**Chapter Forty-One**

It was odd, how I didn’t want to do a thing until I was told I *couldn’t* do it. Before, I hadn’t cared about Vale, but now that I was effectively banned from it, I found myself wanting to go there, *just because*.

However, I resisted, and I wasn’t blind to the fact that, the few times I’d stared in its direction, Pyrrha had been quick to distract me. She didn’t *need* to, but the fact that she was going out of her way to do so only endeared her more to me, if such a thing was possible.

The days continued to pass, turning into weeks, finals quickly approaching, but they weren’t quite here *yet.*

In the meantime the others had redoubled their previously flagging efforts, not only in class, Weiss going out of *her* way to help us all get a handle on Fire Dust *before* we got to that part of Professor Tim’s lessons. Fire Dust was *volatile*, and it took me a bit before I could use it, memories of the *last* time I’d used it at the forefront of my mind. Thankfully, the others hadn’t pressured me, just giving me space to handle it at my own pace, and soon enough I was slinging fireballs with the rest of them.

Yang had wanted to do more with it, but Weiss, Pyrrha, *and* I had all given her a strong *no,* which she joked about, and started to argue about, until she’d looked at me, before backing down.

Tonight, though, was another GURPS ‘Wargame’, which meant that I was making dinner, which in this case was deviled potatoes, sliders, and some guacamole with a large amount of chips. I was never that good at guacamole, but apparently the secret was lime juice.

It was as I rolled up the tray of foods, that I heard the girls talking.

“Wait, you too? I thought my scroll was glitching out, which was bad because they’re *not cheap,*” Ruby opined.

“Scrolls do not ‘glitch out’!” Weiss corrected her partner. “They are Atlesian technology, and they have been *thoroughly* tested to avoid such an occurrence. However, I too, have been having that. . . *issue.* However, if you’ve read the *manual* you’d know what the problem was!”

Coming up on the table, the attention of the other eight now *firmly* focused on the food I’d brought, I asked, “What problem?”

“An anomalous reading from our Scrolls,” my lover told me, as I spread the full dishes out across the table. “They are stating our Aura levels as over one-hundred percent.”

I paused, as that seemed familiar. “Oh, right, Yang, you had that issue in the workshop,” I agreed, nodding to my fellow blond. “Did you ever figure out what was going on there?”

The girl grimaced, “I, uh, kinda forgot ‘bout it, after I reset my scroll. Think it’s something bad?”

“Probably not,” I shrugged, looking around. “But Ruby, Weiss, it happened to you as well?”

I had a feeling I knew *exactly* what was going on, but playing dumb was *definitely* the right course of action here. I’d been feeding every person here my blood for *months,* and we were just about the at the halfway point for them to jump from Tier Five, the level of all of the other fighters, to Tier Six, the level of the *teachers,* even if just barely. Tiers were a bit odd, in that everyone from Pyrrha to *Weiss* were all Tier five, despite the difference in combat capability between them being. . . *vast.*

Regardless, I looked at the two girls, but it was *Blake* who spoke up. “Not just them. I have as well. My Aura reserves have grown.”

“As have mine,” Ren noted. “And Nora’s.”

“And mine,” Pyrrha added. “Have yours, Jaune?”

I shrugged, “Maybe, I haven’t noticed.”

“Well, we all know how big your. . . *Aura* is,” Yang smiled, getting a disdain sniff from her partner. “If it’s a bit bigger, could you tell?”

*Thank you for the out,* I thought, nodding in her direction. “Point.”

“It *is* possible for one to increase the size of one’s Aura,” Weiss added. “I wasn’t able to find *how,* the textbooks didn’t explain that, nor did my tutors. They insisted I more efficiently use what I already had.”

Pyrrha nodded. “My coaches encouraged the same. For it to do so on its own is. . . *odd.*”

“Well, we’ve been training, right?” Ruby questioned, getting nods from the others. “We’ve been training a *lot*, more than I ever did at Signal. Maybe *that’s* why it’s gotten stronger!”

“Makes sense,” I offered. “And if it’s a linear increase, instead of an exponential one, then that’d explain why I’ve barely got a blip, but it’s been enough for you all to notice.”

Ren nodded, “We have been training it. You build Aura by depleting it,” he revealed. “If you have a Semblance that drains it, that’s easier,” he nodded to Weiss and Blake, “But without one it can be quite arduous.” Several of those at the table grimaced, understanding what he meant by that: Being injured over and over again, suffering the phantom pain of injuries prevented, which, while not lasting, *still* hurt like a bitch.

“That said, I have tried to train my Aura before, and it was only at Beacon that my efforts started to bear fruit,” he informed us, looking around. “If I had to assume, given its status as a Huntsman Academy, there might be something about this location that encourages Aura growth.”

Weiss nodded, hand to her chin. “That would make sense with my own studies. It’s something you said, actually,” she noted, nodding in my direction, but I had *no* idea what she was talking about.

“Is *that* why you had me looking up architectural records?” Ruby asked. “You said it was for an assignment, and I kept worrying that I was gonna fail Oobleck’s class!”

I blinked at that, holding up a hand, “Wait, why didn’t you say something to me? I could’ve told you that you’re fine.”

“Well, you were busy,” the tiny team lead shrugged, and I sighed, as the girl turned back to her partner. “So what did you find?”

The Schnee heiress looked around us, before taking a deep breath and declaring, “Beacon shouldn’t exist.”

“Um, Weiss-cream?” Yang asked, “Your smarts meltin’ in the heat or somethin’, ‘cause this place seems pretty exist-y to me.”

The white-haired girl shook her head. “I didn’t say it *didn’t* exist, fists-for-brains, I said it *shouldn’t* exist! I’ve run the simulations, and while we do have some overlap from Vale, the sheer number of Aura-Active people on Campus *should* be bringing in so many Grimm, it should trigger a Grimm Tide every time we have finals! But there’s *nothing!*”

“How do the other schools handle it?” I asked.

“Haven, Atlas and Shade are in their cities, but we’re. . . *not.* We don’t even have *walls* for crying out loud!” the heiress complained. “And *no one seems to care!*”

“I care, Weiss!” Ruby replied. “But, what can we do about it?”

“*I don’t know!”* the white-haired girl yelled, hands in the air, before slumping in her chair. “I was told to stop looking, like *that* was going to stop me, but I haven’t found anything. There’s not *nearly* the number of Grimm Clearing missions that would be required. I mean, there shouldn’t be any Grimm *left* in the Emerald Forest, but I can just *walk* right out of Beacon and pick a fight with a Beowulf.”

“You’ve been fighting Beowulfs!?” Nora gasped. “And you didn’t invite *me!?”*

Weiss sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose. “I was being *rhetorically hyperbolic* you *philistine!”*

The ginger stared at her. “Is that like philly cheesesteak?” Ren shook his head. “Oh, okay then.”

*Wait, how can philly cheesesteaks be a thing without Philadelphia?* I wondered but it just kind of. . . *did,* just like how sandwiches, hamburgers, and champagne, despite Sandwich, Hamburg, and Champagne not being locations for the dishes to be named after.

“So, do you have any ideas *why?*” I asked Weiss. *Because the answer’s almost certainly magic, but there’s no way she’s going to accept that.*

“I have. . . *theories,*” the girl said, reaching out and grabbing a slider, taking a dainty bite from the mini-cheeseburger, and sighing at the taste. The others jumped a little, as if they’d forgotten the food was there, and started to serve themselves, piling their little plates high. “Most of them are location-dependent,” she added, messing with her scroll, and pulling up an image of the ruins that could be found outside the academy.

Sending the images to us, she continued. “The ruins outside of Beacon are. . . *old.* Older than the kingdom of Vale, old. I talked with Professor Oobleck, who possessed a *wealth* of knowledge on the subject. That is a man who is *very* informed.”

“Teacher’s pet,” Yang teased, getting an unamused look from the smaller girl.

“He wouldn’t answer my more. . . *direct* questions, but when couched in a general interest in history, he was happy to talk, at both speed and length,” Weiss told us. “Ruins such as those are scattered across the land, but, for the most part, they remain largely unexplored. At first the professor stated it was because of a lack of interest in history, an opinion I share,” she added, with a significant look at her partner, who, being the paragon of maturity, stuck her tongue out at the other girl.

“You said at first,” Pyrrha pressed. “He said more?”

Weiss nodded, smiling that at least *Pyrrha* was interested, though I had to admit I was as well, and her eyes darted over to me, before quickly shifting away. “He *did,”* she smugly announced. “The *real* reason that many of these ruins are avoided is because they attract *Grimm*, and usually contain Grimm of advanced age and power. That is why settlements are built *far* away from them, when they know they exist in the first place.”

My lover’s gaze darted over to me. “Like the ancient Death Stalker, hidden inside a cave ringed with ancient carvings.”

*“Exactly!”* the heiress annunciated.

Yang shrugged, “Then why aren’t we hip-deep in Grimm?”

“Because. . .” Ruby trailed off, turning to her partner. “Because if some ruins *attract* Grimm, then other ruins could *repel* Grimm! Weiss, you’re a *genius!”*

“I know,” the girl preened. “And there may be *other* locations out there with similar properties. However, with how many of them are hotspots for the forces of Grimm, very few, other than Oobleck, would attempt to find out. The man must be a *very* competent fighter to investigate them, and come out unscathed!”

Blake frowned. “But, how does that even work? Is there some kind of ancient technology? If we could understand it, then a lot of people could be helped.”

“It’s Magic,” I shrugged, and Weiss rolled her eyes, as did Blake, but Pyrrha froze, shooting me an inquisitive look. A look that Ruby visibly caught. The small girl frowned at me, so I explained, “Any advanced enough technology is indistinguishable from magic. And it might not even be something the people back then understood. A unique kind of Dust crystal, or maybe some kind of weird Anti-Grimm that some ancient Semblance made. Or maybe it’s something completely different, but, Weiss, trust me on this. Oz *isn’t* going to tell you anytime soon.”

“Oz?” the heiress asked. “How can you be so informal about our *headmaster?* And why do you even have *personal* lessons with him?”

It was Pyrrha who answered for me. “Power. I’m sure we all remember what he did during the Grimm Tide?” Some of those assembled had the good grace not to look at my mask. “It’s *still burning.*”

“Wait, really?” I asked, looking to her, and she looked as confused as I was when she nodded in affirmation. “*How?*”

*“Fire Dust!”* Weiss shouted, and we looked at her. “The Fire Dust I gave you. If it was spread out, and then. . . but it should’ve run out. . . *how did you do that?”* she demanded.

“Fuck if I know,” I shrugged, looking to Pyrrha.

The woman shrugged. “I’m sorry. I thought you knew, Jaune. I don’t know why.”

“Probably something to do with my Semblance,” I sighed, breathing out a small wisp of prismatic flame, dropping it to burn merrily on my plate. “That’s what he has me working on, most of the time.”

This time it was apparently Blake’s turn to make an enigmatic statement, as she slowly articulated, “The Basement.” When we looked at her, she elucidated. “When Professor Ozpin talked to us, after the Tide. He was in a room holding unusual Grimm. If there’s something that’s keeping the Grimm away, it might be down there. There were other floors that weren’t listed in the elevator. Going down, the elevator went down too far.”

“But how do we get down there to find out?” Ruby asked, thinking hard about it, and I felt a chill drop down my spine. The room full of Grimm *hadn’t been in the show.* Well, it *might’ve* been in one of the opening sequences, but it hadn’t been in *that* format, which meant there was probably *more* hidden away, and it *probably* wasn’t as benign as Amber’s containment module.

“Simple,” I said, with calm determination, getting everyone’s attention. “We ***don’t.***”

Ruby pouted. “But, what if the answer’s hiding down there?”

“Then it’ll stay *hidden*, and the students of Beacon will remain ***safe****,*” I stressed, looking around the room. “Just because something’s hidden doesn’t mean it’s done so *maliciously*. Also, I can just *ask Oz.* He *probably* won’t tell me, but even his *non*-answer should be telling. Poking around a Wizard’s Sanctum is a good way to get *dead* Ruby.”

“Wizard’s Sanctum? Really?” Blake scoffed, but it was Ren who came to my defense.

The boy shook his head. “Jaune is correct. Think what would’ve happened if any of us had walked down that hallway, and the cages had opened. Either because you accidentally broke something, or as a security measure.”

“Meh, I could take ‘em,” Yang grinned, adding “What?” at the boy’s flat stare, an uncharacteristic hint of *contempt* on his features.

“Tell me, Ms. Xiao-Long, how you would’ve handled the Lillend?” the boy asked, tone mild, but dangerous. The name tickled something in my memory, but I couldn’t remember what. However I *did* have Griselda’s Grimm Guide on my phone, so it was easy enough to handle.

“The what?” the blond asked, suddenly unsure of herself.

The orphan opposite her raised an eyebrow. “The snake woman with wings.”

“Shoot her, and punch her. Like I do everything else. Or are ya saying that wouldn’t work,” she challenged.

Ren took a deep breath, as he noticeably grayed, the vibrant colors of his uniform washing out. “I am saying that, like my parents, you would have died without knowing what happened to you. Died to a threat you underestimated, and paid the price for.”

“Shit, it’s a Siren subclass,” I muttered, having found it. “Mental abilities out the wazoo. Enrapturing, soporific song, enthralling, even a few odder things like low-level invisibility and illusions.”

*I* would be find, Mind and Soul Defense telling it to go screw itself, and so would Pyrrha, but the rest would have minutes, if not *seconds* to deafen themselves. Most of the nastier effects were listed as single-target only, and they tended to be solitary, at least in respect to *other* Lillends, but the ability to cause others to sleep was area of effect, and required *actual* harm done to someone to break, the phantom-pain of Aura loss not enough. “Where the others that bad?” I asked the boy, who nodded.

“An Omukade, a Colchis, a Gug. Others I couldn’t identify. If they were to get loose, people would die,” he stated with cold, emotionless certainty even as Nora wrung her hands.

Nodding to the young man, I told him, “I understand,” before looking to the others, “and this is why you’re going to leave this *alone.*” It was kind of ironic, for me to be telling *others* to be careful, but I *did* watch the first two seasons, and what these girls possessed in combat ability they lacked in *Common. Freaking. Sense.*

It was protagonist ‘I need to save the day’ logic to a T, but, if you were to be aware of the fact that a violent extremist terrorist organization was going to attack a secure shipment, you *told someone,* you didn’t lie in wait to handle them yourself, sure that’d you’d win because you’re of *middling* capabilities compared to your mentor. If it hadn’t been Torchwick waiting for them, but Adam Taurus, or worse, *Cinder?* They’d be *dead,* and *no one* had plot armor here, the Grimm Tide had shown that.

“But, what if we could learn how Beacon was doing it?” Weiss argued, Ruby looking to her hopefully. “I’m not saying we *should,* only that we could.”

“Ozpin is a personal friend of General Ironwood, and the other Huntsman Acadamy headmasters. If there was a way to replicate it, *they’d have done so by now,*” I stressed. “Unless you think there’s some reason that he’s hiding a way to *protect everyone from the Grimm.*” I sighed, surprised I was defending the man, but I was less doing that then trying to keep the others from doing something profoundly *stupid*. “The man has his secrets, but I’m fairly certain *that isn’t one of them.*”

“Jaune’s right,” Pyrrha agreed. “And if such things exist, we can wait until *after* we’ve graduated to discover them.”

I paused, not having considered that angle. It was the same that Ozma had used on me, actually. Not *no,* just *not now.* “Absolutely,” I agreed. “After we’ve graduated, and taken care of another task,” I nodded to Yang, who blinked, surprised, before she blushed slightly and looked away, “I’m all for it. But is there any reason we need to this *right now?* Yes, *if* there’s something that’s doing it and *if* we can study it *without* dropping Beacon’s defenses and dropping the mother of all Grimm Tides on our ***all***of our heads, and *if* we can replicate it then, *yes,* we can save people by using *whatever* is protecting Beacon. But. . . does *anything* change if we don’t? And do *any* of us have a grounding in ancient history, *anywhere* close to Oobleck, who is *already* working here and *already* working with the Headmaster, to understand whatever it is we find?”

I looked around the table, and no one had an answer, Ruby finally pouting, “Well, when you put it *that* way.”

Ren sighed, color returning to his form as he muttered a “Thank you,” to the room as a whole.

An awkward silence stretched across the room. “So. Mad Aura gains?” Nora prompted.

“Right, that,” Ruby nodded. “We were getting stronger! Which is good. But weird. But good! Oooh, Yang!” she said, turning to her sister.

“Yes Rubes?” the blonde replied.

“We could ask dad! He knows all *about* this kind of thing! We’ve got time after finals! Oooh! You guys could come! Oh, um, if you want to,” she added, suddenly self-conscious. “I could show you all around Patch, and um, nevermind, it’s a dumb idea.”

Looking to Pyrrha, I tried to ask ‘Should we?’ without words, and she seemed to understand as the gladiatrix turned to the other red-head. “I would love to see your home, Ruby. And later, you all could come to Mistral. I’m sure you’d love it!”

“Let’s never go to my hometown. It’s cows, bigotry, and boredom the whole way down, but I’d love to see *your* place, Ruby, Yang,” I affirmed, getting a smile from the smaller girl, and a cocky grin from her sister. “How about you guys?”

Nora peered at Ruby suspiciously. “This. . . ‘father’ person of yours. Does he make pancakes?”

“Um. . . yes?” her team leader answered, confused.

Instantly the Ginger’s mood did a 180. “Then I’m in!”

“As am I,” Ren predictably added.

I looked to Blake. “Maybe,” she sniffed noncommittally, and I shot an annoyed look Pyrrha’s way, my lover just smiling.

“I suppose I should see whatever Podunk town you’ve come from,” the Schnee heiress sighed. “If only to understand that collection of weaponry and childishness you call a brain.”

“Ahhh, Weiss, you *do* care!” Ruby grinned.

“I do *not!”* the other girl instantly denied. “And you can’t prove that I do!” The entire table chuckled, as the girl turned to me. “Well? Aren’t we here to *play*- I, I mean run combat scenarios? Let’s do that!”

Shaking my head, I still turned on the display. “Alright everyone, so you’ve gotten a call to scout out an area for a new settlement. You’ve got a gear allotment beyond your normal loadouts, and will have a Bullhead to drop you off and pick you up at a pre-arranged time, though you might be able to call it early. Now, *what do you bring with you?*”

*“PANCAKES!”* Nora shouted, and everyone else groaned.

“Okay,” I couldn’t help but grin. “Nora has spent her share on pancake mix and syrup supplies. While repetitive, you’re likely good for rations. Now, what do the *rest* of you bring with you?”

<DR>

Ozma sighed as he reviewed his reports. It was always a constant struggle, managing the streams of data to screen out the important bits, to spot Salem’s machinations before they could come to their terrible conclusion. Then again, if it was *only* Salem he had to work against, he likely would’ve succeeded. No, despite his successes, and he had a *great* deal of success, it would be many more cycles before he called the Brothers back to Remnant, to see humanity once again united.

That said, he was no longer the only player on the side of the gods.

The boy himself was still a mystery, unobservable through Ozma’s more esoteric means, but through secondary and tertiary effects, much could be learned. The young man was surprisingly stealthy, able to enter and leave Beacon without being spotted by any more conventional means.

But that was not the only effects one could observe.

*Scrolls are wonderous things*, Ozma thought. Incredibly useful, yet also incredibly misunderstood. No, not *mis*-understood, merely *not* understood at all. They tracked the Aura levels of every student on campus, as well as every Huntsman that set foot into his territory, and through that tracking came data, and through that data came *knowledge.*

Knowledge of who trained, and who did not. Knowledge of whose Semblance consumed Aura, and whose were entirely independent. Knowledge of how his students were progressing.

All of those who attended Beacon slowly increased their Aura reserves. It was impossible *not* to do so, with the classes the students needed to take, with the active missions they needed to complete, with the training they all completed, however great and small.

A lackadaisical student would increase their aura by a single percent or so a year. An average student would increase their reserves by three or four. A hard-working student by six or seven. A student who *specifically* set out to increase their reserves could do so by ten, twelve, or even thirteen percent each year, making *enormous* gains over the course of their time here, gaining half again their reserves if they stayed the course, though so few had the wherewithal to do so.

Every single member of Mr. Arc’s ‘team’, consisting of ABYN *and* RRWN?

Bar Mr. Arc himself, they had all increased their Aura reserves.

By an average of *thirty-eight percent.*

In *three months.*

It was, quite frankly, an *insane* amount of growth, and one that had set off a *number* of alarms meant to find students with predatory Semblances, those abusing deleterious training methods that gave short term gains but shortened their lives considerably, or any other anomalous occurrence that would require Ozma’s *personal* attention.

But instead of rushing out and confronting the boy, The Wizard had sat back, and watched, and waited. They had all slowly improved, physically, according to Sepper who was slowly becoming more and more of the Firebrand that Ozma had cherished once again. Even Ms. Schnee was, to the older woman’s grudging approval, improving to the point she would ‘graduate’ from the basics class just in time for the first term final.

And the finals would come, the seasons would change, and things would progress. Perhaps it was time to instate a Fall Physical program, to get a sense of *every* student’s state. It was something that Peach had suggested previously, but, given the number of students they had who possessed skeletons in their closets, it had been better to let those old bones lie. However, in the face of what data could be gained, rattling some ribs might just be what they needed.

If whatever Mr. Arc was doing, and Ozma had *no* doubts that his fellow immortal was doing *something,* could be shared, it opened up certain. . . doors. If the process could increase a person’s Aura, strengthening the strength of their soul, then a *particular* door came to mind, deep under his feet, opening to a long hall, and a pair of pods, one unfortunately filled, and one that, with any luck, may stay empty.

But they had time, still, and nothing was to be gained by rushing. Finals first, then the new semester, and *then* it was time to see what, *exactly*, the draconic boy was up to.