C & C welcome, not to mention needed.

Updated: 1-8-14

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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 3

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Ryoga leaned casually against the tent flap, still holding his box of supplies, amused and pleased beyond words. Boy, she was a spit-fire—he had barely entered the tent when she’d rushed straight at him, indignant as all hell, eyes blazing as she demanded to speak to Ranma.

Immediately he could see why Ukyo was so worried, why Ranma had been guarding her existence so greedily.

She was beautiful. Long dark hair, full lips, expressive eyes, a pretty face.

Of course, Ryoga was used to seeing beautiful women. Shampoo and Ukyo definitely weren’t hard to look at, and his Akari put even those two to shame . . . but this girl looked as though she’d broken her own fair share of hearts, maybe as many as Ranma. And if *Ranma’s* heart had been broken along the way—well then, was it any wonder Ryoga felt so instantly drawn to her? Any girl who managed to get the best of Ranma was utterly gorgeous and could do no wrong in his book.

If it wasn’t for Akari, he would’ve fallen, and fallen hard.

He laughed quietly to himself, in his own special heaven.

That moron Ranma didn’t stand a chance.

While he was ruminating, the princess took several steps closer, appearing to have calmed herself down with noticeable effort. The longer Ryoga observed her though, the more impressed he became. There was nothing weak or passive about this princess—right here, right now, she was just another angry female, someone who was just as likely to beat the answers out of him if asking sweetly proved too useless.

And from what he could tell, that possibility wasn’t too far off.

When she spoke again, her words were measured and slow, but held just as much warmth as a fabled Amazon death kiss: “I demand to speak to Ranma. NOW.”

Ryoga, temporarily taken back by the force of her tone, smiled ruefully. “Sorry,” he replied, shaking his head, “but he’s busy with the ship. If there’s anything *I* can do, I’ll—”

“—Ship?” Akane asked, cutting him off. She watched him warily, all that bottled anger seeming to drain right away; confusion ready and eager to take its place. “Are you guys leaving already? Is that where Ranma is? On this ship of yours?”

“Uh,” Ryoga stared at her, uncertain what to say. He hadn’t missed the way she’d purposely excluded herself in the arrangement—as though they were leaving her behind. She *did* know she was their hostage, right? “You mean, Ranma hasn’t told you anything. . .?”

She frowned at the question, looking troubled and upset, the quietest he’d seen her since entering the tent. “No,” she said at last, speaking so softly he could barely hear her. “No, he hasn’t told me a thing.”

That was kind of odd, Ryoga thought, but didn’t say. Though he knew there was history between the two of them—and apparently not good history, at that—Ranma wasn’t the type to keep quiet for long. He was cocky and brash, and prided himself on it. If anything, Ryoga had expected the princess to either be driven to tears, begging for her freedom, or in the midst of picking out which wedding dress to wear.

Instead, he was faced with an angry prisoner demanding to see her captor, while the captor hid away on his ship.

Something big must have happened between the two of them . . . and Ryoga, now more than ever, was determined to find out what it could be. Before he could take a real crack at the mystery, however, the princess had grabbed a hold of his sleeve and pulled on it sharply, demanding his attention.

“Please,” she said, her hand on his arm, her eyes soulfully pleading with his, “please,” she repeated, almost desperately now, “I ***need*** to see him.”

Oh. Something in her voice got to him then—Ryoga couldn’t explain it, and he didn’t understand why it should. But she looked so adorable standing there, so helpless and desperate and sweet. She was a completely different person—and for some reason, the good guy in him responded to that part of her with an intensity that frightened him.

Swallowing nervously, he cursed his kind, fragile heart. It wouldn’t be the first time Ryoga disregarded a direct order, and it certainly wouldn’t be the last. “Ranma doesn’t want to see you,” he explained, before adding cheerfully, loudly, “but Ranma’s an idiot! I’ll take you to him right now if you want!”

“Really? You will?” she asked, her face lighting up like he’d just offered her the moon. “I can see him on this ship? You promise?”

“Y-yeah,” he managed, distracted by how *shiny* and happy her eyes looked as they stared at him, and before long he felt himself sinking into those dark depths as a goofy grin slid across his face—and then, to complete the transformation from strapping young man to puddle of goo, she smiled at him. The most beautiful, bright smile Ryoga had ever seen and his heart started doing little flips and cartwheels, and all thoughts of sweet, loving Akari vanished from his mind entirely.

But then, much too soon for his liking, Akane’s smile was gone. “Oh, but is it very far away?” she asked him, a look of worry on her face.

“No, no!” Ryoga assured her, desperate to see her smile for him again. “It’s very close—just up the pathway—by the lake, behind a waterfall.” To his utter relief and delight, a smile returned to her face at last.

“Can we go now?” she asked, practically glowing with excitement as she grabbed his arm even tighter, ready to pull him there if necessary.

Suddenly, his arm where she gripped it felt like it was on fire. He could practically *feel* her tiny hand clinging to his arm through the fabric of his shirt—and his eyes were glued to that spot, unwavering. “S—sure,” he said, nodding quickly, eager to please. Not in a million years had he expected her to be so—so *cooperative*.

“Ready. . .?” he asked her.

The princess nodded, still smiling.

Grinning, Ryoga swept the tent flap aside with a dramatic flourish, temporarily forgetting he had no idea how to even get back to the ship on his own. But that wasn’t going to stop him! “After you,” he said, bowing in gentlemanly fashion. The princess giggled cutely. . .

. . .And *that* was when she kicked him in the groin and ran.

\* \* \*

Akane darted right past the pain-ridden boy currently writhing on the floor, the pots and pans he’d carried with him now lying scattered across the ground. Sure, he had seemed nice enough—sweet even—but he couldn’t have been ***that*** nice if he was willingly taking part in a kidnapping plot! Not to mention the way he’d been prepared to disobey Ranma’s orders without a second thought!

A boy like that *definitely* couldn’t be trusted.

Besides, Akane had no idea what Ranma had planned for her, but either way, she had absolutely no intention of walking onto that ship as some pathetic, helpless prisoner. No—she’d find Ranma *her* way, and then—

—then what, she wondered, as a sinking feeling settled in the pit of her stomach.

What could she *possibly* say to him that could make up for everything he’d been through—everything his *family* had been through? If he never even bothered to return a single letter, why would he listen to her now, two years later, when he was still so hurt and so angry with her? Was it even worth trying?

Akane knew that it was.

Whenever she even considered giving up and going home, she would remember how pale Ranma’s face had looked back in the tent and she couldn’t help but worry all over again—in the very least, she had to make sure he was alright.

And after that, just once, she wanted to look him in the eye and apologize about everything that had happened . . . about Ranko, about not being there to say goodbye, about liking him on her own. Clearly explaining everything in her letters hadn’t gone over as well as she had hoped. But now he was back. Somehow she’d make things right.

But first, she had to find him.

In no time at all, Akane made it out of camp and into the protective cover of the surrounding forest, stopping only briefly to catch her breath as the rush of adrenaline finally thinned out. Luckily she hadn’t been seen. Allowing her to escape must not be the sort of thing Ranma’s stooges wanted to broadcast—everyone she had spotted were too busy and distracted to notice her weaving about the tents, hurried and stressed as they tried to finish packing before the sun sank and darkness set in.

Now reasonably safe, Akane allowed herself a small measure of smugness. Clearly she was right—she didn’t need some muscle-bound bodyguards to feel safe despite what her overprotective father seemed to think. She could take care of herself!

Though in all fairness, it probably helped that Ranma wasn’t very good at any of this dark, shady business . . . who kept their captive in an area they were familiar with anyway? Akane knew these woods. She knew these trees, had come here often enough whenever she needed a good cry, or just to get away from the stifling atmosphere of the castle. In the very least Ranma should have had her holed up somewhere new, like on his ship, behind a locked door, guarded by people who were actually competent.

Instead, Akane was heading straight for the waterfall.

She knew right where that was.

Even though it was a closely guarded military secret, Ranma’s father had built and designed it over a decade ago—so of course Ranma had taken her and Ranko there often to play when they were kids, much to his father’s annoyance. But once Uncle Genma was exiled, taking most of his loyal guard with him, the hollowed out dock had pretty much gone into disuse, leaving only the scenic waterfall to guard its grand secret.

The fact that Ranma was the first to use it since its conception, somehow seemed fitting. No one would think to look for her there—they had no reason to suspect the Saotomes would ever return, and by the time that option even occurred to them, by the time they even realized Akane was missing, Ranma and his ship would already be gone.

He had done that much right, at least.

And here Akane was, heading straight for the lion’s den. Even so, she went over her strategy once again, silently praying that doing the unexpected would prove to be her greatest ally—no one would be expecting her to head *towards* the danger.

But first Akane had to do a little snooping of her own. Ranma had to know by now she no longer had any real power—if he wanted his title or lands back, he’d have to go through her father the king, or her young nephew, Prince Akihiro, the male heir. And though her father could be swayed with her as ransom, his court certainly would not—and Ranma would know this. Not to mention, if it really was his lands he was after, why they were packing up and preparing to leave before trying to negotiate? None of it made any sense—why were they even here?

And though another possibility occurred to her, Akane dismissed it quickly, embarrassed for even thinking it. No way he’d be jealous of *Kuno*. . .

No, she really couldn’t make heads or tails of it. And the longer Akane deliberated, the more questions she got instead of answers.

In the end, she supposed it didn’t really matter—she’d be talking to Ranma soon enough anyway and then he could explain everything himself. Maybe they’d even manage to clear the air between them and make things right again.

Well, as right as things had ever been between them, she thought with a nostalgic little smile.

Not wasting any more time, Akane picked up her pace, noting how the sun was finally starting to set, its fleeting rays laying down a path across the forest’s floor before her. To Akane, it was warm, open, and inviting . . . especially since at the end of it lay Ranma.

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Ukyo cursed under her breath, silently belittling the jackass she was embarrassed to call a partner.

Stupid, *stupid*, Ryoga!

She could see the princess straight ahead, wandering around by herself, free as can be. She had headed straight for the forest just like Ryoga had said she would, though why she was heading for the waterfall and their ship, Ukyo couldn’t even begin to imagine.

Did she enjoy playing prisoner that much?

Ukyo narrowed her eyes, disliking the girl more and more. Now it seemed she was actively *trying* to piss her off! If the stupid girl had just headed back to the castle Ukyo could have feigned ignorance and washed her hands of her then and there. Instead, here she was, preparing to deliver the little twit right back into Ranchan’s waiting arms.

Oh, she’d make Ryoga pay for this!

Once she cleaned up that moron’s mess, she was going to enjoy pounding him into unconsciousness.

Luckily, the princess didn’t realize she was being followed. And even if she did, it wouldn’t make much of a difference—Ran-chan had insisted they stake out the area for a solid week, memorizing every tree’s position, every hole, every niche, every bush. She couldn’t possibly know these woods as well as they did. Ranchan had made sure they’d have the upper-hand, and Ukyo intended to keep it that way.

So moving silently through the underbrush, she followed her, moving at her own sedate pace, careful to keep the right amount of distance between them before making her move. Only forty feet now, but she remained cautious. The last thing she needed was to get sloppy and lose her advantage.

Hiding within the shadows of the trees, Ukyo worked on gradually closing the distance between them, her hand hovering over the handle of her giant battle spatula, ready to draw it at a moment’s notice.

*Thirty feet.*

*Twenty feet.*

*Twelve feet.*

She grabbed it then—like a sword being stealthily drawn from its sheath, years of practice made the motion almost soundless.

*Eight feet.*

*Six.*

Good night, princess . . . and good riddance.

The hard flat surface of her battle weapon cut through the air, straight at her clueless opponent’s head.

Only, her target’s head was no longer there.

Ukyo stopped in surprise, confused to see the princess suddenly standing off to her side, hands up before her in a defensive position, ready and waiting for a fight. Ukyo could do nothing but stare back at first, her jaw hitting the floor.

The absolutely last thing she expected was for some goodie-goodie princess to know martial arts.

Even now, the other girl was calmly eyeing her battle spatula, her eyebrow raised in interest. “I was wondering when you’d attack,” she said, not relaxing her position in the slightest, “but I never guessed it would be with such a strange weapon. Isn’t that heavy?”

Coughing uncomfortably, Ukyo tried to pull herself together. “Not really,” she replied, figuring the quickest way to regain control was to answer the dumb question. “Still hurts like heck though, so you’ll probably want to save yourself a world of hurt and just come back with me now while I’m being nice.”

Even though she said that, she really, really hoped her quarry resisted. Nothing would make her happier than presenting her to her captain, bloody and bruised, as well as unconscious.

The princess frowned and shook her head, granting a grateful Ukyo her wish. “No thanks, I’d have to be a fool to walk blindly onto that ship not knowing what you have planned for me.”

“—Prisoner-girl no have choice.”

The voice seemed to come from all around them, and suddenly Shampoo was dropping down from the trees, attacking before Akane could even try and defend herself. A single Chui cut through the air, knocking her in the head and to the ground, where she lay on the forest floor, out cold.

“Hey! I wanted to do that!” Ukyo protested as Shampoo stood proudly over their fallen captive.

“Shampoo sorry, chance too too good pass up. Ukyo beat princess next time, is okay?”

“Oh alright,” Ukyo grumbled as she put her spatula back in its holster.

Moments like these were a terrific reminder of why her and Shampoo got along as well as they did, despite their mutual interest in a certain pigtailed boy. Since not one of them could boast an outright claim over the other—at least not yet, she thought, remembering Lady Nodoka’s proposal—a sense of camaraderie and shared misery had become something of a norm between the two of them. And now, with a true rival among them, tensions had never been lower.

Ukyo just hoped it stayed that way.

“Come on, let’s get back to the ship,” she said as she leaned down to pick up their not-so-precious cargo and flung her unceremoniously over her shoulder—happy to note she wasn’t exactly light—as she followed Shampoo back to the ship. There was a small spring in her step this time as she walked, making an otherwise unbearable trip a tad more satisfying.

She hoped Shampoo was right—she wanted another chance to face off against the princess. Never before had Ukyo felt such a strong desire to pound something that *wasn’t* okonomiyaki.

. . .Little did she know she’d soon get that chance.

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THE END

Chapter 3

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A/N: Don’t worry, Ranma will be back next chapter! Special thanks to Luna12 for proofreading this chapter for me!! ☺