**Chapter Fifty**

Diving into the darkness, I saw the collapsed section of floor narrowed down into a pit, then a tunnel, my hundred feet of vision in the perfect darkness just enough to let me react as the tunnel twisted one way, then another, but always *down*.

Bit of light flashed by, as the tunnel down, dug by the same thing that had dug up to the surface, intersected other hallways, some dark, some lit by hints of distant light of a variety of colors, be they green, red, yellow, and others, and at least half of them holding more Grimm spiders.

But I couldn’t focus on them, only on the route ahead of me, as I dropped down, wings twitching faster than conscious thought, practice and instinct guiding me towards the rapidly approaching sounds of pained screams. Twisting down and around, wing-tips brushing against the stone, I spotted Weiss tumbling down, body pulled in tight, and arrowed in on her, grabbing her and pressing her to my right side, growling, *“Nora! Hold her!”*

The girl did so, and the heiress flailed in panic, hitting my wing and making me almost run into the wall, stilling at my wordless snarl as I tried to keep us on task, not having attention for anything else.

“We have you,” Pyrrha nearly shouted into my ear, over the rushing wind, “Just hold on to Jaune!”

Turning another set of twists, I spotted Blake, flailing with her blades out in a vain hope to catch herself. “*Sheath it!”* I bellowed and the girl turned wide, sightless eyes upwards as I dropped down, quickly doing so right as I grabbed her with my left hand, pulling her in as I growled, *“Pyrrha!”*

“Got her!” my partner replied, and I pushed myself even harder. Aura could protect a lot, and a straight fall at terminal velocity could be survived, but the fighting before, and they way they’d been bounced around here, would drain it until the fall might *indeed* kill them.

Searching desperately for Ruby and Yang, not knowing how much further we had left, I pulled my wings in more, dropping even faster with the weight of the people on me, *barely* managing the turns as a high-pitched yell of fright dopplered before me.

Turning one last twist, I spotted them, Yang wrapped protectively around her sister as both of them fell straight down at the edge of my vision, the bottom of the tunnel visible, lit by a faint blue light, illuminating the rough spikes at the bottom of the pit.

*No!* I thought, panicking, letting go of Blake to grab for the Dust on my belt, grabbing anything I could. From feel enough, I could tell I’d grabbed Fire, Ice, and Wind, and let the first one go, ripped from my hand by the flow of air, and focused on the other two, and the little Flame I still had left.

Opening my jaws wide, I pulled upon the Dust in my hands, ***BLOW***and ***FREEZE*** running up through my arm, sinking deep, mixing in me as I shot a long stream out, past the two girls, green and white flames burning in the pit. I tried to shape them, and lost control of the first aspect, arctic winds blasting up at us in a column, slamming into Ruby and Yang, slowing them, before it hit my wings and I had to hold tight, shoulders screaming in protest as it yanked me back.

The ice aspect, though, I was able to keep a hold of, the song of the enormous crystal seemingly back in my ears, like a tune half-forgotten, and the white Flame twisted, forming, before flash freezing into smooth ramps that extended towards the light, and the open space beside the spikes.

The sisters hit first, both rolling out and to the side, out of sight, and I braced, pulling my wings tight around Pyrrha, myself and the others. The phantom pain of my wing bones snapping sharp, but not *real*, as we rolled out.

*Something* yanked me to the side, and we barely missed the girls, slamming into the wall beside them with another *crash*, the feeling of the *same* wing-bones breaking once more making me grit my teeth.

And then we were done. Stopped, and still. *Safe.*

“Thank you for riding Jaune Air,” I remarked, a little whoozy from the sudden shift, from single minded determination to completion. “Please make sure to tip your stewardess, and I hope you never need to come again.”

Shakily, the others let go of me, pulling away. The sound of movement made me sit up, the room spinning, but I focused and realized it was Ruby, who pulled away from her sister, and was turning her over. “Yang!” the girl cried, panicked, and I tried to stand up, falling, caught by Pyrrha who put me back down on the ground.

Her upraised hand ordered me to *wait,* and I listened, staying there as she quickly moved over to the sisters. Kneeling down, Pyrrha put a hand to Yang’s head, opening her eyes, and feeling her pulse. As the world stopped spinning, I got to my feet, and staggered over. “Is she hurt?” I asked, staring down at my girlfriend’s motionless form.

“She’s out of Aura, and has a concussion,” Pyrrha said professionally, supporting the girl’s head, as she checked the rest of the brawler’s body for injuries. “Some bruising, and maybe a few cracked bones, I can’t be sure.”

“Wait, a *concussion?*” I asked, panicked. Yes, they were the go to Hollywood ‘knock out’ button, but I’d played enough football and studied enough first aid to know they were *serious business.*

The gladiatrix, hearing the fear in my tone, glanced up. “She has Aura,” the woman reassured me. “She’ll be fine. The neural damage will be repaired quickly, though the sooner her Aura replenishes, the better. Assuming she has the chance.” The girl gave a look around, indicating the room we were in.

Following her gaze, it was a room of dark stone, glowing green gems set into silver sconces set along the walls, which were covered in intricate murals. The pit we’d fallen into, by comparison, was rough and ugly, almost organic looking, just like the tunnel we’d first entered. *The Ruins were here first,* I realized, *and the Grimm opened up the trap.*

Thankfully, there wasn’t a Grimm in sight, the hallway empty, even as the others slowly got to their feet, Nora not letting go of Ren. Turning my attention back to Pyrrha, Ruby, and Yang, I asked, “So she just needs to replenish her Aura?”

“Yes,” the red-head nodded, “But one cannot just donate someone’s Aura to another, Jaune. It’s not like blood.”

*Actually,* I thought, opening up a pouch on my belt, pulling out a mechashift metal vial, a cylinder half an inch wide, and one inch long, but with an internal capacity of about a pint of fluid. Ren’s comment about my smoothies had increased his rate of Aura regeneration for a few hours had gotten me thinking, and while this was *nowhere* near ready, it should still work. “Have her drink this,” I told my partner, handing her the compressed cylinder. “It should help.”

The gladiatrix shot me a questioning look, but unscrewed the top, moving to do so anyways. Other than a few spices, and a stabilizer, the vial was filled entirely with my empowering blood as a sort of proto-health potion I hadn’t had much progress with, too many things needing my attention.

As Yang was fed my blood, I pulled my scroll, checking up on my team. The mechanism that scrolls used to track teammates’ Aura was the same it used for sharing information, so even, down here, I could see it. Pyrrha was in the nineties, I was in the eighties, Blake in the *twenties,* and Yang’s was completely empty, a null symbol showing that her Aura was broken. However, as my partner fed the girl my blood, the null symbol flashed, vanishing as a sheen of prismatic energy momentarily flickered around the girl, turning to gold and disappearing into her skin as it re-established itself in the fraction of the time it should’ve.

The brawler stirred, coughing, her lips stained red as Ruby watched, clutching her folded-up scythe tightly. “Wha. . . what happened?” Yang asked, blearily looking around. “And someone put down the Ursa that ran me over?”

“*YANG!”* Ruby cried, launching herself forward, latching onto her sister for dear life. *“I thought I lost you.”*

“You almost did,” Pyrrha noted, and both girls turned to look at her as she waved towards the pit, the rough stone spikes still visible in the ice formation. “If Jaune hadn’t dove after you, that would’ve been your end.”

“I. . . what,” the brawler breathed, staring at frozen Flame. “I. . .”

“We can talk about this later,” I said, looking around. “That trap was meant to kill everyone. The turns. . . you were supposed to exhaust your Aura bouncing off them,” I remarked. “And if you stopped, you would’ve been swarmed. We need to move, as soon as you can, Yang.”

“Are we going to. . .?” Nora asked, looking at me questioningly, gesturing up, but trying to keep the secret I’d asked her to.

I smiled, appreciating it. “Let’s try and find a way out here, before trying anything *drastic*.”

I wanted to run, and I was *terrified* of what else we might find, but. . . but in a way, Weiss had been right. If we were swarmed again, we’d portal out, *consequences be damned*, but. . . but this place was wrong. This place was *different.* This place, this place was ***new.***

There was *nothing* close to this in *any* of our textbooks, and a quick search of the ones still loaded on my Scroll only showed ruins like the ones we’d run into in the Emerald Forest during our initiation. I knew Oz was keeping secrets, but. . .

*I’m an idiot.*

I lifted my scroll, making sure it was on vibrate, and took a picture of a mural the green crystal lantern in frame. I was going to show him this *anyways*, so why not now? The Wizard had given me his scroll address, but I’d never used it. Sending him the photo, I added the message, ‘Teammates did something stupid. Found Ruin. Lots of Grimm. Can’t talk. Please advise.’

“Weiss, keep recording,” I directed, looking around. “Ren, you start doing so too. Yang-”

“I can move,” she bit out, standing, but almost fell, her sister catching her.

She wasn’t correct, but I respected the effort. “Blake, help your partner. Ruby, your sister needs you watching her back with Crescent Rose more than she needs you that way.” The girl nodded, still looking at her sister with concern, but readied her weapon. “Nora, the back. Pyrrha, you’re with me. Which way?”

My partner considered that, closing her eyes for a moment, frowning. “I. . . I don’t know,” she told me. “I’m sorry. I feel a breeze, but I can’t tell where it comes from.”

Speaking of, I, too felt a breeze, but, as I moved, it seemed to be coming from the lamps. Moving to one, I reached up, putting my hand in front of it. “Weiss, are these Dust?”

The heiress moved up beside me, frowning, and nodded. “Wind Dust. High quality. *Oh!”* she gasped, and I looked at her questioningly. “That’s why the air isn’t stale! That’s ingenious!”

I grabbed the lamp, my fingers wrapping around the base of the lamp, and, with a twist and a flex of Aura, ripped it free with a screech of twisting metal. Sure enough, as I moved it, the source of the breeze came with it.

“What! Why’d you do that!” Weiss demanded, as I shrugged off my bag, dropping it inside.

“You said it was ingenious,” I shrugged. “And we’re *never* coming back. Might as well have something to show for it.”

“Not the mechanism, the *idea* you dolt!” she yelled, before sighing. “Though the mechanism might be interesting to study.”

Shaking my head, I tried to inject some levity. “We’re adventurers in a dungeron full of monsters. Looting everything not nailed down is just tradition.”

The white-haired girl glared at me, pointing to the torn up base. “That was *part of the wall.*”

“And it came off, so it wasn’t nailed down *enough*,” I shrugged, noting as Yang slowly recovered. “Now, what way to go.” Holding up a hand, I spat out a ball of flame, only for it to almost instantly dissipate, blown away in a second. “Well. . . *that’s* omnious. So, towards the source of the Grimm, or away.”

*“Away,”* the group chorused, Blake looking at me like I was insane.

I nodded, walking the way my Flame had been blown away. “That was my vote too.”

<DR>

We walked down corridor after corridor, every one of them empty save more murals, lit with the same green lamps, of which I stole another two, trying to keep the bases more intact. Soon enough, though, the murals repeated. While the ones above had depicted areas, and people over them, surrounded by elements, the subjects of these murals were much more familiar and easily understood.

*The Grimm.*

The Beowulfs were the most recognizable, one almost looking like that ‘evolution of man’ image I’d seen online, where monkey turned to ape, then cave-man, then human, and then usually devolved into some characiture that someone didn’t like.

This, though, started with a newborn Beowulf, a reddish metal for its teeth and eyes. The image progressed, the Beowulf growing, armored ‘ribs’ forming to protect its chest, hips, and throat, until it formed the spike-ridden monstrosity of an Alpha Beowulf, right out of our textbooks.

*And then it kept going.*

The creature seemed to continue to grow armor, the spikes forming a mane of sorts down its back, fingers no longer ending in claws, but growing to cover fingers and toes, knees and elbows. It still looked wild,

In the next the pattern continued, growing into plates that covered more than they left, the whitish-steel that represented pale bone forming proper armor, and the creature seemed to shrink, smaller than its previous form.

The next completed this pattern, encompassing the Beowulf in solid armor, losing some of its spikes, but those that remained seemed almost. . . planned, like a person would forge armor into instead of the naturalistic look of the others. This Beowulf was almost the size of a normal one, though seemed taller, as it stood straighter.

The last was the oddest of all, not a speck of armor in sight, but its form was oddly stylized compared to the others, the embossed image almost flowing compared to the smooth carvings of the others. It could be fur, but from the way its depiction streamed backwards, it seemed almost to be smoke. What stood out to me, though, was that its eye was no longer a solid red void, but an almost human looking red pupil, the only bit of color in the representation, that stared out of the carving, as if it saw the observer, and found it wanting.

And they were *all* like that.

The longer we wandered, without hint of Grimm, the more on edge we got, though after half an hour Yang was able to walk on her own, so I was thankful of the recovery time, *everyone* having recovered from the fall.

At every intersection, I used a small bit of Flame, just enough to tell us which way *not* to go, and then did the exact opposite. After the third, Ruby asked I check the other hallways that way, to make sure we were *really* going the right way. It was a good idea, and four bits of flame later, we switched course, as *away* from the Grimm wasn’t always the same as *towards* the exit.

After all, this ill wind had to blow *somewhere*, and, if the tunnel were any indication, it’d lead us out.

More corridors were transversed, and we ascended several sets of stairs, ready to be met by more Grimm spiders at any moment, but there were none.

Not a *single* one.

Eventually, though, we found an exit from the hallways, and we stood, unsure of what we were seeing.

It was an *enormous* chamber, that we exited about a third of the way up, odd architecture blanketing the cavern that had to be a *mile* across. Green lights adorned the walls, crystals of incredible size to be seen from here. It was a city almost the size of Vale, hidden deep underground, for who knows how long.

And most of arresting of all?

Was that it was *destroyed.*

Some buildings at the edge seemed intact, but the city was a ruin, as if the site of some great battle, one that’d scarred the walls, sections gouged out as if from enormous claws. In the center of the ceiling was an enormous edifice of metal and stone, Fire Dust crystals likely as large as I was studded it, but only the top remained, tendrils of twisted metal the ragged remains of an ancient wound hanging down, like torn steel entrails.

“Weiss?”

“I’m getting this, Jaune,” she replied, sounding just as unnerved as I was.

“Is anyone getting trap vibes off this?” Yang asked, “Because I know I am.”

Turning to look at her, I asked, “You have a better idea?”

“No, just sayin’,” she shrugged. “If this is a trap, I *totes* called it.”

The heiress beside me huffed, “Is *that* what you think it’s important about this?”

The brawler considered that, then nodded. “Yeah.”

“Ruby, use your scope. See anything odd about this place?” I directed instead, our words not echoing, but seemingly eaten by the void in front of us, oddly muffled.

The girl hefted her weapon, scanning over the area, as I mentally added binoculars to my standard kit. “*There!”* the girl said, pointing to an area near the center, though thankfully not *perfectly* so, as that would be just too much. The girl waved me down, and I leaned over, peering though the scope.

Sure enough it was a flat circular area, completely cleared of rubble, that with a design that almost looked almost like an open lotus, eight smaller circles forming a ring around the center, which was raised, with a pedestal in the center. Of the eight circles, two were cracked, while three more were just. . . *gone*, wholes where the round bits of floor should be empty, as if they’d been removed entirely.

However, it was also the only place *not* covered with rubble, which was both highly suspicious, and meant that it was probably something special.

Also a trap.

I clenched my scroll as I stood straight, toying with the idea of calling it quits here and now. As if in response, the device buzzed, but I needed to make a decision. “Let’s make our way there. Hopefully it’ll have our answers. Weiss-”

“Still recording,” she replied, her voice shaking a little at the enormity of what we’d found.

“Good girl,” I sighed. “Pyrrha, you take the lead, I’ll go high in case anything flammable tries to say hello.”

My partner nodded, and the others started making their way down the stairs we were standing atop, to enter the city below. Checking my scroll, I chuckled mirthlessly, Oz having replied to my request with a single word.

*‘RUN.’*

Snapping another picture, I replied, ‘Trying. Will evac to school if injured. Will need explanations.’

The man’s response was immediate this time. ‘You will have them. Peach is on standby.’

That. . . made me feel better. *Explaining* this was going to be a bitch and a half, but there was a time to play things close to the chest, and there was a time that you were buried in ancient runes miles underground. And, as dangerous as this all was, if we could come back with new information, it’d make this katabasic shitshow worth it. Either by bringing new information, or by forcing Oz’s hands to bring me, and the rest of my team, in on *what the fuck was actually happening in this world*.

Because the more I learned, the more I realized just how *little* I knew, and continuing to assume the snapshot I’d seen was representative of reality was going to keep biting me in the ass.

With a beat of my wings I rose, flying high, my own Scroll recording as I moved. I could somewhat make out different districts, and tried to figure out what had destroyed this place. The buildings were all made out of the same gray stone as everything else, but some building looked to be crushed, like a giant hammer had slammed down upon them, while others almost looked *cut*, worn but recognizable pieces fallen inwards, like the buildings could be reassembled if you just put the bits back together. Others had been worn away, or melted, or a few that seemed like parts had just been removed entirely, leaving the rest to fall to pieces into the void left behind. Most, though, were pierced, like a meteor had struck them, and then ripped itself back out.

And there were spider webs *everywhere*.

But what there wasn’t, was movement. Gliding down to the others, I landed at a jogging pace. “I don’t see any Grimm,” I reported, as the rest picked their way through the ruins, Ren leading, the boy directing them. “But they should be here.”

“You haven’t?” Blake said, bow twitching, as she glanced back and forth. “but I thought I saw-”

Ruby yelped, firing her weapon, and we all spun about. But there was nothing there. “There, Grimm, I. . .” the girl said, wide eyed.

In front, Ren twitched, firing a volley from his machine pistols, hitting nothing but rock, “They’re out there!” he said, taking a few steps back, towards Nora, and glancing my way. “We need to go!”

I frowned and leapt up, turning around, but there was *nothing there.*

Then, so softly I barely felt it, something *skittered* across my defenses, it’s touch light, but enough for me to notice. “There’s nothing there,” I called back. “But I felt something. . . don’t shoot unless it’s right in front of you. Something’s-”

This time, whatever it was didn’t bother being subtle, my defenses almost ringing as something slammed into them, only to find them to be an immovable object.

*“Jaune!”* Yang yelled, firing up into the air, only to look confused as her eyes tracked *something* that arced towards me, but instead of dropping or moving, like I would’ve just from the mental attack alone, I stayed hovering in the air. “What? But. . .”

“Something’s messing with us!” I reported.

Pyrrha, below me, seconded that, calling out, “I can feel it too. It’s. . .” she trailed off, staring into the ruins. “The Grimm aren’t here. Trust Jaune and I. Ren, we need to move quickly,” she directed, the boy hesitating, before looking up to me.

“And if there are Grimm?” he demanded.

“I’ll tell you, and burn them to a crisp,” I reported, “Now *keep moving.*”

The group broke into a run, looking around, flinching at things that weren’t there, but looked to Pyrrha, whose defenses, being *mine,* meant she no-sold *whatever* this was, though I wondered how she could tell what the others were seeing. They also glanced up to me, as I kept pace with them, whatever was trying to affect me not stopping, varying its approach, but I shrugged it all off.

At one point Yang let out a muffled cry, falling back, but Pyrrha held out her hand, a black glow enveloping the brawler’s gloves, and yanking her forward instead. Yang seized up in fright, but a moment later, stumbled, confused, even as the Gladiatrix kept the girl moving, but I couldn’t allow myself to watch fully, as we made it for that central platform.

As we crested the last bit of rubble, the ground started to shake below them, and I yelled, “That’s actually happening, *jump!”*

I held back myself, flying forward as Ren started to fall short, grabbing his arm and carrying him as we made it to the lotus, landing on the center platform as the others got there. The pressure on my defenses eased, as the shaking got worse, to the point the rubble started to come apart.

*No,* I realized with dread. *Not come apart.* It was *lifting.*

The section of the streets we’d been walking on came apart, the rest still, splitting along an invisible seam as it lifted *up*, like a giant trapdoor.

*The webs were holding everything in place,* I realized, as enormous, bone-white insectile legs, each over a hundred long emerged, lifting with it an enormous form, the size of a battleship. This Grimm *titan* hefted its body up, even as I fumbled with my phone, opening the app and creating a portal Home, because *NOPE.*

“That, that’s not real, right?” Ruby asked, clutching her weapon, as the others stared up at it.

“No, it’s real,” I said, eyeing the portal, trying to figure out how to get everyone in it. They *couldn’t* see it, and there was almost certainly some kind of aversion affect, to stop people from blundering in accidentally.

“Oh. Okay,” she replied, so past fear she sounded calm.

*If there is that affect, Pyrrha and I might have to physically throw them in,* I thought, looking at the numbers. *That means we each grab two, before carrying the last pair in. Can we do that before this thing strikes?* I wondered, as, while it was large, from my studies the larger Grimm *didn’t* necessarily get slower, the coldness of the air one of the few reasons we were able to fight that Ancient Deathstalker as easily as we had.

And while it wasn’t hot, it *wasn’t* cold either. And if the smaller spiders were any indication, we *didn’t have enough time.* ***Especially*** if it pulled more mental attack bullshit and made them dodge us.

The Grimm took its time lifting itself up, and I debated trying to move before it was ready, or, with us still, it was taking its time. I started to hedge over to the portal, and the titan sped up. A hurried few step to the right, and one of the thing’s legs moved with the speed I’d feared, slamming down on the street to try and block my ‘escape’, the blow shaking the ground slightly, the circular sections in the lotus design around us rattling oddly.

*It can’t see the portal*, I realized, trying to figure out how to leverage that.

Lifting itself fully, the ship-sized Grimm stared down at us, and the pressure on my defenses slammed back, the others around me driven to their knees, shaking in fear so hard they were unable to stand, as an alien voice echoed in my skull, dripping with age and contempt.

**It has been quite some time.**

**Pests rarely wandered into my nest.**

**Do you have anything to say before you die?**