C & C welcome, not to mention needed.

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Broken Palace

By: Angela Jewell

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Disclaimer: Didn’t own them then, don’t own them now . . . and yes, this fact still upsets me.

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Chapter 2

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Akane could never remember the dreams. They came in fragments—short and fast, and without any sort of context to place them in.

This one was no different.

*She was walking through a dark corridor, her attention drawn to several flickering torches lining the walls.*

*Leaning against a wall, counting.*

*A door yawned open before her. But Akane didn’t want to go in.*

The sound of that same door slamming shut behind her finally jolted her awake, and the remnants of her dream faded fast, leaving nothing in its place but lost time and a confounding sense of dread and despair.

But Akane could never recall why.

Forcefully brought back to the real world, she slowly sat up, and tried to clear her memory of any lingering cobwebs. She had no idea where she was but bits and pieces of the mystery were gradually falling into place—she remembered slipping out of the palace, shopping in the marketplace, chasing a pickpocket through the labyrinth, and finally the butcher shop. . .

Akane groaned at that last one. Had she really been that stupid? She wasn’t weak and defenseless like Kasumi and Nabiki! How could she let herself get captured without even putting up a fight?!

Climbing to her feet, she ignored the painful pounding in her head—it was the least she deserved—and began to look around, taking in the state of her makeshift prison. She was in a tent, with no furniture to speak of, not even a cot. Whoever had knocked her out and brought her here had just dumped her on the ground like a worthless bag of dirt. And glancing at her hands, something even more distressing occurred to her.

The jerk hadn’t even bothered to tie her up!

Akane scowled, her pride feeling the sting. Not only did he leave her alone in some flimsy fabric tent—honestly! One good gust of wind could’ve easily knocked it over—he hadn’t taken any precautions to ensure she couldn’t escape!

Not much of a threat, was she? Well, she’d make him regret *that* decision.

“Stupid, arrogant jerk,” she muttered. “I’m going home.”

She could see the tent flap straight ahead, though there didn’t appear to be anything guarding it or holding it closed. This time though, Akane wouldn’t allow herself to feel insulted—instead she congratulated herself for being captured by a bunch of brainless monkeys.

Marching up to the exit, she wasted no time in pushing it aside, not even caring that she could hear people talking and laughing nearby. If the guards had the mental capacity of their leader, they’d either be asleep on the job or too drunk to realize she’d escaped.

Putting one foot firmly outside, Akane prepared to take her first step towards freedom . . . and didn’t make it two steps.

A pretty girl—with a ponytail and flowers in her hair—suddenly appeared before her, and shouting in surprise, Akane threw a quick punch out of reflex, which the newcomer easily avoided. “I apologize if I startled you,” said the girl, with a small bow of apology, apparently unfazed by Akane’s rude welcome. “My name is Konatsu. I’m to stand watch until my Master returns.”

“Oh. Um, hello,” Akane replied, unsure how to address a polite kidnapper. Clearly a punch to the face hadn’t left an impression, though it didn’t take Akane long to realize why. The girl before her was dressed as a kunoichi, and though she openly carried no weapon, Akane knew there were likely a dozen or more concealed on her body somewhere—ninjas were known for stealth. If it did come down to a fight, this girl couldn’t be taken lightly.

At the moment though, she seemed harmless enough. Having said her piece, and seeing no immediate threat, Konatsu sat down gracefully in front of the exit and started looking around the room, her nose crinkled in distaste. “Not very tidy in here, is it,” she observed, before turning to Akane and announcing vehemently, “I’m not cleaning! I was given no orders to clean!”

Akane laughed nervously. “Um, it’s okay, you don’t have to,” she assured her quickly.

Konatsu seemed satisfied to hear that and nodded happily. Akane watched her carefully, looking for any weaknesses she could exploit, though judging from her little outburst just now, she didn’t think it would be very difficult to find one. Giving her a friendly smile, Akane sat down right across from her, thinking maybe she could reason with her. A fight now would only draw attention, and she didn’t want to hurt some poor girl who was only following orders.

“So, does your Master make you clean very often?” she asked, careful to keep the question unassuming and light.

“Oh no, not my current Master,” Konatsu explained. “He rescued me from a cruel, dismal fate. But if he asked me to clean, I would do so with much gladness!”

Akane smiled. The way she talked about him made her wonder if maybe she had a little crush. Then chastising herself, Akane resolved to concentrate on the problem at hand. “Sounds like you really like your master,” she said, “but you know, I honestly have no idea what I’m doing here. I’m just a traveler from Yokohama, so your master can’t hope to get anything useful out of holding me here.”

Konatsu stared at her curiously. “But you’re Princess Akane Tendo,” she replied, rather bluntly.

“I’m *who*?” she asked, perpetrating the performance of a lifetime. To really sell it, she began to laugh loudly and freely. “Really? You really think she looks like *me*? I mean, I’m flattered of course–to be mistaken for a beautiful princess, who wouldn’t be?”

Konatsu sniffed and crossed her arms. “Miss Ukyo’s prettier,” she informed her.

“I-is that so?” Akane replied, her voice tight. “Well, I’ve never seen this princess myself, but I hear she’s pretty reclusive. How do you people even know what she looks like?”

“Oh, my master. He recognized you immediately. He knows everything.” Though in truth, living so far away, nobody was quite sure how he’d known that either.

But Akane frowned, not liking that bit of news one bit. She always prided herself on staying pretty much off the radar—she rarely ever made a public appearance with her family, and whenever she did go outside, she tended to disguise herself in order not to be recognized. Even in the palace, her father was careful to hire only honest and trustworthy workers—people who’d been with her since she was a child or had proven loyalty to her family in one way or another.

Yet, somehow, this always happened.

Why in the world did she have so many enemies?

“He did, huh?” Akane lamented. With a sigh, she stood up, having realized she wouldn’t be able to talk her way out of this one after all. It was too bad though, aside from the fact that she had terrible taste in men, Konatsu actually seemed like a pretty nice girl. “Sorry,” she said, taking up a defensive position, “but I’m not staying here. I’m not about to sit here quietly while you guys ransom me off.”

“And who said anything about ransoming you?”

It wasn’t Konatsu who spoke, but Akane recognized the voice immediately. Peering through the open tent flap was the thief she had chased through the labyrinth, the same boy who had attacked her in the butcher shop.

Suddenly her legs felt weak.

“R-Ranma. . .?” she breathed, not believing her eyes.

“Hey, Akane,” he said with a mocking little wave. “Did you miss me. . .?”

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When Ranma asked him to get lost, Konatsu was all too happy to oblige him; the moment his master had appeared, the air in the tiny tent had become quite stifling and he couldn’t wait to get out. Yet when he stepped into the coolness outside, he was greeted by a restrictive air of a different sort—a bevy of curious, expectant onlookers awaited him, ready to hang on his every word.

Konatsu put his hands to his burning cheeks, flattered and happily overwhelmed by the attention.

Many questions were hurled his way, but he listened loyally to only one: “So, what’s she like?” Ukyo questioned, her eyes burning with curiosity as she grabbed a hold of his arm, an unnecessary ploy to get his attention. “Is she spoiled and stuck up? Did she cry a lot? Please, please tell me she tried to seduce you. . .”

“Ranma hate girly-girl-types,” Shampoo agreed, having approved this line of questioning.

“Come now, Shampoo. You speak as though there’s a type of woman Saotome *wouldn’t* take an interest in,” Mousse grumbled, before adding petulantly, “a false assumption, if ever there was one.”

“Shut mouth, stupid-Mousse!”

Love-sick fool that he was, Mousse did as ordered.

Konatsu, however, ignored everyone who wasn’t Miss Ukyo. “I fear I have failed you,” he informed her gravely, his outcry full of sincerity. “I was unable to gleam much from my short acquaintance with the princess, only that she’s a terrible liar, and seems to think herself beautiful—and sadly, no, she did not cry or try to seduce me. I believe she thought I was a woman.”

“Rats! I knew he should’ve sent in Ryoga,” Ukyo cursed.

“Oh, my Ryoga wouldn’t have succeeded either,” Akari informed her, hugging the directionally-challenged boy proudly. “He may be as handsome as a pig, but he’s just as loyal. He never could’ve stomached such a distasteful task. Isn’t that right, Ryoga?” She asked, hugging him tighter.

Ryoga reacted with giddy laughter, his normal response to physical affection.

Seeing that pathetic display, Ukyo guessed Akari was probably right—Ukyo herself would’ve had better luck cross-dressing and going in herself rather than entrusting such a delicate mission to the sorry lot Ranma had scrounged up. “What do you suppose they’re talking about in there, anyway?” she asked, unable to hide her worry as she glanced at Shampoo, who alone could understand her plight.

Shampoo just shrugged, not willing to put into words what she expected would happen—Ranma wasn’t known as a Lady-killer for nothing.

But Konatsu, remembering the familiar way his master had greeted the princess, wasn’t so ambivalent. “Oh, lots I expect,” he supplied, happy to be helpful. “From what I could gather, I believe they were already acquainted and once knew each other quite well.” At that, every head turned towards the shy ninja, who hadn’t yet realized the impact of what he’d just said.

But everyone else had.

Ranma was a very private person, to hear any mention of his past was rare. Ryoga especially came alive at the prospect, though judging by how manic Ranma had been lately, it’s something he should have guessed on his own. Still, any chance to nettle Ranma was a chance he wouldn’t soon pass up.

But for Ukyo, the news couldn’t have been more disastrous. “He *knows* her?” she cried, her heart hitting the floor. If it was some random, spoiled hussy, she thought she had a shot—but a childhood friend, or worse, a first love? Ukyo knew she didn’t stand a chance. If she hadn’t snagged his heart by now, what hope did she possibly have against a legitimate rival? Suddenly it all made sense though, why Ranma who had sworn off marriage was suddenly so keen to wed a perfect stranger, why he’d been so eager to tackle this strange mission, and why Lady Nodoka had been so quiet and distraught lately.

She might as well throw in the towel now and go join a nunnery.

Hoping for a sense of kinship, she looked to Shampoo who looked frustratingly unmoved by the whole thing. Which only depressed her all the more.

Konatsu, feeling awful for having upset his super-secret crush, followed her around as she wallowed in grief, begging to be forgiven. “I’m not worthy to walk in the same dust as you, Miss Ukyo, please forgive my thoughtless words. I don’t think it was a friendly relationship at all—in truth, Master Ranma seemed very cold and distant, and only the princess seemed happy to see him. I’m sure they’ll make a terrible union, I’d wager my freedom on it!”

Rather than cheer her up though, this news only managed to distress her further. Ukyo frowned and worried her lip, having come to a sudden realization. Girls had been chasing after Ranma for as long as she’d known him . . . and though he never pursued any of them beyond a quick fling, he rarely turned down their initial advances either. For him to be giving the princess the cold shoulder now, when he was normally so charming and aggressive—somehow, it felt different. Every warning bell in her head was going off. How could Shampoo not *sense* it?!

Unless she had.

Unless Shampoo just didn’t care.

Was it possible, Ukyo wondered, as a terrible possibility occurred to her—could Ranma’s mother have approached Shampoo with the same offer? And if so, just how many other love-sick girls had she told?!

A light blow to the head rudely snapped her out of her frightful musings. “Are you going to stand there moping all day, or are you going to help us finish loading the ship?” Ryoga asked, as unsympathetic as ever, his arms full of supplies, food, and blankets. Akari and her giant sumo pig stood behind him, both carrying their own fair share of the weight.

Heaving a heavy sigh, Ukyo grabbed her grill and a small box of cooking utensils and stuck her tongue out at her shipmate. “I do not mope.”

Akari gave her a sad smile. “Of course not, but there’s no shame in it if you want to,” she informed her. “Even pigs get sad, Ukyo.”

Though she could appreciate the sentiment, Ukyo bravely shook her head. There was no reason to get depressed about the princess yet, she decided. A lot could happen in the four days it would take to reach Sapporo—and who knew, maybe she’d get lucky and Ranma would throw the princess overboard himself! “Thanks, Akari, but I’m okay,” she assured her.

Throwing one final look of longing at the tent where Ranma and the princess were talking—*just* talking, her mind insisted—Ukyo turned to her faithful sidekick and promptly placed her supplied in Konatsu’s free hands. “Be a dear and throw this on the ship for me, would you?” she asked, adopting a smile. “Thanks, Sugar!”

Tears of joy streamed down his face. “Yes! Of course! Anything you say, Miss Ukyo!” Being free was pure bliss.

With her part of the work done, Ukyo brushed off her hands and began yelling orders for people to load the ship. Soon, they’d be heading for home.

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Back in the tent, Ukyo would’ve found she had nothing to worry about.

After sending Konatsu away, Ranma’s first order of business was to give Akane back her pouch. As he walked inside, he threw it to her without a word, watching in amusement as she clumsily tried to catch it, her fingers fumbling in the air, missing it completely. It landed on the cold hard ground and Akane’s cheeks burned with embarrassment as she hurried to retrieve it.

Yup, still a klutz, Ranma noted with interest. Though his interest was purely scientific.

For years, he’d been running a catalogue in his mind, wondering how much Akane would have changed since they’d been apart. Would she still be a crybaby? Stubborn and headstrong? Violent and tomboyish? Had she ever learned to swim?

Ranma had changed. It didn’t seem fair that he’d be the only one.

So far though, all the changes he saw in her were what he’d discerned from the marketplace. She sat placidly on the ground, docile and shy, not at all like the Akane he used to know—the tomboy who could never sit still for long. For obvious reasons she seemed incapable of meeting his eyes just yet, instead she carefully tied her pouch to her belt and then began smoothing out the imaginary wrinkles in her cloak, adjusted her hood—anything that would delay the inevitable.

Finally, when she realized he wasn’t going to speak first, she looked up at him—slowly, hesitantly. “Ranma,” she began, shaking her head. “I—I still can’t believe it’s you.”

He stared at her and didn’t move a muscle. “Yeah. It’s me.”

Silence reigned, the sound deafening.

Akane tried to smile. “So. Um, how are you?”

A sharp laugh escaped him before he could stop it. “How am I?” he repeated incredulously, his tone rising. “Gee, I’m swell, Akane. And you?”

Oh, she could hear the sarcasm all right, but if anyone had the right to be angry just now it was *her*. Still, she’d waited five years for this reunion, there was no way she was going to let the dummy ruin it in the first five minutes. “I’m fine, thanks,” she replied, purposely schooling her expression and tempering her tone; as though silently daring him to twist her words around this time.

Ranma didn’t disappoint.

“Fine, huh?” he asked, laying it on extra thick. “Wake up in strange places a lot, do you? That normal for you or something?”

Akane’s jaw clenched. “Oh, all the time,” she countered, proving she was no slouch in the sarcasm department either. “Why, just this morning, I woke up and said to myself, ‘You know what sounds fun, Akane? Getting robbed and attacked by my dear friend, Ranma!’”

“’That a fact?”

“Sure is. I’m so happy we could meet under these circumstances, and after such a friendly welcoming too!”

“Yeah, sorry,” he jeered, crossing his arms against his chest. “Guess I forgot to bring the red carpet.”

“What is WITH you?” she demanded at last as she climbed to her feet, sick of being talked down to with such vitriol. “You haven’t talked to me in five YEARS, Ranma, and now you show up unannounced, out of the blue—did it ever occur to you to just ASK if you wanted to meet me? Honestly—knocking me out and DRAGGING me here—THAT sounded like a good idea?”

“A GOOD idea would’ve been to gag you too!” he shot back.

“Just go ahead and TRY it Ranma!”

Rather than take her up on that offer, he watched as she visibly fumed in front of him, her eyes flashing, cheeks flushed . . . damn, THIS was the Akane he knew, the Akane he recognized. The girl who could go from sweet and kind to angry hellion in ten seconds flat. She was so keyed up that her aura was shining for him without even having to search for it—yet, what he saw there only stole his breath and stopped him in his tracks.

She was . . . happy?

Even as she threatened him and railed like a banshee, underneath it all, she was excited to see him, relieved even—auras didn’t lie. Her reaction to him was genuine.

“Hey, are you even listening?” Akane asked him, unnerved by how quiet he’d suddenly become, how pale his face looked. Then a scary thought occurred to her, and just as quickly she turned twice as pale. “Ranma, you—you’re not, not *sick* or something, are you? Is—is that why you came here looking for me. . .?”

There—he could see bluish-gray now, the color for worry. Where the hell was the guilt? The fear, resentment, and the shame—he needed something incriminating, something to assure him he hadn’t wasted the last five years of his life hating her for no goddamn reason! Growing desperate now, he searched her aura again, like a drowning man grappling for a life line, figuring maybe it was buried, or just really well hidden—but as he searched through the intricate web of colors, growing more and more frantic by the second, to his horror and frustration they began to blink out and fade until they’d disappeared completely . . . mimicking exactly what had happened back at the marketplace.

Ranma froze, suddenly at a loss. He hadn’t realized how much he’d depended on this ability, how much he’d counted on it showing him exactly what he *needed* to see. In every scenario he’d come up with, in every possible way he’d imagined this reunion going—this never occurred to him. After seeing him again, overcome with remorse, she was supposed to fall on her knees, cry, confess, apologize—

--Instead, all he got were her eyes, large and wide, staring at him, *afraid* for him.

In that moment, five years of fury, of careful planning, of memorized speeches and reckless living, seemed to amount to shit. He was a naïve thirteen year old brat again who didn’t know squat about nothing.

“Ranma. . .” Akane repeated, and this time put her hand on his arm out of concern. Ranma wrenched it away, his mind racing.

Suddenly the urge to get out, to regroup, to *think* was overpowering. He really couldn’t do this right now. “I—I’ll be right back,” he said, and hated the pathetic way his voice almost cracked on the words. “Don’t be stupid—just, just stay here and you won’t get hurt.”

Ignoring her protests and questions, Ranma quickly pushed the tent flap out of the way and stepped outside, blocking her so she couldn’t push past as he quickly scanned the area for one of his men. Thankfully Ryoga was the first to walk by, carrying a box leaden with pots and pans. As he passed, Ranma snagged him by the shirt, and hissed, “Stay here and watch her. Don’t let her out of your sight. Got it?”

Ryoga slowly nodded, not used to seeing his captain so ruffled. “You alright?” he asked, more out of curiosity than actual concern.

“Just . . . just keep her the hell away from me Ryoga.”

Having said his part, Ranma made his way back to the ship, anxious to set sail and get out of this fucking town as soon as possible. It wasn’t safe to linger any longer—any minute now they should be realizing Akane was missing. And though his ship had become somewhat of a sanctuary for him in years past, when he was finally onboard, the ship swaying gently beneath him, he didn’t feel any better. His insides felt twisted. And though there was no chill in the air, he couldn’t seem to stop shaking.

What the hell had she done to him?

And more importantly, how did he make it stop?

\* \* \*

THE END

Chapter 2

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A/N: Sorry if this chapter was riddled with errors, my original version was so terrible it required a complete rewrite, and by the time I finished, sending it to my pre-readers would’ve made me miss my deadline. Hopefully it’s still readable regardless. :)