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.

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Chapter 7  
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“If you’re going to kill her, does that mean the wedding’s off?”

Ranma ignored the voice of his friend, too busy willing the stubborn girl below to slip and fall. The wind and rain was doing a pretty good job all on its own, but somehow she was managing to stay upright—he watched as she swayed back and forth unsteadily, braving a particularly ferocious tempest, determined to get to wherever she was going with a stubborn tenacity that surprised even him.

Should he strangle her? Bring out a slab of wood and make her walk the plank? Throw her in the brig to feed the rats? The possibilities were endless, and Ranma was having trouble deciding which one to go with.

It wasn’t until he heard the sound of Ryoga laughing that he was brought back to himself. Hearing the obnoxious sound, he turned to glare, an expression that would’ve been much more intimidating on his male-form than on his current, tiny, red-headed one. “What are *you* laughing at?” he demanded, incensed. “I don’t find this funny, Ryoga!”

Ryoga wildly shook his head, putting his hands up before him defensively. “No, sorry, me either,” he insisted, but then snickered again.

This time it was Ranma’s turn to hit him, though without a spatula handy he had to make do with his fist. “Do you WANT me to throw you overboard that badly, you jerk? Because I can make that happen!”

“Sorry,” he apologized, successfully this time, and reigned in the laughter. “Right then, don’t worry, I’ll go get her.”

“You?” Cocking an eyebrow, it was Ranma’s turn to laugh. “That’s real funny, Ryoga, considering she smiles at you and your brain turns to mush . . . not to mention the fact you’d never be able to *find* her.”

“I can find her!” Ryoga defended, insulted by the jibe, however true it may be. “She may be cute, Ranma, but I’m not so pathetic as to fall for the same trick twice! You just watch!”

The boy-turned-girl rolled his eyes, but found his own options pathetically limited—he couldn’t exactly face her now, not looking like this—and tempting though it may be, allowing Ryoga to wander off and get lost again wouldn’t help their situation at all.

Katsunishiki would definitely kick him for that.

No, it was imperative to keep Ryoga right where he was. At least until Shampoo returned with Akari, or Ukyo got back with the water. Until then, the tomboy would have to do her best not to get herself killed—a skill she’d been pretty proficient at so far.

Turning to Ryoga, he gave him a hearty slap on the back. “Hey, man, don’t sweat it. I’ve already got some people keeping an eye on her anyway—” conveniently omitting the fact that those “people” were him and Ryoga. “—she’s fine right where she is. Besides, a little rain will do her some good—if she catches a cold, maybe she’ll finally stay put!”

Ryoga laughed derisively. “Well now,” he scoffed. “Isn’t that just like you, Ranma . . . taking the *easy* way out. What’s the matter? One princess too much for you to handle?”

Though he knew better, Ranma bristled at his words. “Oh, like YOU’RE one to talk,” he shot back, referencing his epic screw-up from earlier. “You don’t see ME falling to pieces over a pretty face, or letting my captive PRANCE right out of captivity while I sit there stupidly twiddling my thumbs!”

“That—that’s not fair, Ranma!” he sputtered, his face blazing though several interesting shades of red. “I already explained all that!”

Ranma dismissed the lost boy’s protests with a wave of his hand, already used to his tired excuses. Instead, his eyes returned to Akane, enjoying the view as she continued valiantly fighting to stay vertical. It was with some disappointment then, that she finally reached the coveted railing, and taking a moment to steady herself, paused just long enough to catch her bearings and reclaim her balance.

*Then* she did something fucking crazy.

Ranma watched as she grabbed the ship’s railing, and ignoring the wind and the rain, and the crashing waves below, began to *climb*—that same stupid grin plastered across her suddenly wan face.

Just what the **hell** was she doing?!

His heart suddenly in his throat, he stared at her—the part of his mind that *wasn’t* numb from disbelief and shock, looking on helplessly, dazed, as she paused at the very top, teetering precariously where she stood—only to tumble over the side gracelessly, head over heels, into the churning waters below.

. . .Like a shot, everything hit him at once.

She was doing this JUST to piss him off! If she thought she could escape him *that* easily, she had another thing coming!

“Stupid, klutzy tomboy,” he seethed.

Ranma ran without thought, forcing Ryoga to follow behind cluelessly—looking just as lost and confused as Ranma had felt moments before. Then, having reached the very spot where the princess had been standing, Ryoga watched, shocked, as Ranma did something just as monumentally stupid.

He jumped right in after her.

\* \* \*

For a moment, Akane felt weightless.

Then reality came crashing down around her, and true, honest terror greeted her as waves slammed into her body, stealing her very breath as she was dragged helplessly beneath the icy surface. Horrified, she began to panic—but no matter how hard she fought, she continued to sink, her eyes burning as she struggled to keep them open.

She was frozen. Truly and completely *petrified*.

Where was she?! What in the world was happening?!

She could no longer tell which way was up, where down was—the sea and the cold overwhelmed her, disorienting her, making her question if she was still facing the surface at all. But she continued to struggle in desperation, until finally, she could hold her breath no longer. Her mouth opened in a silent scream as water filled her lungs, a fire exploding within her—her chest tight from the strain.

And when her eyes were growing heavy, when her lungs felt ready to burst, in the growing darkness and terror, she saw it—

—a flash of memory, so clear, it was like a photograph springing to life.

*Ranko, lying on the floor, bleeding profusely, her body cradled in Akane’s arms . . . the Tendo sword dropping from nerveless fingers, covered in her friend’s blood . . .*

Water choked back her screams, and soon, all Akane could see was darkness.

\* \* \*

Seconds felt like hours as Ranma fought to ignore the cold, his eyes stinging as he struggled to see through the darkness of the water, forcing himself on. He could feel the pressure in his lungs straining as they neared his breaking point, and knew he was almost at his limit.

For a moment, he thought of giving up—if she wanted to die so badly, then the fucking sea could *have* her—but, despite the pain, he kept on searching, his pulse hammering in his ears, the ache in his chest intensifying with every excruciating second. Finally, when he thought he had no choice but to retreat or drown himself, he saw something . . . a faint red glow out of the corner of his eye, gleaming through the murkiness of the water, beckoning him towards it.

Ranma, feeling desperate, drew closer, surprised and relieved when he finally saw Akane’s body drifting before him, a bright crimson light surrounding her like a protective shield. Her aura, shining once more. He could see terror there—but nothing else.

Then just as quickly, the light faded out altogether, leaving them in the darkness once more.

But that one glimpse had been enough.

He reached her in seconds. Grabbing a hold of her wrist, Ranma pulled her towards him—trying to ignore the way she didn’t respond to his touch, and the cold clammy feel of her hand in his. Ranma wasted no time. With his arm wrapped tightly around her, he headed for the surface, coughing and spluttering as he broke through the turbulent waves with a burst of speed and power he didn’t realize he still had in him.

It took him several moments to orient himself and catch his breath, but when he did he turned to look at Akane, terrified by the paleness of her face, the clamminess of her skin. He forced himself to look away, his eyes searching for a crew member, a life preserver—*anything*.

“Ranma! Grab a hold, quick!”

Somehow, miraculously, he managed to follow the voice, and turned to see Ryoga leaning over the side of The Silky Darling, having thrown something overboard and right towards them. It was floating off to his right, bobbing in the sea; a beacon in its own right.

Ranma struggled towards it, feeling the strain of their combined weight in his small female form. But finally, gratefully, he reached it, and in a hoarse voice, he yelled for his men to pull them up. He could hear them shouting above him, pulling the rope that connected the buoy to the ship.

But Ranma didn’t hear them. His gaze and his attention was fixed solely on the girl barely breathing in his arms.

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It didn’t take long for Akane to come back to herself . . . and when she did, it was to see two familiar blue eyes staring down at her; large and round and wracked with worry. For a moment, she thought for sure she was still dreaming. The girl had red hair, tied in a braid just like Ranma’s—and her face, the concerned look in her eyes—it was familiar.

It was like she was looking at Ranko. . .

Only Ranko was dead.

Slowly Akane sat up, her eyes never leaving the girl who was sitting beside her, her face hovering. Her heart sped up as she remembered everything she’d seen in the darkness of the rushing water.

The sword she could remember holding . . .

Ranko’s dead body lying in her arms . . .

And then the girl spoke, her voice very familiar.

“Akane . . . are you okay?”

Akane couldn’t think rationally after that. Tears filled her eyes, and a tightness enclosed her chest as she began to back away quickly, desperate to put distance between herself and the talking phantom before her.

Was she dead?—was she seeing things? *What* was going on?

The girl—the spirit—whatever she was, continued to watch her warily from a good ten feet away. Akane, feeling slightly better now that she had some room to think, leaned forward slightly, her eyes locked on the familiar blue eyes—eyes that were so much like Ranma’s, but now in the face of his twin. Her throat ached and her body felt cold, but somehow she finally found the strength to speak; her voice anxious and hopeful.

“Ranko . . .? Is—is it *really* you?”

A startled look crossed Ranko’s face at her question, and then, inexplicably, her eyes fell down to stare at her well-endowed chest, her expression troubled. Akane could have sworn she seemed almost angry. But then, with eyes full of emotion, she finally lifted her head, struggling, “Akane, wait a minute—this isn’t what it looks like—”

But Akane didn’t hear her. Not really.

She could only stare back, her mind and eyes at war with what she was seeing. She didn’t register *what* the other girl was saying—only that she was **saying** it. Ranko was alive—she didn’t kill her! Tears fell from her eyes freely now, watching as her friend sat there, living, breathing—looking alive and as healthy as she’d ever seen her.

“So,” Ranko continued obliviously, unaware that Akane hadn’t been listening. “—you understand, right?”

With a cry of “Ranko!” Akane launched herself at the other girl, hugging her tightly—a little *too* tightly, Ranma noticed as he felt his breath suddenly being squeezed out of him.

“Hey!” he protested, “did you even hear a word I said?”

Akane proved yet again, that she hadn’t. Unbelievable guilt, coupled by a throbbing pain in her chest, made her start speaking before she even realized what she was saying. “I’m so sorry, Ranko,” she whispered, images from her memories plaguing her conscience as Ranma stared down at her.

Akane’s tears came harder now, her body wracked with sobs as she began to apologize over and over again; her face buried in Ranko’s shirt, clutching at it like it was her life-line. But the harder she cried, the more her words became muffled and indistinguishable, though Ranma said nothing as he watched her.

“All my fault” — “please, Ranko” — “I’m ***sorry***.”

Finally, he had heard enough.

He had to make her stop before he threw her back into the sea. . .

Slipping his arm behind her, his fingers found the point at the base of her skull, and pushing lightly, activated the acupressure point that would instantly put her to sleep. Ranma caught her in his arms as her body collapsed against his seconds later, the hands that were gripping his shirt finally loosening.

Turning to the closest crewman, he gritted out, “I’m taking her to my room—bring the hot water there.” Without another word, he picked the princess up in his arms and headed back towards his cabin.

. . .Their talk could no longer wait.

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THE END  
Chapter 7  
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A/N: I apologize for the shortness of this chapter. The original was several pages longer, but after all the revising I did on earlier chapters, most of it had to be cut. And since the next chapter is almost entirely flash-back, there was no way to transition it over. On the good-news front though, from here on out, the story starts progressing more quickly – so thanks for sticking with it so far! :)