C & C welcome, not to mention needed.

Updated: 1-17-14

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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.

Special thanks to all my wonderful reviewers: Compucles, miikodesu, pursemonger, ToraHimeSama, AliceTheBookGirl, tomboy 26, Darksouled Saiyanphoenix, Luna12, katlykat, Ranko twin, mia, TL, linkgold64, KaChan84, kana, ilkane, J Luc Pitard, MEI-CHAN, Tii-chan, and KohanaSaotome. Every time I see a new email alert for a review, it’s like my energy’s restored and I power up! :)

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Chapter 4

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For the second time that day, Akane awoke on the floor—disoriented, angry, and in considerable pain. Her head *hurt*, and her mind was a jumbled mess.

Images, confusing and unfamiliar, were dancing around in her head—*A body lying motionless on the floor, a bloody sword, and a scream—*they were short, fast, and frightening—and this time Akane could remember them, every terrible detail.

Sitting up slowly, she put a hand to her throbbing skull, mentally willing the images away. She needed to clear her mind, to concentrate and refocus. She turned her attention to her newest prison, grateful for the distraction.

It didn’t take her long to realize she was in a room. Unlike the tiny fabric tent, this one was scarcely furnished, with a narrow bed, a table, and a small oval window—though for some reason Akane was finding it progressively harder to focus on anything for long. She didn’t know if it really *was* the room or simply a side effect of that last blow to the head, but it felt like everything was swaying beneath her.

Climbing unsteadily to her feet, Akane walked over to the window and soon discovered why.

She was on the ship.

The ocean stretched out before her, wide and immense, water from the waves splashing against the little oval window from outside. There was no sign of land, nothing to indicate they were still docked in the cavern or behind the cascading waterfall. They were on the open sea now, moving at a steady pace far away from Nerima . . . heading who knew where.

Closing her eyes, Akane concentrated fully on her breathing.

She should be happy, she tried to tell herself—she *had* been heading for the ship, after all. And though it may not be the exact way she’d pictured embarking, at least the end result was the same. Plus, Ranma was trapped here too. He couldn’t very well run away from her now, not unless he planned to jump overboard in order to avoid her.

Still . . . trapped. Akane didn’t like that feeling one bit.

Suddenly, it felt like the walls were closing in, like she was some animal being locked away in a cage. Dismay, anger, fear—she couldn’t decide which she felt strongest, but they were all there, crowding in on her from every direction.

Now more than ever, she needed to get out of here and talk to Ranma.

Intent on doing just that, Akane headed for the door on the other side of the room, half expecting, ridiculously, to find it unlocked. To her surprise and frustration it wasn’t; unbidden, her earlier criticisms came back to haunt her.

Apparently Ranma was learning.

Annoyed that he chose now, of all times, to start being competent, Akane kicked the door with her foot, letting off some steam. Honestly! Was this even necessary? They were on the open sea, where exactly did they expect her to run off to?

But more importantly, did Ranma want to avoid her that much?

She frowned at that thought, her confidence beginning to waver.

With an uncertain future before her, Akane was finally starting to realize just how serious her situation was. What if they sold her off as a slave to a foreign country? Royals certainly didn’t go cheap! And if Ranma had never forgiven her, had set his mind to be rid of her, could she really change his decision? Before, she would’ve said yes, absolutely. But at the moment she wasn’t so sure.

Those visions from earlier bothered her, and she couldn’t get them out of her mind.

What if she was finally starting to remember something. . .?

“Please no,” she said quickly, out loud, and started slapping her cheeks with her palms, as though trying to force such distasteful thoughts away. If those were flashes of memory, she was better off forgetting forever.

Instead, she turned her attention to her current predicament. Everything had been happening so fast, so unexpectedly, she felt like she’d awakened from a tailspin. Getting caught once was bad enough—but getting caught twice, and right after managing to escape—that was unacceptable. Her pride as a martial artist would never let her live it down. Not to mention Miss Hinako would definitely drain her for allowing herself to be taken down so easily.

That is, if she survived long enough for her sensei to get the chance.

As it stood now, Akane had no delusions about her position. This was looking less and less like a ransom issue and more like an abduction case; which meant they either wanted something from her, were seeking revenge, or were trying to start a war. If Ranma was simply following orders, doing a job and nothing else, then she was in big trouble. But if he was in charge, if this was about something else entirely, she thought she might be able to reason with him. She’d have to—she couldn’t exactly *swim* back to Nerima.

In any case, one thing was clear—she needed to talk to Ranma, and soon. Until then, her hands were tied. In a rare moment of helplessness, Akane leaned her head against the door, trying hard not to give into despair.

How in the world was she going to get out of this one. . .?

\* \* \*

Ranma stood before Ryoga, visibly fuming.

For the most part, his subordinate was doing an excellent job of looking guilty and ashamed all on his own. He couldn’t *quite* meet his captain’s gaze and every now and then he’d open his mouth to say something, only to close it uselessly, and shake his head in silent condemnation.

But Ranma knew everything he was feeling.

Shame. Guilt. Disgust. Humiliation.

The multitude of colors rolled off his body and seemed to engulf him.

Ryoga had always been ridiculously easy to read, and his colorful range of emotions were some of the first Ranma ever learned to interpret. But even so, he didn’t allow himself to feel an ounce of pity. Even if the moron was feeling guilty over his mistake, Ranma still needed answers, and waiting for Ryoga could mean waiting all day.

“So,” he began, trying to keep his voice neutral, to give the moron the benefit of the doubt. “Which part of ‘watch her’ didn’t you understand exactly?”

Ryoga’s head immediately shot up, and he looked animated for just a second. “I watched her!” he insisted, blushing furiously as he thought, *boy*, *had he watched her.* . .

“Yeah, a little too well,” Ukyo scoffed, having already heard the whole story. “I can’t believe you’d fall for the oldest trick in the book, Ryoga. What are you, an amateur?”

Too embarrassed to even contradict her, Ryoga simply hung his head, having realized the less he said the better. “Anyway, sorry,” he said, glancing at Ranma. “I messed up. Go on and hit me if you want.”

Ranma was tempted, but only because the moron hadn’t *told* him anything yet. “Look,” he sighed, realizing he’d been going about this all wrong. “All I wanna know is how some dumb girl got through your defenses, Ryoga—that’s *it*. Did she have a weapon? Did she use magic? Shiatsu? Did someone come and help her?”

Ryoga and Ukyo both stared at him like he’d said something crazy. Aside from Ranma’s little issue, nobody used magic anymore, not since the practice was banned . . . so all these wild theories came off as a bit outrageous; especially in light of the simple truth.

But Ranma continued to stare at them expectantly, growing impatient. “What?” he deadpanned, unnerved by the creeped out way they were looking at him; it’s not like he could tell them he was checking up on something, that it had to do with his past, so instead he shot back defensively, “Well what other reason could there be? It’s not like Akane’s a martial artist like you guys.”

Again, that look.

“NOW what?” he groused.

“Ran-chan . . . you *do* know she practices the art, right?” Ukyo asked, sore on that particular topic herself.

Ranma simply stared at her, positive he’d heard wrong. Then he laughed. “Come on, Ukyo. Sure, she may be a huge tomboy and can hit like a pile driver, but she’s no fighter. She’s not *trained*. Any of you should be able to take her easy. Especially an idiot like Ryoga.”

“Not trained?” Ukyo repeated incredulously, as Ryoga protested being labelled an idiot, “Ranma, she *sensed* me coming, and was very willing to trade blows even before Shampoo showed up. Trust me, Sugar. She knows martial arts.”

Ryoga quickly nodded in agreement; not because he knew she was telling the truth, but because misconstruing the blame might get him off the hook faster. And it looked like Ranma might even be buying it! He was biting his lip, looking thoughtful.

Akane, a martial artist? That was the first Ranma had ever heard of it . . . not that she hadn’t wanted to learn when they were younger, but her father had always forbidden it, even made Ranma and Ranko promise not to teach her a thing. And though stubborn and headstrong, Akane had always been dutiful, especially after losing her mother.

Was it possible? Had she been learning martial arts all this time?

Ranma felt something warm settling in his chest at that, but then forcefully pushed it away.

Feeling courageous due to Ukyo’s intervention, Ryoga pointed a finger accusingly at his captain, finally going on the offensive. “This is partly your fault anyhow, Ranma!” he announced, righteous fury burning in his big brown eyes. “I never would have let my guard down if you had properly warned me about her!”

“*Warned* you?” Ranma asked in disbelief. “Warned you about *what*?! I didn’t even know, stupid!”

“No, no, not that!” Ryoga informed him, bravery turning him rash and inept. “The *other* thing!”

Ranma narrowed his eyes, noting the way the other boy’s face had suddenly gone red. “And what ‘other thing’ would that be?” he asked, a clear hint of malice in his tone. Ukyo, recognizing it immediately, wisely took a step back.

But Ryoga missed the way his captain’s jaw clenched, the way his fists had begun to tighten. “Because,” he explained, blushing so fiercely now his face was deep scarlet. “She’s really, *really* pretty.”

This time, Ranma *did* hit him, and he would have kept on hitting him if Ukyo hadn’t quickly thrown herself between the two of them, using herself as a human shield. “Stop it, you morons!” she shouted, forcefully pushing Ryoga out of the line of fire. Her captain dutifully backed up several steps but remained in an attack position, ready and willing to hit Ryoga again if he said anything equally as stupid. True or not.

“You mean to tell me,” Ranma said, breathing hard, “she got away from you because she *batted her eyes*, and you swooned like a goddamn idiot?!”

“Uh . . . no?” Ryoga choked out, choosing to stay safely behind Ukyo this time. If this turned into another brawl, he’d run the risk of getting thrown off the ship for mutiny against his captain; Ranma was just mad enough to play that card.

Ukyo, determined to cut the tension, came to the big lug’s defense. “It’s partly your fault, anyhow, Ran-chan,” she informed him. “You shouldn’t have left such an important mission to a numbskull like Ryoga in the first place.”

“Hey!” the aforementioned-numbskull protested.

“From now on, why not leave me in charge of the princess?” she asked, and to underscore her commitment, Ukyo eagerly cracked her knuckles. “You *know* I won’t let her anywhere near you, and this way you won’t have to worry about the little harpy seducing Ryoga again! Or any other guy for that matter.”

“She wasn’t seducing me,” Ryoga grumbled, petulant.

Ranma laughed without humor—the thought of Akane seducing anyone had him seeing red. If Ryoga had gone along with it, he definitely would’ve killed him. “Just you wait, Ryoga,” he said, attacking in a way he knew would leave its mark, “I’m sure ***Akari*** would love to hear about this. Hey, Ukyo . . . think you can go grab her for me?”

A look of horror crossed Ryoga’s face at that, and he threw himself to the ground, grabbing Ranma’s leg in a desperate plea for mercy. “Oh no, please! She’ll be so upset with me—Ranma-you-jerk—you KNOW we haven’t been going out long, and I’ll NEVER forgive you if she breaks up with me!”

Ranma’s eyebrow twitched in annoyance. “And how’s that MY problem?” he pressed, unmoved by Ryoga’s show of debasement. When it came to his love-life, and only his love-life, the moron’s brain went right out the window.

“It was just a moment of weakness, Ranma,” Ryoga stubbornly insisted. “I’ll never go near the princess again, I swear!”

“Fine, jeez. Just let go of my leg already.”

“Not until you swear!” Ryoga said, his grip on his leg actually tightening. For Akari, he could even allow Ranma to use his head as a stool! “Swear on your honor, Ranma! Swear that you’ll never tell Akari!”

“Fine, I swear. Now go away.”

“And the princess?” Ukyo asked, trying not to sound too hopeful.

Ranma waved his hand in dismissal. “Sure. Anyone’s better than this idiot,” he said, before adding ominously, “but we can’t afford another screw up, got it, Ukyo? I don’t want to see her out of that room until *I* say so. Understood?”

Ukyo nodded, all smiles. “Right! Leave it me, Ran-chan. I’ll go check on her now!” Turning swiftly, she headed straight for the door, but paused briefly, glancing back at Ranma. “That is, if it’s safe,” she added, nodding in Ryoga’s direction, fearing the fool would go and get himself into trouble again.

Ranma, sensing her worry, waved her concern aside. “I promise not to kill him,” he assured her, and Ukyo smiled happily as she once again turned to head towards the Princess’s prison.

With one problem out of the way, Ranma now turned to regard the other. “Don’t screw up again, Ryoga,” he warned him, his voice like ice. “If you do, I won’t be so forgiving next time. . .” Ryoga nodded, looking sufficiently subdued and repentant. His shoulders had begun to slump, and his level of guilt was gradually beginning to return.

Satisfied his scolding had made it through even Ryoga’s thick skull and that the dumb sap wouldn’t be going near Akane anytime soon, Ranma nodded, pleased with himself—and prepared to walk away.

Something stopped him in his tracks.

He could feel it—the heat from Ryoga’s aura swimming in the air; so intense, it was stifling. Slowly, he turned back around, shocked to see his friend standing in place, head bowed as waves of dark depression rolled off his body and into the surrounding air.

Failure. Regret. Futility. Anguish.

Ranma’s smile quickly disappeared.

Ryoga may be an idiot, but he was a *dangerous* idiot. The last thing he needed was for his depression to get out of control and for a shi shi hokodan to blast a hole into his very sinkable ship.

*Stupid Ryoga. Why the hell had he brought him along anyway?*

Walking over to him, Ranma slapped him across the head, knowing that was the quickest way to get his attention. “Hey. Akari was looking for you earlier. Not that you care, or anything—what with your little crush on my future *wife*—but, last I heard, she was downstairs in the kitchen—” he left the words deliberately hanging, relieved when he saw his friend’s entire demeanor change at the mere mention of Akari’s name. His aura was no longer black, but a soft happy yellow. The sun had risen for Ryoga; albeit briefly.

“Did—did she really?” he asked shyly, his eyes wide and hopeful, his canines peeking out.

“Moron,” he grinned, relieved to see his first mate back to normal, “just go already.”

Ryoga laughed giddily as he walked out the door and headed straight for the other side of the ship—the *wrong* side. “THAT way,” Ranma corrected, pointing in the opposite direction. Embarrassed, Ryoga turned to go back in the direction he had just come from, and Ranma shook his head, trying to hold back a chuckle as he watched him heading straight towards the storage dock.

In about ten minutes, Ranma was confident he’d hear Ryoga’s familiar shout of frustration at being lost again echoing throughout the ship. He smirked at the thought, looking forward to some predictability for once.

In the last few days he’d had way too many surprises.

Lifting his head, he glanced out the window—and suddenly got another. Ranma’s good humor quickly left him as he noticed clouds gathering on the horizon, dark and gray and heavy with rain; portending a storm. Leaving his cabin, Ranma headed above deck to evaluate the situation more closely.

He’d been right. The weather was about to get nasty; he could feel it in the wind, a skill that was almost second nature to him thanks to many years of sailing . . . though by the look of it, they might just miss the worst of it. If any ships from Nerima or their allies managed to follow them though, *they’d* likely get the brunt of it.

Ranma grinned at that, pleased that mother nature was finally on his side for once. *I hope they come,* he thought arrogantly, full of confidence as he surveyed the slowly darkening skies. *Because they were already too late.*

\* \* \*

Far, far behind them, preparing to set sail, Kuno sneezed.

\* \* \*

In her prison, Akane was doing remarkably well. Her short stint of helplessness and despair had quickly passed, leaving in its wake a renewed sense of determination—and a stubborn unwillingness to go down without a fight.

There was no way she was going to sit here all day staring at the wall. What if Ranma never came to see her? What if he was so afraid of being swayed, he was purposely staying away? That didn’t work for Akane . . . she’d have to go to him then. She had a plan and everything, and it was so simple, it might even work.

Lying quietly on the floor, right where she’d awoken, Akane deigned to wait—her heart pounding in her chest, her breathing even and steady. It was a good thing Miss Hinako had thought to teach her patience. One time, during a particularly memorable training session, Akane had been forced to do nothing but stare at a wall for an entire day, forbidden from moving even a muscle. *This* was child’s play.

And though she could’ve waited much longer if necessary, it was with some relief that she finally heard a key jingling in a lock, and then the sound of a door being opened behind her. “You stay here, Mousse,” said her jailer, and a small smile flitted across Akane’s face when she recognized the voice; the disappointment that it wasn’t Ranma, short-lived.

It was the girl with the spatula. The one who had distracted her while her friend knocked her out.

Yay! She was going to enjoy this!

Pretending to be unconscious, Akane waited with breathless anticipation as the girl crept closer. Since she wasn’t facing her captor, she had to use her other senses to gauge where she was—but she could feel the floor creaking beneath her with every step that she took, could hear the girl’s breathing as she came closer and closer, saw her shadow fall and knew right where she was standing. “Still out cold, huh?” the girl said, and then gently nudged Akane’s body with her foot.

Akane knew an opportunity when she saw one.

Moving fast, she swept out with her foot, knocking the surprised girl right off her feet and onto the floor beside her. Then jumping up, she sprinted for the door, relieved to find it open, the brass key still in its lock. “Stop her, Mousse!” Ukyo shouted as she leapt to her feet too, quick as can be.

Suddenly, a tall man with long dark hair and gorgeous green eyes appeared in front of Akane, looking intense. “You’re not going anywhere,” he informed her, and then lunged forward aggressively.

. . . Right into the wall.

“Mousse, you jackass!” the girl behind her yelled. “I told you to put on your glasses!”

Though she was shocked, Akane didn’t hesitate for long.

Grabbing the guard whose face was still crushed against the wood paneling, she lifted his surprised body into the air and tossed him over her shoulder, straight into the path of her female captor who had just about reached the door. Akane watched in satisfaction as the two bodies collided hard, falling to the floor in a beautiful, tangled heap.

“Next time fight fair!” She yelled, as she quickly slammed the door closed and turned the key in the lock, trapping them both inside. For added measure, she pocketed the ornate key.

Then Akane took off running like her life depended on it.

She was pretty sure that it did.

\* \* \*

Ranma stretched and cursed the weather.

They might be missing the worse of the storm, but they definitely wouldn’t be missing the rain. Looked like he’d be staying in tonight.

Giving final orders to his men, Ranma started heading down below, trusting Konatsu to keep the peace while he hid away in his bunk, safe, and more importantly, dry. For once, he was actually looking forward to some quiet time to sit and think. After all, he still had to figure out what to do about Akane . . . he couldn’t exactly avoid her forever, no matter how appealing that option might sound.

Reaching the bottom of the stairs, Ranma paused, curious, positive he’d just heard something—a loud crash or a bang—something out of the ordinary. Or maybe it was Katsunishiki again, running into things as he tried to navigate the narrow halls. Deciding to investigate just in case, Ranma headed in the direction the noise had come from, and was just about to turn a corner when someone else turned too, running right into him.

The two collided. Fast and hard.

For several uncomfortable minutes, they lay entwined on the floor in the hallway, groaning in mutual pain. “Damn, that hurt,” Ranma muttered, rubbing his head as he slowly sat up, throwing a glare at the reckless moron sprawled face down across his lap. He opened his mouth to yell at them when the words died in his throat—having recognized the familiar dirty cloak, and feeling the very feminine body pressed intimately against him.

The cloak was definitely Akane’s.

As if to confirm his suspicions she lifted her head seconds later, her surprised eyes meeting his. “R-Ranma. . .?”

Ranma didn’t bother to answer. His jaw clenched as he glared in the direction his prisoner had just come running from.

“Ukyo!” he shouted, his voice carrying down the long stretch of hall, echoing ominously around them. “WHAT THE ***HELL***?!”

\* \* \*

THE END

Chapter 4

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