C & C welcome, not to mention needed.
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Broken Palace
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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 not for you guys, I definitely wouldn't be able to keep these updates coming at such a steady pace. Every time I get a review in my inbox, inspiration seems to follow! :)

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Chapter 6
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His cabin wasn't exactly fit for royalty. It was narrow, cramped, and as empty as the room Akane had left behind, with only the bare essentials to make it feel lived in—a bed, closet, trunk, desk—and little else. But Ranma didn't mind.

At the time, he had thought it perfect. No unnecessary junk to clutter it up, no extra space for Shampoo, Kodachi, or Ukyo to try to weasel their way in. The larger rooms would be put to better use by the girls, anyhow—so taking the small cabin for himself had seemed like a no-brainer at the time.

Now though, he was starting to regret it.

It was big enough for him, sure—but add another person to the mix and suddenly the small space became even smaller—the bed, ironically, almost *too* large. He knew how it must look, especially for Akane who had grown up in the castle with all sorts of extravagances and wide, open spaces. *She* *knew* how he used to live—how his own room, though lacking in opulence, had been spacious once too, how his bathroom could've fit inside this one several times over.

Five years later and *this* was what he was reduced to. . . a room that was essentially the size of *one* of her closets.

For Ranma, it was a harrowing reminder of just how much he'd lost; though stacked against the bigger picture, the state of his living quarters paled in comparison. Who cared about the size of his room when he'd lost his sister, his pride, his home, his fiancée, his entire fucking *future* in the span of a single day?

Akane, standing in the doorway, quiet for once—said it all. He could read what she was thinking in the set of her eyes and the turn of her lips, even if he couldn't read it in her aura. Sorrow and sympathy—the last two things he'd ever wanted to see from her. All it did was make him even angrier.

"I know it doesn't look like much," he said, feeling the need to defend himself, "but it's still better than the brig. Unless," he added with narrowed eyes, "you'd prefer sleeping with the rats?"

Terrified by the thought, Akane quickly shook her head. "No! No, this is fine," she assured him. Still, she shifted uneasily, biting her lip as she looked the room over with a less critical eye, but an eye all the same. For whatever reason, her gaze kept returning to the floor by his bed—only to look away guiltily as soon as she felt his eyes on her.

*That* look set him on edge.

Even if his cabin didn't look like much, she was his damn prisoner, not a fucking house guest. She wasn't exactly in a position to be choosy.

Tired of trying to placate her, Ranma decided to remind her just who was in charge here. Grabbing her by the wrist, he shoved her towards the bed, watching dispassionately as she stumbled and fell, a surprised cry escaping her lips as her body hit the mattress hard.

She looked up at him seconds later glaring, that familiar fire back in her eyes. "Honestly. Did you really have to *push* me?" she muttered, sitting up slowly.

"Not really," he replied, and fought back a grin.

He never did get tired of seeing her angry . . . he wondered why that was.

Still, as fun as it was to piss her off, he knew he couldn't afford to leave her that way for long. The last thing he wanted was to return later and find his room torn apart and his window smashed. When left to her own devices, Akane could do just as much damage as a shi-shi-hokodan.

So taking pains to clear his throat, Ranma worked up the courage to try and mollify her—at least for now. The moment he'd decided to bring her back to his room, he knew he was stuck having to hear her out—but first, he had a ship to run and a crew to protect. Waiting a half-hour more wasn't going to kill her.

"Look," he began, already prepared for an argument; they couldn't seem to hold a conversation without one. "There's a bit of a storm coming—nothing major or nothin', but I still have a few things I gotta tie up before I can settle down and deal with you. If you were serious before though, about trying to find me, about wanting to talk—I'll hear you out—but it's gonna have to wait till after I get back."

Akane actually frowned, not happy or grateful at all. "How do I know this isn't some elaborate trick?" she asked, eyeing him suspiciously. "You haven't exactly been accommodating so far, Ranma. What if you don't even bother coming back? Or—or what if you're sick of dealing with me, and plan to pump some weird gas into the room to make me pass out, or—?"

Ranma struggled to keep a straight face, and held up a hand to stop her. "If I wanted you out-of-action, Akane, there's easier ways to go about it—remember the butcher shop?" Akane blushed furiously, indicating she hadn't forgotten at all. "Besides, just how stupid do you think I am?" he went on, putting a hand behind his head in casual indifference. "If I didn't return, you'd do something dumb like trying to rip the door off its hinges or something, and frankly, I'm running out of places to put you. So yeah, I'll come back—I promise."

She liked the sound of that, but. . . "Can I trust you?" she asked him, the words halting and strained. Knowing she had trusted him with her life once, and now, couldn't even trust him at his word, was sobering. It *hurt.* But Ranma nodded firmly, unaware of the toll that question had taken on her.

"I always keep my word, Akane," he assured her flippantly. "I haven't changed that much."

She wasn't sure if she believed him, but she *wanted* to trust him so badly, wanted to believe there was still something left of the old Ranma in him . . . so without reservation, she took him at his word. And once that burden was eliminated, Akane finally smiled for him; a real smile, warm and genuine and powerful enough to make his heart skip a beat. "Thanks, Ranma," she told him softly, sincerely. But not before adding with playful menace, "But you better keep your promise! I meant what I said back there—I'll hunt you down if I have to—you *will* hear me out!"

"No problem," he said, and couldn't help but smile too, as if the expression was contagious. "As long as you're here when I get back, you can talk till you're blue in the face. Just—no more trying to escape, deal?"

"Deal," she said, and nodded with complete seriousness.

Satisfied that they'd finally reached a compromise, Ranma nodded, pleased with himself, and finally turned to go. But not before sparing one last look over his shoulder at his prisoner, something bothersome tugging at the back of his mind. She hadn't moved an inch. She was sitting patiently on his bed, her hands in her lap, smiling brightly and looking entirely too happy. Like a dog eagerly awaiting its master's return.

For some reason, that bothered him.

Ignoring it for now, Ranma stepped out of the room and closed the door behind him, locking it just to be safe. Once away from the curious eyes of his prisoner, he stared at the hard-grained wood of the door as he tried to figure out what was setting him on edge.

Suddenly something clicked.

Her reaction . . . it wasn't making sense.

No matter how he looked at it, she wasn't acting like a girl who was about to confess—like someone who was guilty. And Ranma *knew* guilt. In the past five years it had become a frequent ally and unwelcome friend. Akane, sitting happily on the bed, relieved and practically glowing, could not possibly feel it.

He had thought it briefly in the hallway too, when he had decided to bring her back to his room . . . but now the uncertainties were back, tenfold. *Was she innocent after all. . .?*

Just the thought brought the doubts he'd harbored five years ago rushing back to the surface—even the beatings he had suffered at the hands of his father and Happosai hadn't been enough to drown them out completely. Hating her had taken effort, not to mention years—yet, within seconds, all it took from her was a simple look or a smile, and all that malice had melted right away, as if it never existed. It was unnerving. It was *frightening*.

No one should have that kinda power over a person.

And if he couldn't read her aura, could he trust anything she had to say? If she was lying, would he even be able to tell? Would he even **care**?

Ranma wasn't so sure. Akane had been his best friend, his fiancée, his first love. They may have only been kids then, but those kinds of feelings, they didn't just go away—no matter how much he had wanted them to. He was only sure of one thing: He needed answers. Figuring out the lies from the truths could come later.

Shoving the key into his pocket, Ranma started to jog down the hall, headed further below deck to the engine room. Confronting her was important, but making sure the people on his ship were safe came first. *After* the storm was over, then she'd have some explaining to do.

And Akane better hope he liked her answers. . .

Inside her latest prison Akane sat quietly, silently observing her room—no, she thought with a slight blush—*Ranma's* *room*. She had no idea why he hadn't mentioned it earlier, but the Chinese-style shirt shoved half-way under his bed, similar to the one he'd just been wearing, was obviously his—and unlike the last place, this one definitely felt lived in. Cozy even.

And it *smelled* like him.

Why he'd brought her here, of all places, she had no idea . . . but for now she had no intention of complaining. *Because*, she thought with a giddy smile, *I'm in Ranma's room*. No way he could hide from her now!

Not quite able to contain her glee, Akane stood up from the bed, tempted to do a little snooping around. Though she didn't normally condone this sort of behavior, after everything she'd been through, she figured a little payback was definitely in order.

She'd start with his desk. If there was anything of interest to be found, she knew it would be in there. In her mind, she was already envisioning her letters stuffed in one of the many drawers, creased with time and well-read—even if he hadn't forgiven her, he still would've kept those, right? One mortifying letter in particular she wanted to find and throw away for good.

With high expectations, Akane opened several of the drawers, disappointed to find each and every one of them empty. In fact, it didn't look like he used the desk at all. She didn't see any ink or paper, no maps or compasses—things you'd normally expect to find in a captain's room. Did he do anything in here besides sleep? she wondered.

Disappointed, Akane turned and looked towards the other side of the cabin, the area Ranma had been blocking when he'd first let her in. She spotted something interesting almost immediately. There, in the very corner of the room, half-hidden by the darkening shadows, was a rather large traveling trunk.

Akane couldn't help but think, *maybe the letters are in there*. . .

Walking up to it slowly, she tried to ignore the inner voice in her head that was busy trying to dissuade her from opening it. She wasn't sure why, but there was something more personal about a closed chest, much more so than a couple wooden drawers thrown into a hastily assembled desk. Besides, the voice insisted, it was probably only filled with clothes anyway.

Still, curiosity proved too strong to ignore. Kneeling beside it, Akane's hands reached out to unclasp the trunk's lid, relieved to find that at least it was unlocked. Whatever he was hiding in there must not be too valuable, she decided. But even so, her heart fell the second she was confronted with a trunk full of clothes—only clothes, stuffed full, nothing else.

Maybe he hadn't brought them along after all. Maybe he had burned them.

Stupid Ranma. . .

Akane's heartbeat slowly began to steady as she closed the trunk's lid and leaned against the wall, trying to fight back the bitter disappointment. "He only ever answered one of them anyway," she quietly berated herself. "Why in the world did you ever think he'd have *kept* them?"

She didn't receive an answer.

Instead, she heard the sound of a door creaking open behind her.

Akane turned, surprised but excited, never having expected Ranma to be back so soon—only to find the doorway inauspiciously empty—the door, slightly ajar. She stared at it, trying to understand what was going on. Had Ranma not locked it after all? Had a draft forced it open? Or was this some kind of test?

Crossing her arms stubbornly against her chest, Akane scowled. She wasn't falling for such an obvious trick. Did he think she was that gullible?

Still, she moved towards it—just to check and make sure no one was hovering outside, waiting to attack. Knowing the company Ranma kept, it was a definite possibility. So approaching cautiously this time, she grabbed the door handle and pulled it open, peeking quickly around the corner, still in defense mode. She looked down both sides of the corridor, only to confirm the hallway was indeed empty.

Figuring it could have been a trick of the wind, or normal for a ship as old as this one, she moved to shut it, determined to put it out of her mind once and for all. If someone had opened it, they were likely long gone by now anyway.

. . .at least, that's what she'd *thought*.

"Nihao," a voice greeted as a masked-head dropped down from above her, hanging upside down from the ceiling outside.

Akane, shocked, took a startled step backwards.

But it was already too late.

Quick as can be, the intruder's hands had shot out, two fingers extended towards Akane's temples. There, they pressed down hard and stayed, holding the position until Akane's eyes closed, and she had slumped to the floor seconds later, blissfully unconscious.

Satisfied the element of surprise had paid off, Shampoo dropped to the ground soundlessly, like a cat, on all fours—then careful not to be seen, wasted no time in dragging the princess's body back inside, closing the door quietly behind them. Safe at last, she removed the rain-slicked mask she wore and shook out her long purple hair, grinning proudly as she stood over the princess, surveying her prize. "Shampoo do remote-control acupressure," she informed her happily. "Now Akane do what Shampoo say. And Shampoo say—"

Leaning over the prone girl then, she whispered her command in Akane's ear, clearly and precisely, just the way she'd practiced. And then sat back to wait, anxious for her slave to awaken and obey.

She could practically feel Ranma's warm, possessive touch already.

The smile that came to her face at that thought, was almost feral. Nothing in the world that could match possessing Ranma—and if Lady Nodoka spoke true, then that once strong, proud, handsome, virile man would bow to her, and her alone.

Shampoo could hardly wait.

Ukyo was ninety-nine percent sure she'd misheard him, so she repeated her question one last time, just to confirm that extra one percent.

"The princess is staying in your room? Alone? With you?" She laughed, it was that absurd. "You're joking, right?"

Again, Ranma shook his head. So Ukyo repeated the question one more time.

Ryoga, already testy after trying and failing to locate Akari, complained, "I'd give it up if I were you. He's not going to change his mind just because you're in a pathetic, embarrassing state of denial. Have a little class, why don't you?"

His complaint was met with a battle spatula to the head. "Butt out! This has nothing to do with you, Ryoga!"

"It DOES when I have to listen to it!" he insisted, and got another smack to the head for his trouble.

"What's the big deal anyway," Ranma muttered, confused and annoyed. "I was gonna be guarding her anyway—who cares if it's in my room, or the spare one?"

"Don't you understand?" Ukyo repeated in disbelief, walking right up to him, her voice shrill as she poked him in the chest. "A guy's room is a very private place, Ran-chan—you can't bring just *anybody* there! And isn't that what she's been plotting all along? To get you alone so she can lie and manipulate you? You've played right into her hands!"

Ranma glowered, offended that she thought he could be manipulated so easily by anyone. "Well, what exactly did you expect me to do?" he asked her, going on the offensive. "The door to her room was blasted off the god-damn hinges, and I couldn't exactly put her with any of you."

At the reminder, Ukyo had the good sense to look embarrassed. "Well, no, I suppose not," she allowed, racking her brain for a solution. "Couldn't you have tied her up and thrown her in the galley or the brig or something? Any place else would've done as well!"

"Sure, surround her with disease-infested rats or sharp knives. Great plan," Ryoga nodded.

The first two strikes to the head hadn't done any good, but that didn't deter Ukyo from trying with a third. "Would you PLEASE quiet that stupid mouth of yours!?"

"Look, either way, I don't have time for this," Ranma told her, running a hand through his hair in frustration. "I didn't come up here to hear your complaints—I just wanted you guys to know where I'd be in case you needed me. This isn't even open for debate!"

"But Ran-chan!"

Ranma gave her a look that could freeze steel, and to prove the conversation was over and done with, turned to go, anxious to get back to Akane as promised, and away from those dark, forbidding clouds overhead.

. . .Unfortunately, he was seconds too late.

It was just a few harmless drops at first, scattered across the deck. But within seconds, those same innocent drops had developed into a million tiny driblets, and a mighty downpour that stopped Ranma in his tracks. Find himself caught in the middle of it, he swore under his breath, cursing his damn luck as the transformation took hold, as he shrunk, his hair turned red, and his voice became higher, more feminine.

"Great! Just fucking GREAT! Thanks a bunch, Ukyo—this is just what I needed!"

Ukyo hung her head, cowed and repentant; well aware of how his curse affected him. "Sorry, hun! I'll go get you some hot water," she told him and hurried away.

Ranma frowned as he leaned against the railing, his eyes closed.

Not having to see himself definitely helped.

Although it had been five years now, he still wasn't use to the change—to the feeling of being *her*—and he knew that he never would be. In any case, he couldn't exactly show himself to Akane like this, not unless he was willing to walk to the kitchens himself—to feel the extra baggage on his chest, to see *her* hair falling over his eyes with every step, to feel his entire body being out of whack. No, he had no choice but to hold fast and wait for Ukyo to return.

Damn. But he hated this fucking curse.

"Tough luck," Ryoga observed from beside him. "Isn't this exactly what you were trying to avoid?"

Ranma growled. "Thanks, Ryoga. Real helpful."

The wind was starting to pick up now, sending the rain lashing against them, soaking him more than he already was—and Ranma shivered, not having thought to dress any warmer, and absolutely refusing to cross his arms over his chest. By now, he'd expected to be back in his cabin, nice and warm, fully male, and holding a very important conversation with Akane.

Not stranded on deck as his sister.

Hoping to distract himself from the cold, Ranma opened one eye and fought to see through the pounding rain, surveying the deck while he waited for his water and an umbrella. Thankfully it was swamped with people—tying down lines, securing cargo, tightening the sails—and he knew Konatsu was on the other side of the ship, at the helm as promised, keeping them on course. His crew may be helpless when it came to handling a prisoner, but at least they knew how to run a tight ship. Apparently not *everyone* could be as competent as he was. . .

"Hey, Ranma," Ryoga said, a lilt to his voice.

Ranma turned to him. "Yeah?"

"Isn't that Akane?"

Positive the idiot was seeing things, Ranma shielded his eyes the best he could, following the direction Ryoga was pointing. Sure enough, she was out there, alright—looking windswept and cold, doing her best to not get blown away as she headed portside, her hair and cloak whipping about her as she fought to stay vertical.

He swore she even had a big stupid grin on her face.

This time, when Ranma started to curse, it wasn't under his breath. His knuckles were white from holding the railing in a death grip, and he was so mad he couldn't think straight. Finally, after a few calming breaths, he relaxed.

"Alright," he said aloud, with surprisingly calm. "Now I'm going to kill her."

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THE END
Chapter 6
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