**Chapter Ninety-One**

They made it on time!

Well, with fifteen seconds left, but Ruby considered that as *still counting!*

“Team Rowan?” a dark haired man questioned.

A person in a garment

Description automatically generated with medium confidence

<https://imgur.com/a/AUNkUjo>

“Yes! That’s us! We’re on time!” the young team lead cheered, waving to him. “Are you, uh, ‘Samt Alyashm’?”

“That is I,” the man agreed, looking over them all, and, was that a *snake-tongue?*

Weiss flinched, “You’re a *Faunus?*”

Samt lifted a thin brow. “Yes. My trait is of *quite* the help in tracking down foes. It is alright, I am sure you will learn to compensate for your *lesser* abilities.”

“*L-Lesser abilities!?”* Ruby’s partner demanded, offended.

“Uh, we’re willing to learn!” the mini-reaper stated with forced cheer, before the heiress could mess things up for them, leaning over to whisper to the girl, *“Ix-nay, on the acism-ray, eiss-Way!”*

The white haired girl stared at her leader for a moment, and Ruby panicked, wondering if, when they were so busy teaching the Atlesian girl stuff like trigonometry and how to use three different forks, they’d missed the *really* important stuff.

Like *Pig-Latin!*

“*I, uh,*” Ruby added, glancing at their guide. “*I mean-”*

*“I know what you mean!”* Weiss hissed back, then sighed, gathered herself, and turned towards the Huntsman. “I apologize, Mr. Alyashm. I have had… *unpleasant* experience with Faunus whose traits were hidden to casual observation. That was *unprofessional*, and I ask your forgiveness.”

The older man regarded her for a moment, then shrugged. “Do not worry overmuch about it, Schnee. It’s why I mentioned it before we left. And, Rose, perhaps creating a *less well known* code could be beneficial?”

Ruby blushed, but rallied, and took a step forward. “Will do! Now, uh, maybe we should leave now? To save those people?”

“And to kill the *heck* out of Nix!” Nora announced, walking past them all, towards the waiting bullhead.

“Ah,” Samt noted, motioning for the others to follow, picking up a green, black, and gold warhammer that was resting behind him, “You are aware of our target. Good. That simplifies things. We’ll head out then, and discuss our mission en route.”

**<DR>**

They were going camping!

On the way to capture murderous bandits.

But… *camping!*

Their Huntsman Mentor had talked about his own talents. His Semblance, **Paralyzing Gaze**, let him well, *paralyze* whoever he focused on, but they could fight it with their own Aura, and it drained *his* Aura to use. Great for subduing bounty targets, or for him to hit them with his combination warhammer/cannon, Consequence, which made up for what it lacked in speed with *raw power*.

“Because while you can run from the Consequences of your actions, they will strike you if you ever *stop,”* the Huntsman had remarked, pleased with himself, as Weiss visibly tried to both be annoyed at the terrible pun, but *also* not be annoyed with their superior officer, *especially* as he was a Faunus and she *was* touchy about that, so *now* she was being touchy about being touchy about it, which he could tell, so she didn’t need to be *as* touchy, but *Ruby* wasn’t touching *that*, so that was just what it was.

After a *really* long bullhead flight, heading southwest to where the convoy had been hit, they’d dropped out of their ship, the aircraft continuing to head on to make a supply run to another town, so as not to give away that *they* were on the hunt. Landing with *style,* Ruby used her Semblance at the last moment to bleed off her momentum, and reform on the ground, mid-step, like it as no big thang!

Looking around, though, the remains of the convoy were… not in good shape.

Trucks and carriages were burned out wrecks, broken boxes were strewn across the area, parts scattered about, just left there.

And then there was the *smell*.

It wasn’t the first time Ruby had gotten a nose-full of *death,* Uncle Qrow had made sure she and Yang had both gone out and *seen* what the aftermath of a Grimm Attack was like. But that didn’t mean she had gotten *used* to it.

*“Oh, god, what is that?”* Weiss frowned, having landed on a Glyph beside her partner, looking around, and waving the air in front of her nose. “It’s *terrible.*”

Ren, who’d made a barrier with his Aura to slow his fall, and Nora, who’d just slammed her hammer down to bleed off the force of her landing, both exchanged glances, while Mr. Alyashm, who’d landed in a smooth roll before standing, shot *Ruby* a look, as if saying, ‘You’re the ‘leader’, how are you going to handle this?’

“Uh, *Weiss?*” the mini-reaper said, getting her partner’s attention. “That’s the dead bodies. Did you… did your training not cover this?”

“My training was *far reaching* and *complete,*” the rich girl sniffed, then grimaced, adding, “But it was mostly…*theoretical*. So that’s the ‘smell of death’. I… I didn’t expect it to be so…*pungent.*”

Nora snorted, “Oh, you think *this* is bad? Wait ‘till they’ve had time to age! It’s like cheese, but in reverse!”

Their guide didn’t say a word, moving forward, picking through the wrecks, and they followed him, keeping an eye out for Grimm. “According to the reports, they were attacked several days ago. Putrefaction will have set in, but I merely need traces,” he explained.

“But, why leave the goods?” Ruby questioned, mentally cataloging the parts. She didn’t know most of them, but *that* was a crate full of weapon parts over there that would be worth a *good* bit of lien. “Aren’t they bandits? Shouldn’t they, you know, band?”

“It’s odd they have not,” Mr. Alyshm nodded. “I had counted on following the traces they’d left behind when they came back to finish their looting. Take note, your first plan may not always work, especially if it counts on the actions of the enemy. You never know *everything* else that’s going on in their lives, to make that prediction flawlessly.”

They nodded at that. It was something that’d come up in Jaune’s ‘Wargames’, to the point that, with Blake complaining he was changing things *just* to mess with them, after she was ‘mission killed’ and her character was knocked out, he had her sit behind him to see his notes and dice rolls as they finished the scenario.

She’d stopped complaining, at least about that.

“So, spread out and find what way they went?” the tiny team lead suggested, getting a half-smile and nod from the older man, so they did so. Ruby had gotten a *bit* of ‘wilderness tracking’ training from Uncle Qrow, her dad a lot better at *defensive* situations where he could really use his Semblance, so she had an *idea* of what to look for. With how the convoy’s trucks were spread out, either they were driving in a weirdly wide pattern, or, or the bandits had taken some of them. And the road was blocked, which meant…

Stopping to look at the ground, a stone road, made with the use of Rock Dust, there was bits of blood crusted in the grooves, most of it washed away. Walking over to the side, where the dirt came up to the sides of the street, and examining it carefully, the wild grass had grown up, but… it looked *wrong.*

*“Mr. Alyashm?”* she called, the man calmly walking towards her. “There’s something wrong here! The grass is *too* green! It looks like spring growth?”

“It does?” Nora questioned, having wandered over as well. “Looks fine to me.”

Ren, however, shook his head. “Fine for Mistralian grass, not Valian.” Looking both ways, he frowned, pointing deeper into the woods. “It’s different for a couple hundred feet, then reverts. On either side, it fades.”

“Good catch, Rose,” their Huntsman nodded, glancing to the other side of the road, “but wrong direction. See those trees over there, and the mounds of grass? Someone moved them to cover their path. Our target has someone with a plant-based Semblance in his crew, to hide their tracks, but they won’t have done so too far away.”

She blinked, then dropped her shoulders at getting it wrong, “*Oh maaan.”*

“You would’ve likely found it with time,” he reassured her, “but time is at a *premium*. Do you all know how to Aura Run?”

“Mrs. Sepper showed us the basics, and everyone but Ren has a Semblance that can make us faster, and he’s a *lot* better at it than we are,” Ruby nodded, turning and calling “*Weiss!”*

Her partner shot up into the air, thrown by one of her Sigils, using another to land gently next to them, the Atlesian girl asking, “You found it? I… I’ve been having a little difficulty. They didn’t leave the normal signs my textbooks laid out.”

“Plant Semblance,” Ren shrugged, the white-haired girl frowning, turning, then groaning.

*“Of course!”* she sighed, glancing about. “I see it now. My lessons did not cover *Semblance* use, but I suppose Mrs. Sepper *did* mention that those changed things.”

“We gotta go. Time for a run!” the mini-reaper smiled, the girl sighing, and nodding.

Looking to the Huntsman, he nodded back, and took off at a jog, the others moving to follow, Ruby focusing on her footsteps, the feeling of the muscles in her legs, and of the energy running through her. Aura Running was *kind* of like when you used Aura to close on someone in a fight *really* fast, only you just *kept going.*

Well there was *more* to that, and it was all about setting up a pattern, a kind of flexing of your Aura in rhythm, conserving your energy, instead of just pushing it out to go *as* fast as you could. Mr. Alyshm sped up, and so did they, slipping through the trees, now able to see the rough road the bandits had taken, tire-tracks faint on the dirt path, but there.

Weiss stumbled, but before Ruby could grab her, she tumbled forward onto a Glyph which shot her ahead, the girl reaching up with one hand to grab her pendant, the other down towards her feet, forming boots of ice, patterned with her snowflake symbol, encasing her feet up to the knee, but it *flexed*, as she hit the ground, each step now sliding a little. It was odd, but it was something that the heiress seemed better at then Aura Running, letting her keep up with the others. They almost *overtook* their Huntsman, who glanced back, surprised, then sent a small smile their way, and sped up *again*, which they struggled to match, but managed, as they took off down the dirt road at speed.

<DR>

“What do you mean, ‘*we’re* *stopping’?”* Nora demanded, as Mr. Alyshm had taken them off the road, and slowed, the sun almost set, but while it *was* dark, the night didn’t seem *as* dark as it should. Stuff far away, yeah, blackness and shadows, but, everything within about a hundred feet was clear-ish. Like, she couldn’t make it out *really* well, but when she looked ahead, she could *tell* where the trees were, and where the road was, so she was fine.

“We’ve still got a ways to go,” the man replied, moving at a walk, glancing around. “But none of you are Faunus. I’m surprised you can see *anything* without using lights, but you obviously can, which is… not something that will be enough if they’re closer than I think. If our target used Humans exclusively, it might be worth it, but if they have Faunus, like I, with our superior night vision, you will be at a *serious* disadvantage when fighting. We made good time, Valkyrie. *Very* good time. If I didn’t know better, I’d say you were *Junior* students, not Freshman, and I now see why the Headmaster overrode my requirements.”

“I, uh, *really?”* Ruby replied, confused. Like, *yeah,* she knew her team was awesome but wasn’t that a bit much? “We’re not *that* great.”

The professional Huntsman shook his head. “You kept up with me for three hours straight, and you barely seem tired. That endurance is good, and we’ll be putting it to the test tomorrow.”

“But we can keep going *now,”* Nora argued.

Mr. Alyshm frowned, but it was Ren who spoke up. “No, we’re not following tracks right now, we’re following the road. Nix moves. If it’s anything like before, he’ll have set up camp out of sight of the side road. And he’ll have a scout.”

The ginger girl frowned, before sighing explosively, shoulders dropping. “Yeah, we gotta make sure that bastard doesn’t get away. *Fine*. At least this time we’ve got tents and stuff.”

“A welcome change, to be sure,” her partner noted, slipping off his own pack and looking to the side. “Sir, is that location suitable?”

Following his gaze, the Snake Faunus nodded. “Yes, it’ll work. Are you *certain* none of you are Faunus?”

“I think my family would *know*,” Weiss sniffed, getting a short chuckle from the older man.

“Then I must commend your eyesight,” Mr. Alyshm stated, slipping off a slim pack of his own, reaching into the Gravity-Dust enlarged space and removing a lamp, which, turning it on, *wow* that was bright!

They all flinched away, Ruby blinking as her eyes adjusted to the unnecessarily harsh illumination, but they got used to it fast enough, and, with it *that* bright, she was glad they were off the road, but, looking around the shadows seemed… weird.

Her first thought was *Grimm*, but, paying attention to her surroundings, she got nothing, and while Grimm could stalk, they wouldn’t just *wait*. More than that, the others were looking around, to the point that Mr. Alyshm asked, “Something wrong?”

“It’s a *really* bright night,” Nora said, as, one hand on Crescent Rose, which was folded up and sitting on the small of her back, Ruby walked over to some leaves, and grabbed them, turning them one way, then another, but they were *just leaves*.

“Not particularly…” their mentor stated, trailing off. “Use as much light as you think you need, but keep it to a minimum,” he ordered, Taking out a bit of wire and walking the perimeter of their camp, stringing it up in the trees, tying off a couple bells to it, before taking out a bedroll, shifting his bag to make a pillow, and sitting on it as he activated the grain of fire dust in his MRE.

They did the same, taking out hooded lights of their own, and Ruby was confused as the brightness settings for *hers* were too high as well, turning it down to just what she needed, the others doing the same. She was glad that Weiss had insisted on buying supplies, because these Atlesian ‘Meals Ready to Eat’ were actually *really* cool, or, well, they were *hot*, so they cooked themselves, which *was* cool, and they did it while self-contained, so it didn’t smell at all until you opened them!

And they didn’t smell *bad,* but Uncle Qrow had talked a *lot* about how, when you were going after *people*, they used their brains *and* their senses, like smell, usually, which could be bad, but these took care of that problem!

Kinda heavy on the sauces, and with different spices, but it came with a little thing of powder, three grains of Water Dust, and one grain of Fire Dust to make hot chocolate! *It even had tiny little marshmallows!*

“This is Atlas grub?” Nora questioned, as they finished, and the white-haired girl nodded. “You ate like this *all the time* growing up*?*” she pressed. “How are you so *thin?”*

“I… didn’t,” Weiss replied, confused. “This fare is a little heavier than I am used to. More designed for a *laborer* or soldier than a ‘High Society Lady’. It’s a passable stroganoff, considering it is prepackaged. Hmm, maybe I should ask Jaune to make one when we get back,” the Heiress mused, blushing a little for some reason.

Then they were done, and threw the trash together in a bag and tossed it away, far enough that it wouldn’t attract any animals, and went to bed, Nora and Ren taking first watch, Mr. Alyshym the second, while Ruby and her partner would take the last. It was a *little* hard to go to sleep, since they were here to *save people*, but both her Dad and Uncle Qrow were clear that sleep was *just* as important as everything else on a mission, so she did her best, not sure *when* she fell asleep, only coming to when she felt something nudging her foot.

Using her Semblance, she was out of her tent in a moment, Crescent Rose at the ready, but the Huntsman was standing in front of her tent, waiting. “Oh, uh, tiiiiime?” she asked, yawning a little, and by a little she meant a *lot*.

“It is,” the other man nodded, motioning to Weiss’ tent. “Get her up; I am going to sleep.”

*“Yes, sir!”* she saluted, waking up her partner, who was being a bit of a grumpy-puss, but that was just Weiss in the mornings, and pouring her out a cupful of breakfast shake woke them both up, leaving them to hurry up and… *wait.*

And wait.

Aaaaaand wait.

“I kinda see what Jaune was talking about,” Ruby finally commented, startling her partner.

“What?” Weiss replied, looking around for the danger.

“Guard duty *suuuuucks,*” the mini-reaper sighed, leaning against a tree. “They never made us do this at Signal. How about you?”

Shaking her head, her partner answered, “No, this long just doing… nothing? That is time that could be *better* spent attending a lesson, or practicing, or making an appearance at one of father’s functions.”

“Hmm,” Ruby nodded, the silence returning, but, now that it’d been broken, she couldn’t help but do so again. “What was with those ice boots? When we were running.”

The Dustcaster frowned, one hand coming up to grab her pendant, the other girl clearly thinking hard. “I’m not sure. I was having trouble, and thought that I would have an *easier* time if I was skating. But there was no ice, so I made my *own* Ice, and it… worked. It almost felt familiar, though I’m *certain* I’ve never used Dust that way before.”

“Well, if it’s stupid, but it works, then it *ain’t stupid!*” the mini-reaper grinned.

“It *wasn’t* stupid,” her partner shot back, frowning.

Giving the Atlas girl a smug look, the Patch native replied, “You *covered your feet in ice* so you’d *go faster*. That sounds like something *I’d* do.”

Starting to reply, Weiss stopped herself, before sighing, resting her face in her hands. “Oh Gods, it *is,* isn’t it? And pointing out that I was *sure* it would work wouldn’t help because *that’s what you’d say.*”

“Hey, you got *me* to study, well Jaune did too, but also you, so of course some of *my* plucky can-do attitude would rub off on you too!” Ruby teased, which just caused her partner to groan.

This time, the silence wasn’t *quite* so awkward, and they hung out for the *hours* until Dawn started to break, and the alarm on their scrolls went off, waking everyone up. Ren and Nora had their smoothies, something that interested Mr. Alyshm, so they gave some to him too, the man appreciative, before they broke camp, packed and were off again, not even sore from yesterday, taking off down the road and running for *hours*, stopping now and again as the Huntsman had them wait to make sure they hadn’t found their turnoff.

They *finally* stopped for a quick lunch, the Huntsman showing them how the tracks were getting clearer, having stopped to point out the overnight camp the *bandits* had made an hour previous on their journey, telling them that, as long as *they* were taking to get there, the raiders in *vehicles* had taken just as long, possibly longer, which helped calm Nora a little, though the girl was getting *antsy*.

Another couple hours and, when Mr. Alyshm darted off into the woods, he came back *just* long enough to wave them to follow, as they entered the trees, the signs of some of them being ‘moved’ a lot clearer now, a lot of trees just felled, roots and all, then pushed aside.

The Huntsman was moving slower, so they did too, Ruby ordering the others with hand-signs to be quiet, using Ren and Blake’s lessons, Mr. Alyshm glancing back at them a couple times, though he didn’t say anything, so the tiny team lead hoped they weren’t *too* loud.

It took another hour or so to get there, but Ruby could *tell* they were getting close, because of the *smell*.

Not of dead people, *thankfully,* but of something bad in its own weird way.

***Grimm.***

*“Mr. Alyshm,*” she whispered, after using her Semblance to come up beside him. *“Enemies ahead.”*

He looked at her, surprised, but, couldn’t he smell them? It wasn’t nearly as bad a smell as *Jaune* acted like it was, but it *was* kind of distinctive, when you started looking for it. It was actually kind of funny, as she’d killed Grimm by the *score* before, mostly newly formed ones that got near her house in Patch, but, after the last mission, where they’d killed *thousands* of them, she’d been able to pick out the smell herself, and the others had too.

The Huntsman still nodded, holding a finger to her lips, and she nodded back, slowing down and giving the handsign for ‘Grimm Ahead’ to the others, who nodded as well, Ren turning a little pale and drifting to the back of their group.

They’d tested it, during one of their field-trips, and having him use his Semblance a little meant the Grimm tended to go after Nora or Weiss, which let the boy get the jump on *them* before *they* could finish getting the jump on *their team*.

Soon after, Mr. Alyshm saw something and slowed down even more, to a walking pace, the others following, and, very quickly, they could see the camp.

*Or what remained of it.*

It was a *big* camp, and several of the buildings seemed *grown* together, with a large, odd-looking tower in the center, but the wall surrounding it had been ripped apart, as had several buildings. The remains of a single Grimm were in the main yard, so degraded it was hard to make out what it was, the decomposing blackness the only sign of what did it. Ruby would put it at adult King Taijitu size, maybe smaller, so like a *bus*, partially buried in the ground, and was probably what she’d smelled.

But that was *it.*

“Did, did we miss them?” Weiss whispered. “Did they move out?

Nora, frowning, shook her head. “*No.*”

When the hammer-wielder didn’t say anything else, the Heiress asked, “How can you be sure?”

*“No one’s been impaled,*” Ren noted, which, *oh.*

“But then where *is* everyone?” Weiss questioned.

“And why did they leave their transports here,” Mr. Alyshm stated, pointing, and Ruby followed his finger, seeing a garage, partially open, truck within. Taking a moment, he unhooked his weapon, Consequences, from it’s holster on his back and toggled the weapon to its warhammer configuration, the spiked head of the green-gold weapon unfolding outwards. “Weapons out. Stay together.”

They all did so, forming a diamond, looking in all directions, while the Huntsman’s focus was centered on the strange tower in the center. It was about fifteen feet wide, but kind of spindly, and didn’t have any doors, or stairs, or anything, the top platform, with a covered roof, a good forty feet up in the air.

A flash of movement caught their attention, and a *man* fell out of the top, his body paralyzed, as Alyshm darted forward, catching him, the Huntsman’s eyes glowing as he turned around, pupils slit kind of like Jaune’s, though the Faunus’ pupils opened back up, rounding out, as the man sagged for a moment, before tensing in a different way.

*“Get up! We need to get up!”* the man yelled, tearing himself out of the Huntsman’s grip and running for the bark-like wall of the tower, scrabbling at it’s side. *“Fuck! Fuck! We gotta get up! They’re coming!”*

“*Who’s* coming?” Mr. Alyshm questioned, but something about this made the hair on the back of Ruby’s neck stand on end, remembering a Wargame *just like this.*

“***Weiss! Elevator!***” Ruby snapped, feeling panic, almost *seeing* Jaune’s little sand timer flipped and counting down until she was ‘Beset by indecision’ and she lost her turn.

Her partner acted, a Glyph appearing underneath them all, Ruby darting out with her Semblance to grab the man and drag him back, Mr. Alyshm, seeing Ren and Nora stepping toward Weiss, doing the same, as, below their feet a moment later, an ice-pillar shot up, carrying them *all* upwards, just as a long, worm-like Grimm launched out of the ground and slammed *headfirst* into it, cracking it, but breaking its *own* mask in the process, letting them get high enough that they could all jump, making it to the top of the tower, seeing two other people inside, a man and a woman.

The bandits, from the leather armor they wore, were *just* as surprised to see them as *they’d* been to see the Grimm worm, which was native to *Vacuo*, but they still went for weapons, only for the woman to freeze, and Ren was on the other guy in a moment, StormFlower pointed directly at his forehead, causing him to stop as well.

“Rose, restraints,” Mr. Alyshm ordered, and she hurried over, slipping out the cuffs he’d had her pack in a side pouch of her backpack to more easily grab, darting over to them with her Semblance and slapping them on the criminals in seconds.

The woman sagged, the guy they saved too busy hyperventilating to stop himself from getting cuffed, while the third bandit just stared at their group, confused, finally asking, “Who the *fuck* are you?”

“Bounty Hunters,” the Huntsman lied. “Where’s Nix?”

The man stared at him, then threw his head back and *laughed*, a crazed, broken sound.

“Something *funny?”* the Snake Faunus demanded.

“You’re three days too late,” the man told them, shaking his head, grinning. “Nix thought he was hot shit. *Was* hot shit. And now he’s just *Grimm* shit. They fuckin’ *ate* him. Even as his Semblance meant they were eating *each other* too, but they just fuckin’ held him down, and ate, and ate, and *ate,* until he ran out of Aura, and then they kept going after he was dead, until there was nothing left!” the man cackled with insane glee, unnerving Ruby, and the others.

“That’s… not how Grimm act,” Mr. Alyshm said slowly, keeping an eye on all three of their prisoners.

The woman spoke up, “Never seen anythin’ like it. But they did. Joanne made this tower, but something speared her, and ripped her off it, fore she could grow thorns. All the others, are gone. They didn’t care. Clan, townie, dead, alive, they dragged ‘em all off screaming into the dark that first night. And then they’ve been coming every few hours since, climbin’ up the tower, until they get someone, then they *leave*. Used to be over a dozen of us up here. It’s just us now.”

An inhuman shriek echoed out from the trees, a single Grimm, but the call was taken up by others, of different types, all around them, Ruby spotting dark shapes moving through the leaves, a number filling in the space they’d just walked through.

*They were waiting for us,* she realized, only, only *Grimm didn’t do that.* Even with Alphas, they just rushed you, though they worked together to do it.

This… this was *different.*

The laughing man finally stopped, and looked up at them, with a crooked smile.

*“Time for a sacrifice.”*