**Chapter 101**

By the time we got there, it was all over.

We saw the smoke, first, black clouds that hung over the capital city as an impenetrable obsidian miasma, dark in a way that set my teeth on edge.

“That,” Yang questioned, peeking out from between where Port and I sat, staring out the front viewport, “that isn’t *Grimmsmoke*, is it?”

The teacher did not respond for a moment, but, looking at him, his almost eternally jovial expression was gone, the man’s seemingly half-closed eyes wide open as he took in the devastation that slowly inched its way into view.

“It appears to be, Ms. Xiao-Long, though why there is not a single dead Grim *outside* the walls-”

I winced, *know why*, the man catching the expression, and, Port’s hands tightened on his controls, he asked me, “Did you inform the Headmaster?”

“I heard of White Fang activity in Mountain Glenn,” I stated, “And passed it along to Oz. The Wizard said he had it handled…”

*Except, apparently, he hadn’t.*

“The *what!?”* Blake hissed from behind me. “How did you hear *that?”*

“Fangers can be surprisingly chatty,” I told her absently, seeing her ears, now once more covered by her bows, twitch in irritation, especially as I added, “Doubly so to others they think would ‘join the cause.’” Looking back to the older man, I continued, “But even if they’d gone and blown open the connecting tunnel between there and Beacon…”

Considering that, Port slowly nodded. “Yes, it would’ve been handled without… *this*. Glynda is quite adroit at repairs, a *godsend* given how rumbunctious young Hunters and Huntresses can be, ho ho ho!” the teacher smiled, though his humor was strained, as he looked over the distant city with an experienced eye. “But if my colleague could seal a breached wall, mid-Tide, while under attack, even if the destruction around the tunnel entrance was total, a few collapsed buildings would’ve made a fine enough plug. But, more than that, the city is… oddly undamaged.”

*“Undamaged!?”* Yang exclaimed. “Do you *see* the fires!”

And, indeed, there were over a dozen fires raging across Vale, with blackened spots showing others had already been put out, some structures only smoldering husks.

“I’ve seen depictions of Grimm Attacks on cities,” Pyrrha noted, staring outwards. “They… did not look like this.”

Port huffed, “And while it is good that none of you have seen such devastation firsthand, Students, it has a *very* distinct look to it. No, something *strange* has happened.” Casting a glance my way, the older man noted, “It seems to be a *trend.”*

I just shrugged, not having been responsible for *this*, as we started to crest Vale’s walls, underneath the thick cloud of evaporated Grimm, and got our first look down the city’s wrecked streets.

Blake gasped, while Yang, after a moment of sheer horror, turned away, grabbed the trash, and was *very* ill. Pyrrha’s gaze hardened, her hand reaching over to tightly grip my shoulder as we saw the carnage, bodies littering the streets, most of them nearly unrecognizable as little more than scattered *meat*, the black of *thousands* of decaying Grimm painting the avenues black, except for the islands of partially dried red, splashes of color that were shreds of clothing mixed within them.

It was horrifying, had Port’s ship not had air scrubbers, the smell would likely be *extreme,* and even then the tainted smoke was starting to make its way into the cabin. Breathing a bit of Flame into one hand, and keeping it going, I burned away the substance, our teacher after an experimental sniff, giving me a sharp nod of appreciation.

That said, as I looked down at the near *apocalyptic* destruction, I felt…

Nothing.

Oh, I was a bit annoyed that telling the Wizard about this problem didn’t fix it. I mean, team *RWBY* handled it, even if barely, and while they were good *now,* the them they would’ve been…

*Current* Ruby could likely have 1-v-4’d the *original* team RWBY.

For a moment, I wondered if it was shock, but… no, I wasn’t *numb*, I just…

*Didn’t care about these people.*

I was interested in what had happened, the Grimm that had done it, now put down, unrecognizable as they were, in addition to being half-decayed, practically *mulched*, and as Port continued to fly I could see sections of the city where people were out and about, trying to put out fires, clearing the streets of gore, both supernatural and mortal, for fire trucks and ambulances to pass, and I knew that, with a bit of Ice Dust, I could probably have helped but I just…

*Didn’t want to.*

And it took until we were halfway across, and I saw the city hall, which had armored plates deployed, locked up tight, the metal scratched and chipped from the ground-floor up to the fifth at the top, that I realized *why.*

***They had banished me, and, thus, did not deserve my protection.***

It was an odd thought, and one that carried the… *flavor* of my inhuman instincts, which burned brightly for my use of my greater forms for the last several days, but one which felt as simple as stating that ‘Fire is hot,’ ‘Water is wet,” or ‘What’s mine is *mine.*’

Actually, it was that last one which extrapolated into that longer thought, as, trying to look forward to Beacon, *that* was a place I was concerned about, and, while I had to trust that RRWN could handle themselves, the thought of seeing my classmates on the ground like that, of Charlie, Alex, or Lave rendered into so much *gristle*, did get my hackles up, prismatic sparks carried out as I breathed, as I wrestled the sudden offended ***rage*** that swelled up.

Because, while Beacon *was* the Wizard’s Domain, it was also, at least partly, ***Mine.***

And, by their actions, Vale was *not.*

Intellectually, I knew it was just a handful of corrupt cops and one bad Councilor, but, if I trusted Oz’s word, and I *mostly* did, the situation was such that, were I to touch down, it would not end *without violence*, and while I would not lay waste to them *myself* over such an offense, *emotionally speaking,* I, in turn, would not shed a tear over the results of their own choices.

And the mis-sealing of the Mountain Glenn tunnel that made all of this possible *was their choice.*

Honestly, the only part of this that bothered me was the fact that it bothered *Pyrrha.*

And to a lesser degree, Blake.

Yang could deal.

While I mused about my own inhuman take on such things, Port had contacted Beacon, and received instructions to come in and dock directly instead of deploying into Vale. Clearing the worst of the miasma, and exiting the city’s, starting to make our way over the enormous lake that separated the capitol from the Huntsman Academy, what we could see put me at ease, though it did create… *additional questions.*

Because, while the black haze spread out in every direction from the city, Beacon sat within a dome of *completely clear air*, pristine, in a way that *screamed* Magical Wards, though, given how Beacon had *fallen* in the original timeline in the middle of an overwhelming Grimm Tide, they clearly *hadn’t been around then.*

Regardless, whatever calamity had struck Vale, it had not touched the Wizard’s Domain, and after a few minutes we easily passed through the invisible wall that was keeping the ‘Grimmsmoke’ out. I hadn’t actually gotten a name for the off gassing of those monsters before now, though, given it was *Yang* who called it thus, there was a good chance that *wasn’t* the proper term. Either way, as we passed through it there was a subtle *ripple* and what little of the substance remained in the cabin was burned away, leaving me to breath easier, the distinction between one moment and the next similar to the shift between here and going to *my* Domain.

Putting out my own Flame, the Bullheads parked on other pads at the skyport were beat to shit, though, again, all of the damage was… small. No large rents, no enormous dents, just dozens, *hundreds*, of bangs, scratches, and inch-wide holes.

“Port,” I questioned, as he started to land, “I know our mission is technically over, but what should we do? We can fight, if need be, though I’ve been told I’m *not* to enter Vale, for political reasons.”

“Political…” the older man questioned, before his expression darkened. “Ah. Yes. ***Winchester.*** Truly, the rotten apple does not fall far from the blighted tree,” he remarked, disgust clearly coloring his tone. Smiling slightly at my surprised look in response to his uncharacteristically negative declaration, he added, “As your teacher, I must treat all students fairly, but, as a mission mentor, well, that calls for a *very* different set of protocols!”

“What should we do, sir?” Pyrrha prompted, the Veteran Huntsman not having answered my question, as the Bustard finished its descent with a soft bump.

Cycling open the craft’s door, and shutting down its engine, the heavyset man commanded us, “Return to your quarters, Ms. Nikos, and I will speak to the Headmaster forthwith. It looks like the fighting is over, but if there is need for it, I will suggest he extend our mission. While I’m sure you’re ready to go out of the fire and into the frying pan, one should *not* throw oneself there unless it is needed!”

He moved past us, paused at the exit, and looked us over. “You all did *splendidly*, Team ABYN, and, without you, Gabbro *would* have fallen. Rest well, because I have a feeling we will have more such assignments in the future. Oh, and Ms. Xiao-Long?”

“…Yeah?” the brawler questioned, voice a bit weak.

“Extra bin liners are in the cabinet up and to the left,” he stated, without condemnation. “While it certainly *rates*, that is *not* the worst thing I have seen during my long and illustrious career as a huntsman. However, with time, and experience, you will learn to deal, Ms. Xiao-Long. It is not shameful to feel such things, just make certain you can afford the moment of vulnerability to be overcome in first, and then press on afterwards.”

Pyrrha was already changing out the bin as the blonde grimaced, nodding, “Gotchya, Big Red. But… worse?”

Taking a moment to look into the middle distance, the veteran stated, “As monstrous as Grimm can be, Humans and Faunus can be monsters of a sort that our natural foes cannot hope to match. And there were *still* people left alive as we flew over them, which is better than some circumstances I have found myself in. But I should not tarry, and neither should *you*, so, once more, *congratulations* on your first mission, Team ABYN, and I look forward to your continued career!”

And with that, he was gone, seeing, as we left his ship, the man already halfway to Oz’s tower, taking large, bounding steps that covered several dozen feet at a time, a few of the students turning to stare, though the campus was unusually quiet, and most of those around looked… *skittish.*

Making our way back to *our* dorm, the other three were subdued, the skyport thankfully having public trashcans, but while I was expecting a call, my Scroll didn’t so much as beep, and, as we reached our door, I hesitated, not opening it, instead turning around and knocking on the one across the hall.

“*…coming,*” came a muffled voice, and, opening…

Ruby looked like *shit.*

Though, thankfully, she was *uninjured*.

“J… Jaune?” she questioned, blinking wearily, as she looked up at me, as if she almost didn’t recognize what she was seeing.

“We just got back from our mission,” I told her. “What happene- *oof.*”

The small girl had blurred forward and had slammed into my armored chest, holding onto me tightly, and promptly burst into tears.

Unsure, I gently held her, absently stroking her hair, and, looking past my co-team lead, I saw that, despite it being almost noon, Weiss was out cold, while Ren and Nora were both up and in full battle-gear, just like Ruby was, their weapons within reach.

“That bad?” I asked the pair, noting that Ren seemed a little… *washed out,* likely using his Semblance, though at a low-level, the boy nodding.

“I, uh. Yeah,” Nora replied, her usual energy almost completely gone, only a thin veneer of it left. “*Complete* birdpocalypse. But we’re *fine!*”

That was *obviously* untrue, and, as I glanced back to Pyrrha, I didn’t even need to say anything, the woman nodding and heading into our room, the faint sound of the portal Home opening barely audible.

Blake stood off to the side, awkwardly, while Yang stared at her sister with an indecipherable expression, so turning back to the pair, I prompted, “So, there was a Grimm Tide?”

*“Two!”* Nora corrected.

“The *fuck?”* Yang questioned, stepping up beside me to get a better look at the ginger. “What do you mean *two?”*

Ren explained, “The bandit camp we were there to investigate had already fallen to a Tide that was… it was waiting for us.”

“Oh, you guys too?” I replied, frowning. “How’d you deal with the formations?”

The other man stared at me for a long moment. “…Formations?”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “Pyrrha, Blake, and I are army killers, but you and Nora are single target specialists, and so is Ruby, to a lesser degree, like Yang is.”

“Uh, they didn’t have a ‘form’, except, like a lot of ‘em, Jauney,” the hammer-wielder argued.

I shook my head, “No, I mean like marching in rows.”

Nor gave me a narrow-eyed look. “Grimm don’t *do* that.”

“They do *now,*” Yang disagreed. “But, like, you hit a Tide?”

“We *blew up* a Tide!” Nora countered. “And Fearless Leader one-v-one’d the Alpha! She was *great!”*

From my arms, Ruby, who’d quieted, muttered, *“Weiss helped.”*

“Yeah,” her teammate agreed, with weary exuberance, “but you and the Wendigo were like *zoom* and *roar* and *blammo!*” Her smile dimmed. “Too bad there wasn’t any Alphas in the second. Just… just birds. A *whole* lotta birds. *Too many freakin’ birds.*”

Still *completely* in the dark, I gently took the tiny team lead’s small shoulders and pushed her away, not fully, as the girl’s grip on my armor tightened, but I only moved her enough to get a good look at her. “Ruby, *what happened?”*

Sniffing, and bringing a hand up to wipe her face, she collected herself, “Uh, it was like Nora said. Grimm Tide. Forest. Darkness. Chased us. Found a place to hold out, which was *surprisingly* nice, even if it was… it was…” she trailed off, frowning, before she shook her head and continued, “uh… anyways, when we got out, it was *waiting* for us. So we blew it up. Twice. And Weiss made an arena. And we killed it. Except for the ones that ran. And… yeah.”

“So, first of all, *good job.* Knew you could handle yourself out there, Ruby, even if I wished you didn’t have to *that fast*,” I told her, and, as she sniffed again, the girl smiled, blushing a little at the praise, “but *what happened with Vale?”*

“Oh. uh…birds?” she offered, helplessly, and I felt my eye twitch. “A… lot of birds? And dead people. A *lot* of dead people.”

Ren chimed in, even grayer than he’d been a moment ago, “Tens of thousands of Nevermores, perhaps hundreds of thousands. They were all small, barely grown, but enough to blot out the sky. All coming from a single place.”

“The old connecting tunnel between Vale and Mountain Glenn,” Blake supplied, glancing my way. “There was a… White Fang group that did the attack.”

For a moment, Ren turned completely monochrome, as he turned to look at the girl, and stated, voice robotic, “**Did You Know About This?**”

*“N-No!”* she quickly responded. “I heard about it an hour ago. *Jaune* is the one that knew!”

Saturation fluctuating, the boy looked my way, and I explained, “I heard they were up to something, told Oz *months* ago, he said he’d handle it. Nevermores are new, though.” *But, without team RWBY to kick things off early, this shouldn’t’ve happened until the Vytal Festival.* “So… birds.”

“A *lot* of birds,” Nora agreed, glancing over at her weapon. “And Magnhild only had so many booms left in her.”

“I *wanted* to help,” Ruby added. “But, Crescent Rose only had so many shots, and when I tried to go out and hit em, I was, I was…”

“It was a *cluster-flock,*” the ginger stated. “We had Aura, but a lot of people *didn’t.* And if we hadn’t been able to pull back to Beacon…”

Ren, who was slowly re-coloring, added, “I don’t know how, but they were unable to get in. They tried, but it was like a sparrow flying into glass.”

“I keep tellin’ ya, Rennie, it’s cause the Headmaster is a *Wizard!”* Nora told him. “He’s got a tower and everything! Right, Jaune?”

Her partner looked at me, silently asking me for sanity, however… “Yeah, pretty much,” I shrugged. “Not sure how it works, but I’ll ask next time I see him. Though don’t tell anyone.”

Pyrrha’s voice came from behind me, as she noted, “But Jaune, you tell *everyone* he’s a Wizard.” Turning, she was carrying a tray loaded with mugs of hot chocolate, and, as I took a sniff, *my blood.*

*Good.*

“Yeah,” I agreed, smiling, taking one and gently pressing it into Ruby’s hands, “but when *I* say it, no one believes me.”

“Wait,” Ruby frowned. “The Headmaster is an *actual wizard?”*

I motioned for her to take a sip, and, after a moment’s hesitation she did, sighing in appreciation, a bit of color slowly returning to her cheeks, the bags under her eyes fading infinitesimally.

“Yeah, he is, or maybe he’s just got a very, *very* varied Semblance. Or both. Though the Siege Wards are new,” I agreed. Breathing a bit of fire through my mask, and, concentrating, and running it through a variety of shapes, forming each of my team’s seven symbols in turn, I added, “The man is a *master* when it comes to using his abilities, and has been teaching me a great deal.”

Ruby, taking another sip of her drink and smiling to herself at the taste even though she was clearly still feeling under the weather, finally looked up at me and asked, “Jaune? I. What would you have done? If, if you were there?”

I glanced at her, then at the fire in my hands, causing it to spread out in a slow explosion.

Frowning, she shook her head. “No, I mean, what should *I* have done?”

“Probably what you likely did,” I replied, condensing it back into a rainbow small sphere. “I’m assuming Weiss cast herself dry?” At the smaller team lead’s nod, I continued, “And you made sure she was safe?” As she nodded again, I shrugged, “Then, with your current ability set… *that.* In the future, maybe picking up some Dustcasting materials, *and working on those skills,* to deal with swarms might be for the best. It’s one of the foundational Huntsman abilities *for a reason*, even if practically no one uses it anymore.”

“…Weapons are easier,” the girl muttered, glancing down into her boosted cocoa. “And cooler.”

“And the reason you can’t do both is…?” I questioned. Looking back at my team, I asked, “Actually, do you guys want to focus on *that* a bit more? Professor Tim’s class has been okay, but it’s academic, not combat ready, and, except for Weiss, none of us keep casting crystals on us. Maybe complimentary elements?”

*“Dibs on fire!”* Yang called out, having been silent up until now, which I appreciated.

“*Lighting!”* Nora added, perking up. “Also, super tasty, P-Money!”

My lover smiled, “Thank you. The special ingredient, is *love.*”

“*Riiiight,”* the hammer-wielder agreed, and I froze, wondering if she’d figured it out, but the ginger turned on her partner. “Whatabout you, Rennie? Rock?”

“Water, if I had to choose,” the man noted. “Ruby?”

Blinking, put on the spot, the girl sputtered, “Uh, what about Weiss? Shouldn’t we, like, ask what kind *she* wants to use first.”

Everyone stared at the youngest member of our team.

“Oh. Uh. *Right,”* she muttered. “*Duh, Ruby.* Uh. Wind is cool?”

“This isn’t anything final,” I reassured her, looking to the rest of my team. “If we find incompatibilities, we should try something that gels better with our individual styles.”

Pyrrha considered the question, finally stating, “I believe that Gravity would fit me the best.”

Blake shrugged, glancing my way, “Rock or Hard-Light, Jaune, I don’t care.”

“Then I’ll take Hard-Light,” I stated. “I’m… okay with it.”

Yang snorted. “Okay? My dude, you took out a *mountain.*”

Holding up a finger, I corrected, “So, one, it was a *hill*, and second of all, I was able to pull from a *lot* of pre-prepared flame, and third, I didn’t *take it out,* I just shaved off a strip in the middle.”

Ruby blinked. “You *took out a mountain?*”

“Yeah, *wanna see?*” her older sister grinned, taking out her scroll and showing her footage she’d apparently taken while we’d left Gabbro.

As the others sipped their drinks, I accepted a mug from Pyrrha, considering it and, taking my bit of Flame, I attached it to the outside, opposite of the handle, mentally tagging it to keep it going in order to keep the drink warm. Walked over to put it down next to the still sleeping form of Wiess, the girl holding herself, she seeming cold, so I pulled up her covers and tucked her in, my white-haired teammate relaxing a little.

Walking back to my mate, she was smiling at me as I grabbed the last mug, pulled down my mask, pausing before I took a sip to ask, “What?”

“*Nothing*, Jaune,” she replied, looking over to Yang, who had launched into telling the story of our *own* mission, while Ruby, and Nora listened, rapt, and Ren paid polite attention, all three of them looking better than they had when we first walked in. “It seems that they faced problems of their own.”

“Yeah, but… you were right,” I admitted, and, as she sent me an inquisitive look, I explained, “they handled themselves.”

Considering that, the Gladiatrix nodded, adding, “This time, yes. Dustcasting?”

“It’s a lateral skill,” I stated. “We’re… *okay*, serviceable, and we’ll keep training, but we need options. Well… *they* need options,” I corrected, weaving a bit of Flame between my fingers, trying to shift it through their symbols again, but I couldn’t both form them *and* keep it moving at the same time, causing the stream to become a jumbled mess, which I refocused into movement alone. “We’ve both got ‘Fuck You In Particular’ and ‘To Whom It May Concern’ options, though you’re focused on the former, and Gravity might help, if only to gather your enemies *together*, while I’m focused on the latter, and…”

“And something blocked you,” Pyrrha noted.

Stomping on the irrational ***irritation*** that I felt at that thought, my Draconic instincts fading the longer I spent human-*ish*, I nodded. “And something blocked me. With a stronger handle and firmer understanding of Hard-Light Dust, I should be able to control the beam better, maybe even spin it from a flood, into a *drill*. Besides, any increase in capability would require extra equipment we’d have to carry, along with extra ammunition. On the other hand, well, a high-quality Dust Crystal can be *quite* small.”

She nodded, and we both stood in companiable silence, sipping our drinks, while Yang was describing the setup of our defenses, Ruby’s eyes going wide as she zipped over to me, demanding, *“Jaune! couldIhave-”*

Before she finished, I rolled my eyes, reached back to the harness I wore and popped out a sphere, handing it to her. “Just know they’re Grimm *Catnip*, so don’t take it on a mission.”

*“Thanksyou’rethebest!”* the girl chirped, zipping back to her sister in a swirl of crimson rose petals, though *one* was prismatic, reforming into the globe she held, and prompted the brawler to continue.

Pyrrha chuckled, and my Scroll rang, so I dismissed my Flame and took the call, everyone looking at me. “Hello, Headmaster.”

“Hello, Mr. Arc,” Oz replied. “Have you had time to check in with Ms. Rose’s team?”

I froze, wondering how he knew that, except… no, that was really an easy guess. “Yes. They’re exhausted, but whole.”

“Good,” the Wizard stated. “In that case, could you come to my office? There have been… occurrences, that I believe it would be best if you were to be made aware of.”

“Like the Siege Wards?” I questioned.

The man chuckled, *“Indeed.* Among other things.”

“Like the three nearly simultaneous Grimm Tides?” I prompted, smiling a bit, glad everyone was alright, even as the others stared.

However, Oz’s words wiped the smile from my face.

“Oh, I’m afraid there’s been *far* more than three.”