**Chapter Seventy-Five**

I stared at Cinder Fall, agent of Salem, Soul-Thief, and something that had slipped my attention slowly resurfaced. It had been quickly glossed over at the time, but in our *last* conversation as significant others, Yang had brought up Cinder as another rod for my back, even if it was one that was quickly discarded. By that point, I was already *done* with the girl, but there’d been the implication that the false-Maiden had told my then-girlfriend. . . *something* that’d upset her. Something that the person who claimed to care for me hadn’t talked to *me* about until everything was *already* falling apart.

Part of me wanted to be angry, that Ella had gone after what was *Mine,* but. . . but Yang *wasn’t* mine any longer. Possibly hadn’t *ever* been mine, but had instead been merely mouthing the words without truly meaning them, truly understanding what they meant. That was a relationship that, in retrospect, was *doomed*, because she wouldn’t do even the most basic of things that I wanted her to do, specifically, *be* *honest,* and I *refused* to be *whatever* she wanted *me* to be.

And because of that, well, I wasn’t upset with Cinder in the slightest.

But. . . *appearances* needed to be kept, because this woman *was* evil, and evil could *not* comprehend good, misunderstanding it as stupidity instead, and thus any kind of forgiveness or understanding would go over her head. As such, while I knew I was taking too long to respond, I finally had a way forward.

Sighing, I ran clawed fingers through my golden hair, running sharp points gently over my horns. “I had a *feeling* that was you,” I told her, with a slight tone of amusement. It *wasn’t*, her efforts a drop in an overflowing barrel of *suck*, but, by her smirk, she believed she’d been the root cause of my breakup.

“I told you I *would*, Jaune,” she teased, “and I’m a woman of my word.”

*If that’s true then I’m a newt,* I replied internally, fully aware that this woman’s word wasn’t worth the *air it was carried upon*. Hell, she hadn’t even ‘told’ me she’d do anything, just insinuated she’d lie to Yang as a threat, though I suppose I *could* take this to mean she carried through on those. Instead of calling her out on that, however, I smiled, broadly and honestly, something that *visibly* confused the woman. “And I have to thank you for your help.”

From her hesitation, the dark-haired thief wasn’t sure how to respond to that, and I reaffirmed my assessment of her as having a *giant* E in her alignment designation. She rallied in a few seconds, to her credit, and commented, “You’re taking this rather well.”

It was a shameless probe for information, but one I was more than happy to satisfy, though in a way that she could *understand* instead of dismissing out of hand as idiocy. “I was wrong,” I admitted freely. “I’d thought I had a *far* stronger hold on the girl than I did, and you helped show me how tenuous it was. Better to find out *now* then in the field,” I shrugged.

“*Really?”* the woman questioned, lifting her single visible eyebrow.

*I guess I’m still being too nice.* Pulling on my own emotions, remembering how I’d *felt* in that moment, I let that *rage* pass through me for a moment, letting it show on my face as I growled, “*I’m not* ***happy*** *I was wrong, mind you*.” Letting it fade I took a deep breath, and finished more calmly, “But it’s better to find I was, then rely on a *weakling* like that when it matters.” And, in my opinion, spiritually, Yang was as weak as she was *physically* strong.

“Isn’t that Yawn girl *still* on your team?” Cinder pointed out, clearly enjoying my reaction.

“She is, but, like how *your* little Emerald can’t follow orders, I can manage Xiao-Long on missions,” I said, bragging, but confident I could back it up. “Or at least make sure that she only gets *herself* killed. So, I find myself in your debt, even if a little, Cinder Fall. And that is *not* a position I like to be in. Thus I ask, is there anything you desire?” I questioned, putting out the trap. If she got me involved in her plans, I’d be in a *much* better position to gather the evidence I needed to prove to Oz that this girl was *bad news*, and get him to back me to the point I could eliminate her *without* causing an international incident. Or at least without having to deal with the fallout *myself*.

“Oh, I can think of *some* things you could do,” the seductress cooed, reaching out and tracing my masked chin with a burning hot finger, draining my Aura ever so slightly.

*. . . okay, not what I meant,* I thought, as I gave her a skeptical look, wondering if she really wanted to ‘waste’ the favor on something like that. No matter how good a lay she thought she might be, first of all, with **Sticky Fingers**, *I was better,* and second of all, no matter how good she was in the sack, it wouldn’t be good enough for me to help her *destroy Beacon*.

“Don’t be like *that*. A few scars aren’t enough to scare *me* away,” she told me, misinterpreting my intentions, and, if I was reading *her* implications correctly, trying to suggest that part of why Yang and I broke up was my scarring, which. . . *no.* Ironically, my scars likely made her *more* attracted to me, not less. “How about the two of us make our ways to Vale this weekend. I know this *wonderful* little club-”

“Junior’s?” I interrupted, causing her to pause in surprise.

“Well aren’t you a Faunus of *hidden depths*. I wouldn’t expect Ozpin’s apprentice to know about a place like *that*,” she replied, though there was a slight edge to her words. “Aren’t *you* the naughty boy.”

“Yang took me there,” I shrugged, causing Cinder’s eyes to narrow, just for a moment, the girl not liking the comparison to my ex. “She started a fight, I partially burned it down, and I *might’ve* threatened to eat the proprietor.”

“. . . excuse me?” the villainous Huntress questioned, caught *completely* off-guard.

Smiling, faking my embarrassment, and badly at that, as I’d *do it again,* but the attempt to maintain appearances was important, I told her, “Do not meddle in the affairs of dragons, because you a crunchy, and taste good with ketchup. He threatened to take what was *Mine*, and I made my displeasure known. He had an illusionist on staff, and she covered his escape. Not a bad fighter, either,” I added thoughtfully, as I really wasn’t sure that, if *she* went all out, I’d be able to defeat Neopolitan. I wouldn’t *lose,* but there was a large middle ground between death and killing your opponent, especially with someone who could escape like she could.

“Naughty boy *indeed,*” Cinder commented, visibly reassessing me. “Perhaps a different-”

“I’ve also been told to stay out of Vale by Oz,” I informed her, finding her frustration amusing, which thankfully fit the ‘mask’ I was presenting. “Something about how I set up one of the Councilor’s sons to be expelled because he went after me for being a Faunus, which I thought was better than my first instinct, which was to just *kill* the idiot. So the police force tried to take me in on trumped-up charges, so I left them in the dust, but since I *won’t* come quietly if I return that’ll probably end with, at best, dead cops, at worst, dead cops and me setting their precinct on fire. Not that it’d be *that* large a loss. It’s a bit of a theme, I must admit, but, well, *Dragon,*” I grinned unrepentantly.

For a long moment, Ella gave me a searching look, before, eye twitching slightly, she glanced in the direction of the door into the classroom. “I haven’t heard *anything* like that happening. Not that I don’t believe you, but. . .” she trailed off, still calling me a liar without *technically* doing so, but I wasn’t offended.

Instead, I laughed. “You *really* think a criminal like Junior would admit that he was beaten down, *twice,* once by a student Huntress who hadn’t even *started* attending Beacon, and the second time by her *and* a Faunus? And that goes double for the bigger criminals on Vale’s Council. They talk a good game about equality, but if you can’t see the fact that there’s *no* Faunus in positions of power in their government, I’d suggest you need glasses.”

“You sound a little like some people I know,” Cinder replied, on safer conversational ground. At my questioning look, she said, “Some Faunus that don’t like how they’re treated, and want to do something about it. Do *you* want to try and settle the score?”

I knew she was talking about the White Fang at first, but their stringent anti-humanity stance was such that to get *that* connection instantly would’ve been *very* suspicious, something I only caught at the last second. “Whoever are you talking about?” I questioned, narrowing my own eyes in faked confusion.

“Just an organization that believes that sometimes Humans have to be *made* to give the respect that the Faunus are due,” she smiled, clearly trying to bait me into being interested in, what, *joining them?* Thinking about it though, I suppose if she worked as my ‘recruiter’ she’d simultaneously get blackmail material on me *and* have me owe her an additional, *larger* favor.

Too bad I didn’t give a shit.

“The *White Fang?*” I questioned, disbelievingly, not worried about beating around the bush in the slightest.

“Perhaps,” she offered, not committing to anything.

This time, my laughter was derisive. “*Those* bunch of hypocritical idiots? I’m surprised they even gave you the time of day. Shouldn’t be, I suppose. You have a way about you,” I said, praising her, and she subtly preened at the praise, “but for them to accept the help of a human, it’s a little hard to believe.”

“They people I know were a bit. . . *bull-headed,”* she admitted, smiling at her own joke, “but even a feral dogs can learn to obey their *betters*.”

“Animals,” I shrugged, “what can you expect? Though most humans are little better. The White Fang eat the scraps of society, hating it for that fact, yet never actually *doing* anything about it.”

“And you would?” the Rogue Huntress questioned.

I just smiled, baring my teeth, and let a few prismatic embers dance behind them.

In turn the agent of Salem smirked in return.

Moving our conversation along, I let the bits of Flame spread out into the air as I mused, “Sadly, as I was saying, Vale is currently denied to me, lest I cause an incident by improving the gene pool. Cardin’s father not only let him avoid the consequences of his actions, coming back this semester after being kicked out, but the pathetic fool’s going to be in the Vytal Festival representing *Beacon*. However, enough damage can burst through the protections of Aura and inflict real wounds. Doing it *myself,* well, that’d be a bit of a shitshow, obvious in what it was, but if someone else did it? Well, accidents *do* happen.”

“That they do,” Cinder remarked, putting a finger to her lips, visibly considering something. “If you can’t go into Vale, we’ll have to have our fun *elsewhere.*”

“There’s always the Emerald Forest,” I offered. “We could make a day of it. Maybe even get a bit of combat practice. The Grimm here are fairly weak, but spars only get one so far.” Giving the woman a measuring look, I amended my statement, “Not that I’d say not to getting physical with *you,* Cinder.”

“So *forward*,” the woman mock-chastised, hand to her chest, fingers splayed to bring attention to her breasts. Smiling, she proposed, “Perhaps you’ll even get what you want. Sunday? Nine?”

“I’ll bring lunch,” I agreed, glad I’d managed to figure something out.

Stepping in closer, she trailed her hand down my chest once more, huskily stating, “It’s a date. I can’t wait to see how you handle your,” dropping her hand down, she confidently grabbed my dick through my pants, squeezing it a little as she stroked it with heated fingers, “*weapon*.”

I froze, and she laughed, stepping past me, and heading out the door.

*. . . Okay, I’m in trouble.*

<DR>

After I settled myself down, I realized I should *probably* be getting on top of things, before they got on top of *me.* ***Again.***

. . . Okay, *phrasing*, but the point still stood. As such, I waited until Cinder was *well* and truly gone before I left, keeping an eye out for her minions, but I didn’t spot them. Still, I took a bit of a meandering trip across campus before I finished at the Wizard’s Tower, nodding to the student at the front desk before heading up to Oz’s office.

The door opened, and the Wizard held up a single finger, typing something into his desktop terminal. Walking inside, I snagged the chair from by the door and quietly carried it over, putting it down across from him and taking a seat while I waited. A few minutes later, the ancient man nodded to himself, turning to look my way while grabbing his coffee and taking a sip. “Thank you for your patience, Jaune” he smiled. “How can I help you?”

“White Fang are in Vale,” I stated bluntly, no real good way to handle this, my story already prepared, I’d just been waiting for the ‘right’ time to tell the man, only to realize now that I had no idea when that *was,* so today was just as good as any other.

The reincarnator, however, merely nodded. “They are in *every* city, unfortunately. Would it be presumptuous to assume they tried to recruit you?”

“Nope,” I drawled, not technically lying. “Turned them down, of course. I take it you know about their base in Mountain Glenn then?”

“. . . Pretend I do not,” the Wizard stated, folding his hands in front of himself. “What have you learned?”

“There’s a White Fang base in Mountain Glenn,” I repeated, getting a chuckle from the ancient man. “You know all the Dust that’s being stolen? It’s the White Fang, apparently, and it’s being taken *there*. Don’t know *why,* since, as far as I know, it’s just ruins and Grimm, but the idiots are trying to gain *cultural acceptance* through *terroristic violence*, so they’re not exactly playing with a full deck to start with.”

“I can make an educated assumption,” Ozpin stated, and, at my prompting look, elucidated. “Mountain Glenn was a project of mine, when I was the last King of the ‘Kingdom’ of Vale. Regrettably, I died shortly after beginning it, and my decision to try an experiment in republicanism meant I could not be discovered as a ‘distant relation’ to the previous monarch, one that could pass the tests I set for myself before retaking the throne. I had assumed, given my rather *explicit* instructions, my plans would have been carried out with the proper safety measures in place. Alas, the actions of others, be they purposefully malignant, or base unthinking greed, sent such plans awry. Mountain Glenn fell, but not before a transportation tunnel was carved from the *heart* of Vale, through solid rock just below the surface, into that settlement.”

The man sighed, taking off his glasses and cleaning them. “My *original* plan would have both tunnels emerge at the edge of both cities, and would have buried the passageway several hundred feet deep, but such things were deemed an. . . *unneeded expense.* At the very least, they built enough protections on the Vale end of things after Mountain Glenn fell such that it is not an attack vector for the Grimm.”

“But against terrorists armed with several tons of Dust?” I asked, already knowing the answer.

“The defenses *should* be enough,” the Wizard stated confidently, though that confidence quickly fell as he added, “if it was built *correctly*. Prior experience, however, has shown me that the current government prioritizes short term gain over long-term safety. I’ll send a Scout-Huntsman team to investigate, and an Elimination one once they’ve been found.”

“Elimination?” I questioned, the way he said it suggesting it was a proper noun.

“Yes, Mr. Arc. Not all teams are created equal,” Oz smiled, “and some are more suited to one task than another. All *should* have a base level of competency in all fields, as one never knows what one will find in the wilds, be they boreal or urban, but that is not always the case, and far too many believe that they can handle *everything* that comes their way with equal expertise. This problem compounds when teams break up, and those who work alone are *particularly* vulnerable, but the free-spirited nature of Huntsman means that all too many, through arrogance or circumstance, try and handle tasks they are *not* suited for.”

“What would my team be considered?” I asked, curious.

The ancient man smiled, “You have not yet found your strengths, at least fully. However, if I were to hypothesize, Ms. Rose’s team is suited for Scouting and Assassination, though they do not yet all have the temperament for the latter, while yours would be Elimination and Destruction, ironically.”

“Aren’t they the same thing?” I questioned, trying to figure out the difference between the two.

“They are *not*,” Oz disagreed. “An *Elimination* team eliminates all enemy targets in an area, be they Grimm or Human. A *Destruction* team does not leave the area *standing*. While Ms. Belladonna is not, currently, suited to the latter, the damage Ms. Xiao-Long and Ms. Nikos have inflected on the training rooms you have reserved suggests they are as suited to such an endeavor, as the Tide you held off and the Behemoth you routed indicate *you* are, if to a greater degree. And, given how they are gaining in strength, they will soon be as proficient at destruction as, say, Ms. Adel of team CFVY, without her, shall we say, logistically based endurance issues.”

I opened my mouth to argue that we could do more than kill stuff and break things, but. . . well, we had Yang, who screamed when she hit things because she thought it helped, Pyrrha, who was the *Mistrallian champion* of killing people but not really, and *my* Dragon ass. “Okay, that’s fair. But Nora’s scouting and assassination?”

“Just as Ms. Belladonna seems to be the odd one out, so is Ms. Valkyrie, though, according to Mrs. Sepper, what the girl lacks in subtlety she makes up for in devastating and overwhelming single-target power, when properly charged with lightning,” the Wizard pointed out. “On a lesser target, even one with their Aura awakened, that could be enough to kill outright.”

“We should *probably* talk to her about that before the Vytal Festival then,” I noted, thinking of the possibilities. If it were *Cardin. . .* no, as an orphan Councilman Winchester would try and make her life hell, to the point it wasn’t worth it.

The white-haired man, however, smiled. “If you think she is not aware of her strength, you do the girl a grave disservice,” he chided. “The fact that she has *not* hospitalized her fellow students is proof that she, despite appearances to the contrary, possesses restraint.”

Blinking, I slowly replied, “I. . . guess I haven’t thought about it. She just didn’t seem the type.”

“Which is part of *why* she fits in on an Assassination team,” Oz pointed out. “They are not all laconic living shadows that wield poisoned knives in the dark like her partner, Mr. Lie. They often have dispositions that lull their foes into a false sense of security, ending a fight an opponent believes they *will* win easily in a single moment of their target’s undeserved confidence.”

“But *Pyrrha* can win fights like that,” I pointed out, remembering her railgun shot that’d taken me down in an instant on more than one occasion.

The look I got was one of dry amusement. “Do you *truly* think anyone would be confident they could win against ‘The Invincible Girl’? At least to the point of dropping their guard, Mr. Arc?”

I bit back my reply of the fact that *I* had, but that was more a reflection of me being a complete *idiot* then of relying on such being a viable tactic in combat. “Fair enough,” I replied, though from the amused glimmer in the other man’s eyes I had the feeling that the reincarnator, *somehow*, knew what I’d been about to say. “Uh, that’s all I wanted to talk to you about,” I told him, starting to leave,

“I do have one question, before you go,” the Wizard announced, and, I, slightly dreading what he was going to say, turned back to face him. “Where *did* you come across this White Fang operative. The one who provided you this information?”

“The forest,” I said, waving off to the side, in the direction of the woods between Vale and Beacon. “I was out for a flight and he was waiting to meet someone, but he didn’t know if it was someone from *here* or not. Only thing he knew was his passphrase, that he was to take a package from the contact, and that it was a guy with grey hair, but not an old guy. That describes, like, twenty people at Beacon alone.”

“More than that,” Oz agreed. “And this person was *that* forthcoming to a stranger?”

I winced, as that part of the lie did *not* make me look good, but, in part, that was what would help me sell it. “Well, once his on-the-spot recruitment pitch didn’t work, he pulled a gun on me to try and ‘forcibly’ recruit me, so I beat him until answers fell out. And *that* brought Grimm, eventually, so I let the big-bad White Fanger try and handle them on his own. He didn’t. But I suppose that’s the danger of meeting someone out in the wilderness,” I shrugged. “So when *whoever* he was supposed to meet does show up, he’ll see something unpleasant, but not unexpected. Better than if I just made the guy disappear, and tip them off that I blew his cover.”

The reincarnator stared at me for a long moment, before he sighed, deeply, and pinched the bridge of his nose. “If this person had disappeared, it is much more likely that his contact would assume he had gotten lost, or was killed elsewhere. In the future, please bring any such informants to Beacon’s edge, and call me so I can send someone to retrieve them. I am certain that there was additional information I *could* have gathered from the individual in question, had I the opportunity.”

“. . . *yeah*, I kind of realized that about five minutes after he died,” I sighed. “I was just annoyed at the entire ‘group raging against historic enslavement tries to enslave people’ thing and then the ‘guy wearing a Grimm mask gets killed by Grimm’ thing just seemed karmic.”

“*Indeed*,” Oz agreed, tone surprisingly light in the face of what I’d done, “but trust someone with *experience* in such matters, those small ‘karmic’ actions are *rarely* worth the temporary amusement one gains from them in the long run.”

Knowing I *probably* shouldn’t, I checked, “But, other than that, you’re not mad about the entire ‘killing people’ thing? Well, I didn’t kill him *myself,* but I didn’t save him either.”

This time, the wizard’s tone was *not* light, but carried with it the weight of ages. “How many people do you think I have killed, Jaune, personally or otherwise? However many you think, it almost *certainly* is too low. Losing the information source *is* unfortunate, and going through official procedures for crime and punishment is often better, for many a reason, but when a man attacks another with lethal force, *regardless* of his own skill compared with the one he is trying to *murder*, he has no right to complain if he is met with force in kind. Such things *can* be taken too far, and I would rather live in a world where the taking of another’s life is not required for peace to exist, but I can *tell* you have taken a life, Mr. Arc. I will not ask, but doing so changes a man, even one such as you, and it something I am *well* and truly familiar with.”

Shaking his head, the centuries old man stated, “No, I am not upset with your removal of what amounts to a particularly pretentious *bandit*, Jaune, even if it was by proxy. I do hope, however, that you learn what you can *lose* in doing so, and, when you choose to again, and you *will* choose to again*,* that it is a decision that has been weighed and made with understanding of the consequences of your actions instead of in pursuit of a vague ‘balancing of the scales’, no matter how good such a thing feels in the moment. And that, when your teammates must do the same, you help them understand the seriousness, but also the necessity, of such a final action.”

“I, uh, yes?” I replied, not prepared at *all* for the sudden turn into complete seriousness this conversation had taken, but at least it meant he likely believed me about leaving that fictional White Fanger to die. “Sorry. *Yes*. I understand. Hopefully I won’t need to anytime soon, and I think Pyrrha will be fine with it, but Yang’ll probably not take it well and Blake. . .”

“Ms. Belladonna, to my knowledge, has not taken a life,” Oz informed me. “Atlas robots by the score, indubitably, but nothing that bled. Ms. Rose and Ms. Schnee, likewise, have not been ‘blooded’ as it were.”

“But Ren and Nora?” I questioned, though I had a feeling I knew the answer.

Levelly meeting my gaze, the ancient man intoned, “The life of an orphan is *not* a kind one, Jaune. It is one that I have experienced, many a time. Do not judge them too harshly for it, though, perhaps, that is not advice *you* need.” The man’s terminal dinged, and he glanced at it, and the seriousness in his visage faded, slowly, into a kind of fond exasperation. “Alas, duty ever calls. Have a good evening, Mr. Arc. I shall see you Monday. And thank you for the information. It may save many, *many* lives.”

Smiling at his gratitude, and relived that this had gone as well as it had, I walked back into his elevator, glad to have derailed the runaway train of canon that little bit more.