**Chapter Twenty-Five**

Eventually, the two of us had to stop, both of us tired, sore, and happy. As before Pyrrha went back to our room and I stepped through a Portal, going home, to wash everything off, including myself. I’d told her I’d get dinner on my own, needing a bit more time to get used to ‘my new look’, but that I wouldn’t end up angsting again. My girlfriend had understood, just asking me to head back to our room in a few hours. It was an easy enough request to agree to, and, with a smile, she headed out the door, only slightly limping, Aura already at work.

On my end, it was easy enough to toss everything together into the bag she’d brought and walk through the ‘door’ to my pocket dimension, the last bit of tension draining out of me as I did so, the air just indescribably *cleaner* here then on Remnant. Throwing everything into the wash, and taking a shower, I had to look at my face again. It *was* bad, real life scarring viscerally worse in a way the discolorations of cartoons and anime never were able to convey. But, I reminded myself, *Pyrrha didn’t care.*

Well, she *did,* but mostly in that she was worried *about* me. Over an hour of sex, of varying intimacy, did wonders for my deep-seated fears that she’d reject me over it. Was it healthy to put that much of my self-worth on someone’s opinion? Probably not, but was I doing *that*, or was I just pointing to inarguable proof that my concerns were baseless. Well, not *baseless,* as I was sure that there were others that *would* reject me over it, but not my partner, in more ways than one.

Slipping some pants on, I ambled outside, the temperature perfectly comfortable, the grass soft under my feet. *Okay, time to see how this translates.*

Reaching inside myself, I pushed the internal lever over, first my wings manifesting, and then my entire body shifted and warped, expanding outwards into my mid-form. Standing tall, I stretched, finding myself still a little sore from my earlier activities, but otherwise fine, my injuries transferring from one body to another. Moving over to the swimming pool off to the side, I gazed down into it, regarding my expression.

*Oh, that explains the burn patterns.*

I’d *wondered* why the burn pattern stopped right below my nose, but extended downwards over my chin and faded away on my neck. Turning my head back and forth, able to picture how the fire would flow, the burn patterns didn’t match what would be hit by the backblast from breathing fire as a *human*, with a flat(ish) mouth and a chin, but as a dragon, even this half-dragon form I was wearing, it was obvious what’d happened. To put it simple, I had a bit of a snout, which would cause my flames to erupt outward differently.

I’d opened my mouth as wide as it could go when I’d released that inferno, but while I’d managed to keep most of my head free of the conflagration, the flames had spilled out over my lower jaw, burning me. If I’d had more practice, or hadn’t used as much Fire Dust, or really *knew what the fuck I was doing* I probably could’ve directed those deep red flames better, but all of my training had been as a humanoid, and all of my draconic instincts *didn’t account for Dust.*

If I’d let loose like I had with my *own* fire I’d be fine, as that flame was *mine*, and thus wouldn’t burn me. However, I’d started to delve into things I had *no* idea about, and this was the result.

Shifting my form again, growing even larger, my nearly two-hundred-and-fifty-foot long body stretching backwards, I once again felt the slight soreness of my earlier activities. However, with a different musculature setup as a quadruped, it felt *very* odd. Looking back into he pool, now able to just loom over it completely instead of standing by the edge, the burn patterns were still present, but also a lot more, well, *natural* looking then they had in my human guise.

Launching myself up, I opened my great wings, lifting myself up to go for a fly around my territory, and considered things. Did I regret what I’d done? In a sense, *yes*, if I’d known better I could’ve grabbed Ice Dust instead, frostbite easier to treat than burns, but I hadn’t *known* what would happen. If, instead, I put it into a binary of ‘hurt myself and save everyone’, and ‘don’t, and have them overrun, *maybe* being able to save the others by heading Home’? That was harder to decide.

The ‘unnoticeable’ aspect of the portal was the sticking point. I’d never *brought* someone here, so I had no idea how to get around it. Would merely pointing it out work? would I have to *physically* push them through? Even if I could move people in by literally tossing them in, and they didn’t, I don’t know, *fight* me on it, would’ve I had time to grab all *eighty* people, including the *teachers*, and *throw* them through the portal?

*Probably not.*

So, if the option was ‘get burned’, or ‘end up with half the class dead’. . . well, it *should* be an easy choice, but, now, out of the situation, it *wasn’t*. I didn’t *know* those people. I didn’t *owe* them anything. But, in the moment, I hadn’t considered that, I’d just wanted to help, and had thrown myself into the fray to do so.

Well, I’d been told the scars I now had could be healed, as Professor Tim had taken the time to inform me. And there were my Defenses from the Company, so they *might* be able to help. Landing on a mountain, I dropped down to winged-humanoid form, calling my scroll to me, and checking it. I remembered something about being in peak condition, and another about being immune to things that transformed my body. Didn’t this count?

Looking it over? No, *it didn’t.*

Body Talent that made me in perfect condition, erasing genetic problems, was phrased in such a way that it was a *one-time* effect, giving me a good head-start, but that was all. It’d make me immune to small illnesses, and give me the *best* version of eternal youth, which was nice, but injury was *explicitly* excluded from the things it protected me from.

Body Defense was the next step up, outright making me immune to disease, poisons, parasites, and powers that enacted ‘targeted physical transformations’, so if someone tried to turn me into a newt I could laugh in their face, before burning it off. However, as before, it explicitly outlined that it did exactly *nothing* to prevent injury, nor to help me heal in the slightest.

Both were absolutely nothing to sneeze at, mind you, but neither of which would help me here. Heck, by accepting Peach’s medicine, I might be partially responsible for my own scars *forming*, though more likely if I hadn’t I might’ve just *died*. I *really* didn’t know enough about all of this to make a judgement call, and I *knew* how useless torturing myself with ‘what ifs’ could be, even if I still did it from time to time.

Sighing, I jumped off the cliff, shifting myself back to full dragon, letting loose a blast of fire. While it was still tinged blue and white, causing clouds to form, it came through clean, and it felt good to breathe again. Making it dissipate, the prismatic flames vanished into the air, a ripple of *something* expanding outwards to my senses.

Letting myself relax, riding the air currents and occasionally flapping, I meandered for a bit before circling back down around my home, shifting down forms as I did so. That way, instead of landing carefully, my enormous weight possible crushing whatever I landed on, I was able to come down at a swift walk, bleeding off my excess speed.

Making something small for myself, not wanting to eat dinner in the cafeteria as I was, I still had some time to kill. Heading to the master bedroom, which I hadn’t used since I’d woken up here, I remembered my equipment being here, even though it was *also* in my locker at Beacon. It’d been a copy, and a good one, to the point that I hadn’t touched the gear still in my locker, storing it in my room instead.

Upon entering there was *another* set of armor, this set completely unmodified, whatever was making it unable to recreate whatever I’d done to my gear. That was fine by me, and I snagged the gloves, but I was looking for something else. Picturing it in my head, I tried to will it into being. Somehow, this place was able to make small things at will, like my clothes, the ingredients for the shakes, and *all* of the trays. The last of which had started stacking up in Ruby’s room before I got them from her, dropped them off in my kitchen, only to have them all disappear when I came back, as if they never existed in the first place.

As such, I only jumped a *hair* when one of the dresser drawers in my room rattled a little, freezing as my heart rate spiked, but nothing else happened. Carefully approaching it, I slid it open, only to see a row of what I was thinking of, folded and stacked like they had always been there, and had always been part of my wardrobe. Reaching down, I pulled out the black, stretchy material, and carefully pulled it down over my head, my horns adding a dimension to it that I hadn’t really considered before.

*“I look like Kakashi,*” I muttered to myself, the sound slight muffled by my mask, but not that much. Stretching up over my nose, it fit securely as it came down the sides of my face, leaving my ears uncovered, but covering my scars completely.

However it was *exactly* what I needed, and, while odd, glancing at myself, there wasn’t that instinctive recoiling at seeing an injury. It was nice, but I also knew that it would be *far* too easy to hide behind the mask, never removing it and pretending everything was alright. *Not that Pyrrha will let you,* some part of me noted, and I couldn’t help but smile at the thought.

Collecting everything from the wash, which also dried and folded itself while I was gone, it wasn’t nearly as hard as I thought it might be to leave my Home and step back into Remnant, where I’d been injured so badly, but also where *Pyrrha* was.

Coming back to the room, it was empty, thankfully, and I unpacked and stowed my girlfriend’s stuff, before sitting at my desk, working on progressing through Griselda’s Grimm Guide while I waited for the others to come back, looking up the Triclops. The damn things were *very* rare, but were classified as ‘Alpha’ Grimm, which, looking up the index, meant that it could command lesser Grimm.

The most common type of ‘Alpha’ was the Alpha Beowulf, but they were limited in only leading their ‘pack’, while other, rarer types could marshal larger forces. Considered high-priority targets, the guide described how Huntsman regularly sought them out to take them down quickly, killing them before they could gather enough to start a Tide, but they often hid until that point. Mountain Glenn, an abandoned city near Vale, was thought to have over a *dozen*, explaining why the area was so Grimm-dense *without* any of them attacking Vale, as, left to their own devices, they *absolutely should’ve* as the mindless, humanity hating beasts they were.

Checking Port’s lesson plan, we were going to learn about them. . . at the end of the year, after the Vytal tournament, and right before the final. In a way, that made sense, as this was a *basic* Grimm studies class, and just a ‘If you see these, *run,* and tell someone’ would suffice for these monsters, rather than actually learning how to fight something that we had *no* hope of defeating. At least as we currently were.

The door opened, and I looked up from my desk, Yang laughing as she walked in, freezing as she saw me. “What is. . . oh,” Blake said from before her, before Pyrrha, gently, pushed them both inside, closing the door behind her.

My girlfriend paused, seeing my mask, and smiled in a way that was *almost* pitying, but seemed more. . . sadly caring? “You don’t need to wear that in here, Jaune,” she noted, saying nothing else as she moved to her own desk, turning on her own scroll in computer mode, to re-write the essay for Oobleck’s class that, with more time, she was giving another editing pass after I looked it over for her.

“I, um, I’m sorry Jaune,” Yang told me, still standing by the door, stumbling over her words, her confident persona gone. “I shouldn’t’ve said that and I didn’t think. I. . . are you okay?”

“Okay?” I echoed, not understanding.

“No, that’s dumb,” the blonde retracted. “I. . . feel bad.” She grimaced again, likely reading my *still* confused expression, even partially covered. “You got hurt protecting us. If I’d been stronger- *why are you laughing?”* she demanded, purple eyes flickering red for a moment.

I just shook my head, not having meant to do so, “God our team is messed,” I replied with a sad smile of my own. “I felt guilty because I couldn’t handle what I was doing and hurt myself, Pyrrha felt bad for not being strong enough to fight so I had to do this to myself to protect everyone, and now you’re doing the same. And Blake,” I glanced at the cat-girl, who had gone to her own desk, and was pretending to work, but eavesdropping while watching us from the corner of her eye. “Blake and I don’t talk.”

The Faunus winced, but didn’t turn around.

“He’s right,” Pyrrha noted. “*None* of this was *any* of our faults, but it is a reason to work harder.” Now it was *my* turn to wince, as it *was* actually my fault. She noted my expression, though almost certainly not the reason for it, continuing, “And I think it’s something that will take us a while to accept.”

“But you went out and, Jaune, what you did was *crazy*. And I. . . and I just punch things,” the blonde brawler trailed off, looking down. “And you’re better at that than I am too.”

I hadn’t considered that. We’d fought twice, and not only had I beat her both times, I’d beat her *in her specialization.* Even then, when she’d activated her Semblance, her instant-win card, that’d just made her lose *faster.*

However. . . “Yang, I’ve got certain. . . *advantages* that you don’t, in the way I work. I can red-line myself in way that you *can’t.* I almost *died* pulling off what I did. I’m sure if you could overstress yourself the way I did, you’d be able to punch the Tri-clops into orbit, but your power doesn’t work that way.”

“And winning our spars?” she shot back, undeterred.

“You mean all *two* of them?” I returned fire with.

Pyrrha interceded, asking the blonde, “Yang, how much do you practice?”

“What’d’ya mean, big red?” the girl asked in return. “I’ve been doing pretty good. Beat everyone in GG’s class. I was doin’ pretty well, before this week.”

Glancing over to my partner, she was obviously picking her words carefully. “Well, other than Miss Goodwitch’s class, when have you last trained? And, while enjoyable, that class is somewhat. . . *lacking* in instruction.”

Having experienced *Pyrrha’s* training firsthand, where she worked me into the ground fixing the holes in my defenses, I had to nod in agreement. Even before I’d arrived here, when I was learning to fight, yes, sparring was part of my instruction, but so was learning new techniques, working them in to my skillset, and having a teacher, coach, or sensei *take me apart* to show how much farther I had to go in a way my fellow students couldn’t.

“You’re strong, and you lean into that, but I’m stronger, so it doesn’t work” I offered. “You’re good enough to probably take a weapon-user down, but I’m *used* to hand-to-hand scuffles, since for most of my training I didn’t *have* Aura, so when you go rage-mode and hit twice as hard but thrice as sloppy, it makes things *easier* on me, not harder. Why do you think I try not to fight you with my sword and shield, Yang? I’d *lose.*”

That got her to look up at me, “Really? You’re not just sayin’ that, Arcs?”

“He’s more skilled with hand to hand then he is with his weapon,” Pyrrha agreed, backing me up. “Though, if I had to guess, you are likely better at dealing with armed opponents than he is, bare-handed.”

“I don’t want to get cut!” I objected, having had my partner *destroy* me, *repeatedly*, until I learned to *‘keep hold of your weapon, Jaune!’*

That elicited a confused look from Yang, who put forward, “Cut? But you Aura would. . . oh, right, you just said you didn’t have it when you trained. That musta *sucked*.”

Not being able to tank blows with impunity, where every solid blow you suffered bruised and hurt for days? “Sometimes. Gave me a lot of motivation to learn how not to get hit.”

“Wait, Jaune, have you been taking hits *just because you could,”* Pyrrha asked, disbelieving, and I froze at the suggestion.

“Um. . . maybe?” I asked in turn, suddenly unsure. *Had I?*

Yang laughed at my pole-axed expression. “Ha, thanks Arcs. I needed that.” She glanced down at my mask. “And, um, Pyrrha’s right. You don’t need to wear that in here. Ya got that defending us, it’d be pretty shitty for us ta complain about it.”

“It would be,” I noted neutrally, hesitating, before rolling it down. The material still clung to my neck, not hard enough to restrict anything, just a subtle pressure, but I found it a little easier to breath, and not just because I wasn’t wearing the mask.

Yang grimaced, seeing it, but nodded. She walked over, and I looked at her confused, and she hesitated, before putting a hand on my shoulder. “We’re a team, Arcs. That means we’re there for each other.”

Having heard similar words, which *always* turned out to be lies, I just nodded. I wanted to believe her, but I’d believed others that’d *seemed* trustworthy, and this entire thing with Amakuni, and now this fight, it’d shaken me a little. I’d been seeing this entire thing as a new start, but as things had started to play out, just as they had many, many times before I’d pulled away. Part of me wanted to say *this* time it would be different, but that part of me *always* said that, and it hadn’t been proved right.

But now I *had* a way to prove it right.

Finding the Stamp in my hand, I put it off to the side of my desk, and glanced around, seeing Blake staring at me. “Yes?” I asked, the other two girls glancing up. “Can I help you?

The Faunus glanced away, then back to me. “It’s just. . . My. . . Mentor. The one that taught me to fight, he covered his face too.”

I repressed the urge to roll my eyes. *Did I also breathe air like he did?* I couldn’t help but think. Honestly, maybe it was because I expected so *little* from the scaredy-cat, but her words didn’t have the same impact that Pyrrha’s, or even Yang’s held.

“But, it wasn’t his mouth he covered, it was his eyes,” Blake continued, her gaze introspective, not really looking at me at all. “They say the eyes are the window to the soul. Maybe that’s why he. . . But I never. . . I never saw what he looked like without it. Even when I asked. You’re like him, in some ways. But in others. . . you couldn’t be more different.”

*Well that’s* ***vague as fuck****,* I couldn’t help but think, but it *appeared* like she was trying to be nice, so I tried to take it that way. “Um, the guy who taught you how to fight everyone *but* him, right?” I clarified, and she winced again, nodding. “I kinda hope I’d be different from that douchenozzle, so, thanks?”

Blake nodded, and turned back to her work without another word. Looking to Yang, she just shrugged, but Pyrrha gave me a bright, cheery smile. She mouthed the words, ‘That was nice’, and I didn’t bother holding back my eyeroll, which just caused her to smile wider.