**Chapter Twenty-Four**

Class the next morning was. . . awkward. It was a Friday, as everyone in our class almost dying only got us a single day off, though the message of ‘this isn’t that bad, we’re not freaking out so you shouldn’t’ that the decision to have class before the weekend made a certain amount of sense.

However, I could do without the stares.

It wasn’t that bad, all things considered, and I wondered if it was because of what I’d done, or because of the bandages. Wounds were unexpectedly rare at a Huntsman academy, the staff cognizant of both the fact that, with Aura, they could go harder than would normally be possible in a combat school, but also of how quickly a blow that just put you on your ass could be something that *removed* it.

As such, my heavily bandaged face attracted looks of interest, concern, and disdain for some reason. I almost asked why an older student, maybe a third of fourth year, gave me a look that screamed ‘dumbass’, but resisted as we headed to our first class.

Earlier I’d woken up an hour before sunrise, my face. . . itching, for lack of a better term, for once before my teammates. With breakfast made and left for them on the table, Ren being up a few minutes before dawn and accepting his team’s meals, I’d wandered over to Peach’s domain, the woman personally changing the bandages, re-applying a different salve than last time, giving me a vial tasting concoction to drink, and sending me on my way.

Ooblek’s class went on as normal, the only nod to what’d happened being his statement that today’s homework would be due next Tuesday instead. We jumped around, as we often did, today’s lesson tracking down the events of the Great War that’d led both sides clashing in southern Sanus, Vale and Vacuo versus Atlas and Mistral, and the Grimm Tide that’d caused both warring factions to call a truce.

*Okay, not quite as normal*, I thought, as we skipped forward in our textbook, and looking at the accounts of what’d happened. It’d made what we’d faced seem like a single, lame Beowulf in comparison. I assumed that ‘enough Grimm to turn the sky black at noon’ was metaphorical, until they provided pictures. The tech level of the time had been closer to that of the 1940’s, but that was more than enough for the cameras, meant to capture details of enemy movements and particularly dangerous Semblances, to show the world turning black, the Atlas and Mistral forces overwhelmed and falling back, finding refuge in the Vale and Vacuo fortifications, which barely held.

*This place deserves its rank,* I couldn’t help but think, as Oobleck outlined how that fight provided a halt in fighting and was one of the events that helped turn the Great War towards V&V’s side, as their forces had diversified enough to handle both Grimm and enemy combatants, while Atlas’ forces, hyper-focused on fighting other people, suffered greatly when faced with the creatures of Darkness that rarely made their way up north, and never in large numbers.

Mistral’s corrupt, duplicitous nature further alienated the hidebound but honorable Atlesians, causing internal strife while Vacuo and Vale, different in outlook but willing to accommodate the other, worked more tightly. Atlesian units, on their own, would win against anything less than two-to-one odds against their opponents, but when calculating numbers, Mistral’s forces were a net negative to that formula, only their sheer numbers allowing them to overcome their foes.

After the Great Tide finished, Mistral’s soldiers, many of whom had held back during the fighting, tried to attack the exhausted fighters from Vale and Vacuo, only for Atlas to defend their enemies who’d allowed them into their stronghold, leading to the destruction of a majority of Mistral’s forces, and the beginning of the split that would eventually end the war.

*Did Salem do that on purpose?* I had to wonder, *or was that completely accidental?*

Regardless, it was a fascinating lecture, and I forgot my injuries as I followed it, getting a better handle on an aspect of the world I’d never even heard of, and how its effects had butterflied into all sorts of odd societal practices.

Then came lunch, and once more the stares.

Furthermore, while the medical salve didn’t have much of a smell, it still had one, and that menthol-herb scent made everything just taste *wrong.*

“Huh, you’re the freshie that’s got everyone aflutter?” A female voice called behind me, and I stiffened, turning around. “Huh, you’re not bad on the- *oh*, that looks bad,” the girl commented, getting a look at my bandaged face and grimacing.

Short, brunette, with opaque shades and a single, highlighted forelock, I only vaguely recognized the girl talking. I couldn’t remember her name, only that she’d shown up right when I’d stopped paying attention, and the handbag hanging negligently off her shoulder, strap holding a long string of bullets, was actually a minigun.

“Can we help you?” Yang asked, sounding annoyed.

The girl tried to wave away her comment, replying, “Didn’t mean anything by it, kid. Just wanted to see what the big deal was. My boy, Fox, has a good nose for Auras, and said yours was even bigger than mine!” Taking a step forward, she offered a gloved hand. “Coco Adel. Badass.”

“*Jaune Arc. Dragon,”* I replied taking it, voice still gravelly. Her grip was strong, but she didn’t feel like she was trying to crush my hand.

She shook it, stepping back and looking at me over her glasses. “You certainly sound like it. Well, my curiosity’s sated. See ya round, little lizard.”

Not really knowing what to say to that, I just nodded, turning my back on her as she strode off, the sound of her high-heeled combat boots clear. Almost unconsciously, I touched the bandages. Peach had told me I could take them off tomorrow, but had also warned me the scarring would be extensive.

“Who does she think she is,” the blonde brawler to my left groused, glancing at me. “Like we should just be grateful she came talk to us.”

“Yang, maybe she was just being friendly,” Ruby disagreed, glancing in the direction of the girl in question. “And a lot of people are staring.”

“They’re recognizing talent,” Weiss, sitting next to her team lead, sniffed, glancing my way. “It might be new to *you*, but you’ll get used to it,” she offered, which, for the girl, was as close as she got to making a supportive statement.

“*Thanks,*” I said, nodding to her, and getting a small, sharp nod in return.

Dust class with Professor Tim was, again, done without any overt mention of what’d happened. Surprisingly there wasn’t any subtle mention of it either, as I’d been expecting. No mention of the danger of using large amounts of Dust, or of overuse, or of combing it with Semblances. No, it was just another class of practice most of the class getting the hand of the Ice Dust and moving on to Rock Dust. Ice, it turned out, was the easiest to train, as it was safe to use, the backblast if you failed was minor, and its nature was easiest to grasp. Ice was cold, steady, and while it could violently form or shatter, it was straightforward. Rock Dust was a bit more resistant, and harder to deal with when you failed, as Cardin managed to encase his stand in stone, having to hold still while Professor Tim, wielding a deep blue crystal, cut the boy free with precise streams of water.

It was also one of the forms of Dust that wasn’t compatible with my Breath, which actually made it easier to work with, as the fear I’d started to fell working with the Ice Dust at the start of class, worrying that I’d accidentally activate my flames, was no longer an issue. I knew it was completely coincidental, the Professor having no knowledge of what Dust I could use, and what Dust I couldn’t, but it was still nice.

Glancing over to Charlie, who used the stuff as a key part of his fighting style, I tried to copy him, finding it a bit easier to work with. That said, I was a *long* way from getting anywhere close, though he was the best at using it in the class, Weiss a close second, and Steff Gelb, who was on the same team as Kobe, a distant third.

Soon enough, though, class was over, and we were on our way out.

“Mr. Arc, a moment of your time,” Professor Tim requested, and I paused, my team stopping with me. The middle-aged man waited for the others to leave, though Ruby’s team hung around the doorway. While the Professor’s expression didn’t change, a certain light danced in his brown eyes for a moment, before they returned to their normal flat seriousness.

“Mr. Arc. I have been informed of your actions,” he stated blandly, and my hope of leaving class without what I’d done getting addressed died. “I was not there, and cannot say if your actions were justified or foolish. However you should be aware of two things, one a warning, one a reassurance. The reassurance is that Fire Dust scarring, while stubborn is not necessarily permanent. Professor Peach knows her craft well,” he observed, with a gesture towards his own face.

I didn’t really know what he was referring to, though, from the intake of Pyrrha’s breath, I looked closer, knowing there was something. The man looked completely normal though, it was only when he lifted a hand, snapping his fingers and starting a fire right next to his face that the hundreds of tiny lines covering his visage, only slightly lighter than his skin, could be seen.

Letting the flames fade, he smiled slightly. “And the warning is that the are you devastated, young knight, is *still* burning. Actions like those attract attention. The headmaster may come calling. Do *not* take him lightly,” the man warned, likely unaware that I’d already talked with the wizard. “That is all. I’ll see you all on Tuesday,” he noted, dismissing us, and walking to the devastation our class had left behind, the stones all around him starting to levitate and drift over to a large crate that sat in the corner.

I walked out, along with the others, considering the man’s words. Given my own injuries, his words were comforting. His warning though, of all the things I’d expected to hear from the staff, a word of caution when it came to the Wizard was not on that list, and I wondered what history the two had.

Regardless, Ruby struck up a conversation with Weiss about using Dust, the white-haired girl happy to talk about her specialty, and I was happy to sink into the background, trying not to think too hard on what I’d find tomorrow.

<DR>

It was worse than I feared.

I’d put it off as long as I could, making breakfast for everyone else, heading into the shower in last. Pulling the bandages off, I’d washed off the grey-green paste that covered my skin, wincing at the hardened tissues I could feel under hesitant fingertips. Eventually, though, I couldn’t put it off an longer, and I’d had to look in the mirror.

I looked like I was wearing a mask of twisted flesh.

I could move my mouth easily enough, thank god, but when I closed my mouth my lips blended in with the red, twisting scar tissues that circled my mouth seeming to disappear into an unnatural looking redness extended downwards, covering my chin, and fading as it ran down my neck. I didn’t even know *why* the scar was so large, as it should’ve been only my mouth that burned, but it was staring me in the face.

Literally.

Touching it, the skin was oddly sensitive, like it’d been scrubbed raw, despite being much thicker than it should’ve been in places. Likely something else Peach had done, it did help a little to deal with it, even as I emotionally wanted to ‘take off the mask’, knowing I couldn’t.

It took effort to tear my attention away, and turn on the shower, before someone knocked on the door, and I had to see them.

I didn’t want to see anyone right now.

Soon, too soon, I was done, and dressed almost mechanically, grateful that the mirror had fogged up.

*No,* I thought. *You did this to yourself. You can’t run from it.*

Moving over to it, I wiped away the condensation, flinching as an unfamiliar face looked back at me. Waking up as Jaune hadn’t been this bad, but I had seventeen years of memories doing so, and I’d never seen this before today.

Dressed, it wasn’t as bad, but only just. The twisting redness stood out starkly on my pale skin, running down into my hoodie, looking almost like a fashion choice. If you were a psychopath. But still, *fashion,* that made it okay, right?

Hesitating, I didn’t open the door to leave, knowing my team was on the other side. *This is a world of death and combat*, I told myself. *Everyone here chose to enter a profession where injuries are inevitabilities. You might be inexperienced, but they’re natives. They’ll just nod, Yang will make some stupid pun, and we can move on.*

I knew I was trying to convince myself, but maybe I was right?

Taking a deep breath, I opened the door and stepped out into our common room. “Sorry I took so long,” I apologized, my voice finally healing. “Hopefully no one sprung a leak while I was in there,” I joked, trying to play it off, hoping they’d respond in kind.

*“Holy Shit, Arcs!”* Yang swore, gawking at my scar, while Blake stared, in wide eyed horror.

That hurt, but they could go screw themselves. What mattered was-

I looked to Pyrrha, who flinched, looking away.

*Oh.*

Moving stiffly, I dropped off my pajamas and grabbed my gear. “I’m gonna go train,” I said, mumbled really, and was at the door, Pyrrha saying something, but I’d already closed the door, walking away.

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I breathed hard, sweating, as I ran through practice drills, trying not to think.

It didn’t work.

I knew, *intellectually*, that their reactions were emotional. That they probably didn’t mean them that way. But, *emotionally*, all I knew was the rejection I felt, that all the work I’d done to convince myself it wasn’t so bad fell apart like the house of cards it was. Part of me felt betrayed, that I’d disfigured myself trying to protect them, only for them to. . . *no,* I thought, *that isn’t fair.*

Then again, while fact might not care about feelings, feelings seemed to hold facts with similar contempt, and I could *tell* myself they were just surprised, like I was myself, but that didn’t make it hurt any less.

The door opened, and I called out, “I’ve reserved this room for the next couple hours.”

“I know,” Pyrrha’s voice replied, and I froze, not turning around.

“Not really in the mood to talk,” I informed her, hoping she’d take the hint. With some more time, time to get over my own stupid feelings, I’d be ready to try again, but for now I’d just say something stupid.

“I understand,” she said, but when the door closed, I heard her walk over to the side, instead of leave.

Letting out a long breath, I repeated, “I don’t want to talk.”

“Then I’ll wait,” she replied, simply.

*Was this some sort of power thing?* I wondered, not inclined to be kind at the moment, but. . . that didn’t seem like something Pyrrha would do. *Do you even know what Pyrrha would do?* Some part of me asked. *How much do you really know about her? About any of them?*

That. . . wasn’t fair. I knew some, of what they’d do, and while I wouldn’t trust Blake, Pyrrha, as far as I could remember, had done nothing that’d suggest such things.

Growling in irritation, I sheathed my weapon, and turned, seeing her leaning against the wall, looking down. “What is it, Pyrrha?” I asked. “What couldn’t wai-”

“I’m sorry,” she said interrupting me. I didn’t respond, so she stood up, though her gaze was still downcast. “I’m sorry. I knew you were going to be. . . Professor Tim told us but. . . I’ve seen *worse*, Jaune. I just. . . didn’t expect to see it on *you*.”

I wanted to be mad at her, and her words hurt, but. . . she wasn’t wrong. “I didn’t think it would be this bad either,” I admitted, walking over to her, looking at her, trying to read her expression, but all she seemed was sad.

“Does. . . does it hurt?” she asked. “One of the older combatants at the tournament said his never stopped.”

*What?* I thought, trying to think of what that would be like, and coming up short. “No. No it doesn’t hurt or pull or anything. It’s just a little tender.”

Pyrrha nodded, still looking down. “Well. That’s good. I. . . I’m sure it’ll fade with time, like Professor Tim’s has.”

Even though she was saying what I was thinking, it sounded hollow. Then again, so did my own thoughts. “Pyrrha. Look at me.” Her gaze remained affixed to my shoes. “*Please.*”

She hesitated, and I felt my heart sink, but she picked her head up, her breath catching as she saw my scars.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought,” I said, turning away.

“No, Jaune,” she said, pleadingly. “Jaune, *look at me.*”

Finding the act difficult, I did so, and, while her gaze dropped to the scar that covered a fourth of my face, she looked me directly in the eye. Feeling pinned, I didn’t know what else to do, and froze, as she smiled sadly at me.

She took a step forward, and I reflexively took one back, causing her to pause, before taking another, then a third, closing the distance between us. My heart hammered in my chest, as if it might burst out, and she reached me, her eyes closing as she leaned in, kissing me.

It was warm, and soft, and just a little painful on my raw skin, but that made it all the more real.

I was frozen, and she pulled back, smiling up at me. “See?” she asked.

“But, I’m *ugly*,” I said, voicing what I’d thought the moment I’d seen myself. Some scars could add character, like Weiss’. Some were ignorable. Mine was *neither*.

Instead of responding, she just leaned in and kissed me again. “I don’t care,” she stated warmly.

“I’m damaged,” I objected, not really referring to the scar.

Again, Pyrrha kissed me, the sensation prickling the skin on my lips, but somehow filling the vast chasm that seemed to fill my soul. “I don’t care,” she repeated.

“*I’m not who you think I am*,” I admitted, hating myself for this entire thing, the deception, the lies, *everything.*

Once more, she kissed me, firmer this time. “I can do this all night, Jaune,” she smiled. “And I don’t know who you think you are, but I’ve liked what I’ve seen.

“I. . . *really?*” I asked in disbelief, feeling vulnerable, more than I ever had since I’d gotten here. Yes, we had sex, but that was fun, and in the moment, and this was, just *more* in ways I couldn’t quite describe.

“*Really,*” she repeated, kissing me once more, not pulling back, and something in me gave, as my arms wrapped around her, pulling her close.

She’s the perfect mix of hard and soft, lacking her armor as she presses into me, moaning slightly as my hands massage her perfectly toned ass, our tongues twisting together in her mouth. Her arms wrap around me as well, reaching up to my shoulders, pulling herself up against me even harder as she grinds against me, and all thoughts save one leave my mind as I rapidly harden.

She moans again, as I massage her through her clothes, before she pulls away with a breathless, “Wait.”

I don’t want to stop, but restrain myself, barely, as reality sinks in. “Right, right, everyone’s back at the room. If we do it, and come back, they’ll kno-”

“No,” she counters, cutting me off. “We need to get you out of your armor.”

I blink, “I, yes, but what about-” I start to object, only for her to point to a familiar looking duffle bag by the entrance, not having noticed her drop it off.

If anything, I get harder.

*This better not become a fetish,* some odd part of me worries, but more importantly, “Wait, you came here to apologize. Are you just doing this to apologize? You shouldn’t just to-”

She cuts me off with a finger to the lips. “I brought it to do this all week,” she informed me. “And if doing so convinces you that I don’t think you’re ugly, Jaune, then it’s two birds with one *very* pleasurable stone. Now, let me *rock* your world,” she teases.

“That was *terrible,*” I groan, having to laugh.

She just offers a one-shoulder shrug. “I’ve been spending some time with Yang. She’s fun, but a terrible influence. I’d rather have you rub off on me, personally.” She paused, “And she’s sorry too, Jaune. She’s a. . . lot more sheltered than she lets on, and hasn’t seen something that bad on someone who wasn’t old.”

“I. . . okay,” I nod. “But I’m still not happy with Blake,” I stress.

“Are you ever,” Pyrrha asks, with a smile. “But she didn’t *say* anything Jaune. Consider that. But later, as I *don’t* want you thinking of her for the next hour, at *least.*”

Laughing, I nod, shucking off my armor as Pyrrha, with a speed that wouldn’t be out of place in a fight, pulls out the mattress and strips before I’m halfway done. “Close enough,” she smiles, as I’m unlatching my belt, grabbing me and dumping me on the mattress, swift, strong hands pulling down my pants and underwear.

Despite the pause, seeing Pyrrha, stark naked, smiling at me as she straddles me returns me to full mast. She ignores it for a moment as it slides along her backside, as she leans down, cupping my head in her hands and kisses me once more, as if she’s making a point of it, which I supposed she was.

We stay that way for a long few moments, just enjoying the feel of each other, my hands running down her back, her sides, her hips. She finally pulls back and lifts herself, aligning us, before sliding down, warm, and wet, and perfect as she bites back a moan, smiling down at me, eyes a little unfocused.

However, her training kicks in, probably not in any way her coaches meant it to, and she refocuses, her small smile turning into a full grin as she starts to work herself back and forth, riding me, grinding me deep inside of her.

Following my instincts, my hands slide up her as she does so, not controlling her movements, but cupping her soft, full breasts, massaging them with just the right amount of pressure, barely brushing her nipples, provoking another long groan of pressure as her grinding structures for a moment before starting again, twice as hard, causing my own focus to slip.

*Oh, you want to play it that way?* I think, following my instincts, one hand drifting down as she slams herself down a few times, forcing a groan of my own out in response to the soft, wet, hot pressure that seems to try to wring me dry, as I barely resist.

Her eyes flutter, as her muscles do against my hardness, and I wait for a moment, before, with a soft thumb, I press down on her clit, through the hood, setting off another set of spasms, and provoking a surprised gasp of pleasure.

*“Jaaaaaune!”* she pants, looking down at me. *“That’s cheeeeeeting!”*

“That’s *succeeding,*” I grin, setting off a third set of spasms as she jerks against me in pleasure, shaking her head clear and knocking my hand clear.

“*Fine,*” she grins, “Have it *your way.*” I look up at her, confused, as she leans down once again, pressing herself tight to me, slithering up and down my body, leaning in to kiss me deeply before, breathily whispering, *“inside me.*”

Almost despite myself, I feel my control, already freying, come a hair’s breath from snapping, but I hold back until, with a twist of her hips, she shoves herself down, fully sheathing me in her welcoming depths, and whispers, “*I’m yours. Fill me.”*

With primal growl, I lose control, thrusting against her, holding her to me, my release painting her insides white as I cease thinking, only aware of her shuddering against me, moaning, *“Yes!”* over and over again in my ear, until it’s over, and I relax, momentarily spent.

“*Oh yes, we’re not waiting a week to do this again,”* my lover moans, draped across me.

At her words, I re-harden inside her, getting a pleased, orgasm-drunk hum of appreciation from the woman. “Not what I meant, Jaune, but gods yes,” she smiles, laughing a little. “But you be on top. I can’t quite feel my legs.”

Grinning, I carefully take her in my arms, and place her down on the mattress, feeling warm and whole as she looks lovingly up at me. “I don’t think that’s a condition that’s going to rectify itself any time soon,” I comment.

Pyrrha just laughs. “Stop talking and *fuck me.*”

I do.