**Chapter Twenty-One**

Fortunately, or unfortunately, it took less than a minute of flying before I was back, the cleared space around what was once the glade thrice as big as when I left. The walls, mostly wood, enclosed the central area in a thirty-foot-tall pentagon. They were almost completely built, complete with battlements, though one corner was still completely open, lacking any kind of gate, door, obstruction, or *anything*. It seemed like a major design flaw, but, *completely* out of my element, I had to assume there was a reason for it.

Gliding in, I tried to land gracefully, but stumbled a bit, still feeling weak, if better than I had a few moments ago. It hurt to breath, my entire mouth feeling raw and burned all the way down my neck and into my chest, but the pain, which had made it hard to concentrate on *anything,* was subsiding, as my Aura recovered. Glynda glanced over to me, starting to say something, only to pause, eyes widening, calling, *“Thumbelina!”*

Looking around, I noticed that everyone was staring, what I’d just done the *opposite* of subtle. Professor Peach ran over, looking at me, remarking with a pained, “Oh, that looks bad.”

Unconsciously, I reached up, touching my lips and winced, as my hand came away bloody, with specks of black. It didn’t *hurt* that much, not like my throat felt, and just gave me the oddest sense of pressure with a slight sting. Small, but strong, gloved hands quickly took hold of my shoulders, even as I was directed to a bit of fallen log, and sat me down.

I could see my teammates looking my way, and tried to say something, but as I tried to talk all I could make was an unintelligible wheeze.

Needless to say, that didn’t help their concern, and hurt. A lot.

“Sounds like you’ve burned your vocal chords,” Peach noted, slipping a small syringe out from her clipboard and tried to jab me in the neck with it, only for it to bounce off. “You still have Aura? Odd. Lower it, please,” she requested, and I hesitated, giving her unsure look. “It will aid in your healing,” she assured, and I had a moment of doubt.

I didn’t know her, and the teachers here had been hit or miss. However, with things as bad as they were, I couldn’t see the positives of trying something *now*, so lowered my defenses, both my Aura, and the ones given to me by the Company, to let whatever she was giving me *work*, fairly certain Body Defense would block any drugs, as, to some extent, all medicines were poisons.

She tried again, the stubby syringe piercing my skin, injecting *something* into me. For a second it felt like my Aura destabilized, going fuzzy and *wrong,* before tightening around me, and feeling. . . *warm.* ‘What?’ I mouthed, unable to speak, but Professor Peach understood, answering, “My own concoction. It diverts Aura regeneration solely into its healing aspects, but you’re out of the fight, so it doesn’t matter. Now, sit back and let the others handle this.”

The sound of distant howling rang out, and Glynda’s voice carried through the encampment. “If you have ranged capabilities, man the walls. If not protect the gate. As long as the Grimm see a way inside, they will try to take it. Use that to your advantage!”

*Well, that explains it,* I thought, checking my own Aura. In the time it’d taken to get back, I’d managed to recover enough that I was at a comfortable thirty two percent, but it stalled there, not increasingly like it should. Standing, if only to see what was going on as the others rushed into position, my body felt *heavy*.

That said, I could move, and I *could* fight, my draconic physiology, even in humanoid form, stronger than what the Professor, now dealing with someone else, had assumed. However, I felt like I had when I’d first arrived here. I was in great shape, yes, and my motions, while smoother because of my training, lacked the sense of *power* they’d had mere moments ago.

It was *Aura*, or, more specifically, the *lack* of it, that I was feeling, if Peach’s explanation was to be believed. I still had my fire, though I hesitated even using its normal form, with my throat torn up as it was, and, having exhausted it *all* a couple of minutes ago, I wasn’t even a tenth of the way refilled. I could manage one breath, *maybe* two, before I’d be tapped again, and I heard the pounding of monstrous feet in the distance, the gunfire starting to pound a staccotto beat from the above on the walls.

That brought one fact to the front: the others were fighting, and I *wasn’t*. Yes, I was burned, but I could *still fight*, and sitting in the back while my team put themselves in danger *rankled* me on a deep, *deep* level. But what could I do?

Looking around, at the others who were laid up, healing, I spotted one of my classmates, lying down, unconscious, his combination spear/sniper, like Pyrrha’s blade but worse, on the ground next to him. Grabbing it, I hefted it, reaching down and grabbing the extra clip the boy had on his belt, noting that he’d already gone through four, by the empty slots in his belt. Without Aura, the weapon was weighty, but manageable, and I flapped upwards, to join the others on the wall, not liking what I saw.

The two groups of Grimm had met up, and poured out of the woods, Creeps and Beowulfs leading. I frowned, *knowing* the Deathstalkers could move faster, but they seemed to be hanging back slightly. I didn’t know what that meant, only that it *wasn’t good.*

Nevertheless, I twisted the haft on the spear, shifting it to its rifle configuration, trigger assembly, scope, and grip unfolding as I squatted down, resting the rifle on the edge of the wall to steady my aim. The others all around me were firing with seeming abandon, but their shots were hitting weak points in the Grimm more often than not, and I, lining up my shot, missed completely, not hitting a Beowulf in the eye, but taking the Creep behind it in the leg.

The spear but slammed against my shoulder, *hard,* but my armor took it and only rocked me back slightly. Grimacing, then flinching as the expression sent a spike of pain through me in a way it *hadn’t* a moment ago, I had to assume the healing was letting me feel again. Pushing past it, I tried to line up another shot, something a bit more reasonable, hitting a roaring Beowulf in the chest, knocking it back enough for it to fall under the charging of the others, an Ursa trampling it.

Watching the others around me firing, and trying my best to match, I could practically feel myself get better with every shot, but with each shot the pain I was feeling grew, whatever the ‘healing’ I was experiencing seeming to set my throat ablaze. After only a dozen, my hands were shaking, and my vision was shuddering, but by that point they were right on top of us, the walls vibrating from the force of the Grimm slamming into it. Some of the creatures tried to scrabble up the defenses, but most were running past the walls in either direction rather than crowding in and trying to climb over each other.

Hoping the others could handle it, I tried to focus, firing shot after shot down into the masses, trigger clicking it several times, the clip empty, before I realized what I was out. Fumbling, feeling almost drunk, it took me precious seconds to figure out how to pop the clip, slotting in the next one, and emptying that as well, finding it hard to tell if I was hitting anything as my eyes teared up, the pain *getting worse and worse.*

*“Brucha!”* someone yelled, and I looked up, to see what looked like a hundred spears flying through the air towards us, black with bone-white tips. I wasn’t sure what to do, hoping what Aura I had would help me, and, looking around, say Ruby, Pyrrha, and Weiss on the wall. I turned, ready to fly, when my legs gave out, pitching me over the inside rail, and it was all I could do to flare my wings to stop my fall, hitting the ground of the clearing with a graceless roll, unable to spring to my feet.

Turning around, the rain of spears was almost on us when a purple shimmer spring up over the top of the wall, the hail of death bouncing off, projectiles spinning off into the Grimm all around us. I tried to stand, only for something to grab me around the waist and drag me away from the wall.

A *very* unhappy looking Peach practically slammed me down on the log she’d left me, the sniper I was holding falling away as I gasped, the wind knocked out of me, a motion which caused my vision to start to gray from the pain.

*“I said let the others fight!”* she practically hissed. “Now stay or I’ll *tie you to the tree.*”

I tried to reply, the action automatic, but it *hurt*, my eyes tearing up, and I nodded weakly instead.

Peach looked past me, a blood-red tentacle whipping out at the fighting at the front, continuing, in a more conversational tone, but not the cheer she’d showed before, “You haven’t had your Aura for long have you.”

I blinked, but, as it was more statement than question, I just nodded again, the pain I’d been feeling starting to recede.

“When you’re hurt, your Aura dulls it. For a last moment victory, it’s quite useful, but it also drains your Aura to do so,” she remarked with a half-smile, continuing to support the front-line fighters from behind, like I *couldn’t.* ”With your Aura shifted to maximize healing, the effect is disrupted. If you’d stay resting, it would last, but you *didn’t.* Now *sit.*”

I nodded, not sure what else to do, the burning, piercing pain from my throat having already faded to manageable levels. Professor Peach smiled broadly, then leapt over me, heading into the thick of the fighting, while I had to sit, feeling useless, turning to watch the others fight.

It wasn’t going well.

Almost every single one of my classmates fought as individuals, with occasional pairs, not that I was any better, but to hold a line against this kind of attack, it wasn’t enough. While they were killing the Grimm as fast as they attacked, Glynda and Peach eviscerating most before they hit the line of students, the ones that got through didn’t take their time before attacking, pressing forward in a clawing, biting, snarling horde, a situation not helped by the fact that everyone was already tired, and only getting more-so. Most people, in the few minutes between attacks, had barely gotten a fifth of their Aura back, and that was a reserve that, from the hits everyone was taking, was likely to run out soon.

Worse, they still were only dealing with the Creeps and Beowulfs, the first Ursa only now rounding the corner, charging the line only get picked up by a purple glow and thrown back out the gates at speed, but a second quickly took its place.

Screams of pain and terror came from the wall facing the oncoming horde, and an enormous spider, body fat and distended, but covered with white armor, lifting itself up over the walls, white-clad legs holding firm against the defender’s attacks.

Goodwitch took it down with a thrown wooden log, one end sharpened to a point, a stack of which next to her, but was a very limited resource. The creature shrieked as it fell back, but without her to help the students, the Grimm seemed to redouble their efforts, someone falling back as their Aura flared, breaking, barely missing another claw as they scrambled backwards.

Another hail of spears rained down on us, followed by another couple spiders, one spitting black webs that sizzled as they hit the ground, missing me by several feet.

Checking my scroll, trying to do *something,* Pyrrha was down to the seventies, Blake in the twenties, and Yang in fifties. I had to assume Ruby and the others were in a similar state, Ren and Nora doing their best to hold back the tide, the boy ducking around his partner to protect her between massive swings, but they were tiring as well. The girl swung, and Ren cut a Creeper down as it jumped from her, but from her other side a Beowulf slashed at her, her Aura breaking as she cried out in pain.

Staggering to my feet, needing to do *something,* even if it was just block a blow with my remaining Aura, I rushed toward my teammates. My inner fire had barely refilled, but I hoped it would be enough. Ren took the Beowulf’s next blow blocking it an inch away from his hand before stabbing his blade through its skull, but more closed on him, without Nora to watch his back.

The pain, which had faded, started to come back, but I could do at least *this* much, as I mentally focused, trying to form the ‘nozzle’ I needed. Pulling my shield, I raised my it, catching a blow that was coming in for Ren, who glanced at me, nodding in thanks, even as my knees felt like buckling from the pressure of the attack.

More Shelobs crested the wall, as a large Deathstalker forced its way through the gate, though not as large as the one we’d fought before, but more than I could handle right now. Peach leapt up to stop one of the spiders, leaving the field clear, and I took a deep breath before allowing more of my flame to *flow*, spraying it out in a column of prismatic incandescence that melted the lesser grim, slamming into the Deathstalker, its armor starting to deform under the waves of draconic fire.

Back and forth I spread it, covering the field, the pain in my chest spiking as my legs gave out, two pairs of hand grabbing me and pulling me backwards even as the Grimm screamed in pain. Focusing on the flames, I fed the last of my reserves into them, causing them to burst into an inferno, clearing the field and giving the others a moment of respite.

My vision was waving, but I could practically *feel* the Deathstalker as it tried to force its way through, but, weakened as it was, a single stone spike was able to crash through it’s armor, killing it.

But more came.

I could feel my flames diminish, smothered in a tide of darkness, only now the heavy footsteps of the Triclops starting to draw near.

“We’ve got this,” Ren told me, putting me down on something, but his voice didn’t have its normal calmness, and I could tell he didn’t believe what he was saying.

*Enough.* I thought, fumbling, reaching into my pocket to grab my phone, as I saw the Grimm, head and shoulders easily above the wall, reach us, calmly walking around the same way the others had instead of striking out at the defenders that were riddling its hide with bullets, to no effect.

*We weren’t going to win this.*

The enormous Grimm strode up to the gates, reaching out with two gigantic hands, gripped the sides of the opening, and *pulled.* With a torturous sound, the wood splintered, turning the narrow gateway into an open channel, through which Grimm *poured* in. Glynda threw her last projectile at the Grimm, who, with surprising speed, lifted one arm, blocking it with black, rugged flesh, only the hint of underlying red flesh exposed, barely injured.

Opening a portal Home, I tried to call out to the others, to tell them to evacuate, only to be able to do nothing but wheeze, and realized the problem instantly. The portal was set so that it was unnoticeable, which was *normally* useful, but now, without me able to talk or draw attention to it to try to counter that, I had no idea how to make this work, how to save everyone.

Semblances fired, as every single student seemed to use their last reserves, and while the Grimm around it were destroyed, the forty-foot-tall monster raised one arm to cover its face, and barely seemed harmed, the attacks trailing off, the last of my fire blocking the Grimm from getting to us, but it would be seconds before they ran out.

Fingers shaking, I tried to find an option, a toggle, *something* that would allow me to make the escape route noticeable. If I had to, I’d *throw* people through the damn thing, as it hung in the air next to me, but there’d be no way I’d be able to get everyone out that way.

The Triclops looked down, staring *directly* at me, and *roared*, starting to move forward, picking up speed, charging with unstoppable force.

Grabbing Ren, finding the boy rooted to the ground, I started to try to pull him to safety before an odd sound carried itself across the battlefield.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iYDQMZMwT8g>

**“*OH HO HO HO!”***

From over the walls a dark red missile flew, slamming into the Triclops even as it tried to raise an arm to block, causing the massive beast to stumble backwards mid-run. As its arms went wide, none other than *Professor Port*, skin nearly as red as his suit, was shown to be holding onto the Grimm, with his axe buried it its chest.

Gripping onto the spikes that studied it’s body, the teacher yanked his weapon out, and hurled himself upward, as the Triclops tried to slam its hands down an crush the huntsman, axe-head catching the creature under the jaw with enough force to yank it off its feet, the giant Grimm slamming head-first into the ground, Port riding it down, laughing carefree, like he was recounting one of his stories.

Gunfire rang out behind us, as three bullheads came over the battlements, each one armed, all three firing their gatling canons into the mass of Grimm outside of our walls. One turned, opening, and Ozpin stood there, waiting, watching as older students streamed past him falling down into the fray, taking up where we left off, gunshots, explosions, fire, lasers, lightning, ice, and everything else going off as they took over the lines and pushed the Grimm Tide *back.*

Closing the portal, and letting go of Ren, I saw as Amakuni and Professor Oobleck dropped down into the fight as well.

I’d barely seen any of the professor’s fight before, but here. . . I realized I was outclassed, that *any* of us, save *maybe* Pyrrha, were hopelessly outmatched, and my partner was, when it came to *this*. One versus one, she might win, but the staff of Beacon Academy, like Ren and Nora, didn’t specialize in fighting duels, they specialized in *killing Grimm.*

Oobleck blurred across the battlefield, setting lesser Grimm alight and clearing out a wide swath behind the Triclops, which flailed and tried to tear Port off as, still laughing, still with blood red skin, and seeming to *steam,* the fat man almost negligently slapped the giant’s hand away and started to hack at its head with his blunderbuss-axe. With only a few blows, each one seeming to cause the ground to vibrate, he cracked through meter-thick armor, and killed the beast.

Upperclassman continued to spread out, our freshman class ferried to the center of what had once been a forest glade, where one of the other Bullheads came down to land, crushing some dissolving Grimm corpses, more students carrying gurneys rushing out to the worst injured, loading them up quickly but carefully.

One boy, in a white outfit with purple piping, hurried over to me, not saying anything, just physically picking me up in a fireman’s carry and starting to run with me to the bullhead. I felt *something* bounce off my defenses, and, when I was put onto a medical bed, the student looked at me oddly before running over to someone else, who seemed to pass out as soon as he picked them up.

Ozpin, observing this all, stepped calmly from the first bullhead, still fifty feet in the air, landing on the ground without breaking stride and approaching Goodwitch. “You were almost late,” the vice principal snapped at him, the sound barely audible over the fighting. “What happened?”

The Wizard, however, shrugged slightly, commenting blandly, “I do believe I arrived precisely when I needed to. And as to what happened.” He turned his head, and stared directly at me. “I have some theories.”