**Chapter Sixty-Two**

Confronted with the architect of Beacon’s destruction, I found myself with a bit of a conundrum.

What do I do with her?

I knew she was my enemy, but she obviously believed herself safe. She was dangerous, enough to ambush a maiden and steal some of her power, though I’d never seen *how.* When she’d reclaimed the *rest* of the maiden’s power, she’d been strong enough to kill Oz. But, if anything, the danger made me want to fight her even more.

. . . which was dumb, and likely another of my nascent draconic instincts. *Worse than a teenage boy,* I thought to myself, *and I would know, as I’m one. Again.*

“My competition?” I asked the wolf in ill-fitting sheep’s clothing. This woman practically screamed ‘Danger’, and just as obviously reveled in the fact. “Beacon’s teams aren’t even chosen. I might not be, ha, sorry, I can’t even say that with a straight face,” I laughed at her annoyed, incredulous look. This was a girl with *no* chill, ironically speaking. “So, Cinder, what makes you so dangerous?” I questioned, wondering her answer.

She just pouted, in a way that she likely thought was alluring, “That’s for *me* to know, and *you* to find out. But tell me, is it true you’re receiving *personal* lessons with the headmaster? For a freshman, that’s *quite* impressive.”

*Oh, shit,* I thought. I knew my team knew where I was going, but either they’d talked, not realizing why they *shouldn’t,* or someone else saw me. Then again, Oz never told me to keep our sessions a secret, only my burgeoning magical abilities. Distracted, I reflexively tried to reply with something witty in return, playing off of the girl’s name. “I have, but catching the attention of powerful Patrons comes with its own problems,” I shrugged, “though I’m sure you already know that.”

Cinder’s eyes narrowed, and she regarded me. “I’m afraid I don’t. I doubt I’ve said more than a few dozen words to Lionheart myself. Unless you meant someone *else. . .*” she trailed off significantly, as if she already knew who I was talking about.

The problem was, I realized who *she* was talking about, and *I* wasn’t supposed to know about Salem. *Screw it,* I thought, doubling down on the gag. “Come on now,” I chided, leaning back in my seat, crossing, “Who do you *think* I’m talking about*, Ella?”*

I expected a blank stare, or maybe a laugh when she realized what I was referencing. What I *didn’t* expect was for her calm to absolutely *shatter,* the girl turning white with fear before snarling, taking a step forward, flames bursting to life in her hands, tightly constrained din clawed fingers as she demanded, *“How do you know that name!?”*

From the shocked looks of her minions, they were just as surprised as I was, but I covered mine, already keeping a mask up, even if my thoughts could be surmised as ‘*What.’* I’d been making a joke, unless. . .

Oh dear god, the writers were fucking *hacks.*

The girls were all fairy tale references, but if I called Weiss ‘Snow White’, Blake ‘Belle’, or Yang ‘Goldilocks’, they wouldn’t know what I was referring to, but Not-Cinderella’s name was literally *Cinder Ella*.

*Screw it, doubling down seemed to have worked a little* ***too*** *well, let’s make it three for three, and go for the full tale.* I glanced at the fires in her hands, and detected a faint sensation at the edge of my perception, likely the fragment of the Maiden’s power she’d snarfed, only detectable because of my *own* magical abilities. But I’d already stepped on one landmine, which I was going to hopefully ride to safety, not need to hit two at once. However, if it resulted in the woman in front of me, her version of Cinderella’s story likely ended much, much worse than the original.

“Fire Semblance. Huh,” I remarked, bringing out a single tongue of Flame to dance upon my lips. “What a coincidence.”

Cinder took another furious step forward, demanding an answer without speaking, and I could feel my teammates behind me tense. Standing up, to put myself between them and the thief of Magic, I opened my arms in a ‘what can you do’ gesture. “Just a story I read, a while ago.”

That confused the villainess. Her fires dwindling. “A. . . a *story?”* she questioned, unsure.

With her on the proverbial back-foot, I took another step forward, *right* in front of the woman, tracking her hands, and feeling for a resurgence of Magic. If she flared it, I’d burn her right here and now, secrets be damned. When the Maiden power left her corpse, Oz’d back me, and my Aura would let me tank her hits long enough for my team to support me. We were all ready for battle, while her minions were ready for *class.*

Cinder looked up at me, cautious, and on the edge of violence. Letting the Flame in my mouth disperse, I leaned forward, and down a little, to murmur loud enough that only she could understand me, “*And if the story I heard was true, those bitches deserved it.”*

Pulling back, I waited, Flame at the ready, to see how this played out. Cinder blinked, honest shock and a weird vulnerability in her eyes that I hadn’t expected, the flames in her hands having gone out, and as her gaze searched mine, I smiled, waiting. Then, in a moment, it was gone, her mask back in place as the ‘seductress’ smirked, lifting a hand to run fingers across my breastplate, leaving a trail of heat as she did so, though her Magic remained still.

“Most would disagree,” she informed me she stated conversationally, and, lacking any *actual* details, I merely shrugged, as I tried to make sense of what she just did. *So her Semblance* ***is*** *a fire one?* I thought. *Or is it something broader, like heat, or energy?* “I’ll see you around, *Jaune,*” Cinder almost purred, in a way that would’ve likely made the *original* Jaune go weak in the knees, turning her back to me and striding away with an exaggerated sway of her hips.

The woman’s path took her between her still staring minions, lightly hitting them on the shoulders, both jumping a little before following their boss, both glancing back at me, Emerald giving me an oddly hostile look, while Mercury’s was just measuring.

Keeping my blindsense open, just in case, I turned my back on them and took my seat, as if nothing odd had happened, which lasted the four seconds it took for Yang to, kind of loudly, demand, “What the *fuck*, Jaune?”

Glancing up at her from my burger, pausing mid-bite, I took it, taking my time chewing it, before swallowing and answering blandly, “What’s up?”

“What’s up?” Yang echoed, and I nodded, grabbing my soda to take a sip.

Pyrrha interceded, holding up a forestalling hand as she remarked, “Jaune, you seemed not to know who she was, but that was obviously not the case. Do you have history with her, or is she like Penny?”

I considered the question, “We’ve never met before,” I told her, “but. . . Ruby.”

“What?” the girl squeaked, as the rest of the team turned to look at her. “I-I just met her once before. But, but I didn’t tell you I did-”

“No,” I interrupted. “This might seem like a stupid question, but have you ever met your grandmother?”

Weiss frowned, “What does that have to do with this ‘Fall’ girl?”

“Just answer the question, please,” I prompted the mini-reaper, watching her, wondering just how deep these girl’s tales went.

“I, uh, maybe?” Ruby answered, explaining before I could ask what she meant by that. “Dad’s died when I was really, really little, and she lived in Mistral, so I might’ve, but I don’t know. Mom’s died when she was really little.”

I nodded, thinking, *Okay, things aren’t that closely related. It’s either a* ***massive*** *coincidence, or someone got lazy. I heard things went downhill, but. . . making Cinder’s last name Ella and having her have abusive step-siblings?* ***Really?***

“Jaune,” Pyrrha prompted, and I realized I needed to give an explanation.

“Cinder is. . . not a friend,” I stated. “She plays it cool, but she’s volatile.”

Blake snorted, remarking dryly, “Got that.”

I shook my head, “*No*, I mentioned something she thought was secret, but I didn’t realize was, and she didn’t take it well, but she’s normally better than that. *Don’t* press her and keep your distance. She’s *dangerous,* in a way that almost everyone else here *isn’t*,” I directed, looking around at my team, gaze serious.

“Then,” Ruby said, scrunching up her face in confusion, “Shouldn’t we tell someone? I mean, if she’s-”

“I’m sure they already know,” Weiss rebuked, cutting off her partner, but hesitated herself, looking my way. “Don’t they?”

“Probably,” I agreed easily. “But. . . I’ll talk to Oz about it. Just in case.”

I hadn’t up to this point, because we were both pretty much playing Secret Chicken, both hinting and referring to things, but. . . but maybe it was time for a little more trust.

**<DR>**

“You asked to see me?” Oz asked, regarding his apprentice. The boy having requested a meeting. “Is this about the confrontation between yourself and one Ms. Fall?” He’d reviewed the footage, and with the open threat the visiting student had presented to the teen, Ozma would have expected a repeat of the incident with Mr. Winchester.

Instead, the boy had de-escalated the situation with words, Lionheart’s student, if anything, flirting with Mr. Arc before she left. It was only because his protegee asked for this meeting that Oz had reviewed the day’s events in detail, as there had been no reported incident.

The blond boy nodded. “Yeah. It’s. . . at what point should you not bother trying to help someone?” he asked, seemingly out of the blue.

Oz smiled, asking in return, “Starting things off with the easy questions, are we?” The boy reddened, and the headmaster took a sip of his tea to give himself time to think of an answer, not having expected the question. It was a question that *he* had asked himself, more than once, and had yet to find a satisfactory answer.

Which meant the proper answer, was no answer at all.

“Might I ask what prompted this?” he questioned instead.

Mr. Arc reached out a hand, his scroll appearing in his hand in a way that Oz was *still* trying to understand. To his senses, there was no Magic to the motion at all, but that meant very little in the grand scheme of things. Not all magic was obvious, and for an item of power that was quite obviously meant to avoid notice, subtle expressions were key.

Oz’s own scroll beeped, receiving a message, which the wizard summoned to his screen with a gesture of his free hand. It was a news article, from a little over half a decade ago. The burning of a hotel in one of Mistral’s smaller cities. It was investigated, the owner and her two daughters found dead, along with a few guests. All of the staff were located, except for a young girl, named Ella, who had disappeared.

Reading further into it, the destruction had caused a slight stir, as several of the staff were interviewed and a salacious story of mystery and abuse was reported, the populace all too quick to focus on negatives. *Sadly,* Oz thought, not for the first time, *sadistic joy does not draw the Grimm.*

It was a known fact, and stories, such as this one, were often published and spread, as, while they did cause some sadness, disappointment, and anger, the more prevalent emotions they solicited were satisfaction of the reader’s moral superiority, a more positive attitude about one’s own failings, and relief that, as bad as their lives may be, at least they weren’t *that* bad.

It was the kind of tactic that he had always tried to avoid, but he was only one man, in only one place at a time, and it was an easy way to decrease Grimm attacks while simultaneously deterring any of the populace from trying to better themselves in unwanted ways, a boon to any leader.

At least one without a heart.

There were even a few images, of a girl in rough, somewhat dusty clothes, hard at work, always unaware that she was being photographed. The only jewelry she wore was a silver necklace, inset with a golden crystal. It was a simple design, but even that stood out against the girls white clothing, grey with dust. Looking closer at the image, the crystal was not golden, but they yellow of an Electric Dust crystal.

Dust was often worked into jewelry. In the hands of a Huntsman of sufficient skill, such jewelry was as potent weapon as a blade, but even a novice Aura user could use it to create basic attacks, good enough to hold off the Grimm. As such, wearing such a device was an indicator of skill, though, when nobles got involved, they became an indicator of status, even if the noble themselves could not use it.

The images of the hotel showed it to be one of a certain level of opulence, which could explain its presence on what would’ve been a scullery maid a mere lifetime ago. However, when combined with the girl’s disappearance, the destruction of the hotel, and the death of its owner, a different picture was painted.

One altogether more unpleasant.

Looking at this Ella, she could have been anywhere between eleven and fourteen, still a child by any metric. Bringing up an image of Ms. Fall, he understood his apprentice’s issue.

“You believe Ms. Fall to be this Ella?” he inquired.

Mr. Arc bit out a laugh, “Considering she went from flirty to fiery the second I mentioned her real name? Yeah, a little.”

Oz looked into the girl’s record, sent over from Haven Academy. The girl was talented, *very* much so, with notes that she was driven, a fact that had annoyed more teachers than it had pleased, notes on her smug, superior attitude, but none indicating any lack of ability. Overall, it denoted a grudging respect, though one with the hallmarks of a Huntress that may one day go rogue. It was clear why she was chosen for the tournament, and, knowing her origin, made a certain amount of sense.

Often, those who had suffered were most motivated to push themselves, in order to never suffer like that again. He hadn’t understood that in his first life, or even his second, but, over many lifetimes, it was something he’d come to know full well, seeing it both in others, and in himself.

“And you are worried,” Oz stated, the boy nodding to the non-question. “I appreciate the effort you have put into this, but everyone deserves a second chance,” the Wizard pronounced. “If you look around, I’m sure you could find those with less than pristine histories.”

Jaune rolled his eyes, “I know about Blake. There’s only so many Cat-Faunus Belladonnas out there, and we’ve talked about it. She’s made a clean break from the Fang.” The admission brought another smile to the Wizard’s face, glad the girl had started to find the family she had found herself without. “But. . . I’ve got a bad feeling from Ella, Cinder, whatever. *Grimm* kind of bad, but I can’t say why.”

That was more concerning, but could mean any of a hundred different things. “Then perhaps you should keep an eye on Ms. Fall. You seem to be getting on well enough.”

From the boy’s wince, the girl’s flirtations hadn’t hit home. Likely a good thing, as the heart could cloud one’s judgement all to easily. “I, I’d rather not. How about the rest of her team? Mercury seems. . . off. Not Grimm off, but. . .”

Obliging his apprentice, Oz reviewed the files on her teammates. “Ah, that would be because his father is an assassin. *Was* an assassin. Hmm, I didn’t know that man had died,” Oz commented, flicking through the others. Emerald Sustrai, an orphan who’d turned to thievery to survive, and Neomi Noire, child of bandits who’d developed a conscience and helped lead to their capture, after they’d started using Grimm as weapons.

“Wait, that’s *in* there?” the boy questioned, the headmaster sending him a questioning glance at the teen’s odd wording. “I mean, that seems the kind of thing people would keep secret.”

Oz smiled, the boy far too straightforward. In many ways reminding of him, in his first two lives. “It is not something to be shared, young man, but second chances can only be given if a person’s history is known.” Looking at the collection of malcontents, realization dawned, as he understood what Lionheart was trying to do. The man might not be the most forthright, but he had good intentions, and, was only doing what Oz himself had done. “Tell me, Jaune, have you heard of the Branwen bandit clan?”

“Tai told us about Qrow and Raven,” the blonde replied. “Not *everything,* but the fact that they used to be bandits, and Raven probably still is.”

Again, Oz was surprised. Taiyang Xiao Long was a good man, but one as caught up in the past as he was reluctant to discuss it. Then again, with how the teen had saved his daughters, a certain level of reciprocity could be expected. “I allowed both siblings, who were clearly here only to better serve their family, in the hopes I could show them a different way. Raven eventually backslid, but Qrow, Qrow Branwen is undoubtedly one of my greatest successes of this life. Though, don’t tell him that. The man has a bit of an ego, and Glynda would never let me hear the end of it if I inflated it.”

“I won’t,” the younger reincarnator agreed with a nod. “So, you think Shade’s Headmaster is doing the same. But. . . but what if he’s doing the same a little *too* closely?” he asked. “That Cinder isn’t a Qrow in the making, but Raven, or worse? *Everyone’s* attention will be on the Vytal festival, and that provides an. . . an *opportunity*. For good, yeah, my team’s gonna show off, but also, well, if they try something, it’ll be one hell of an interview. She’s human, so not for the White Fang, but there’s a lot of criminal organizations out there. *Especially* in Mistral.”

Jaune seemed to want to say more, but held it back, stopping there. It was unusually pessimistic, for the boy who had nothing but confidence in his own team. Oz had to hold back a laugh, the comparisons with Professor Amakuni’s reaction to Jaune himself clear. To the teen’s credit, he’d de-escalated the situation instead of souring it like she had, and Oz didn’t think Mr. Arc would find the same amusement that he did in it.

“You really are that worried?” Oz asked, an idea striking him, and baiting the trap.

Jaune nodded. “Yes. It’s not based on anything, but, yeah.”

The Wizard smiled. “Good. In that case I have a task for you, Mr. Arc. I would like you to keep an eye on Ms. Fall and her associates. Do not give away your suspicions, and if you find evidence, come to me before you act on it. Do you understand?”

Jaune looked at him blankly. “what.”

Opening his hands, Oz explained, “Lionheart was trying to do what I have done, but, as has often been the case, he did not understand the minutia. The man is an excellent administrator, but as a headmaster?” Oz shrugged. “Team STRQ worked because it was balanced, as all things should be. Yes, Raven and Qrow had a checkered past, but Taiyang came from a huntsman family line that I knew previously, and Summer’s disposition, while the girl had no aversion to violence, was not one to revel in it. In RRWN, you have naivety mixed with experience, theoretical mixed with practical. In ABYN you have those who appeared to live in the shadows, with you and Ms. Belladonna, given your forged transcript, with those that live in the light, Ms. Nikos and Taiyang’s eldest.”

The young man gave the headmaster a measuring look. “The launchers we all stood on. They’re programmable, aren’t they? That’s why we didn’t run into anyone else.”

Oz smiled, not confirming that, *yes*, yes they were. There was always a possibility of chance, but by changing the directionality, as well as power, of the launch pads, it was easy to group up possible team configuration, so that groups would arrive in waves, and when they did, they were far more likely to pick similar totems. It wasn’t an exact art, but very few things in his job guiding young minds were.

Jaune groaned. “So. . . so what. This team. . .” he trailed off.

“CMNE,” Oz supplied, pronouncing it ‘carmine’.

“CMNE, it’s all dark, no light. And you want *me* to be that light?” the teen asked incredulously.

Waving his mug, the headmaster pointed out, “You are aligned in that way. Who knows, maybe you will be what they need? And if you are not, at least you tried. Trust me, Jaune, there are few things worse than looking back, and knowing you could have prevented something, if only you had tried.”

He waited, watching as the boy struggled with himself, wanting to say something, but holding it back. Eventually, with an inhuman growl that sent even the Wizard’s hairs on end, bits of flame floating out as he said it, Jaune bit out, “You know what? Fuckin’ *fine.* If that’s what it takes. But if things go down as badly as I think, and you *don’t* listen to me, I’m going to throw those words back in your face, Oz,” the boy promised, which seemed. . . *extreme,* but whatever the boy sensed had unnerved him more than he let on.

“It will not be the first time someone does that,” The Wizard replied serenely. “And, unfortunately, it likely will not be the last. But even if that hand is burned from time to time, it is worth it to offer it, for those who truly needed it.”

The young Faunus stared at him for a long moment, before looking away, muttering under his breath, “Stupid morals. Maybe she won’t screw us all over. And maybe Nora will pass on pancakes.”

Looking back to the older man, Jaune stated, annoyance barely held in check, “So, to be clear, you *know* she’s dangerous, but you want me to redeem the almost certain murderess with the power of *‘friendship’*. That about right?”

“Or find the evidence of what you suspect, in which case I will act as needed,” Oz agreed. “Being a Huntsman, and being a leader, is about far more than grades and combat capabilities, Mr. Arc. Consider this another aspect of your training. After all, what do you have to lose?”