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.

Special thanks to all my wonderful reviewers. If it wasn’t for you guys, I definitely wouldn’t be able to keep these updates coming at such a steady pace. It goes against my very nature as a writer, lol! :)

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Chapter 5

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“—*What the hell—?!*”

Akane cringed; Ranma was still mad.

Not wanting to upset him further, she chose to stay right where she was—afraid to move and draw his attention, to bring his focus and his fury back down on her. In the meantime, she was more than happy to allow Ukyo to be the source of his ire, because honestly, this wasn’t going a bit like she’d expected.

This time around, *she* wanted to be the one in control. She even had the perfect plan and everything!

First, she’d find his cabin and force her way in—blocking the door so he couldn’t escape—then, speaking frankly and sincerely, she’d clear the air between them once and for all. If she was successful, hugs and possibly tears would ensue. And if not, if she couldn’t find his cabin, she’d resort to Plan B: Go topside, create a scene, and threaten to throw herself overboard until they allowed her talk to Ranma.

Either way, he was sure to be furious with her . . . but at least *she’d* be the one in control, not him. Now though, it looked like she’d lost the advantage before she’d even had a chance to enjoy it. Ranma was too angry to reason with now.

She could feel the heat of his rage as he continued to fume silently beneath her, his chest rising and falling rapidly, the puffs of his breath warm against the side of her neck.

Hoping to get out of his line of sight, Akane tried to slink away quietly—or to get off his lap at the very least—but to her surprise and confusion, Ranma abruptly grabbed her arm and stopped her. Suddenly, she found herself half-lying, half-sitting across her angry captor—one of her arms on the floor supporting her weight, the other suspended midair, prevented from moving by his iron-clad grip.

Akane tried uselessly to free her arm.

“Don’t even think about it,” he told her, his grip actually tightening.

“This isn’t exactly comfortable, Ranma,” she complained.

“And you think I care?” he bit back.

Akane scowled up at him, but resisted the urge to argue. If she wanted to butter him up before their big talk, she couldn’t exactly afford to make him any angrier—not when he already looked ready to bite her head off.

Still, her arm *was* starting to get tired. Making one last attempt, she tried to gently pull it away, or in the very least to loosen his grip—but Ranma would have none of that. His fingers tightened further and he pulled her forward sharply with much more force than necessary.

“I don’t think so,” he said, his voice cold and hard. “You’re staying right where I can see you till Ukyo shows up—then I’ll tie you to the damn bed if I have to!”

Thinking of the incompetence of his crew, and figuring Ranma couldn’t be much better, Akane scoffed without thinking, “If you think that would help, go ahead and try it, Ranma.”

“You think I won’t?” he asked her, his eyes dark as he leaned closer, his voice low. “I’ve had a lot of practice, Akane, do you really wanna try me?” He held her gaze a moment longer, and finally, heart pounding, Akane looked away.

Had—had he been bluffing just now?

Trying to regain an edge, to prove he hadn’t shaken her, Akane replied coolly, “I wasn’t trying to run away, Ranma. I was *looking* for you. Do you really think I’d risk letting you out of my sight now that I’ve finally found you again? I—I want to talk. That’s *all*.”

“Well I don’t,” he told her, then looked away, frustrated by his failure to read her again.

If he had this ability he was sure as hell gonna use it! Until then, he had no intention of holding any conversation where she could try to manipulate or trick her way into gaining his trust—he knew how gullible he was when it came to Akane. He wasn’t about to take that chance.

Instead he turned his attention back to the hallway, silently cursing Ukyo and her stupid blunder. She better have some damn good excuse; this whole mess was her fault.

Having immediately noticed the shift in his anger, Akane felt something painful clench in her chest at that. She preferred his rage over his blatant neglect—apparently, a negative emotion was better than none at all. And as she watched him secretly, she couldn’t help but wonder who it was he waiting for. He’d mentioned the name Ukyo earlier—could he be looking for the girl with the spatula? Was that her name?

Almost without realizing, Akane felt something twist in her gut that felt suspiciously like jealousy, but quickly forced it away. She wasn’t thirteen anymore, and he wasn’t even the same Ranma. The one she was reaching out to was her childhood friend, not her ex-fiancé—even if she realized the two had become synonymous long, long ago.

Still, being this close to him, it was hard not to notice the man he’d become. . .

He was taller and stronger now, that much was obvious. His shoulders were broader, his chest, muscular and firm, and though his features were the same, they had grown more attractive with age, less rounded and more angular. He still had his braided pigtail, but his smell, that was slightly different—like sandalwood and lavender, conjuring up memories of windy, rainy nights. And though his eyes were still that familiar shade of blue from their childhood, they’d changed somehow too—became harder, more cold.

He may not be the same thirteen year old she’d kissed . . . but he was still Ranma. Still cocky and arrogant, and still capable of making her heart race and her anger soar. At some point though, he must have felt her eyes on him, because he turned slowly to look at her, suspicion in his gaze. “What?”

She blushed, suddenly very aware of just how close they were. The hallway had never seemed so narrow, so restricting, and it felt like the temperature around her had steadily begun to rise.

“What?” he asked again, sharper this time. “Are you planning something?”

“Nothing,” she said, more out of habit than anything else. Then, embarrassed by her lack of nerve, and realizing it was now or never, quickly corrected, “No, not nothing. Listen, Ranma. You want to shut me out? Fine. But just know this: I’ll keep fighting. I don’t care how many guards you post outside the door—I won’t stop trying to escape until you agree to talk to me! You can’t avoid me forever, you know.”

“Wanna bet?” he said, not because he meant it, but because her tone had set him off again. “Just what part of *I’m* in charge here, aren’t you getting, Akane? If you wanna waste your time and energy breaking out of some dumb room, feel free—but you can’t *make* me talk, and since you’re too dumb to realize it, we’re in the middle of the sea—there’s not exactly any place to escape *to*. IDIOT.”

“Don’t call me an idiot, Ranma!”

“Then stop ACTING like one!”

The two could’ve gone on fighting like that forever if not for the sound of running footsteps approaching fast from behind them. Temporarily putting their quarrel on hold, the two turned their heads in unison to find the source of the noise . . . Akane’s guards were making their way towards them, another girl with long purple hair in tow.

“About goddamn time,” Ranma muttered as he rubbed his head, though Akane felt her stomach drop at the sight of them.

She’d barely gotten started. . . was their time together ending already?

Only one thing cheered her up: Her two guards looked noticeably worse for wear, though the girl with the spatula visibly more so. She glared at Akane, her clothes in disarray, her hair hanging loose over her shoulders and she was clutching her spatula with both hands, just *itching* for a chance to use it.

If looks could kill, Akane was sure she would’ve been dead a hundred times over. Hoping for a little less animosity and an expression that said something other than I-want-to-claw-your-eyes-out, Akane found her gaze wandering to the new girl.

. . .Only to find her glaring in much the same way.

Akane, despite herself, frowned. She just couldn’t understand it—she hadn’t even *met* this one yet! What could she possibly have done to inspire that level of hatred?!

Then it hit her. The death glares, the angry scowls, the possessive glances as they looked beyond her towards Ranma. . .

Just then Ranma began to shift uncomfortably beneath her.

Oh, Akane thought, suddenly remembering just *where* she was sitting. Blushing furiously, she tried once again to move away, positive if they stayed that way much longer they were going to incite a mutiny—only to have Ranma pull her right back into his lap, his other hand sliding around her waist to keep her still.

Akane’s entire body seemed to turn red, though from anger or embarrassment she couldn’t quite tell. Was he *trying* to get her killed?! Because she was pretty sure that’s exactly where this was headed—though Ranma didn’t seem concerned.

“Mind telling me how this happened?” he demanded at last, turning his full attention—and for once, his anger—on someone other than Akane.

Ukyo immediately relaxed her position, looking flustered and embarrassed as she stood before him, ready to be judged. “I’m so sorry, Ran-chan,” she said, offering a small bow of apology. “I was tricked by that—that *harpy*, and let my guard down for a second. But it won’t happen again! You have my word!”

“You gave your word the **first** time,” Ranma snapped back, incensed by the very memory of their last meeting. And though he saw her aura flare with unhappiness at the reminder, surprisingly it was Mousse’s colors that managed to catch and hold his attention.

Incompetence. Failure. Recrimination. Duty.

“I’m afraid I share the blame in this fiasco as well,” the other boy admitted, adjusting his glasses which he’d finally deemed to wear. “Had I guarded the door more soundly, this never would have happened.”

After confessing he glanced briefly at Shampoo, as though looking for words of encouragement or compassion; he was looking in the wrong place.

“Mousse right. Mousse never dependable, even as small boy,” Shampoo agreed, seconding his ineptitude. “Ranma want Shampoo guard princess now?”

Mousse visibly deflated.

“No thanks, Shampoo,” Ranma replied, barely glancing at the pretty foreigner. Shampoo may be strong, capable, and smart, but she was also ruthless, devious, and manipulative. He couldn’t trust her with Akane—she’d sooner see her thrown overboard than make it back to Sapporo alive. “I’ll be needing you and Mousse starboard,” he said instead, using the storm as the perfect excuse to keep her where he wanted her. “The weather’s about to get real bad. The worse of it should miss us, but I want all capable hands on deck just to be safe.”

“Got it! Let’s go Shampoo,” Mousse said as he headed out, grabbing Shampoo’s hand along the way, undeterred by her earlier rejection—only to get smacked in the head for his trouble.

“Just who are you calling Shampoo?” Ukyo demanded.

The novelty of Mousse’s eyesight had died out more than a decade ago, but Shampoo sighed anyway, looking put-out. “Stupid-Mousse,” she complained as she dutifully dragged him along.

Once they had gone, Ranma turned to confront the girl responsible for his current predicament. Now that Ukyo was alone, he expected her to protest her innocence, to apologize, or make more excuses—instead she simply stood there, looking like a criminal already resigned to her fate.

Ranma sighed. He really needed to get better minions. . .

Well, if she wasn’t going to say anything, he’d do the talking for them. “Damn it, Ukyo,” he muttered, climbing to his feet as he dragged Akane up with him, his hold shifting down to her wrist. “You let down your guard—that’s it?! Ryoga I can understand—but *you—*Fuck! Why the hell can’t any of you handle one stupid girl?!”

Akane tried not to take offense at that, instead she noted with satisfaction how Ukyo had finally put away her weapon and was looking cowed and humbled. “I’m sorry,” Ukyo said again, lowering her eyes. “I’ll never forgive myself for disappointing you, Ran-chan. I let myself down, I let you down, I let EVERYBODY down!” When she finally glanced up tears were glistening in her big blue eyes.

Akane scoffed, unimpressed. Did she really think that would work on—

—Ranma took a small, panicked step forward. “H—hey! It’s, uh, fine,” he told her, avoiding her gaze this time, as though unable to bear the sight of her tears. “I mean, she’s here now, right? No real harm done—not like she could go anywhere anyway. . .”

Ukyo sniffled as she delicately wiped away a tear. “Still. . .”

“Look, I’m not *mad* anymore, alright? Just disappointed,” Ranma explained, as Akane stared at him in open disgust. “So just stop crying already, would’ya?”

She nodded bravely, and Ranma sighed openly in relief. “Good. Now, why don’t you go and help Shampoo and the others? With me stuck down here, they can use all the help they can get. . .”

“But . . . what about. . .” Ukyo asked, gesturing to Akane, a new fear rising within her. “I can still watch her!” she insisted quickly, desperately. “I’m fine now, and I promise I won’t let her out of my sight, Ran-chan, I won’t even—”

“No,” Ranma said, swiftly cutting her off. No matter how well-intentioned the offer was, he was sick to death of screw-ups. “I’ll handle the princess from now on, at least that way I know she won’t be going anywhere.”

Ukyo looked like she was about to protest, but one last look from Ranma quickly had her shutting up. “Alright,” she replied, sullen, knowing when it was better to cut her losses and run. Glaring at Akane once more for good measure, she headed back upstairs with a heavy heart, her steps heavier still.

As she watched her walk away, Akane couldn’t quite contain the glee she felt as she glanced sideways at Ranma. If Ranma was watching her from now on, that meant he was giving her another chance—she could *fix* this!

“Come on,” Ranma told her, dragging her in the direction of her room, not looking nearly as thrilled as Akane was.

But Akane didn’t care. For once, it felt like things were finally beginning to go her way—it was a small victory, but a victory nonetheless.

At this point, she couldn’t afford to be picky; she’d take what she could get.

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Ranma was not happy.

He stopped outside the room, his eyebrow twitching. It seemed Ukyo had forgotten to tell him one small detail. . .

The door to the princess’s room was gone.

He could still see parts of it attached to the hinges, hanging by wooden splinters at odd angles from its frame. The rest was lying in broken pieces around the hallway, most of them scattered outside the room. If nothing else it looked like a hurricane had swept straight through the door—probably in the form of Ukyo and Mousse. Beside him, he could hear Akane stifling a laugh.

He certainly *wished* he could find it that funny. Instead he was angry and frustrated once again, finding himself faced with an unexpected problem.

Now where was he gonna put her?

If he put her with Ukyo or Shampoo they were likely to kill her; Akari’s room was already crowded with her sumo pig; Ryoga was too stupid and gullible to be left alone with her; and all the other males onboard couldn’t be trusted.

That only left Ranma’s cabin. . .

And truth be told, he wasn’t so sure he could be trusted either. He was a guy, after all, and Akane was very, very pretty—as Ryoga had elegantly put it. Even now, Ranma couldn’t quite forget the feel of her body against his, the attractive way she blushed, or the possessive little look she had given Ukyo when she hadn’t realized he’d been watching. He’d certainly taken his sweet time letting her up from his lap too. . .

Even with her this close now, he could feel something like electricity pulsing in the air between them. And though he still couldn’t see her aura, he was starting to think it might not matter.

That inner fire . . . the thing that had drawn him to her in the marketplace. . . it was still there. It was in every little gesture; every word she spoke; every glare she shot his way. He didn’t need to read her aura to see it.

And it was getting harder and harder for him to stay mad at her, to convince himself that everything they’d told him was true. He knew everyone else believed she was guilty—auras couldn’t lie—but believing something, and being right, were two totally different things. And though being wrong scared him spitless, it also made him feel strangely alive, for maybe the first time in forever.

She was right. They had to talk.

Unconsciously he loosened his grip on her arm, having finally come to a decision. He began to lead her away from the broken remnants of her prison—heading towards a new and very familiar one.

He really hoped he didn’t regret this.

Though something within him knew that he would.

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THE END

Chapter 5

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A/N: Sorry guys, this chapter just wasn’t jelling for me this week, and it felt like my writing skills were on holiday. Hopefully next week’s will be better and I’ll have some time to revise this further in my spare time.