a few seconds, hidden in the shadows, then realizing she couldn’t see anything, looked around and soon spotted a tree that might allow her to see what Ranma was up to. *That room’s got to be one of the better suites, maybe even the Princess’s. It’s one of only five that have their own small patios. What the heck is he doing?*

Climbing a tree is easy. Climbing a tree at night, with a full moon out, isn’t all that hard. Doing so silently, that’s a different story, and it took Makoto several minutes to get high enough in the tree’s branches to see what Ranma was doing, and even then, she didn’t have the best view.

Despite that, her eyes widened at the sight of the glass in Ranma’s hands glowing cherry red. *He’s holding it like that, and how did he heat it!? Is it more of that ki stuff he and Kazuma were talking about? Amazing!*

As Makoto watched, Ranma then began to pull the glass this way, and that like it was so much taffy, contorting the glass into different shapes and sizes. Soon the first bit of glass turned into a large crane or some other kind of bird in his hands, Makoto couldn’t make out any details, but the shape of the neck, beak, and wings was distinctive, especially since the glass was still glowing red and orange.

Finished molding the glass, he held the figurine in his hand, waiting until it stopped being so hot before moving onto the next. This one turned into a dolphin. The snout and eyes were very recognizable even from where Makoto was watching this, something she felt she could do all night. It was just amazing watching Ranma work with both his ki and the glass like this.

Eventually, Ranma had five of the creatures, and the first one had finished cooling down. Ranma picked it up, holding it up in front of his eyes. They began to glow, and a moment later, so too did the figuring.

Makoto started, staring in shock. *Don't tell me Ranma's going to melt it again!*

But thankfully for Makoto's artistic sensibilities, Ranma instead infused some of his ki into the bird, causing the glass to glow with a faint blue light.

"Wow," Makoto whispered aloud, keeping her voice low with difficulty before stuffing her knuckles into her mouth to keep a squeal from escaping. That was the most amazing thing she had ever seen. It was so beautiful! As she watched, Ranma began to take the items inside, and Makoto frowned, thinking furiously, trailing her eyes up and down the wall for a moment. Whatever Ranma was doing was way too interesting to leave just yet!

Makoto moved to the wall and began to climb. She was in very good shape, a track and star athlete back in school. And one of her best exercises was rock climbing. But doing so silently and without safety gear at night, that was a very different story. Still, while Makoto didn't climb quickly, she was able to slowly move up the wall until she was directly below the balcony Ranma had been working on.

There, however, the tall brunette's luck failed her. Just as she was about to heave herself up onto the balcony, Makoto heard the opening of the patio door above her and was forced to drop back down, hanging there by her arms for a moment until her feet found purchase below on the top of the windowsill below the small porch. She hung there suspended between the two, muscles straining as she heard whispered voices above.

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By the time the Princess was done with the Headmaster, and passing on the ready-made excuse of receiving news of the search of the Judge Magistrate's house, Henrietta's hard-won sense of serenity and calm had faded under the attack of the potion. The glimpse of Natalie's brown hair was enough to set it off, desire and arousal ratcheting through her towards Makoto. It was only with an extreme amount of effort and the thought that Ranma might well be back in

her suite waiting for her that kept Henrietta from running off in a lust-fueled panic to find the earth-girl.

Luckily, Agnes and the rest of her musketeers quickly realized Henrietta was in distress and hurried out before her to make certain that no one would see the Princess in such straits. This was aided by the fact that it was now near midnight, and by that point, all but a few of the most energetic students and teachers were awake.

However, there was still security to consider, and Agnes held the Princess for a moment as she gestured to her musketeers to reenter the quarters they had all left earlier.

Inside, they found the room changed. All of the lights were out, or at least the lanterns, but that wasn't to say that the room was without light. A light blue color permeated everything, shine from a series of figurines in some manner that none of the four Musketeers who entered the room could understand. It was certainly magic and had something to do with the young man playing the flute as he moved around the room, practically dancing in place.

Amie moved towards him, and Ranma paused, pulling his makeshift flute away from his mouth and looking somewhat sheepish. "Sorry, that was, er, well, I thought the princess would be the first to..."

Amie cut him off, shaking her head. "Did you, that is, did you do this, Ranma, all of this?" She spluttered, gesturing around.

"Er, yeah. I found the workshop here, and they had a few extra panes of glass, and I figured they would miss 'em, so I kind of yeah. I mean I know this thing's supposed to be..." Ranma stuttered to a halt and then just gestured. "I can't help against the potion, but at least I can well make it romantic for Henrietta."

Touched by his thoughtfulness, Amie hugged the younger man. She was one of the older Musketeers at twenty-four, and she decided then and there that whatever happened, Ranma was going to be very good for their Princess. "Thank you for this, Ranma! I know this is all, that damn potion and everything, especially on top of your memories, is really a lot for you to handle, But I'm sure she'll love it."

"Yeah, well, that's the main thing," Ranma laughed self-consciously, scratching at the back of his head with his flute, looking a little terrified to Amie's eyes as he thought about what was going to happen soon regardless of his efforts all around them. "That um, that Henrietta enjoys this, despite this really just being to beat that damn love potion."

Taking pity on the young man, Amie whispered a few words of encouragement. "Don't doubt yourself, Ranma. We've all seen the connection between you over the past two days. Just because this potion is forcing you to rush ahead doesn't mean you wouldn't be doing this eventually. Believe in that, and I think you and the Princess can make one another very happy."

As Ranma blushed but nodded at her words, Amie ended with the quick ribald maxim of, "And don't be scared to lick anything at all on her. And I mean anything."

Leaving Ranma a stuttering mess, Amie headed back out the door, while Natalie came back from looking around the porch and patio. The two musketeers grinned at their fellows, who had been looking around the bedroom where two more of the figurines rested, then exited the room. Outside they reported the suite clear to Agnes, who nodded briskly, her face taut and annoyed but also resigned to what had to happen tonight.

Nodding her thanks, Henrietta was about to enter, but Amie leaned forward, whispering into her ear. "I think you're going to be pleasantly surprised tonight, Princess. In a lot of ways."

Henrietta looked at her confusion but shrugged when Amie made no move to elaborate and moved to open the door herself as the two guards on watch that night stood to attention while the other musketeers left to bed down for the night. Several of them had been assigned a nearby suite to be on hand just in case, while the rest would be in a room directly below the royal suite, kept clear of people purposefully for them.

OOOOOOO

The moment the person who had been on the balcony was gone, Makoto twisted around, dropping down to grab onto the ledge of the windowsill below her, her legs burning. She was barely able to clamber down before someone entered the room she had been hanging outside of. But eventually, Makoto was able to get down to the ground. There she had to hide for a few moments as a Musketeer took up position at the window, placing a rifle there and looking out into the night.

Eventually, she scuttled along the outside of the building pressing back into it to keep out of view. It was with a certain amount of relief that Makoto went around the corner, where she breathed heavily as her tension left her. As it did, Makoto began to think about what she had heard. While Ranma and the woman she had been talking to hadn't been all that loud, Makoto had still heard some of what they had been saying.

So, the Princess and Ranma were kind of edging towards a relationship before this love potion thing, whatever that is. That gave Makoto a lot to think about, about this world, the Princess and Ranma. But one thing Makoto was certain of: she wasn't about to give up on Ranma. Oh no. Not after what she'd seen tonight. A piece of that pie is worth sharing the rest with someone else! Besides, the Princess is cute too. I could do worse.

Smiling cheerfully, Makoto made her way back to the servant's quarters where she had been given her own room for the night, as

Henrietta opens the door and is astonished, not for the last time that night. ([More from the original, lemons.](#))

The judge magistrate learns his home was raided by the Musketeers. He responds. (Action, coitus interruptus, many people getting angry)

Tabitha waits in the room assigned to Makoto, the laptop open in front of her and an offer. (Makoto centric, character interaction, magic)

Longueville the Thief meets with her current employer. Her orders have changed. (World-building, dastardly deeds plotted)

End Episode 12

I will shoot to have the next episode up by Next Sunday.