C & C welcome, not to mention needed.

Updated: 3-07-14

-------------

Broken Palace

By: Angela Jewell

-------------

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: pahlee, La Pisces, Flameraven1, O'Donoghue, pursemonger, ilkane, AliceTheBookGirl, KohanaSaotome, linkgold64, Teddy's Circus, katlykat, ToraHimeSama, miikodesu, KaChan84, Minako-chan4, Tii-chan, Clarissa2404, KaikiH, BobV, and AkaneKagome. I honestly couldn’t have finished this chapter on time this week without all your encouragement and reviews! Thanks so much for keeping me motivated when real life keeps wanting to get in the way. :)

-------------  
Chapter 11  
-------------

Feeling numb, Akane stared at the door.

For a moment there, she’d seen him—the *old* Ranma—the boy who had comforted her and protected her when they were younger. The look in his eyes had been so familiar then; a faint trace of fear and concern, peeking through eyes that recently always seemed tinged with hatred and fury—until the scene from her vision had ended, clouding her mind, causing her to pull away, suddenly afraid.

Like a switch turning off, she’d watched the gentleness leave Ranma’s eyes, a now-familiar coldness rising up quickly to take its place. Akane had no idea what to do to make it disappear, but she would’ve done anything to bring her old friend back, to make sure that darkness never entered his gaze again.

Because she *NEEDED* her friend right now. More than she’d ever needed anyone ever before.

She could still hear the bastard breathing, could still hear the sound of fists striking a chest; saw the fear and pain on Ranko’s face as the scene replayed itself in her mind, over and over, an endless torturous loop.

She would never forget that image for as long as she lived—how in the world had she ever forgotten it in the first place?!

Her best friend had been raped and killed—right in front of her.

And in the end, Akane had been unable to do a thing. . .

This time, the tears came easily. For once she didn’t bother to fight back the burning sensation in her eyes; the tight, painful twisting in her gut. She buried her head in her lap, her body shaking with her sobs as she curled herself against the wall—allowing herself to give into the pain and the guilt.

There would be plenty of time to absorb what she’d seen.

But for now, she just wept.

\* \* \*

Ranma didn’t bother with formalities. In fact, he didn’t even bother to knock. He threw open the door to Ryoga’s room, tossed a blanket on the floor, and promptly laid down, all while ignoring his friend’s openly puzzled expression. “I need to crash here for the night,” he said by way of explanation, and then flung his arm over his eyes, and sighed.

It didn’t take long for Ryoga to get over his surprise. “What’s the matter?” he teased, unwilling to pass up a supreme ribbing opportunity. “One princess too much for the great Saotome to handle?”

“Yup,” Ranma told him, too tired to even fake a lie. “I give up, Ryoga. She is the most fickle, stubborn, frustrating woman I’ve ever met—and I’ve met a lot. Once we’re married, I’ll lock her in a room somewhere and be done with her once and for all.”

Ryoga almost laughed at that. From what he knew of the Nerima princess, she wasn’t the type to let herself be locked away *any*where, besides the fact he doubted Ranma would even be able to do it. This was one of the first times he’d ever seen his captain and friend so worked up over *anyone* before. He didn’t think the problem would go away simply because he willed it to. “Wow. She must have really gotten to you.”

“Yeah, well. . .” Ranma trailed off, and then, very quietly, said, “I kinda, sorta—maybe—attacked her . . . or something.”

“Huh?” Ryoga asked, not quite sure he’d heard him correctly.

“I said, I ATTACKED her, alright?! I jumped her like some damn fucking animal*,* Ryoga.” Running a hand through his hair, Ranma grimaced. “Hell, I don’t know what I was thinking . . . things were fine, and then she said that bastard’s name, and I just—I, I *snapped*.”

Ryoga tried to look sympathetic, but ended up cackling instead. “Well. Can’t say I’m surprised,” he told him, buoyed by the knowledge that HE’D never try anything so low. “Women have been throwing themselves at you for as long as I can remember—it’s about time you found one that didn’t worship the ground you walk on.” He laughed, nodding his head knowingly as the full implications of Ranma’s actions truly hit him. “Kinda funny that it turned out to be your future *wife* though, huh? After what you pulled, I doubt she’ll ever forgive you.”

“You aren’t exactly *helping*, Ryoga,” Ranma gritted out.

“Yeah, well . . . can’t win ‘em all,” he said with a shrug. “If you want, I could go over and check on her—see how she’s doing? Or maybe send Akari instead. You may have turned her against men altogether.”

Ranma perked up at that. “Well, that’s not such a bad thing then,” he replied.

Ryoga hit him over the head with his fist. “Just how big of a brute are you?!”

As he rubbed his aching head, Ranma briefly toyed with Ryoga’s suggestion, but in the end decided against it. *She* was the one who led him on in the first place—finally opening up to him, kissing him like that—calling out for that dumb jerk Kuno when her concentration should have been on *him*. Sending someone to check on her now would be like admitting defeat. It would be like saying he was *worried*—or even worse, that he was sorry. And he wasn’t.

Not really.

He’d felt that familiar spark between them. Even as kids, it had been there—always present, like a live wire quietly pulsing between them. And he was damn sure she’d felt it too. To throw that all away for a jerk like Kuno? Yeah. No way was he gonna apologize or grovel. He’d die first.

But, despite telling himself that . . . the look in her eyes, right after she’d come back to herself . . . it weighed on him. She had looked terrified. Yet Ranma got the impression her reaction had had very little to do with him. He’d meant what he’d thought back there—if she’d really wanted to stop him, to get him off her, she could’ve done it. Her attempts had been half-hearted at best, which was really what had spurred him on.

The question was why. Was she trying to pacify him? To apologize for having killed Ranko, but her feelings for Kuno kept getting in the way? Was that why she’d tried to throw herself overboard? Because the guilt had finally driven her over the edge?

Annoyed by the path his thoughts were taking, Ranma shook his head, steeling his resolve. He couldn’t keep second-guessing himself. He was the one in control, not her. He’d check on her himself when he was good and ready! Lay down some ground rules—set the record straight. Tomorrow. Or maybe the day after.

Ryoga must have read something in his expression because he sat back down on his bed, looking disgusted. “No, huh? Figured as much. You’re such a jerk, Ranma.”

“Hell—it’s not like I really *did* anything,” Ranma defended, as though he was trying to convince himself of that fact rather than Ryoga. “I mean, I stopped myself before I could go too far. . .” Sure, he was distracted by her aura, but still. That wouldn’t have stopped any *other* guy!

“Sure, Ranma . . whatever you say,” Ryoga replied, and then briefly toyed with the idea of poking him further. Maybe if he made him angry, Ranma would pound him or throw him out, then he could go to Akari for comfort and treatment. And finding him homeless, maybe she’d even let him stay with her for the night!

Blushing at the thought, he began to laugh softly. For a second there, he’d been tempted to start BEGGING Ranma to beat him. With effort, he got himself back under control. “So what do you plan to do now?” he asked, choosing to prove himself the better man by denying his own base urges—something Ranma had proven a failure at.

Ranma frowned. “Hell if I know,” he told him, and turned away, ending the conversation. He doubted sleep would come easily for him tonight, but hell if he wasn’t gonna try. If there was any justice in the world, Akane would have just as much trouble sleeping as he would.

With that thought dragging him under, Ranma closed his eyes, allowing the comforting sound of the waves crashing against the ship to slowly lull him asleep.

\* \* \*

Back in Ranma’s cabin, sleep was the farthest thing from Akane’s mind. Finally she sat up, and with the back of her hand, wiped away the last of her tears.

There. She felt better now. Like five years of frustration and guilt had been momentarily washed away, leaving her more focused and level-headed. And she *needed* to be able to think right now—to understand what it was she’d seen in the glimpse she’d been given of her memory.

At least one thing was for certain.

Someone else was in that room the night Ranko was killed. Akane was *sure* of it—she’d SEEN him. And yet . . . she still couldn’t recall the image of his face. She tried, but it was like there was a mental block there—like something was preventing her from seeing the whole picture.

But HE had killed Ranko. Not her. And as soon as she found him, she’d make him pay for everything he’d done—to her family and to Ranko’s. All she had to do now was figure out who he was and how he’d done it . . . and *that* shouldn’t be too hard. She knew all the facts. All she had to do now was try and put them together.

First of all, she knew he was strong and stealthy.

Nobody had found him in the room—none of the guards, Kasumi or Lady Saotome. At the very least, it had to be someone whose presence in the palace would go unquestioned. He couldn’t have disappeared into thin air after all—he must have slipped away, or hidden himself. Was he one of her father’s guards? A visiting nobleman? One of the servants perhaps?

Suddenly, Akane felt encouraged.

See? She was already narrowing down the list!

Now, for strength. Even at thirteen, Ranma and Ranko had been known for their fighting ability. To subdue her, he couldn’t have been an average fighter. But would any of their servants have that kind of strength? Or for that matter, the *nerve*? Everyone in her kingdom knew Ranko—she was the sister to the future king, after all. To attack her would be the equivalent of attacking Akane or one of her sisters. And Akane couldn’t think of any servant who would be a match for Ranko in a fight . . . not to mention, be brave enough to try something so dangerous. Surely, there were easier targets around than *Ranko*.

Of course, she thought, her heart sinking . . . that wasn’t counting the servants of the visiting noblemen or the nobles themselves. Any of them could have wandered into the east wing on one pretense or another; and who was to say one of them couldn’t have overpowered her friend? Had they hidden in the shadows, emerging only after the guards had stormed the room, when everything was in chaos?

And what of the soldiers themselves. . . ?

Ranko’s own father had been captain of Nerima’s army—she’d spent more time in the training grounds with him and Ranma than she did at home, despite her mother’s many attempts to make her more ladylike. If a soldier had attacked her, wouldn’t she have known him?

Could that be why she was killed afterwards—to hide what he’d done?!

Akane frowned, frustrated with her lack of progress.

Narrowing down the list of suspects had proven more difficult than she could’ve possibly imagined. In the end, all she succeeded in doing was throwing suspicion on almost everyone in the palace. She needed more clues. Better yet, she needed a *face*.

She had known all the guards—knew every servant by name—had stood by her father when every young, eligible noblemen had arrived at the palace for Kasumi’s ball. If she could just see him, she was positive she could identify him. But until then, she was at a standstill.

She needed her memory back.

But how?

Forcing herself to remember didn’t seem to work—Akane had been trying that for the last five years. So why? Why now? Why after so many years of trying, was she suddenly remembering when she hadn’t been able to before? What was different?

Could it be connected to Ranma somehow, she wondered. Was she recalling everything now that he was here? It couldn’t be a mere coincidence, could it? But if it wasn’t, how did *that* make any sort of sense? He wasn’t a lightning rod—touching him couldn’t magically make her regain her memory. If that were the case, she would’ve recalled everything the moment she slammed into him in the hallway earlier.

No. There had to be something else, something she was missing.

Unfortunately though, she had no idea what that could be.

Frustrated, Akane released a heavy sigh. All she was doing was getting more questions and absolutely no answers, and the thought of sitting back, doing nothing while waiting for more memories to fall into her lap was maddening! She had to distract herself somehow . . . decide what her next course of action should be.

Maybe she should tell Ranma what she‘d seen. There was only so much she could do on her own, after all, and perhaps he’d remember something she’d forgotten. Or better yet, maybe he’d know how to trigger another memory. He had certainly helped trigger the last one. . .

At that thought, Akane frowned, suddenly uncomfortable. “Help” wasn’t the best way to describe it though, was it? Ranma had *attacked* her. Just as surely as that monster had attacked and killed Ranko.

Though part of her realized she may have let him. Just a little.

She hadn’t quite been able to forget how it had felt *before* Ranma lost control—as though his touch was forever ingrained into her body, the feel of his warm breath, his scent, the softness of his lips lingering, as she relived that kiss over and over again.

Even the memory of Kuno and her promise hadn’t been enough to drown it out completely.

Not that it made Ranma’s actions any less right or excusable, but she knew a bit of what he’d been feeling—had felt it herself at the time, and had even been swept away by it. It was countless years’ worth of emotional and sexual frustration, come to life. It had always been there, bottled up, like a cork in a champagne bottle, ready to explode. She still planned to give him a thorough talking down and beating the next time she saw him, but if he showed ample remorse and promised never to do it again, she’d probably forgive him eventually. Maybe.

But the man who killed Ranko . . . he wouldn’t be so lucky.

And if by chance, Ranma was the key to unlocking that mystery, then she had to try and tell him what she knew. The only question remaining was whether or not the dummy would believe her.

Feeling better now that she had a plan of action, Akane turned to stare at the door, waiting with an impatience she hadn’t even realized she was capable of. The sooner she talked to Ranma the better.

But for now, *again*, all she could do was wait.

It was starting to become a habit.

\* \* \*

The next few days for Ranma were a bit of a blur.

He’d forced himself to stay far, far away from Akane and his room, and kept updated by way of Akari and Konatsu—the only two he really felt comfortable leaving her alone with. Not that he was jealous or uncomfortable with her being around other guys or anything—Konatsu was a guy, after all, kinda—but they were perfect for guard duty because both were nice, easy-going, and competent enough to control her without fear of her lashing out. Plus they weren’t in love with him, which was a definite plus.

But even so, locked away as she was, he knew Akane was getting more and more restless and impatient. And angry, if Konatsu’s assessment was correct. She hadn’t tried to break out of his room quite yet—but according to his friends, she was damn near close. They couldn’t open the door without her demanding to talk to him, or threatening to tear the ship apart, and any moment now, he knew she’d finally snap.

He was just impressed she’d lasted as long as she had without causing an uproar. But now, Ranma knew he couldn’t put their confrontation off any longer. At last, they were nearing Sapporo—if he was gonna do this, this was his last chance. After today, obligations and expectations would take precedence, and things were inevitably going to change.

So standing outside his room, Ranma mentally prepared himself for the unpleasant task ahead. Puffing up his chest, he wrapped his courage around himself like a cloak, trying to pump himself up. *He was in control, not her. He was in control, not her.* Silently repeating those words, he opened the door with a quick, angry jerk, and finally made his way in.

Akane was alone and sitting on his bed, looking surprised to see him. She was wearing the long blue dress he’d left her, the light fabric hanging sweetly off her body as she slowly stood to face him—and yup, she was still mad. The moment their gazes met, her eyes narrowed and her lips thinned.

Ranma bravely faced her anyway, trying to look firm. Even so, it was difficult to keep his level of bluster up as Akane began to walk towards him, determination behind every small step. His own meager attempt at bravado seemed to crumble around him, and Ranma took a deep breath; fortifying himself.

“So. Look who finally decides to show up,” Akane said, her gaze sharp and accusing as she crossed her arms. “I certainly hope you have something to say to me, Ranma, otherwise you can crawl right back out that hole you climbed in through.”

Even in the face of her fury, Ranma didn’t back down an inch. He crossed his arms against his chest, mimicking her stance. “I DO actually,” he told her, jutting his chin into the air defiantly. “I just came to inform you we’ll be reaching our destination shortly, so once we disembark, don’t go doing anything dumb like trying to escape again, got it?”

For a long moment, Akane didn’t say a word. She simply stood there, staring at him—unsure if he was really that stupid or simply putting up a front. She’d managed the last several days without running away, hadn’t she? Just who did he take her for? “That’s it? *That’s* what you wanted to talk to me about. Nothing *else* comes to mind?”

“Nope,” Ranma said, and was proud of how confident he sounded. He hadn’t sounded nearly this good during practice. “That’s all. Hope the trip hasn’t been *too* uncomfortable, *princess*.”

“I see . . .” She said, very softly. And then, without another word, Akane took one giant step towards him and smacked him hard across the face, leaving a lovely red handprint in its wake. Not giving Ranma a chance to retaliate, she continued on, furious now: “Here I am, giving you a chance to apologize, and instead you start acting like an arrogant macho ***jerk***! Are you a MAN or AREN’T you?!”

“OF **COURSE** I’M A MAN!” Ranma yelled back, suddenly venomous as he rubbed his aching cheek. “What kind of dumb-ass question is that?!”

“HA!” Akane mocked, glaring now. “You sure have an odd way of showing it, Ranma! What kind of MAN does what *you* did, and then disappears for *days*? The very LEAST you could do is say you’re sorry!”

“What the HELL do I have to apologize for?! You’re my *prisoner*, stupid. I don’t gotta apologize for anything!”

Akane punched him again. And then for good measure, kicked him in the shin. She was so angry now, she was literally *shaking,* a fire lighting her eyes. “PERVERT!” she yelled. “MASHER!”

“*Dammit*, Akane!” Ranma yelled, doing his best to block her attacks. They hurt alright, but for some reason he couldn’t bring himself to attack back, or even to stop her. There was something about seeing her this way that was affecting him. It wasn’t until her fifth strike though—this one to his arm—that he figured out why that was.

This was the first time in five years he’d seen her angry—really, truly angry. Hell, even after kidnapping her, locking her away, and forcing her to *strip* for him, she’d been rather chill.

But now . . .

Ranma still couldn’t see her battle aura, but he knew if he could, it would have been strong enough to set fire to the entire ship. She was breathing heavily, her cheeks flushed, her stance full of indignant fury. And yet, for some inexplicable reason, he \*liked\* her like this. THIS Akane he recognized. *This* was the Akane whose aura he’d glimpsed back at the marketplace.

Passion. Anger. Fire.

And suddenly, Ranma wanted nothing more than to lead her to the bed, and put all that fiery passion to good use. With her willing of course. . .

Man, maybe he really *was* a pervert.

“Are you even LISTENING?” Akane demanded, as she hit him again, this time in his stomach. This one barely hurt at all, but Ranma doubled over a bit to make her think that it did; deciding he owed her that much at least.

“Nope. Not a word,” he replied, comfortable in this anger-fueled confrontation they were in. “Why? Was it important?”

If he thought it was impossible for Akane to get even *more* mad, he was wrong. “RANMA!” she screamed as she shoved him hard in the chest—pushing him with enough strength that his back struck the wall. It was a good thing she didn’t have any weapons—if she did, she’d be bashing him over the head with every single one of them.

Still, Ranma almost laughed. He was really enjoying her like this, much more than he had a right to. But even he had a limit to how far he could take this. Forcing her had been wrong; he knew that. “Fine. I’m sorry, alright. I promise—I won’t touch you again till our wedding night. Happy now?” The expression on her face could be described in many ways—happy was *not* one of them. Still, she seemed to be satisfied on some level. Probably because she figured there wasn’t ever going to be a wedding.

She crossed her arms, most of her bottled anger temporarily spent. “In what way does that possibly qualify as an apology?” she demanded.

“The word sorry was in there, you know.”

“Just because you *say* it, doesn’t mean—”

“—doesn’t mean what?” Ranma challenged, growing annoyed. “I said what you wanted to hear, dummy, and I ain’t gonna start groveling. So take it or leave it!”

For a minute, Ranma thought she might strike him again. But somehow she got a hold of her emotions and turned her head away, in a huff. “Honestly! From the way you talk, sounds like you must do this kind of thing a lot.” Her expression darkened. “Well then. You’re not forgiven.”

“Wait. What?” Ranma asked, too confused to be angry at the accusation. “What the hell do you mean by that? I ain’t some kinda deviant you know!”

Akane scoffed. “Could’ve fooled me.”

Ranma frowned at the insult, but realized he kinda, sorta deserved it. Ryoga was right—he was an ass. “Look, I’m sorry, okay? REALLY. I got carried away, and was pissed off, and it won’t happen again. I mean, it’s not like I *wanna* touch an uncute, violent chick like you anyway,” he added with exasperation. “If I wanted to, I could have any girl on this ship. Willing *and* eager. I have no reason to force anyone.”

Akane forced a laugh at the blatant insult. “Well then, don’t let *me* stop you,” she snapped as she grabbed one of his arms, and started dragging him towards the door. “Go right ahead, Ranma! With my blessings!”

“Gee—thanks.”

“Don’t mention it!” Grabbing the handle on the door, Akane yanked it open, and with a final word of “ENJOY!” pushed Ranma outside without another word. For added emphasis, she slammed the door right in his face.

Ranma didn’t even bother trying to force his way back in. Muttering about uncute tomboys, she heard the sound of the door being locked again, and then his feet stomping down the hall, headed who knew where—probably to one of those girls he’d mentioned. The jerk.

A few minutes later, when Akane had stopped pacing and calmed down enough to think rationally again, she realized she’d forgotten something very important. “Oh no,” she groaned, once again cursing her impulsiveness. “I completely forgot to tell him about Ranko!” And then, furious, she added, “This is all Ranma’s fault!”

Still, she knew she’d have another chance. At least Ranma was talking to her again, and if what he said was true—that they were almost to their destination—she knew he’d be back soon. In the meantime, it’s not like she was going anywhere.

And as odd as it seemed, Akane couldn’t quite shake the feeling that to find Ranko’s killer, she was right where she needed to be. They both were.

Together they’d get to the bottom of this.

If they didn’t kill each other first. . .

-------------

THE END

Chapter 11

-------------

A/N: Sorry that this chapter came out a little later than usual, even though I still made it by my self-imposed Friday deadline. Like I said, the real world keeps getting in my way, and it’s hard to stay focused, but thanks to all your kind reviews and encouragement, I somehow managed to stay motivated. I doubt I could’ve gotten this posted without you, so again, really, thank you all so much!!