**Chapter Forty**

A prismatic comet, I streaked towards campus, heedless of the small flock of Nevermores that tried to follow, quickly left in my metaphorical dust. Following the line of the river until I eventually spotted Beacon, sitting at the edge of a cliff, several smaller rivers around it dropping down in small waterfalls.

If I cared, I might’ve even called it beautiful.

However, I was in a *hurry*, and so I didn’t give two shits, rocketing down towards the Wizard’s tower, several students stopping and pointing up at me, a few even reading weapons. Letting my Flames fade, I swooped in low, landing in a jog as I passed through the open doors, past the student working the front desk, and into the waiting elevator. I’d been half tempted to just fly straight into his office, but, while a cold fury burned in my gut, I wasn’t at the ‘break open your windows to make an entrance’ level.

*Yet.*

As soon as the doors opened, I strode out, seeing Ozma speaking on a scroll, the Wizard holding up a single finger to ask me to wait. I didn’t want to, but held my tongue, walking up to his desk and standing, clawed fingers flexing.

“Then I’m sure you’ll understand why, if she is not released in the next fifteen minutes, some of Mistrallians will likely become aware that you arrested *The Invincible Girl* for acting in the face of a lethal threat. And also why that would *not* be conducive to your career prospects, correct? Good,” the man smiled, an edge to the expression. “I look forward to hearing from her and Ms. Xiao-Long in the next twenty minutes.”

He sighed, putting down the phone. “Hell, Mr. Arc. I’m sure you have some questions?”

“Pyrrha and Yang are being released?” I demanded, and he nodded. “Glynda said you expected this? What’s going on?”

“In a word, *politics,*” the headmaster offered, and I glared, that explanation *not* fucking enough. “In many, Mr. Winchester’s boasts were not empty air. His father *is* one of the five that sit on the Vale council, and the man has certain unfortunate beliefs. It does not matter that we found evidence that he had been keeping Rapier Wasps in his room, in direct violation of the school rules, nor that the other members of team CRDL attested to his ringleader status. He fully supports his offspring’s claim that it was a plot by you to expel him, and that you attempted to murder him. Demanded your expulsion and arrest, actually,” the Wizard smiled.

I, however, didn’t find anything funny about this in the slightest. “I’m assuming you told him to shove it where the sun don’t shine, since I’m still here?”

“Indeed,” Ozma agreed. “Beacon, unlike the other three schools, is a jurisdiction all of its own, and, furthermore, given the evidence, the others on the Council rejected the man’s motion to commission a Hunter team to ‘bring you to justice’. In a way, I almost wish he had, as it would both be enlightening on what Hunters did not deserve the title, and set precedence by which to remove *him*,” the Wizard mused. “However, despite my hopes, it appears that Winchester Senior decided to try less than legal means of retribution.”

“Dirty cops?” I asked.

The Wizard nodded again. “If you had gone with them, the case against them would’ve been greater.”

“If I went with them, and they tried to have me ‘fall down a flight of stairs’, only to discover I had Aura, how would things have gone?” I questioned flatly.

“They possibly would have let you go,” the ancient man suggested. At my unamused stare, he sighed, “Though they likely would’ve tried something a bit more vigorous.”

I snorted, “Thought so. At which point I would’ve killed *them,* anyone who got in my way, broken out of my friends, and likely *burned the police station to the ground.*”

Ozma raised an eyebrow behind his tiny glasses. “You would kill that easily?”

“Hunters regularly clear out *bandits camps,*” I shot back. “Outlaws are defined by their active rejection of the law and their predation on those weaker than themselves. The fact that they are supposed to *enforce* the law makes it *worse*, not better. The fact that they underestimated me does not make their sins any *less,*” I added, seeing the other man’s counter-argument before he could offer it.

The Wizard regarded me. “And for that, they deserve death?”

“For their *continued* actions, they do,” I replied, having expected this sort of argument from *Ruby* if, or when, I ended up killing White Fang terrorists. “They aren’t prisoners awaiting punishment, or someone seeking redemption, they are acting as *enemy combatants*. If it were mistaken identity, then I would’ve cooperated, right up until they tried to kill me. But they weren’t. In fact they weren’t even being *subtle* about it, so sure of their power, and thus, like outlaws, give up any pretense of protections.”

“You’ve certainly given this some thought,” Ozma commented, and I stood, waiting for him to get to the point, now that Yang and Pyrrha were going to be safe. “Then, perhaps, this was for the best. They struck the first blow?” I nodded. “That makes things easier.”

I hesitated. “If we’re being *very* specific, he tried to punch me in the stomach, and I deflected it, but Mrs. Sepper’s been clear on why allowing hits is not done. And then they tried to shoot me.”

“A technicality which will be argued against, I’m sure, but one that will not matter,” the Wizard agreed. “And thus, I’m sure, you wish to know of what the next step will be?”

I folded my arms. “I assume it won’t be burning the Winchester mansion down?” I offered, only half joking.

“You assume correctly,” the ancient man agreed dryly, looking past me as the elevator doors opened again. “Hello Ms. Goodwitch, I assume things went well.”

The distinct clacking of her heels came up from behind me, the woman coming to a stop beside me. “Mr. Arc. You certainly made an entrance.”

“So did Winchester’s goons,” I replied.

Her neutral expression, which was well into ‘resting-bitch-face’ territory, twitched, a shadow of distaste further souring it. “Indeed. I had assumed a Vale Councilmember would not act in such a way. Apparently the Winchesters are Mistralian.”

“Now now, no need for that,” Ozma chided. “Leonardo would not attempt something like this.”

From the woman’s look, she disagreed, but did not argue the point.

“So, what’s next?” I questioned. “I know my strengths, and this sort of thing isn’t it. Not the way *you’d* prefer I’d handle it, at least.”

“Ah, that is quite simple,” the headmaster smiled. “We do. . . *nothing.*”

I stared at him. “What.”

Glynda shifted beside me, obviously not happy with her boss’ statement either. “Headmaster?”

“There are certain unpleasant realities that need to be accounted for,” the Wizard explained. “Despite what I may have wished, Mr. Arc’s status in the eyes of the public as an unknown Faunus is enough for many to think the ill of him. His exploits, such as they are, are only known to a select few here at Beacon, and are easily dismissed.”

“And what is to stop something similar from occurring the *next* time Mr. Arc goes to Vale?” Goodwitch questioned scornfully.

“Absolutely nothing, which is why he shall not be going,” Ozma replied easily.

“Wait, so I get attacked by oathbreaking scum because a spoiled brat couldn’t handle someone being better than him and tried to *kill* them, and we let them win?” I demanded, anger flaring.

The Wizard tutted, “escalating the situation will help no-one, Jaune.”

“Because if we just ignore the ‘bully’, they go away, right?” I sneered. “Oh, wait, we did, that’s what led to me getting blindsided by corrupt cops. So I’m attacked and so I’m under house arrest?” Almost despite herself, Glynda gave the slightest nod of agreement, stopping herself as soon as she started.

“Nothing so extreme,” Ozma disagreed. “I’m not saying you can’t leave Beacon, young man, only that you *should* not go to Vale. By your own admission, you had not been there in months, I am sure you can wait until after the Vytal festival.”

I narrowed my eyes, as *I* knew that was when everything changed, but, as far as I knew, the Wizard did not. Rather than focus on that, however, I asked, “So as long as I didn’t go to *Vale. . .?*”

“There should be no issue. You do love your daily little excursion into the forest, it would be a shame to deny you them,” he smiled, which caused Glynda to wheel on me.

“Your *what?”* she demanded.

I froze. *What the hell was he talking about?* I thought, confused.

“Now now, Glynda, a morning stroll, or flight in his case, is nothing to be upset over,” the headmaster disagreed.

“My morning. . .” I trailed off, before things clicked.

*He knows when I go Home.*

I didn’t know *how,* and, given his statement, he didn’t know what I was doing, exactly, but, *somehow,* he was able to tell I’d *left*. Unless he was running a double-game, and trying to be doubly subtle, but. . . *no*. If he had, he’d have insinuated something about ‘my other home’ or ‘commuting’ or something. I wasn’t sure, just as I could *never* be sure when dealing with someone like him, but, mentally going over his phrasing, and what made sense *in-universe*, he likely only somehow could tell I was *leaving,* not where I was going.

“It’s only for a few minutes each morning,” I replied, “and I never fight Grimm doing so.” *Mostly because they don’t exist there*. “Besides, I’m never truly unarmed, and, if needed, could get back to Beacon easily.”

The vice-headmistress stared at me, clearly unhappy, before she pinched the bridge of her nose. “I would normally suggest you save your wanderlust for the weekend, and go to Vale, but that, *apparently,* is no longer an option. And do not think I didn’t notice you changing the topic, Headmaster,” she noted, turning back to Ozma. “If you wish Mr. Arc to comply, given his propensity for ill-thought action, perhaps you should fully explain your plan.”

I wanted to argue, but the woman’s significant look at my mask, while a little hurtful, defanged any objection to her characterization. Instead I turned an expectant look the Wizard’s way.

“Ah yes, of course,” the other man agreed, as if that was never in question. “The *Vytal* festival. As I’m sure you can guess, your team, along with Ms. Rose’s, will be representing Beacon.”

“Headmaster, that has not been decided yet,” Goodwitch rebuked.

Opening his hands, the Wizard replied, “It just has. Where was I? Oh, yes, Glynda and I were having a little problem, in that we could only find one team among the Sophmores that had both the skill and desire to compete.”

I frowned, “*Really?* I’ve met CFVY, and they seem the type that has both.”

“Ms. Adel’s team is the team that qualified,” Glynda informed me, crossing her arms. “The others that had the ability all had the some rationale for turning our offer down.”

“What was it?” I questioned.

The Vice-headmistress gave me a sour look. *“You.”*

“Your team, specifically,” Ozma explained. “No one wished to lose to their juniors, and, with your partner participating, as well as the few stories they have heard of you from the Forever Fall Forest Grimm Tide, they have bowed out. This leaves us an empty space, one which a certain someone will burn *quite* a few favors to secure.” The silver-haired man laughed, “As if such things would happen without my permission, but appearances must be kept.”

I wondered if this was how things had turned out originally, the knowledge allowing me to declare, “You’re putting CRDL in the games.”

Ozpin smiled enigmatically, as Glynda turned on him. “We’re *what.* That is a position of prestige! What will the others think when they see our performance!”

“Those that know enough of the situation will understand, and those that do not will be too busy watching RRWN and ABYN sweep to consider the lesser talent. Obviously CVFE & ABYN are the sophomore teams, while RRWN, with its smaller members, are the freshman team along with the less skilled CRDL,” The Wizard revealed, turning to look to me. “They will be humiliated, as your own status is affixed. After that, any retaliation will not be accepted, seen as a racial divide, but the actions of a petty, low-skilled Huntsman trying to drag down a superior fighter. Huntsman *are* the protectors of mankind, and to stop them is to put us all at risk.”

That seemed. . . awfully straightforward, especially for Ozma. “And that will be the end of things?”

“That is the most likely outcome,” he replied, which wasn’t *really* an answer. “And if not, it will provide an easily accepted explanation, should Mr. Winchester go after you directly, and you, after graduating, begin to investigate him, finding whatever misdeeds he has perpetrated.”

That just seemed. . . a little too pat. “You expect me to wait *four years* to end this threat to me and mine?” I asked, incredulous.

“Mr. Arc, which would you prefer?” The Wizard requested. “A minor slight, ended overwhelmingly with no chance of redemption, or a righteous judgement at the end of a road only the evil would walk, where no doubt is left on the worthiness of their fate. Besides,” he added, looking over his glasses. “Out of all out there, we have the *time* to truly enjoy such things.”

Again, I froze. *Okay. What the fuck,* I thought, trying to figure out how the *fuck* he knew that. *Wizard. He’s a Wizard. He knows that* ***something*** *is up with me, but there’s* ***no way*** *he knows the truth. If he would, he would’ve already pumped me for information, gotten me to stamp the Maiden in the basement, and/or found a way to turn me against Salem.*

Glynda looked between us, confused, and I sighed. “I’ll have to defer to your experience,” I replied, not needing to fake how unsure I was about this entire thing, even if my nervousness was trying to not reveal *too* much instead of not understanding. “I’m not happy about this, Oz, but. . . I can wait until the Vytal festival. Can I share this plan with my team?”

The centuries, maybe even millennia old man gave me a searching, assessing look. “Perhaps only your partner. Ms. Nikos would not share such a thing. Ms. Xiao-Long. . .”

“Would lose her temper and try and throw it in his face,” I sighed, seeing his point, even as my Scroll rang, Pyrrha calling me. “Do you mind?” I asked, and the Headmaster made a shooing motion. Accepting the call, I said, “Yes?”

“*Jaune, are you all right?”* my lover questioned, which was like her. She’d just gotten out of jail but it was *me* that she was worried about.

“I’m all right. I’m with Oz and Glynda,” I reassured her. “How are you and Yang?”

*“We’re fine. Ruby, he’s back at Beacon,”* I heard her tell someone else. “*Jaune, you should stay there.”* I couldn’t help but laugh. “*Jaune?”*

“You and the Headmaster agree there,” I told her, Ozma, who was shamelessly eavesdropping, smugly smirking. “See you back at the dorms.”

*“See you there,*” she agreed, hanging up.

I looked at the pair, sighed, and nodded. “Fine, I’m in.”

<DR>

“Oh this is fucking *bullshit!”*

“Yang, don’t swear,” Ruby chided her sister, turning to me. “But she’s right, this isn’t *fair!* You didn’t *do* anything!”

It was Ren who countered. “Sometimes, life isn’t fair.”

“Want to know what is fair? *Broken legs*,” Nora offered with a mad grin. “You can’t visit Vale, he can’t walk *out* of Vale. Or at all.”

I shook my head. “No, when he comes back, ignore him. Not ‘I’m doing my best to not let you get to me’ ignore, but ‘you’re not worth my time’ ignore. He lays hands on you, clean his clock and *move on.* He’s going to be on thin ice when he comes back next term.”

“Wait, he’s coming *back?*” Blake demanded. “After what he *did* to that Faunus!?”

“That was strike one, attacking *us* was strike two, but he’s still got one more chance,” I told them, going over what I *was* allowed to share with everyone. “However he’s on ice so thin it could be my *patience* with that waste of space, so his team is being switched with another from the other set of Freshmen.”

“And you’re *okay* with this?” Yang demanded.

I looked at her and answered simply, “No. But the headmaster asked me to, so I will. At least until after the Vytal Festival. We sweep that, we’ll have the political capitol to shut his ass down.”

Surprisingly, it was Weiss who nodded. “Yes, that would be enough. As expected of the Headmaster.”

“Um, ya wanna explain that one Snowy?” Yang questioned.

The heiress shot my teammate a ‘how can you not get this?’ look, before shaking her head. “It’s quite simple. The Vytal festival is a competition between the Huntsman academies, yes, but it is also a sporting event, and, though not officially, the source of *quite* a bit of third-part betting. When we win we’ll *also* be winning a lot of goodwill from any who bet on us.” She glanced at Pyrrha. “Well, those that bet on *our* team. The payout for voting on your team are likely to be incredibly small. Regardless, winning, or at least making it to the finals, will cement our status as up-and-coming Huntresses, distinguishing ourselves from the rabble. People prefer to be on the winning team, so they’d back us over a *loser* like Cardin.”

“That much, just from winning a tournament?” Ruby asked, disbelief clear.

“That much, just from winning *the* tournament,” her partner corrected. “There are no other tournaments like it, though the Mistral Regional Tournaments do try. The limitations, as well as the um,” she paused.

Pyrrha took up the explanation. “The fact that many think the outcomes are set,” she stated, getting an embarrassed nod from the white-haired girl. “I was, a few times, offered quite a bit of money to throw matches. And also threatened.”

“People *threatened* you!” Ruby gasped in surprise. “What did you do?”

I too, wanted to know, and know if there was someone I needed to remove with applied prismatic incendiaries.

“Oh, nothing that much,” she smiled. “I reported them, and, the one time a few tried to ambush me in a locker room, I beat them bloody, walked out, and did the same to their chosen fighter. My Semblance is such that I don’t have to worry about bullets, though they didn’t know that.”

*Unless the projectiles are non-ferrous,* I thought, but instead nodded to Weiss. “And so there you go. All we need to do is kick the asses of every other school. You know what *that* means, right?

Yang shot me a look, and sighed, despite her smirk, “More training?”

I nodded, glad to have an excuse to reveal my true deadline. *“More training.* Come the Vytal Festival, they won’t know what hit them.*”*

<DR>

It was the next morning, and the first time that Pyrrha and I could slip away, that I revealed the *full* plan to her. As I finished, she met my gaze, and asked, “And you’re willing to wait that long? I’m sorry, Jaune, but. . . that doesn’t seem like you.”

I shrugged. “It. . . isn’t,” I admitted. “But, what’s the alternative? Go to war with all of Vale over a half-dozen corrupt cops? That’s the problem with corrupt systems, the rotten ones are still defended by the. . . *less* corrupt ones, and the ones who just look the other way, but still wouldn’t hesitate to back the ones they *know* are bad, because of tribalistic bullshit. Then *they* drag in the ones that aren’t corrupt at all, because the nominally good ones would assume the others are as well. Either convince people that their friends and coworkers are evil, which, *good luck,* especially since they’ve shown it’s easier just to look the other way, or fight what are, on the whole, okay people just because of ‘duty’, or ‘well I didn’t know’, or some other variety of excuse because, again, it was easier for them to just look the other way.”

“Even then, I would assume you’d rather burn down such a system then work with it,” Pyrrha pointed out, smiling. “I was assuming I was going to have to argue you out of it, actually. Only here you are. It’s. . . leaving me at a bit of a loss, to be honest. *In a good way,*” she quickly added. “Sorry.”

“Um, well, sorry to disappoint you?” I offered, not sure if that was a compliment or an insult, even if it was a well-meaning one.

Leaning back on the kitchen counter as I prepared the day’s smoothies, my partner regarded me, as if I was a puzzle she was trying to put together. I found myself watching her back, my body moving on autopilot as I made breakfast. It was only because I was doing so, that I saw the very moment realization dawned.

“Tell me, Jaune,” she put forward, almost coyly. “If it hadn’t been you? If they’d gone after *me*, what would you have done?”

Despite myself, a trace of glowing embers danced on my breath as I paused.

Smiling, and shaking her head, Pyrrha laughed. “I should’ve known, especially after what happened at Forever Fall.”

“Which time?” I had to ask.

*“Both,*” she replied easily. “Just, *Jaune*. If someone *does* try to do something to me, like that, please let *me* decide their punishment.”

I considered that. On the surface, it seemed like an easy enough agreement, but. . . while I disliked the thought, there *was* a possibility that such a thing might happen, despite my best efforts. “Only if you’re able to tell me,” I agreed, pouring out the last shake and cleaning out the blender. “If you’re *not*, for *whatever* reason, the one responsible *will* burn.”

Approaching me, Pyrrha reached out, and ran a hand up over one of my horns, drifting back down to cup my cheek. “Jaune, I’m not sure if that’s romantic, or an ultimatum.”

I replied easily, “*Both.”*