**Chapter Fourteen**

I wasn’t going to lie, I knew I was running from my problems. Resting on top of a mountain at my full size, the flat-top providing a good seat to look out over my personal domain, I let out a deep, shuddering, ember-ridden breath, and tried to figure out why it’d affected me so badly.

Except I already knew, on some level. I’d expected Beacon to be better. I’d expected the staff of the world that taught literal superhuman warriors to not have petty bullshit, especially considering how much damage a single determined and intelligent Huntsman could probably do.

Then again, with the fact that people like Cardin Winchester were allowed to act with seeming impunity, and with the fact that, even *with* superhuman warriors, things were still shit, I shouldn’t be surprised.

*“I should’ve gone to UA,”* I grumbled to myself. Then again, I would 1) be fifteen instead of seventeen, 2) be dealing with Japanese Bureaucratic bullshit where saving people without a licence got you in trouble, and 3) *not be a dragon.*

No, I’d chosen this, I just had to deal. It’s just. . . that stupid cow had hit *all* of my buttons. Passive-aggressiveness, dereliction of duty, *abuse of power* ***and*** *authority*, *not even bothering to tell me* ***what the fuck I’d apparently done wrong!***

I took another breath, and let it out, suddenly aware of the Stamp, minute in comparison to my current form, suddenly balanced on one claw. With this I could *make* her be nice, *make* her tell me what the fuck I’d done, *make* her *do her job.* Hell, I’d even get *paid* for it!

I tossed it off the mountain.

It reappeared.

I put it to the side.

*No*, I thought. While it might be the banality of evil at play, all the ‘small’ actions that led to big things, Mind Control wasn’t the answer. Mind Control was *never* the answer, at least if I wasn’t willing to outright kill the person, and, as much as what had happened infuriated me, that wasn’t a proportional response.

Even if it was tempting, if only for a moment.

Shaking my enormous head, I toggled my size downwards, shifting back to a person, and checking the time, finding it’d only been an hour.

Not really feeling like facing my teammates after my little temper tantrum, running away, crying, like a child, I stepped off the side of the mountain, wings open, carrying me lazily back towards the mansion. I was being stupid, probably, but I just didn’t want to have do deal with the questions, the recriminations, or whatever else was waiting for me.

I laughed as I entered the kitchen to make lunch, the Stamp there waiting for me. I had no memory of how I got into this situation, whether I signed up for this, or got drafted, but I could see how, even if I wouldn’t’ve agreed to this explicitly, I could’ve agreed to this in theory. A simple stamp and I wouldn’t have to worry about getting stabbed in the back, worry about those I depended on accepting my help, but disappearing as soon as I needed them. One simple act, and I could trust them, because their loyalty would be assured.

All it would take is enslaving them.

“Would you like to have someone who you knew would stand by you?” I asked the room at large, knowing that my answer would be a resounding *Yes.* “Would you like to have someone you *knew* cared for you?” Also *yes*. “Hell, *Would you like to help people?*” I questioned, as, from a certain point of view, I *would* be helping them by stamping them, giving them protections they normally wouldn’t have, and, very likely, diverting their timeline to not be so shit. It’s what I was planning to do, after all. It’s what I was doing for Jaune, by *being* him, and I still didn’t know *how* that’d worked.

It’d been a spur of the moment decision, but, like coming here in the first place, it wasn’t one I could take back, just one I had to live with.

Taking a bite of the grilled cheese I’d made, I was momentarily distracted by how *amazingly fucking good* it was. *Right, forgot to turn down Fairy Feast,* I realized, glad I was immune to it’s more insidious effects.

Despite myself, I felt a bit better. “Okay,” I sighed, letting the house clean up, and wandered outside, not really having anything I *needed* to do. Today’s class, *if you could call it that,* hadn’t given us any homework. My habit of making sure it got done ASAP bit me here, as I didn’t really have anything else to do.

Taking in the open area, I considered what else I needed to work on. Combat ability, for one, but I really needed a partner to do that effectively. I wanted to find my Semblance, but, if it was *anything* like Jaune’s I’d need someone else to work with as well. That left my own draconic abilities. Again.

Then again, I was working on my *Draconic Abilities,* which wasn’t exactly a bad thing.

Focusing, I brought up just a small amount of Flame, and breathing it out, just wanting enough to work with. It spread out on the grass, warm, but not hot. Reaching down to scoop it up, I frowned, as the grass below it was perfectly fine. Feeling it, the ground was warm, but not hot, just like the handful of prismatic flames I held.

Standing, I turned my attention to the fire. I could toss it from hand to hand, and, with it so close, I could feel some sort of connection to it. Closing my eyes, I fed it more fire from my core, feeling the power of the flames.

Looking at what I was holding, it’d grown three times as big as it’d been before, but, when I tried to pull it back the other way, nothing happened. It took me a long moment before I realized the issue. I was a dragon of *Creation.* I could make the fire, but I couldn’t *un*make the fire.

Except I had.

Or had I?

Watching the dancing flames, I mentally pushed it down and out, only for the fire to not go out, like I’d thought, but to almost. . . *drain* into my glove, the bottom of the flames, sinking into my palm, and, barely on the edge of perception, sending glowing patterns through it that quickly disappeared.

Trying to pull the fire back, it was gone, and I flexed my glove, the material stiff, but quickly softening back up again.

Pulling up another bit of prismatic flame, I spit it into my hands, catching it, pushing it down, and watching the patterns. They were spiralling, almost fractal, parts curling in on themselves in a way reminiscent of the patterns on my Draconic form.

Doing so another few times, the patterns started to take longer and longer to disappear. I kept going, bathing it in flame over and over again until, barely visible, the designs didn’t completely vanish, leaving marginally darker sections on my light brown gloves, with slightly lighter tracing on the black sections over the palms and backs of my hand.

Flexing them, the cloth felt like it was made of iron, but, with Aura, I could *bend* iron. Working the gloves back and forth, they seemed to. . . *settle,* moving more and more naturally. Taking a moment as I got ready to move onto the sweatshirt I wore as an ersatz gambeson. I blinked, realizing the sun was starting to set.

I’d fallen into the repetitive process, losing track of time, and it was only now that I realized I was *exhausted.* My inner flame was at a low flicker, slowly building itself up, but not nearly as quickly as it normally did, my muscles *ached*, I was *soaked* with sweat, and I was *ravenously* hungry.

Not wanting to show up like this, I staggered off to take a shower, grabbing a few apples from the kitchen as I passed by, eating then, even the stems, barely tasting them. Getting out, I found the mansion had cleaned my clothes, and I shook my head, getting dressed and feeling like I’d been fighting for an hour straight.

It was an odd sort of pain, not *quite* a muscle pain, but not in my bones either, just a feeling of. . . *strain.*

Heading down to the portal room, I queued up a doorway, still forced to re-open where I’d opened the last one. Instantly, my scroll metaphorically blew up as I reconnected to Remnant’s CCT, with texts, emails, and, apparently, one hundred and twenty one calls from Ruby.

“What the fuck?” I swore. Yeah, it’d been about six hours but. . . who *did* that? I mean, I’d heard of people doing that, but that was usually of the crazy ex-girlfriend type, and none of my exes had been crazy in a way that meant they actually cared.

I’d called my friends a few times when we were supposed to do something and they just. . . didn’t show up, or when they went incommunicado, but I’d never had anyone do that to me. Well, other than my mother, but that always had a ‘how dare you not answer my call instantly’ tone, not actually caring and that many. . . that was more than just someone being angry, and Ruby didn’t have a reason to be angry. I mean, neither had the cow, but I *knew* Ruby, if only a little.

There were also texts, and. . . an email from Glynda minutes after I’d sent mine to her, saying she’d look into it? And then another, from an hour ago, saying the teacher would be reprimanded? That. . . *didn’t happen*. I mean, it was *supposed* to, but it never actually *did*. What *always* happened was I’d get some noncommittal reply, and then a week later I’d be told to shut up about it, or whoever it was would lie, and be taken at their word, and I’d be punished.

Yang had texted me, asking if I was okay, as had Pyrrha. Hell even Blake had sent an apology, though I wasn’t sure what for, but that, too, was odd. I was used to performative apologies, where a person would make sure to do so in front of others to show how ‘reasonable’ they were, only to do whatever it was they were apologizing for a few weeks later, not actually being sorry.

*What the hell is going on?* I wondered, confused, trying to figure this out. Before I could do anything else, my scroll lit up with another call from Ruby. I froze, not really sure what to do. Did I hang up? She’d likely know this one actually got through. Grimacing, I clicked answer, only for Ruby to shout “YOU PICKED UP! Hey guys, I finally got through!”

A muted “What, really?” from Yang made me wonder what exactly had been going on. “Hey, Light-Knight, where’d ya go?” her voice came through. “We saw you fly off, and then you dropped off completely.”

“Needed some time for myself,” I replied lamely, walking up to the portal back to Remnant, a shimmering ovoid, as there hadn’t been any physical doors nearby to hook into. “Sorry, I just-”

“No, it’s okay!” Ruby interrupted. “I get it. I don’t like to be around people when I get like that either, but we’re you’re friends!”

Yang agreed. “Yeah, even if ya get a little weepy,” she laughed.

“You mean like you do when you run out of shampoo?” Ruby asked, provoking a *“Ruby!”* from her sister. “But, like, you didn’t need to. And we talked to Ms. Goodwitch and she looked *an-gry!*”

“I, really?” I asked, stepping through the portal and into the forest of Forever Fall, where’d I set down after I’d left Beacon. Stopping, a dozen Beowolfs all of whom were sniffing around, paused, turning baleful red eyes towards me.

The closest one, only a couple feet away, growled and swung a clawed hand for my head. Without thinking I turned, and caught the limb in my free hand. I fully expected the Aura drain and phantom pain as it tried to tear through the thin leather of my glove, but I felt nothing at all, just pressure.

“Jaune?” Ruby asked, as the other Beowolfs snarled. They started to close, and I turned, pulling the Grimm next to me over, using my body as the fulcrum before throwing it into the others. Another Beowulf lunged, but I turned, catching it’s claw as well, wincing as I felt the not-pain as a claw hit my uncovered finger, draining my Aura, but the sharp points that hit my glove were stopped cold.

Tossing it to the side, I leapt high, manifesting my wings and flapping off, leaving the ground-bound Grimm to howl in frustration. I realized what the pressure was, right as I lost sight of them. It was the same sense of pressure that I felt when I used my *shield.*

Whatever I’d done, bathing my gloves in my flames and sinking it into them over and over again, had strengthened the material a *great* deal. It hadn’t done anything ridiculous, like make gauntlets of force, as my unprotected fingers had been just as vulnerable as before, but it’d make the smooth, supple leather gloves as strong as metal. Instinctively, I knew they weren’t invincible, that a strong enough force would still tear through them, but it *did* open up a *lot* of possibilities.

“*Jaune!”* Ruby’s voice cried through my scroll, “*Are you okay?”*

Realizing that she’d like just heard me say wait, and then Grimm noises, I quickly responded, “Just some Beowolfs that got nosy, no big deal, I’m on my way back now.”

“On you way, *where are you Jaune?*” the team lead demanded, her high pitched, girlish voice making it more cute than irritating.

“Um, the place with red trees? I’ll be there in five,” I reassured her, but it didn’t help.

It was Yang who said, “Forever Fall? But that’s, like miles away. How’d you get all the way over there?”

“Um, I flew?” I asked, rhetorically. I was already feeling a bit better, despite the somewhat smothering feeling of the air in Remnant, my own internal reservoir of fire nearly refilled. Pushing Aura into wings that didn’t feel so stiff, I accelerated, the ground blurring below me. It was nothing on what I could get up to in my larger forms, but it was still more than fast enough to get back in a timely fashion. “Can you open my window?” I asked, and there was silence on the other end.

Hoping they had, I quickly approached Beacon, flying in low. Crossing over the wall that protected the campus, I noted the air here felt. . . *calmer.* Less rolling smoke and more settled striations of haze, if that made any sense. Coming to the dorms, my window was open, and I flew in, to find Ruby, Yang, and Pyrrha waiting for me, with quite different expressions on their faces.

Ruby looked concerned, but also happy, which. . . confused me. Yang wore a smug grin, but there was an edge of something else to it. Pyrrha, however. . . Pyrrha just looked sad, and I had no idea why.

“You’re back!” the smallest of the three cheered, using her Semblance to cross the dozen feet between us in an instant, looking as if she were going for a hug, then aborting it at the last minute for an arms in the air cheer.

“I said I’d be back later,” I reminded her, not sure about the reception, looking to the other two for some clue. Yang’s brittle smile softened a little, even as Pyrrha’s frown deepened.

It was the older sister who replied with a “People say that. Then things happen. And they aren’t.”

“Pyrrha said you were hurting, and that it wasn’t just what Professor Amakuni said, but how you were treated before, so we shouldn’t bug you, but I was like ‘that’s when we *should* bug you’ because we’re your friends and helping is what friends are *for!*” added Ruby, glancing at the other redhead as she did so, who grimaced slightly, likely not having expected the younger girl to outright say so.

The fact that she cared enough to offer that advice, and that Ruby cared enough to ignore it was. . . well, it was *weird.* Sure people said things like that, hell *I’d* said things like that, but I’d never seen anyone else actually *mean* it.

I pulled back a little, trying to figure out what I was missing. People just *weren’t that nice.* I’d thought they were, before, but experience after experience had proven me wrong. They were nice, as long as it didn’t inconvenience them, and then, suddenly, they’d find reasons not to be. And, if you dared to point this out, then suddenly you were bad and needed to be punished.

Jaune’s sisters were nice, but they were also *very* possessive, driving off every other friend he’d ever had. I didn’t even have that level of caring myself, always with people that said they cared, right up until I was vulnerable, and then, when I was weak and unable to help them, they left, striking out on me if I asked for their assistance.

“Ruby,” I tried, “We’ve known each other for less than a week. I. . . that’s. . . I’m sorry,” I defaulted to, falling back on old patterns. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t’ve let myself get so. . .” *Triggered* might be the correct term, but in my old life it’d be misused to the point of near meaninglessness. “Affected, by what happened,” I tried instead.

The small girl stared at me in disbelief. “That’s. . . you think I’m mad because you got upset?”

“You aren’t?” I asked, now completely lost. I’d been down this pattern before. I needed to be in control, firm, or else others would react badly, as if I were some dangerous beast, or pathetic, despite not actually *doing* any of the things that they suggested I might do, and-

“Of *course* I’m not!” she disagreed. “I’m mad because you didn’t let us help! We’re your *friends*, Jaune!”

I winced, “You’re not the first to say that, and then. . . the floor can look stable, but just as easily give way if you’re not careful,” I offered, trying to explain it without calling her a liar.

Ruby pouted, and, while adorable, didn’t really matter with what we were talking about. “Then those people weren’t really your friends, Jaune. They were just. . . dirty liars who lied. But I *am.*”

For a second I didn’t see her, but my cousin. Who’d said, while not those exact words, then something similar. Then she’d left for a semester abroad and what came back. . . *wasn’t her.* Oh, she still looked like her, and sounded like her, but suddenly every plan we had was cancelled if it didn’t involve me helping her, and even the suggestion that she’d help me was treated with scorn, like I’d done something wrong just by asking.

“You’re not the first to say that either,” I sighed, looking away.

Yang stepped closer, not between us, but to the side, forming a triangle so that she wasn’t exactly standing with her sister, but not exactly next to me either. “I got ya, Arcs. Ya think we’re solid, but yer not sure if we’ll leave you Yangin’.”

“But *Yang,* you know I wouldn’t!” Ruby objected. “Hey!” she added, as her sister patted her head.

“I know that, little sis, but *he* doesn’t, and ya can’t just say, ‘I’m good, trust me!’ I doesn’t work that way,” the Blonde said, shooting me a complex look.

“But I *am!*” the tiny team lead argued.

Yang half-frowned in thought. “Remember *Diam*? What *he* was like?”

At that her sister gasped, “I’m not like *him!* How could you *say that?*”

“Remember what he was like at first?” the blonde prodded undeterred.

“Diam?” I asked, a little lost.

The older sister glanced at me. “Diam Davies was a. . .”

“He was a meanie!” Ruby announced.

“He was a little snotrag,” Yang agreed. “But he pretended to be nice. Tried to pressure Rubes into doing all his work for him, one of those ‘but I thought we were friends’ dick-bags. We got him back though, at least once my little sis started listening to her awesome older sister.”

“*Yaaaang,*” Ruby whined, but glanced at me, and sighed. “Fine. I get it if you’re not. . . you know. Ready for friends or whatever. But I’m not gonna be goin’ anywhere, okay! You need help, I’m gonna be right there!”

The declaration was so painfully honest, so pure, that I choked up a little, only for her eyes to go wide, and for her to rush to the window, closing it with a slam. “Nope! No running! You just got back and, and, you’ll miss dinner!”

While some part of me was a little annoyed at the presumption, I laughed, shaking my head. “I’m not going to head out again it’s just. . .” I trailed off. I believed Ruby, that she was being honest *in this moment*, the problem was that, every time I had something like this, a golden moment where I thought things were going to get better, it all came crashing down, and usually sooner rather than later.

I felt a weight in my hand, a way to ensure that the moment wouldn’t fade, that the person who proclaimed themself my friend wouldn’t turn, or be turned by another, and let me down, or stab me in the back because it’d get them something.

I pocketed the Stamp.

“Actually, I was wondering if I could have a moment to talk to Jaune,” Pyrrha chimed in, the first words she’d said since I’d arrived.

“But, I just said I wasn’t gonna be goin’ anywhere!” Ruby argued, causing her sister to shake her head.

“I wouldn’t count across the hall as going anywhere,” I offered, and, after a moment of consideration, the girl nodded.

“Come on, Yang, we need to tell the others that he’s back!” she announced, grabbing Yang’s hand and dragging her out of the room, closing the door with a slam.

There was a moment of silence as we looked at each other from across the room, before she motioned towards our beds. “Would you like to sit down?” Without saying anything I took a seat on my bed, Pyrrha across from me on hers. “I apologize for all of this,” she started, and I gave her a confused look. “For telling the others about you.”

“Did you tell them anything I told you in confidence?” I asked, trying to figure out where she was coming from.

“Well, *no,*” she admitted.

“Did you tell them anything I asked you not to share?” I tried again, starting to get an idea.

“No, I would never!” she replied.

“So you shared your personal observations, to try to help them not hurt me,” I nodded. “Pyrrha. . . *thank you.*”

“Then, you’re not upset that I. . .” she trailed off, looking down.

I stood, and she looked up at me, unsure. The woman who could destroy me in the battlefield, and who could apparently see right through me, but didn’t seem to understand me in the slightest. Stepping forward, I leaned down slightly, and put my hands on her shoulders.

*“Pyrrha.* You were trying to *help.* How could I *ever* get upset with you over that?” I asked gently.

She stared back, looking just as confused as I’d felt a few moments ago, before she saw *something* in my face and nodded, smiling slightly. “I suppose, when you put it like that, it seems foolish.”

I stepped back, to my own bed, and sighed. “No, it’s not. At least with another person. But I’m. . . *odd.* *Different.* *Off.* I’m well aware there’s something wrong with me but-”

“No there isn’t!” she objected, standing to her feet, sounding offended. “There’s nothing wrong with you, Jaune!”

Skeptically, I glanced in the direction of the engineering hall. “Pretty sure a number of people would disagree with that, Pyrrha.”

She sat, huffing. “You’re not *off,* you’re just. . . *different,*” she informed me.

“Pretty sure that’s just the polite way of saying there’s something wrong with me,” I pointed out.

“I meant what I said,” she informed me heatedly, before closing her eyes and releasing a sigh of her own. “If you were like everyone else Jaune, then I wouldn’t. . .” she paused, considering what she said, “Then I wouldn’t enjoy being on your team, even if it’s only been a few days, as much as I have. I do believe that I *like* the way you are, Jaune Arc, and I’d not have you change just because you think you should be ‘like everyone else’. Unless you believe that *I* should be like everyone else, do you?”

“No!” I replied, thinking of the others I’d dealt with, and how many of them had claimed ‘normality. “I. . . it’s just. . . really? You like, *this*, overreactions and all?” I asked, looking to her, and she looked back at me, eye wide, clear, and *honest*, and it struck me like a physical blow when she nodded.

I. . . I didn’t know what to do with this. I felt the Stamp in my pocket, telling me that I could lock this moment forever. Hell, I didn’t even have to do it without her consent. This was a girl that was willing to mutilate her soul to save others. What was the Stamp compared to that?

But. . . I needed time. Time to put myself together. Time to see how things played out. Time to see if Pyrrha *really* was who I thought she was, who presented herself as.

“One month,” I said, without really meaning to.

“What?” she asked, not understanding.

“In one month, I’ll talk to you about this again. About. . . *me,*” I told her, making a decision, and ready to live for it. “In the meantime, just keep. . . being you,” I requested.

Pyrrha laughed, covering her mouth as she did so, a musical sound that made my heart hurt. “I don’t think I can be anyone else, Jaune. But if you feel it will take that long to understand that I’m me, I understand. Do you still wish to spar this weekend?”

I laughed, and I felt better, like maybe, despite the corruption choking the air around us, things wouldn’t be so bad.

I’d watch, and observe, and hope for the best while being on the look for proof I was wrong. And, If it lasted a month, and I was right, *and she agreed,* then perhaps I’d have someone I could finally trust completely and wholeheartedly.

There was a *great* deal of difference between enslavement and willing cooperation, after all.