**Chapter Seventy-Seven**

Walking back to my room, after my Magic 101 lesson with Oz, I couldn’t help but smile. I’d graduated from making a spark, to making. . . *a drop of water!*

Okay, on its own that didn’t seem that big of a deal, but I wasn’t pulling it out of the ambient humidity of the air, I wasn’t summoning it from another location, I was *literally making matter ex nihilo*, no Dust required, nothing but my own powers, and that was ***awesome!***

The Wizard, who at first had thought I would be disheartened at *only* making a couple drops by the end of our session, was visibly amused at how excited I’d gotten over my success. The man had agreed that, once I got a handle on water creation, deserts would be a *great* deal easier to handle, as I’d have the ability to create hydration on demand. However, once I asked if, long ago, *everyone* could do this, he’d shaken his head no.

“As is often the case, most do not make full use of their capabilities. Some desert tribes could do so, but unless a person *specialized* in water-based magics they normally could not,” the ancient reincarnator had shared. “After all, when you can throw a bolt of barely contained destruction at your lesser, why should you work to create anything? You, however, have a *prodigious* talent with the art, Mr. Arc. Though perhaps this, too, is a trait of your heritage?”

Shaking my head, I’d replied, “No, while we can learn anything, if I didn’t have you as a teacher, this would’ve taken a lot, *lot* longer.” Which *was* true, as without the master of magic to copy the skills off of, my **Soul Talent** wouldn’t be pushing me *nearly* as far as it was.

Working with Oz, though, I’d started to notice an oddness in the way the man worked his magic. He was teaching *me* how to create the elements directly, but it seemed that he. . . *couldn’t.* Not directly, at least. I hadn’t asked about it yet, and he could describe the process in detail, but whenever he demonstrated the *technique*, he first made an array of glowing green energy, wheels of blocky runes shimmering into existence, spinning against each other like gears, and from *them* I could feel the magic formation required to create the elements come together to show me how it was done.

Regardless, I *literally made things from nothing*, and that just made me *so* happy I almost wanted to break into song!

“You’re in a good mood,” I familiar voice called, and I turned, spotting Blake under a tree, reading one of the books I’d given her.

Striding over to the catgirl, I grinned, “Yeah! I, uh. . .” I hesitated, realizing that I *couldn’t* tell the secret Faunus what I’d been doing, as *Magic wasn’t supposed to exist*, and, not only had Oz asked me *not* to tell the others about it, we *were* in public. “My lessons with the Headmaster are going really well. A lot of foundational stuff, but I’m starting to see results, even if they’re small,” I revealed, which I felt was suitably vague.

Plopping down next to her, I glanced at the book, asking, “Enjoying *The Hobbit?*”

The girl’s bow twitched, as she slowly nodded. “I am. It’s an interesting story. I’d rather take trolls and goblins over Grimm, though I wonder why none of them have Aura.”

“Different world, different rules,” I shrugged. “They have magic, but only a few like Gandalf can wield it, as it’s mostly gone from that world by that point. So you have things left over from that more magical time, magic items like-”

“Like the ring?” she interrupted, smiling. “I’d like something like that.” I winced. “What?” she questioned.

“You’re reading the *introductory* novel,” I slowly stated. “Really, one meant for kids.”

Blake lifted an eyebrow, “They all almost got eaten in chapter *three*.”

“But they’re *not,*” I argued. “And ‘for kids’ is. . . not always the same thing everywhere. After the one your reading comes a trilogy, collectively known as ‘The Lord of the Rings’. Some people think it’s okay,” I remarked, smiling slightly at the understatement.

“There’s others?” she asked, looking thoughtful. “Does Bilbo collect them?”

“Does Bilbo seem the type to want to be a *lord?*” I questioned in turn.

“No, no he doesn’t,” she mused, bow twitching. “Can I have them?”

Pointing towards the book in her hands, I directed, “Finish *that* one, and I’ll grab *The Fellowship of the Ring*. It takes place a few decades after this book ends.”

“I’ve finished others,” the avid reader informed me, reaching into her bag and pulling out several more, offering them to me, the unspoken request obvious.

Taking the likely *faux*-leather backed tomes, though with the resources I had at hand who knew, I dropped them into my own backpack, promising the girl, “I’ll get you the sequels to these as well. Anything else you want me to look for? Your suggestions were pretty good, by the way. A bit *worrying*, in some ways, to be honest, but definitely informative.”

“Worrying?” she echoed, head tilting slightly, “In what way?”

Frowning, I tried to put it into words. I’d *tried* to have this conversation with Pyrrha, and while she’d listened, the gladiatrix had admitted it wasn’t her field of expertise, and that I should talk to our resident bookworm.

Novelkitten?

She’d suggested I talk to Blake.

“Well, they’re, for lack of a better word, *patriarchal,”* I mused, used to the term being utilized as a snarl-word by bad actors, or *actresses*, but here it fit. “Every wise figure is male, *every single one,* and while there’s mentions of *gods,* there is not a whisper of any *goddesses.* Witches, foul queens, and evil female spirits are plentiful, and there are men who do wrong as well, but there’s a distinct *lack* of female leaders, of any *kind*, unless they specifically are carrying out the will of a man, be it their father, king, or husband. Even the one about the dangers of precognition, where the king was gifted the crown that let him see problems coming and got obsessed with them, the advice the woman gives him at the end is just the same advice he gave *her* earlier in the story. Hell, there’s a myth about a Grimm *Queen,* but no Grimm *King.* And it’s. . . *odd*, to say the least.”

Blake stared at me, her eyes wide, and for a moment I’d thought I’d somehow offended her, but she looked down at the book in her hands, murmuring, “I. . . how come I never noticed that?”

“Fish don’t realize they’re wet?” I shrugged, her attention snapping back to me. “I grew up with. . . *different* stories, obviously, which gave me my *own* blindspots and hangups, I’m sure. Like the fact that I think the Faunus Creation Myths are kinda, well, *terrible*.”

“What’s wrong with them?” the Faunus questioned, frowning.

“They’re elitist trash,” I instantly replied, without meaning to, but I wasn’t *wrong,* “and they’re the type of thing that *you’d* decry if we switched it around.”

She stiffened, demanding, “What’s *wrong* with ‘The Shallow Sea’?”

Leaning back, I replied, “Okay, let’s have another story, and call it ‘The Little Lake’, where the god of Humanity lived in Atlas, where only mankind could survive, but he liked Faunus, but was worried about inviting them up and potentially having them destroy what humans had built due to their ‘baser natures’,” I narrated, sarcastically, the catgirl not happy, but following along.

“So this god of Humanity turns himself into a monkey Faunus, and travels Remnant, seeking out those who ‘seemed to be more than they currently were’ and told them to go and ‘Leave for the little lake. It’s where you’re meant to be’. So he builds an ark, full of Faunus, and asks them to jump into the water and join the Humans, with the price that they’d give up their animal traits. Those that had faith did so, and were reborn as Humans, but others weren’t able to accept it, or the fact that being a Faunus was a, and I quote, ‘little disguise’ of their true selves, and they could *now* choose their own fates, suggesting they couldn’t before. The remaining Faunus, horrified by this, rejected the idea, but the god of Humanity washed them away, *where* it doesn’t say, with a vague implication that he’d *killed them,* and left Humanity to themselves to prosper. Sounds like this story is saying that Humanity is ‘true’ and ‘pure’ and just inherently *better than the Faunus*, as they’ve shed their ‘disguise’, doesn’t it?”

“Well. . . maybe we are,” Blake replied, defensively, voice raising at my flat look. “We don’t *enslave* people!”

That caught a few glances from nearby students, though all of them were out of earshot, only hearing her yell, and I sighed, scooting closer to the angry girl, her glare intensifying as I did so, but I didn’t care. “Yeah, Blake, *ya did*. Not *you*, but, if you look into the history books, the ones that go back a *millennia* or so, you guys were *just* as much dicks to each other as the Humans were to *you*. In fact, as a ‘dangerous predatory feline’, the Mistralian *Faunus* Kingdom of Summervale would’ve clapped you in irons and forced you to work in the fields to better ‘channel your violent, carnivorous urges’. Faunus being a monolithic group only happened in the last few hundred years, and, just like there were some *Humans* that believed their darker skin made them better, or rarely worse, than others depending on the nation, Remnant has a *long* history of people screwing each other over.”

The ‘light skin equals bad’ thing that cropped up in history had come as a bit of a surprise, until I remembered that Salem was shown in the media as being *bone-white*, and this pale skinned Oz was only the *latest* of the man’s incarnations.

“And you believe those books?” Blake questioned, though quietly, when I made a lowering motion, looking around the others to indicate that *maybe don’t announce you’re a Faunus if you don’t want people to know you’re a Faunus*. “They could have been written to justify the oppression of. . . *us*.”

“I trust Oobleck to not give a *damn* about political correctness, only the evidence, and he corroborated the account, pointing me in the direction of a number of artifacts that have survived the years,” I countered, not able to tell her that I’d *also* asked Oz, who had *been there,* the man having confirmed the books, while a little negative, hadn’t been incorrect. He *had* noted that he’d never been reincarnated *as* a Faunus, but he didn’t know why.

“But more than that, the *other* Faunus Creation Myth is even *worse*,” I told her quietly, but with no give in my tone. “The one where animals and humanity are at war, so the god of Animals, who happens to look *kinda like me,*” I said, tapping my antlers, “shows up, offering to judge them both, then turns them *all* into Faunus, whereupon they all realize that being a Faunus is *objectively better than being a Human or animal*, which kinda puts Humans on the same *level* as animals, but the Humans that are still Humans shun them, so they’re on their own? Holy *shit*, Blake, how would you take *Weiss* talking about a ‘God of Humans’ turning a whole bunch of Faunus into Humans, which are objectively superior, only for their *Faunus* brothers and sisters to shun them, leaving them to try and get by on their own? That’s, like, *tailor made* for a ‘we can do whatever we want to them’ societal narrative, where not only do you tell yourself the other side are *literally your lessers*, but they’ve *spurned* you, so they ‘brought this on themselves’ or some bullcrap like that.”

“That’s. . . *different,*” Blake half-hissed, angry, but keeping quiet as well. “*Humans* have a history of-”

“Humans have a *recent* history,” I cut her off. “But history didn’t *start* when you were born, or your parents, or your parent’s parents. On the bright side, for our *actual* goal, this is nothing but good.”

The catgirl, bow twitching at the sudden shift, started to respond, before she stopped herself, and stared at me, eyes searching my face, before she finally commanded, *“Explain.*”

“We want *equality* for the Faunus, correct?” I questioned, and she nodded suspiciously. “Well, equality doesn’t just go *one way, Blake*. Equality means they are *equal* to Humans*,* just as capable of good, but *also* just as capable of ***evil.*** By looking at things *historically*, we can prove that they aren’t ‘animals’ because they had kingdoms, even *empires*, just as grand as those of the Humans, though we *will* need to find out *why* they fell. If it’s because of the same reasons that the *Human* ones fell, even better, because that means there isn’t some inherent trait of ‘Faunus-ness’ that makes them special, and for this purpose being special is *bad*, Blake, but it means that Faunus are just *people,* just like Humans are.”

I paused, giving the catgirl a flat look, “That is, of course, assuming that *you* don’t think you’re special, just because of your race. Because if you do, you don’t *actually* want equality, Blake, you want *supremacy,* and are just calling for ‘fairness’ when you’re in a position of weakness, which you’ll abandon once you’re in a position of strength. At which point, anyone with some real-world experience will *see* what you’re doing, and rightfully look down on you for it. So, do you want *equality* with Humans for Faunus, like the White Fang *originally* called for, or do you think, as their *current* actions indicate they believe, that Faunus are *superior* to Humans*,* and that, for *whatever* reason, be it that it’s ‘their turn’, like that’s how *that* works, or because of your better morals, or greater physical capabilities, that the *Faunus* should be in charge, not Humans?”

Blake stared at me, obviously working over what I’d just said, finally asking, “What do *you* want, Jaune?”

“I don’t give a shit,” I answered easily, and she glared at me, not getting the answer she wanted. Shrugging, I reminded the Faunus that, “I’m a *Dragon.* I *know* I’m better, but at the same time blaming Humans for *being* Human is like being mad at a bird for taking a crap on the sidewalk. They *can* be taught not, but without training they’re just acting according to their natures, and it’s not worth it to work oneself up about that fact. If they act up and become a danger, Humans *or* Faunus, I’ll put the ones that *do* down like the rabid animals they are, but I don’t blame the *whole* on the actions of a *few*. Also, I’m also pretty sure the God of Animals *doesn’t exist,* or has long since left if he did, as, if he were up and about, we would *see* the results of his actions, and I haven’t found that at *all* when I looked back through history. I’m looking into this entire thing because *you* want it, Blake, and I see it as a worthy goal, but if you *don’t* want that, I have other things I’d honestly rather be working on instead, and I’ll get around to that shit eventually,” I reminded her.

*Probably when I make my own kingdom,* I added internally. It’d take a while, but with some multidimensional tech, it wouldn’t be *that* hard, and it’d give key people a safe base to work from when the next incarnation of Oz dismantled Vale’s corrupt government.

“You’re. . . you’re doing this, because of *me?*” the catgirl asked, confused. “But, don’t you care about the Faunus?”

“I care about *people*, which both Faunus and Humans are, but tribalism’s a thing that’s been around for as long as *people* have, and it’s not something that’s *that* worth bothering myself over,” I admitted. “Maybe if I grew up in Menagarie, I’d care more, but I was one of maybe a *dozen* Faunus in my town, and the rest of them wanted *nothing* to do with me.” Pinning the girl with a stare, I informed her, “Apparently, I *‘smelled wrong’*, though none of them had the good grace to tell me that. Maybe that was for the best, though, or I might’ve developed OCD trying to ‘get clean’.”

The girl’s bow drooped, and she let out a little, *“oh.”* There was a moment of awkward silence, before she rallied. “I. . . I didn’t know,” she admitted.

“Not that big a deal,” I shrugged, which, from her reaction, *wasn’t* the right thing to say, though she didn’t respond, so I continued. “But, yeah, you’re my teammate, so I want to help you. Just like I’m trying to help Yang and Pyrrha. But that means that *you* need to know what you want, so when someone points out how *racially supremacist* the Faunus’ origin myths are you need to not get your hackles up. Because, trust me, someone like Weiss *would* notice, and, well, *instinctual* reactions are going to do *nothing* but reinforce all the lies she grew up hearing.”

“*Weiss,*” Blake hissed, kind of proving my point, and the look she sent me my way was annoyed, but still off-balance from everything else we’d talked about. “Why’d you side with her if you think everyone’s ‘just people’?”

Blanking for a moment, I tried to think of the last time the two had talked, “When I accidentally left a bomb in her room?”

“*Yes!* What *else* do you think I was talking about?” she demanded.

Shrugging, I replied, “I don’t know, that’s why I was asking.” Taking a moment to recall what the incident, I came up empty. “I don’t remember actually siding ‘with her’,” I stated slowly, continuing before Blake could respond. “I remember *derailing* her before you gave yourself away, *again,* though. You’re welcome, by the way.”

“*Excuse me?*” the dark-haired girl hissed.

“*Blake,*” I sighed, “tribalism *is a thing.* You *clearly* care about the plight of the Faunus. A *lot.* In fact you do so *far* more than it would be expected for a socially conscious *Human* to, to the point that it’s obviously *personal,*” I enunciated, voice dropping to a whisper as I leaned in. “More than that, you are a *known member of the White Fang*, and while you quit, I’m sure *others* have ‘quit’ before, waited until they were in a position to mess stuff up, and showed they’d done *nothing of the sort.*”

The girl winced, frowning, and whispered back, leaning closer to me, *“But I have!”*

I nodded, stressing, “Yes, and *I* believe you, Blake. *Oz* believes you, and make no mistake, you currently live here *under his protection*, which is why DOGG didn’t go after you, or call in some heavy hitters that *would*. The problem is that while *you* know you’re telling the truth, *others don’t know that*, because, and this shouldn’t be news, but *people* ***lie****.* And if Weiss finds out, it’s gonna be *bad.* Which, honestly, is why you should *probably* talk to the girl yourself, but I’m not going to *make* you, just cover for you, but she’s not *stupid,* even if she’s a bit naïve, and it’s a *when*, not an *if* that she figures out who you are. So, *yeah*, I’m being a bit of a dick about it because I think you’re being *dumb*, but, *you are my teammate* and so I *will support you.* Until you explicitly ask me not to. *Are* you asking me not to?” I questioned, staring her in the eye.

Her golden gaze met mine, neither of us giving ground, and I realized we were only a couple inches apart, but I *refused* to back down. She inhaled, to talk, but twitched, and glanced down at me for some reason, before she looked away, leaning back slightly, and closed her eyes, sighing. “*No,* I’m not Jaune. I. Just. You’re hard to deal with sometimes. *Okay!?*”

“. . . Uh, okay?” I replied, not leaning back, but shifting slightly to be more comfortable, and she opened one eye to look at me skeptically. “I’m not *wrong,* but the truth is hard to deal with sometimes. God knows *I’ve* had to learn that one.”

The girl closed her eyes and gave off a frustrated growl.

“Yeah, a bit like that,” I mused, smirking slightly. “I try and be a good person. Sometimes I fail, but not *that* often. *Nice* is a whole different matter. And easy to get along with?” I laughed. “Yeah, not even close. But *honest?* I like to think I hit that one on the head. So I’m not ‘siding with Weiss’, because I don’t ‘side’ with *anyone,*” I declared. “At least not for no reason *other* than they’re the person I like. If you and Pyrrha were having an argument, I wouldn’t side with Pyr *just* because she’s my partner, and you’re *just* my teammate, I’d listen to what you both have to say, and decide on that. And if you were correct, *Blake*, I’d be doing my best to help to explain to my partner why she was *wrong.* Mind you, if both your arguments came down to ‘trust me because you know me’, I’d almost certainly believe Pyrrha, but I’d do the same if it was the *Headmaster* who said ‘trust me over her’.”

Blake frowned, but didn’t say anything for a long moment, eyes still closed. “And if it was someone like. . . like Cardin?” she questioned. “If he had evidence, and Pyrrha *didn’t*?”

“Then I’d go over that evidence with a *freaking microscope,* because I don’t trust him *at all,* but I’d be asking Pyrrha some level of ‘what the hell?’ if that checked out,” I stated slowly, much to the girl’s surprise, her eyes flying open as she gave me a look to confirm I was being honest. Given that Pyrrha was *Stamped,* that would never happen, but Blake didn’t know that, and if it was someone like Oz instead, the same point would stand. “Now, I almost *certainly* wouldn’t do whatever that piece of *Human filth* would demand I do when he’s proven right, but I *would* believe him,” I admitted. “I wouldn’t *like* it, but I would. I couldn’t call myself a man otherwise.”

The catgirl considered that, not responding, but clearly working up to something, so I waited. “That’s really important to you. Isn’t it?” she mused.

“*Yes*,” I replied emphatically, glad she was understanding me. “Blake, if *I* can’t be trusted to keep my word, how can I reasonably expect *anyone* else to? There’s different degrees of ‘word’,” I offered, “From ‘Sure I’ll do that later’ all the way up to formally swearing an *oath*, but most people understand that, and it’s only the malicious types that try and conflate them, but, metaphorically speaking, *my word is my bond*.”

Something niggled at me, like a dream half forgotten, on the importance of one’s word, and of those very same bad actors. My mother, not Jaune’s, had been like that, but she’d also like to put words in your mouth that you *never said* and then hold you to them, and this felt. . . *more.* More recent, more *important*, more. . . ***dangerous****,* but I couldn’t say *why.*

Regardless, my teammate was responding, and I focused on her, as she slowly put forward, “So if you promised that you’d stop doing something when asked. . .?”

Snorting, I replied, “It’s *your* partner that doesn’t seem to understand safewords, Blake, *not me.*”

The girl flinched, blushing slightly as she looked *anywhere* but in my direction, stuttering, “Th-that’s not what I meant! I, you, what makes you think I was?”

My response was simple:

*“Ninjas of Love.”*

The slight blush turned into a full scarlet bloom. “You, you read it?” she questioned with dread.

“I skimmed it,” I replied, teasing her, “and I’ll read the whole thing later. Actually reminded me of a series I have based on a myth from back home, though I haven’t read it myself.”

“You have books you haven’t *read?*” the novelkitten demanded, scandalized, adjusting that to, “Enough to loan out?”

“I have a *lot* of books,” I replied, smiling slightly as I thought of my room back home, *my* home, before this all started, not Jaune’s. “And if you don’t have them stacked three deep, is it *really* a bookcase?”

*“Three?”* she sputtered, eyes going distant.

Shrugging, and putting her statement with what little she’d shared of her life beforehand, I told the girl, “Not having to move around meant I could collect *a* lot more, and mechashift tech means one can pack a small library into a few very, *very* heavy boxes. So, interested? The author’s known for her vampire books, but I’ve heard good things about these as well.”

“I. . . I suppose I could make some time, as we *are* learning about each other’s myths, after all,” she gave, trying to appear dignified.

Laughing, I stood, “Uh *huh.* I’ll throw them in with the rest,” I promised, on instinct reaching out to pat her bow clad head, and while the girl gave out a slight hiss, she didn’t move away. “Good talk, Blake. See you at dinner.”

“. . . *see you then, Jaune,*” the girl replied, so quiet I almost couldn’t hear her, and I smiled as I walked away.