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.

Warning: This story is mature/adult, so please respect its rating. Later on, it touches upon issues that may serve as a trigger to some, so if you’re easily affected or offended, please steer clear of this story.

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Chapter 1

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He watched her closely; the girl who would be his bride.

In the five years he hadn’t seen her, she had changed. Gone was the snot-nosed, short-haired, angry little tomboy, the stubborn princess who would choose a good fight in the mud over acting like a lady any day. At eighteen now, she came across as surprisingly mature and self-assured—just like Kasumi and Nabiki. And though she tried to hide it, she couldn’t quite disguise her lineage; any fool in the marketplace could have picked her out as royalty if they took the trouble to look.

So no, he could see no trace of that young girl now . . . not in the woman standing before him.

And somehow that made everything easier.

“That’s her, isn’t it?” Ukyo asked from behind him, her voice resigned and laced with anger.

Ranma silently nodded—too intent to take his eyes off his target; too afraid to blink and find her gone.

But Ukyo didn’t take kindly to being brushed aside . . . he could feel it in her aura, pulsing strongly behind him, emanating an ugly cocktail of loathing and jealousy. He didn’t have to turn around to know what color it would be—green, pallid and unflattering—the color it always was whenever he glanced at another woman.

Clearing her throat uncomfortably, Ukyo leaned forward. “I thought she’d be prettier,” she said.

Ranma ignored her comment with a skill he had long ago perfected. In the end, it didn’t matter if she was blind, limbless, scatter-brained, or toothless, they’d be married no matter what—a fact Ukyo couldn’t seem to grasp, nor Shampoo and Kodachi for that matter, no matter how many times he tried to spell it out for them.

And frankly, Ranma no longer cared enough to even bother.

“Konatsu,” he ordered, his gaze remaining steadfast on his fiancée. “Take Ukyo back to camp and tell everyone I’ll be there soon—and no,” he added, cutting Ukyo off before she had a chance to protest, “I don’t need backup. I can handle one stupid girl on my own.”

Konatsu bowed respectfully, and Ukyo grumbled, but his two companions followed his orders and quickly lost themselves in the crowd.

Finally alone, Ranma allowed himself to watch her freely, trying to take everything in.

Though she was wearing a long cloak, a friendly wind and jostling crowd had knocked its hood back several times, allowing for brief, unhindered glimpses. Right away he could tell that her hair was longer now, much longer than Ranko’s had been, with several strands falling loose from a bright yellow ribbon. And she had grown taller, her face slimmer, and her lips . . . well, Ranma didn’t linger there long; instead his gaze was drawn to her eyes.

*They* were the same . . . a shade of brown that changed with her mood. At the moment they were shining brightly as she talked with the street merchant, probably haggling over some silly bauble—though Ranma knew how those same eyes looked when she was feeling mischievous or angry, or even when she cried. Instinctively, his hands clenched at the memory and his muscles grew tense.

Then, suddenly, she smiled. . .

At that, Ranma felt his breath catch and his heart race.

It wasn’t *just* her smile that held him captivated . . . in truth, it was her aura. A powerful outer light that glowed brighter the moment she smiled*.* It was vibrant and gorgeous, full of passion and strength; a shade of red that occasionally showed hints of deep crimson.

He had never seen anything like it.

She was life, energy, and passion personified.

And that energy, that spark: he WANTED it.

But then without warning, the light surrounding her aura was inexplicably gone. Ranma stared hard, trying to will the colors back into being—unsure what had happened to make the image slip. He glanced around at the other people in the marketplace, checking to see if he was losing his touch—but colors and emotions—hatred, giddiness and greed, feelings common to the area, still assaulted him from every direction.

Yet when he looked back at Akane, for some reason there was nothing there.

In that moment, all the anger and resentment he’d harbored for five hellish years came flooding back—was she going to take this from him too?! Suddenly, Ranma wanted nothing more than to walk right up to her and wipe that grin right off her face–preferably, with her down on her knees, begging for forgiveness. Seeing her standing there, so *happy*, just reminded him of everything he’d lost, everything that was stolen from him.

He badly wanted to break her, just like she had broken him. . .

. . . but then, just as quickly as they had fled, the colors of her aura returned and Ranma could read her again. He heaved a heavy sigh of relief. When he finally confronted her, he *wanted* to know what she was feeling, to know all the years he’d spent hating her hadn’t been in vain.

And there she was, right in front of him, a stone’s throw away . . . laughing, her cheeks red from the cold, as she grabbed a small pouch off her waist and paid the merchant for some small trinket. Ranma watched as she placed the item in her pouch, bowing politely before turning away; her guard completely down. She was so vulnerable to attack it was almost laughable—get her someplace secluded and she’d be putty in his hands.

But for now, against every instinct, he waited . . . not stupid enough to take her down with witnesses around. Happosai’s orders had been clear: Make it to Sapporo without being discovered.

So continuing his vigilance, Ranma followed her with his eyes and noted the general direction she seemed to be headed, then frowned. He had known these roads by heart once, had memorized every nook and cranny, even knew how to get into the castle undetected—and that’s exactly where Akane was headed.

Ranma cursed under his breath.

He had hoped to be able to watch her a while longer—to find the perfect time and place to make his move. Now if he didn’t act fast, he’d have to break into the castle and snatch her from under the very noses of her father and his guards. And though the thought of sticking it to the Tendos so brazenly was tempting, it was also risky and foolish—especially when she was right in front of him; alone, unguarded.

He couldn’t let this opportunity slip away. It was too good to pass up.

As he rose from his position behind the cabbage stall, a plan began to take form. It was a bit risky—if it went badly, every guard in the city would be on high alert, and their plans could be set back as a result. But if it was successful, if there was ANYTHING of the old Akane left in her, she’d definitely take the bait, and they could be headed for Sapporo by nightfall. In any case, it was better than simply letting her slip inside the palace gates. Without putting up a fight. Without trying.

No way in hell *that* was gonna happen again. With that spurring him on, Ranma made his move.

With a deftness born from a lifetime of martial arts, he weaved in and out of the crowd, closing what little distance remained till she was close enough to touch. Then purposely making his presence known, he made a show of grabbing the small pouch tied securely to her belt and ripped it away, veering sharply to the left as he took off running.

Behind him, her screams of “Stop!” rang clear and loud, yet she didn’t call for help or sound the alarms, all he heard was the sound of footfalls as she immediately gave chase; the sound music to his ears.

Laughing lightly, Ranma relished the moment.

*He had her* . . .

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Akane wanted to *kill* something—or to be more precise, some*one*.

Honestly! Of all the days to get robbed. Couldn’t a girl sneak out of her father’s castle without running into unnecessary drama. . .?

The thief was straight ahead now, moving swiftly as he dodged people left and right with an ease that was actually quite impressive. Still, she wasn’t about to get discouraged. He was fast, but she could be faster. Using the hand that wasn’t holding her hood in place, she hiked up her cloak and pushed herself harder, adrenaline and a healthy sense of justice giving her a heady boost. This was her country, after all—she wouldn’t be beaten by some common street hoodlum!

Hoping to shake her, he suddenly turned a sharp corner, making his way down one of the many side-alleys that led to the labyrinth—a series of twisting, conjoining passageways even the locals had trouble navigating. Akane followed without hesitation. She knew these alleys like the back of her hand, had explored them often enough as a child—but even with her cloak out of the way and a working knowledge of where she was, she still couldn’t seem to make any headway.

No matter how hard she pushed herself, the distance between them remained the same. Yet Akane never once considered turning back or going for help; instead, she happily rose to the occasion. You couldn’t get a thrilling workout like *this* inside the castle, and for once she’d have an exciting story to tell the maids! The heroic tale was already taking shape in her head—‘Princess Akane’s daring chase through the streets of Nerima: Notorious thief, caught and jailed’.

Okay, so maybe she’d just slap him on the head and tell him not to do it again . . . but she was allowed to embellish for the sake of suspense! Besides, she had no doubt she’d catch him eventually. . .

Her quarry’s outfit didn’t exactly scream discreet.

He was wearing black pants with a burgundy sash tied tightly around his waist, and a sleeveless red shirt that was ridiculously easy to pick out in a crowd. And then there was his hair. Even in Nerima, a man with a pigtail was still fairly rare to see, especially in this part of the country. Judging from the way he was dressed, she was almost certain he wasn’t a professional thief—or if he was, he was a rather cocky, undisciplined one.

Still, Akane continued to follow the boy as he turned down one alleyway, then another and another, until even Akane found herself getting confused. Somehow, this wasn’t making sense—a local would be focused on losing her and exiting the maze as soon as possible, and a traveler wouldn’t know the routes this well, not by pure luck. Yet, somehow, this thief did. He was turning her around in circles, as though purposely trying to disorient her—and with a sinking feeling, she realized she’d been wrong all along. He *knew* this area. He wasn’t trying to lose her at all—he was drawing her in, like a cat slowly ensnaring a mouse.

Akane immediately stopped running, her heart beating painfully in her chest.

She had to get out of here. . .

For the first time since the chase began, she let the thief out of her sight and quickly began to backtrack, conjuring up a map in her mind as she struggled to recall where the closest shop was. If she could get there and call for help, she could have every guard in the city hunting for this red-shirted jerk—and though a quick glance back assured her he wasn’t following, she wasn’t naïve enough to assume she was safe. There could be others.

With that thought in mind, Akane made her way out of the maze as best she could, a job made infinitely more difficult by frayed nerves and Kasumi’s voice in her head, chiding her for leaving the castle in the first place. Eventually though, after what seemed like hours, she finally saw the front door of the butcher shop straight ahead and released a breath she hadn’t realized she’d been holding. It was still a bit far removed from other storefronts, but was still a sight for sore eyes.

Rushing inside, she didn’t bother with niceties. “Hello?” Akane yelled desperately, glancing around the very empty, very dark shop. It didn’t look like anyone was there, but she stepped further into the room just to be sure. “Hello? Is anyone here? Please, I need some help!”

To her frustration, no one answered . . . but seconds later she heard the door slam shut behind her, and a voice that clearly wasn’t the shopkeeper’s spoke from the shadows, cold and arrogant.

“You may be cute, but you sure are dumb.”

Akane turned fast, her hood falling with the motion—but it wasn’t fast enough.

The man she’d been chasing leapt from the shadows and before she could take up a defensive position or get a clear view, he was behind her, a hand closing over her mouth, cutting off her cries for help. Then almost instantly, his finger was pressing a point on the base of her neck—and her vision began to blur as everything around her slowly faded to black.

She fought it, struggled to keep her eyes open, to stay conscious; but in the end, it was a losing battle.

Ranma caught her body as she went slack in his arms, and staring down at her, he smiled.

“Hey Akane. I’m home.”

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THE END

Chapter 1

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A/N: Alright, here we are at long last! I apologize for the ridiculous wait—I was determined not to post another story until it was almost finished, that way people wouldn’t have to wait several years between updates (I swear I don’t do it on purpose—I’m just that slow, lol). As stated on my profile page, Broken Palace is almost complete (I only have around 3 or 4 chapters left to write), so I’ll be posting one chapter every Friday to give me time to write/revise past and future chapters (Chapter 2 will be posted January 3rd, and so on). With your encouragement and pestering, I’m hoping I’ll be able to get those remaining chapters churned out by the time we get to that final week!

And now, a big enormous shout-out to my AMAZING pre-readers—Roja-Cyd, Lichan44, and tomboy 26. Any errors remaining are completely my fault! I either revised it until it was unrecognizable, or ignored their sage advice for one stupid reason or another.

I hope to see you all again in chapter 2! ☺