**Chapter Thirty-Seven**

Sepper’s lesson was. . . *different*. When I trained with Oz, it was almost scientific, the immortal wizard making seemingly off-hand comments and asking random questions, his non sequiturs all invariably leading me to try something *new.* They rarely *worked* mind you, but it still pushed me in new directions.

If Oz was broadening my horizons, Mrs. Sepper *defined* them. What I *could* do didn’t matter, what I was *able* to do did. “Again, faster,” she instructed, pulling a pistol from its hip-holster and shooting me as I tried to create a flame shield. As it had the first time I used it, it didn’t *stop* the projectile, the bullet bouncing off my forehead, but it did slow it.

*“Again,*” she commanded, reaching inside a pocket and pilling out a speck of Ice Dust, an icicle forming and firing for my face. This time, the shield caught it, a splash of freezing cold water splashing my face, while most of the frozen spike dropped to the floor, the front half melted completely. “Good for large projectiles. Possibly arrows. Continue practicing. Focus on increasing its density and speed,” she ordered, walking over to help Ren better shape his Aura in whatever way he needed to in order to use it like a Semblance.

The rest of the class passed that way, the teacher, still cold, but considering her suggestions carefully, noting the strengths or weakness of a technique before directing on something to work on, then moving to the next person.

Pyrrha had a dozen metal rods she was having to make dance in complex patterns, Charlie doing the same with his rocks. Ruby was flashing back and forth while she practiced slashes, Blake practicing with her clones to work out a dashing slice she could use in an instant. Ren and Steff were both practicing Aura techniques. Steff’s Semblance, **Counter**, was effectively a spider sense, letting the girl dodge right before she was hit, but, lacking in offensive options, she was in the same boat as Ren, if slightly better off.

Amusingly, both Nora and Yang were set to meditate, something neither girl was happy with. The Ginger had been given a pendant inset with a Lightning Dust crystal, and was training to tease out bits of power without overloading herself. From the arcs of pink lightning that occasionally leapt from her to the grounding rod that Sepper had driven into the ground right next to the girl, it was a work in progress. Eventually, the girl was supposed to be able to pull it without touching it, the crystal hidden under her clothing, able to power up in an instant.

My kinda-psuedo-second girlfriend was, if anything, having a tougher time, trying to pull just a *little* bit of her berserker strength to the surface. Ruby had started to object, saying that Yang needed to get hit in order to activate it, to which Sepper had asked how, if that was the case, the girl’s sister was able to pull it out at a moment’s notice, before she’d taken that many hits. A short questioning session later had shown that to only be *partially* correct.

While the girl’s Semblance strengthened itself as a result of kinetic impacts, *any* kind of impact charged it up over time, even walking, meaning the girl always had a ‘resting’ charge. Taking more hits in a short amount of time supercharged the effect, though after a minute or so it’d start to bleed itself off back down to the resting charge, meaning she could take a few hits, then fight, then turn the tables, then, *without getting hit again,* activate her charged Semblance for a finishing blow, dropping herself a minute afterwards.

She’d tried to figure out how to tap a bit of that power on her own, but whenever she pulled any at all, the entire thing activated. However, she’d always done so mid-fight, so now she was trying to do so *without* a battle to go for, and it was. . . going. Her hair sparked a *little*, glowing in subtle ripples, but nothing stable.

Given she’d been at it for a single hour, that wasn’t that bad.

Feeling a sudden sense of danger, I started to dodge, throwing out a flame shield, which *barely* stopped an icicle from slamming into my chest, again dousing me with freezing cold water. “Focus on your own training,” Mrs. Sepper chided. “Check their progress later.”

I nodded, once more mentally reaching for that inner reserve of fire, the internal motion starting to become easier, as I did it over and over again, becoming route.

Soon enough the bell rang and class was over, the others leaving while I walked with our teacher to the Wizard’s tower. The man was at his desk, looking amused as the doors opened. “Problems already? I do believe I’ve lost the betting pool,” he smirked.

Mrs. Sepper strode forward, and I followed, about to reply when she beat me to it.

“We have a changeling.”

As if a switch was flipped, Oz’s relaxed posture stiffened, the man sitting up, shoulders squaring, something *shifting* in his posture in a way that was hard to describe. One moment he was the relaxed, almost lazy administrator, watching things play out, the next he seemed. . . *strong,* more statue than man, his chair seeming less oddly modern artsy seat and more. . . *throne.*

“Report,” he snapped, gaze hard, and Sepper stood imperceptibly straighter.

“Local criminal. Creates illusion screens. Weapon is umbrella with a hidden spike. Particulars unknown,” the woman replied quickly, glancing my way.

Taking up the description, I added, “She might be mute, there’s no way to see when she creates an illusion, but a good hit breaks them like glass. Oh, and she can make several of them at once.”

“Hence screen***s***,” Oz noted with grim determination, stressing the plural. He started to say something else, but paused, letting out a long breath, posture softening. “I will. . . pass on word to the Vale city guard.” He leaned back into his seat, glancing over, and slowly pulling his cup of tea to himself, staring at it for a long moment. “Thank you for bringing this to my attention. That is all.”

“Ozpin,” Mrs. Sepper started to object, eyes narrowing, but the wizard waved a hand, as if to ward of whatever she was going to say.

“Thank you. It is good to know, and I’ll tighten security here,” the man stated. The teacher obviously wasn’t happy, but he shook his head. “I’m only a headmaster, I only have so much power.” The wizard took a sip of his tea, mouth quirking in the hint of a smile. “I must say, I am happy to see you to getting along so well.”

The woman scowled, before striding back to the elevator, and pressing the button, while I stood there, unsure. The doors closed, and I turned back the wizard. “Um, ‘changeling’, sir?”

“An odd term, in these modern times,” he nodded. “In some communities, there were certain Semblances that were cause for alarm. Changelings. Pipers. Stiltskins.”

“Stiltskins?” I echoed, thinking I knew where he was going, but needing to make sure.

Oz nodded. “Predatory Semblances. Some Semblances can effect the Semblances of others, but the worst require a person’s permission.” The centuries old wizard read my expression. “Permission seems an odd requirement, does it not? But consider what a Semblance *is:* a manifestation of one’s *soul.* To give permission is to open oneself, and through it truly monstrous acts can occur.”

I felt a sinking feeling, as I thought about how I’d pitched my Stamping to Pyrrha. “So, the story of Faust and the dæmoness. . .”

“A story, but, like all good stories, one that is wrapped around a kernel of truth,” Oz stated, pausing before shaking his head. “If someone offers you power, especially pale women with red eyes, say no,” he stated, smiling at a joke he was sure only he knew, but with an underlying tension to his words.

“Will do,” I agreed easily enough. I didn’t know that much about Salem, but I was a *Dragon,* and there was nothing she could give me that I couldn’t eventually get myself. “But, um, if you have terms for it and everything, why haven’t I heard of them before?”

“Because they only occur in places where Awakened Auras are common, or far enough away from others to hide the Awakening of a person’s Aura” the wizard replied easily. “In your town, with your half-dozen Huntsmen, it would be hard to hide the benefits of Aura. In larger towns, let alone cities like Vale? No one knows everyone, and there may be dozens of hidden Awakened, and any one of them could hide themselves, control others, or make. . . *deals.*”

I nodded, thinking hard. Did Pyrrha not know, or did she not care? “When would we’ve heard of them?” I asked, trying to figure out which it was.

“We don’t use those terms anymore,” he informed me, once more shaking his head slightly. “We live in more peaceful times. Better times. In the spring we have a guest lecturer come in and give a seminar to the students about dangerous Semblances they might face when fighting bandits and the likes. He’s an expert in the subject and those that attend end usually up crowing about it.”

*Yeah, three guesses on who that is,* I couldn’t help but think. “Then we’re *lucky* to have him,” I joked, without meaning to, getting a raised eyebrow from the Wizard. “If it’s not something that’s common knowledge,” I quickly defended, having to remind myself that, while I was getting a bit more comfortable working with Oz, I could *not* trust him completely. “If that’s all?”

“It is, though I am curious. What is your impression of Mrs. Sepper?” he questioned, inclining his head towards the elevator door.

I didn’t need to think about it, the woman’s capabilities clear. “I think she’s dangerous as all hell, and I look forward to learning from her.”

The wizard chuckled. “I’ve received a few complaints, but this *is* a Huntsman academy. Her standards are high, but, with the losses we’ve suffer in recent years, she might not be entirely wrong.”

“Losses?” I asked, not able to help myself.

Oz however, didn’t take offense, only nodding sagely. “Fatalities in our profession are inevitable, but there have been more the last two years than normal. For better or worse, there is not a great deal I can do about that, though. I am only a headmaster, after all, and most of the fallen were not graduates of Beacon, but with less defenders. . .” he trailed off.

“The pressure on those that remain will be greater, and while we might have a few Ajax’s among us, Ajax *died,”* I finished, thinking of Pyrrha, who’d thrown her life away trying to kill Cinder, unprepared for what she’d find, and who’d died for nothing more than making Salem’s lieutenant wait around, something that she might’ve done anyways, and be the trigger for Ruby’s silver Not-ingan.

*Not this time,* I thought, anger sparking in my chest. *Pyrrha was* ***mine****, and I’d rip Cinder limb-from-limb before I let her take my lover from me.*

“Mr. Arc?” the Wizard asked. “Is something wrong?”

I shook my head, mastering my own temper. “No. Nothing.”

Oz looked at me for a long moment, before he nodded. “Ah, you are worried about Ms. Nikos.”

Wincing, I nodded myself. “Ajax and the wall is her favorite story, headmaster. I’ll be there to protect her but. . .” *Jaune originally wasn’t, and she couldn’t trust him to have her back.* She wasn’t *wrong,* but the fact that he wasn’t was a sin that laid at a great many people’s feet, though none more than Glynda, who was supposed to be his combat instructor, and Jaune *himself.*

It was that reason that, despite the implications of me now *being* Jaune, I didn’t dwell on the possible moral implications. The boy would’ve given *anything* for Pyrrha to live. And now, she would.

“But not everyone so inclined has a partner such as you?” Oz questioned, with a smile, misunderstanding by statement, but not exactly wrong. “Most teams break up shortly after graduation. I take it you have no such plans?”

“If I can help it, the eight of us will work together for a long, long time,” I replied, getting a smile and nod from the other man.

“Then I look forward to your careers. Good day, Mr. Arc,” he bade me, turning back to his computer, the dismissal obvious, but not rude.

“You as well,” I replied, turning my back and leaving the Wizard’s sanctum.

<DR>

Time passed, another two weeks of training, schoolwork, and incremental gains in skill. Weiss was still in Sepper’s basic class, but she no longer had to be carried back to her room, so. . . progress! Blake’s seminar on 3D movement was interesting, Ren’s lesson built on that to show us how to do so *quietly,* and Yang’s ‘punching (for) dummies’ class was as amusing as it was useful for everyone else.

In sheer fisticuffs, Yang was better than I was, though not by much, and Pyrrha was a close third. The *rest* of our team was. . . . a mess. Ren could use Aura-enhanced strikes, but his flowing martial arts style was more deflection than it was striking, and Nora’s Chaos-Fu would’ve been shockingly effective if she didn’t end up messing it up nearly as often as she got a surprise hit in.

Ruby and Weiss were. . . . present.

“Okay Ruby, I gotta ask,” I finally said. “Isn’t your dad a hand-to-hand combat *instructor?*”

“I’m not *that* bad!” the girl protested, and I gave her a doubtful look as we sparred. She darted forward, telegraphing her cross so much I could’ve picked it up on my *scroll,* and squawked when I twisted to the side, lightly kicking her in the side and shoving her back a dozen feet.

“Ya kinda are,” I told her, looking around, as Ren sparred with Blake, and Pyrrha with Nora.

The girl pouted, gesturing to Yang, who was helping Weiss make a proper *fist*. “At least I’m not the *worst.*”

I raised an eyebrow, “And you’re saying your father is comparable to *hers?”*

The other team lead started to object, before deflating. *“noooo.”*

“That still doesn’t answer my question,” I reminded her, as she darted forward again, and I caught the blow, a little surprised by the strength behind it, as I was pushed back a couple inches. Looking her over, her stance was nearly perfect, but, once she’d struck, she didn’t seem to know what to do.

Pushing her fist away, I lashed out with a snap kick, which she dodged away from with hurried steps. “Dad showed me the basics, but, since I use Crescent Rose, Uncle Qrow was the one teaching me how to fight,” she offered with a shrug.

“Which gives you the same kind of weakness as Weiss,” I nodded, getting a ‘Hey!’ from the small girl. “You hyper-specialized. That makes you *really* good in your specialty, and weak outside of it. Fine if you’re in a hurry to survive, but *we’ve got time to train.*”

“Like you’ve got room to talk. You’re good at *everything,*” she whined.

*Because I’m a cheating cheater who cheats,* I thought, my various Talents doing the heavy lifting for me. “I’m pretty sure *Weiss* would disagree with you on that one,” I corrected, the one thing that Talents *not* helping me out being in-world knowledge, the phrase, ‘How do you not know this already!?’ a common one whenever the heiress gave one of her ‘This is why going to school is important’ lectures. “Besides, if I wasn’t stupid tough, I wouldn’t be good at *anything.*”

“First time having a thick skull,” the girl started to say, before blurring forward in a streak of red, reforming and trying to punch me in the guy, “was a *good,”* I deflected the punch, *barely,* my arm smarting at the force of the hit as I was able to grab her and twist her around. “thing?”

She tried to blur away, and I felt something push against my defenses, the swirl of red stuttering for a second before it got away, and she came out, falling on her but, eyes wide. “What was *that?*”

“I. . . don’t know?” I replied, unhelpfully. “You did something, and I. . . said no.”

“Rubes, what’d I say ‘bout using your Semblance?” Yang called, walking over. “What’s up?” she asked, looking between us.

The others stopped, looking over in our direction as I explained, “It felt like she was trying to take me with her when she moved.” It was something I didn’t remember her ever doing in the show, but it *was* on her ‘character sheet’ for the version of her that’d exist a year from now. I hadn’t pushed her in that direction, yet, because we were still in the spring semester, and patching the holes in her techniques was more important than introducing new ones. “Is that what you meant to do?”

“I, I don’t know!” the girl said, getting up. “No. Maybe? I. . . I wanted to throw you like dad does.”

Her sister shrugged, looking to me. “Ya wanna try it again?”

“I. . .” I hesitated. If this was going to work, I’d need to lower my defenses, which was something I *didn’t want to do*. But. . . I *knew* what Ruby was trying to do, and while I didn’t exactly *trust* everyone here, Blake being the most questionable, would they actually *do* anything.

“If you want-” Pyrrha started to say, as I cut her off accidentally as I said, “S-sure.”

My lover looked at me, “If you’re not comfortable. . .” she offered, *knowing* about my defenses, but I shook my head.

“No, no, I’m sure it won’t be a problem. Come on, Little Red, let’s give this a shot,” I insisted. The girl looked at me skeptically, before shrugging and coming over. “Okay, you’d punched and I’d grabbed your arm like *this,”* I said, reaching out and grasping her wrist. “And then-”

Ruby blurred into red, and I once more felt the brush against my defenses, and, knowing it was coming, let it in. The world *shifted,* for a moment all color draining, everything ‘visible’, almost in monochrome, as my body twisted in ways that limbs *couldn’t*, before everything snapped to reality and my breath was forced out of me as I was dragged from mid-air and slammed, back-first, *directly* into the floor.

*“Ow,”* I wheezed, not *actually* hurt, but having to gasp for a moment. “Okay, what the heck just happened?” I asked, looking up at the surprised expressions on everyone’s faces, including Ruby, who held my arm with both hands.

Again, something brushed against my defenses in the exact same way and I let it work, the world swirling again, snapping back to reality as I landed on my feet, stumbling a little.

Yang caught me before I could faceplant, and I smiled in thanks. “Rubes fell over a *lot* when she first got her Semblance,” the blond smiled back.

“So she’s always been a craterface?” Weiss sniffed, her team lead making offended, yet also, adorable noises of protest.

Looking to Pyrrha, she answered my original question. “When Ruby moved, you turned to petals as well. Hers were red, like they always are, but yours were a rainbow of colors, like your flames.”

“Oooh, do me next!” Nora cheered, jumping a surprised looking Ruby and throwing her arms around the smaller girl. Ruby looked at me with an expression that screamed ‘what do I do?’ and I just shrugged. She frowned, before she shifted into a mass of roiling red petals, Nora shifting as well into a mass of pink petals shot through with lightning, both girls moving to a different location.

When they emerged Nora’s arms weren’t around Ruby’s chest, they were around her outstretched hand. Ruby stood easily, while Nora stumbled, pulling on the smaller girl to keep her balance.

“That. Was. *Awesome!”* the ginger cheered. *“Do it again!”*

Ruby winced, doing it again, stopping near Ren and dropping the other girl in a way that caused her to stumble into Ren, who caught her easily. Yang held a hand out, grinning, and her sister sighed, taking her hand, shifting their position again, the brawler turning into bright yellow petals that shimmered with dancing embers. Shifting back, it was Ruby who stumbled, her sister catching her.

“You okay Rubes?” she asked, concerned.

Ruby took a second to collect herself, looking woozy. “Yeah, it’s just a *lot* harder to move other people. Gimme a sec and I can do it again.”

“Then maybe shelve that for now?” I suggested. “That sounds like something that’s gonna take a lot of work, and we’re still working on your hand-to-hand.”

“Light Knight’s right,” Yang nodded. “C’mon Soft Serve, we need ta work on your stance!”

“My stance is-” Weiss started to object, only for the blonde to strike out and lightly pushe the white-haired girl’s shoulder, sending her stumbling backwards. “I wasn’t ready!”

“Combat rarely waits for you to be ready,” Pyrrha informed the heiress, taking the wind out of her sails, and causing her to go over with Yang without another word.

Squaring up to Ruby, the girl tried again, but she still hadn’t recovered, her swing just *slow.* “Okay,” I said, catching her blow, “You need to *rest.*”

“I can keep-” she started to object, having to yawn in a way that reminded me nothing so much as a kitten, “*going.*”

“We’ll have to practice again later, but let’s take a seat,” I said, walking to the side. “I’m feeling kind of worn out from working with Oz.”

“Well, if *you’re* tired,” she agreed, following me over. Taking a seat in the stone bleachers, Ruby plopped herself down right next to me. “Why is this so *hard*,” she finally muttered, and I tried to figure out the answer.

Looking at the others sparring, I started to notice a pattern. Ren fighting Blake unarmed looked a lot like Ren fighting Blake *armed.* Ren, probably the best all-rounder of all of us, was able to work in swift jabs and kicks into his style, striking precisely and sweeping out of the way. Blake was. . . passable. Her attacks were. . . segmented. In one, two, or sometimes three strike combos, before breaking off, just like she did with her swords.

Pyrrha and Nora were matched a bit better, both better with their attacks, but, again, both fighting the same way they would *with* their weapons. Nora was going for large hits, though she was bucking the trend in she was also going for grabs, which Pyrrha was doing her best to avoid. My lover was a lot more kick-heavy, which she often used *with* her weapons, and she wasn’t throwing that many punches, but elbows, hammerfists, and the occasional grab to try to reposition her opponent.

Then there was Weiss, who barely used her sword, and whos movements were all overextensions. With her rapier, and moved by her Semblance, she was somewhat effective, if her opponent was slow enough. With her fists, she couldn’t slash, nor was she was her instinct to repeatedly ‘poke’ her opponent that useful, her hands not sharp in the way she’d trained.

And then I got it.

“Ruby, fists aren’t scythes,” I said verbalizing my realization.

“Um. . . *yeah*,” the girl said. “I know I slammed you on the floor, Jaune, but did you hit your head?”

“No,” I disagreed, motioning outwards. “Your scythe, it’s. . . heavy. It has momentum, and inertia, and you need to manage it. So you have one hit, maybe two if you chain them, and then you need to figure out what to do next. But with fists. . .”

“I *don’t,”* the girl groaned. “But Uncle Qrow does the same thing!”

I considered that, not actually having seen the man fight unarmed. “And if he *doesn’t* hit, does he stick around, does he hit again, or does he *immediately* pull back?”

“. . . he pulls back,” the girl admitted. “But if I don’t hit there’s still. . . *oh.*”

“Oh?” I echoed, having a general feeling of what she was going to say.

“If I don’t hit, Crescent Rose is still in the way,” she explained. “But, she isn’t.”

I nodded. “Pyrrha and your sister are the experts here, but, everyone except Ren, and maybe Pyrrha, are fighting the way they normally do. That’s not bad, but you’re. . . not big, so you don’t have the reach you’re used to. Your Semblance can help, but it’s something you need to work on.”

“But, how often am I *not* gonna have Crescent Rose?” the girl complained.

“You mean like how you didn’t have it during the inn during the wargame,” I prodded, having run a few more GURPS sessions.

Ruby poked me in the side, “Come on, how was I supposed to know the townspeople were gonna try to turn us over to bandits!”

“And if you fight some kind of sticky Grimm that runs away with your weapon? Or someone like Pyrrha yanks your weapon out of your hands? Or any other thing?” I prompted.

“Ugh. Stupid *logic.* Who needs it!” she grumbled, and I couldn’t help but reach over and mess up her hair. “Hey!”

“*We* need it. We’re team leaders, so we need to be the best we can,” I chided her good-naturedly. “So, you wanna give it a try at half speed? It’ll help you figure out techniques. Walk, run, *fly.*”

“Easy for you to say, you have *wings,*” she shot back, but got up, walking towards our corner of the gym.

I chuckled, standing up and following her. “Fair enough.”