**Chapter Forty-Nine**

Striding down into the cave, pulling my mask back up, and sword in hand, I tried to take in as much as I could. The oppressive *stench* of the Grimm was a little blocked out by the thin material flush against my face, but even then it was nearly eye-watering, though, looking back, the other three of my party didn’t seem nearly as effected.

*Human noses?* I wondered. Given my own were Draconic, and likely superior because of that, it made a certain amount of senses. Looking back forward into the cave, the light from the entrance quickly faded, then the brown stone of the rock all round us shifted to an odd off-white, not the color of Grimm armor, before, in the distance, seeming to stop entirely and open up into a gaping abyss of blackness, with no sign of RWBY in sight.

Panic seized me, and I dashed forward, running, but, as I did so, the cave seemed to magically extend further, my run slowing to a jog, then a slow walk, before I stopped entirely.

*“Jaune!”* Pyrrha called, rushing up to me a moment later, her scroll tucked into her sash, it’s flashlight on, as she came. As she yelled my name, I turned around, in that tunnel of white stone, to see it turn to its normal dark brown hue as she approached, Ren and Nora behind her fumbling with their own scrolls. Between them, the tunnel faded from sight, turning to shadow, before blooming back into existence in, what I realized, was the same tunnel, only in monochrome.

. . . *I have darkvision,* I realized, stupidly, the light of Remnant’s broken moon always enough for me to see by. And when it wasn’t, there were always lights around me, enough for my low-light vision to kick in.

“Jaune, are you alright?” my lover asked, looking at me in concern. “You ran off into the dark.”

“Which, I can apparently see in,” I mused, earning a confused look from my partner.

“Jaune, everyone knows Faunus have superior night vision,” she reminded me.

I grinned, “But can they see in the dark?” At her lifted eyebrow, I laughed. “Sorry, didn’t expect it to be the way it was. Used to places being at least a *little* lit.” Ren and Nora caught up to us, and I turned to them, the lights in my eyes oddly not bothering me in the slightest. “Sorry about that. I thought I saw something, but there wasn’t anything there.”

Ren looked at me, before remarking, “That can happen. You’re not using your scroll?”

“Don’t need to,” I shrugged, turning back to look down into the cave, the angle a little steep, but not so much that anyone was in danger of falling, the cave a dry one. “But I thought we’d’ve caught up to them. Let’s-”

A gunshot resounded from down the length of the cave, the sound warped, but incredibly loud, though still recognizably from Crescent Rose.

“*Follow me,”* I commanded, and took off running once more into the darkness, the entire tunnel a straight shot, the unnaturalness of it unsettling me. Eventually it curved, and I passed several side tunnels, all of them caved in, only the lack of the cacophony that followed a tunnel collapse reassuring me.

The cave, which remained the *exact* same size, turned a few more times, yet *always* going down, and I relaxed a hair when the sounds of voices ahead told me I was catching up, though the fact they sounded pained made me run even faster.

“Wait!” I heard Weiss yell, and then the shotgun blast of Yang’s gauntlet shotgun, the sound of the explosive shot detonating nearly deafening, but I rushed ahead as four voices shouted in pain.

Turning the corner, RWBY was facing off against a small pack of five Beowulfs, three of them already dead, and the last two running forward past the edge of the girl’s lights, the girls in question all on the ground.

“Jaune?” Ruby asked, confused, as I hurtled past them, sword at the ready, and leapt forward, slamming bodily into the creature, the newborn Grimm’s chest caving in, even as my blade swept in and cut through the second’s arm, its head, and then ending in the dented chest of the Grimm I’d crashed into.

Ripping the blade free, I stalked over to Yang, RWBY having gotten to their feet. “Explosives in a tube,” I told her waving around at the cave. “You *made a gun.*” Glancing back down the cave, one last Beowulf entered my range, about a hundred feet ago, running nearly silently towards us, the sound of its claws hidden under the sound of pounding team as the rest of JNPR came towards us. “Weiss, single icicle, downrange, left side of the cave. Fire in four seconds,” I ordered, the girl looking at me in confusion, and I met her gaze with an unyielding one of my own. “Two seconds,” I reminded her, and the heiress turned, gesturing with Myrtlenaster, a glyph spinning up in front of her. “*Now*.”

The caster fired, the sound, while still loud, nothing on the gunshots and explosions from before, and struck the Grimm right as it entered the range where monochrome shifted to color, Blake gasping as she caught sight of the creature a second before it was struck through the chest. Its forward momentum was mostly cancelled, thought it still fell forward, rolling slightly, dead, the frozen projectile half-buried where a normal person’s ribs would be.

“How,” Blake asked, staring at me. “How did you know it was there?”

Deciding to fuck with the hidden catgirl, I smiled grimly, “Faunus have better night vision.” Pyrrha and the others rounded the corner as the girl spluttered, *almost* pointing out that *she* hadn’t seen it. The group reached us, and I nodded to them, walking over to my lover, before turning back to RWBY. “So, did you all have a sudden attack of common sense, or are you still determined to keep going down?”

“That’s not fair,” Yang objected, frowning. “We were fine.”

Weiss harrumphed, looking to her partner, “Until *someone* decided to destroy our eardrums.”

*“Sorry!”* the tiny team lead apologized, her distress at hurting her teammates obvious. “I’m used to fighting outside. Or in big rooms.”

“As are most huntresses,” Pyrrha noted nonjudgmentally. “Which way are we going?” she asked the other girl, gaze quietly intense. “Either further down, or back to the surface, we are with you.”

Yang glanced at the gladiatrix in surprise, then to me. “R-really?” she asked, and I nodded, the girl quickly covering with a “I mean, yeah, we’re a team!”

I bit back my response about how, if we ‘were a team’, she shouldn’t have left *us* on the surface. Instead, I looked over RWBY, and tried to approach this tactically. “Ruby,” I said, “Do you have a smaller weapon?”

She shook her head no.

“Then collapse it down to it’s rifle formation,” I directed.

The mini-reaper did so, but frowned, asking, “But, if I shoot it. . .?”

“If things get that bad, shoot it anyways, but no,” I said, walking over her to tap the heavily armored underside, where the scythe’s blade folded up into. “Bash them with this. It should take the abuse. Otherwise, stay in the center. If things open up, your options will too, but here your weapon is a liability, almost as much as Nora’s. That’s not your fault,” I added, as the girl looked sad, “It just is what is. We’ll make sure to diversify both of your kits when we get back to school.”

*If* we get back, I couldn’t help but think, but pushed the errant thought away. Something about this place. . . it was more than the stench of Grimm. It was *wrong.*

“Just to be clear,” I said. “You four still want to press on?”

RWBY looked to each other, before facing me and nodding as one.

“*Fuck.* Fine,” I swore, considering our strengths. Despite my teasing, Faunus *did* have better vision in low-light conditions, even if it was nothing on a Dragon’s. “Blake, Pyrrha, you and I will take point. Both of you are better than me in pure melee, and I’m a flamethrower. Yang, Ruby, Weiss, you’re in the middle. Weiss, your glyphs can work at angles, or at a distance, and Yang, you cover both girl’s weakness in melee.”

“I’m getting better!” Ms. Schnee pouted, stomping a foot.

“And when you can cast while a Beowulf is trying to tear out your throat right in front of you, I’ll *still* likely have you defended if I can, given the strength of your Glyphs,” I countered. “Shoring up your weaknesses doesn’t mean it’s not smarter to utilize your strengths.”

“And we’ll watch your back!” Nora tried to cheer, but her furtive glances down each end of the tunnel showed her true feelings.

Nodding to them, I turned to face down the tunnels, and to the dead Beowulfs.

Dead Beowulfs which had *barely* degraded, the finest of dark mist wafting over them, only, instead of dispersing itself fully into the air, it gathered, swirling, and drifted *down* the tunnel in defiance of physics.

On a whim, I held out my free hand and spat a baseball sized Flame into it. The bit of prismatic fire sputtered, and wavered, slowly dying, but, focusing on it, I strengthened the Flame. Taking a few steps forward, I held it to the rising vapor, which was sucked into the fire and disappeared, the body of the nearest Grimm breaking down at first as fast as normal, then, as I fed more of my internal reserve into it, even quicker.

Dropping the Flame onto the body, it burned a whole right through it, the Grimm corpse quickly collapsing into itself as I felt my fire consumed in the process. I looked at the others, wondering if I should repeat what I’d done but the others, but that’d cost me a good amount of Flame for destroying that which was already dead. Shaking my head, I led the others further down, catching up to the thin mist of Grimm remains that flowed along the top of the cave like an unnatural river.

We descended further. And further. And *further.* Taking a few turns as we did so, passing dozens upon dozens of collapsed tunnels, Weiss finally breaking the silence after twenty minutes of walking. “This isn’t right.”

“What?” Yang asked. “I thought you wanted to come down here. Don’t tell me you’re meltin’ under pressure, Weiss Cream.”

“You’re right,” I told the heiress, glancing back to her, and reaching a hand out to run it along the regular, subtly undulating grooves in the tunnel’s wall, “This cave is created. Are the Grimm that can do this?”

The white-haired girl nodded. “There are, but they’re native to Vacuo. They shouldn’t *be* this far north!”

“Sand worms?” I questioned, getting another confirming nod. “Anything we need to look out for?”

Weiss frowned, then shook her head. “If we were on Sand, then yes. But it takes time for their acid to eat away stone. You see, they use-”

I cut her off, holding up a hand, another group of Beowulfs coming up the tunnel, having just entered the range of my sight. *“Stay here,”* I said. *“I’ll be right back.”*

“*Jaune?”* Pyrrha whispered back, concerned, but I waved it away.

*“Three this time. It’ll be easy,”* I reassured her, stalking off into the darkness. Because while Grimm used their sense of negative emotions to hone in on their targets, their vision was no better than a Faunus, and would be just as blind in the complete darkness of the cave as Blake would be, possibly even more so.

Putting aside my trepidation, I moved forward, sword at the ready, and approached them. Oddly enough, they seemed to almost be. . . sleepwalking, stumbling forward, moving with none of their species’ grace. It was only as I neared that the lead one seemed to snap out of it, looking up and around, and turned red eyes on the rest of my team, not spotting me at all.

It started to snarl, and I leapt forward, driving my sword *through* its head with ease, moving on the other two and lashing out with blade and claw, my prey unable to sense me in the slightest. Barely coherent shadow-flesh was torn apart in a moment, and with barely a sound, only the soft *thump* of their bodies hitting the ground. “Come on!” I called, the lit forms of the others in the distance jumping slightly, before approaching.

“We’ve been moving for half an hour,” Ren pointed out. “And we’re at least a mile below ground. We should turn back.”

“Come on, where’s your sense of *adventure?”* Yang demanded.

The boy pointed upwards, his reply deadpan. “A mile in that direction.”

“I expected more,” Weiss sighed. “Five minutes more, no longer. Than we turn around.”

I winced, looking down the path, and at what I saw only after I’d finished killing the Grimm, and had called them over. Part of me wanted to press for us to turn back, to hide what I saw but. . . no. I could excuse hiding my foreknowledge, because not only would they not believe me, it’d hurt all of my efforts. I could hide *exactly* what was in the empowering shakes, as I’d been honest on *what* they did, just not *how*. But this. . . this felt like a bridge too far.

“Then get your scroll out Weiss, because we’ve found something,” I sighed, striding forward, the others following, the cave finally evening out into a twenty-food wide tunnel of fark grey sculpted stone, the top edges ragged as *something* had obviously punched through it, digging upwards. The others spread out around me as I kneeled down where tunnel transitioned into solid floor, Aura strengthened muscles letting my claws dig into the solid rock.

Straining, I dug out a bit, revealing more floor continuing onwards, the rock seemingly deposited on top of it. Letting it drop, the others were looking at the walls, which were covered in various carvings. Moving over to Pyrrha, who was keeping herself at the ready, I noticed that Weiss was carefully panning over them, recording. *Smart girl,* I thought.

Looking at them, they depicted a number of things. Ancient cities. Ports. Countrysides full of farms, but with no natural barrier in sight to protect them like my, like *Jaune’s* hometown. And over each was a different person, an aura of energy around them. Some were surrounded by stars, some by storms, some by an enormous snowflake.

And I had *no* idea what *any* of it meant.

On a whim, I took out my own phone and did the same thing as Weiss, making sure to get all of the murals in the passage, as we slowly worked our way down the hall. Pyrrha glanced at my phone, then frowned, reaching out for it. I held it steady, and she tapped the signal indicator, which was full. Slipping her own out from her sash, she tapped the same indicator on hers, which had a small red x through it, and I understood her question of how, over a mile underground, I still had service.

Popping open the text program, I typed ‘Part of my signing bonus, like the house. Can’t get you one, though.’ She just looked at it, then me, smiled, rolled her eyes, and made a shooing motion.

We hit an intersection after a couple hundred feet, branching off in three directions. Weiss frowned, “Which way do we go?”

“Right,” Both Blake and I said at once, and I shot her a questioning look. She pointed, and, squinting down the hall, I could make out a distant blue glow, partially hidden by the forms of three baby Beowulfs, stumbling forward.

“Why did you say that? If you didn’t see it?” she questioned, and I directed my phone upwards, to the thin trail of Grimm Mist which flowed around the corner, in the direction of the glow.

“It’s the ceiling,” Yang shrugged, staring at the darkness, but somehow not really *seeing* it.

Pyrrha stiffened beside me, directing her own phone light upwards, the others following suit, “I, I think there’s something there.”

In the middle of the twisting, shadowy stream a glyph formed, Weiss forming a single small flower of ice, which the flowing river of darkness flowed up and around, clearly visible instead of blending into the stone of the passageway.

“What the fuck!?” the brawler yelled, stumbling back, fists up.

Her yell snapped the Grimm in the distance awake, and they roared, charging us. “Ruby, can you take the shot?” I asked, as the started to charge the couple hundred feet towards us, into the dead-zone where I couldn’t see any better than the others.

“I. . . I can try,” she said. “But won’t it be loud?”

“We can handle it,” I reassured her. “Go for it.”

The girl nodded, moving up to stand with us, lifting her weapon in its rifle configuration. *“You can do this,”* she whispered to herself, the sound carrying in the silence, the only noise the braying of the charging Grimm. Her first shot sounded like it hit, and I could *hear* a body hit the ground, but the two charging shapes continued on.

Ruby cocked her rifle, sighting and firing again and again, six shots before one of the Beowulfs *actually* dropped, her seventh taking down the other right as it entered my range, her shot taking it in the shoulder, but blowing away half its body in the process. She sighed, lowering her gun, and turning to me with a happy look on her face.

“Good job,” I told her, glancing at the ejected shells from her bolt-action weapon. “Collect your shells. We don’t want to leave anything behind but dissolving Grimm.” She nodded, moving to pick up the brass, and I walked forward, still recording the murals as we passed, and came across the *eleven* Grimm she’d killed, hidden in the dark, several having been taken out with a single shot from the small girl’s ridiculous weapon.

“Are we just not gonna talk about what that shit back there was?” Yang demanded, following.

“What stuff?” I asked, confused, and Yang turned her flashlight upwards, highlighting the stream of dark vapor. “Oh, sorry, thought it was obvious,” I apologized, turning my own flashlight on the dead Grimm, and the black smoke-like substance rising up off of them. “It’s bit of dead Grimm. This place *reeks* of it. It’s so thick, it doesn’t seem to be dissipating. Well, unless I do this,” I said, turning and breathing out on one of the dead Grimm.

Unlike normally, when it would just burn away, it collapsed into itself, just like the other had. Feeding the blaze more from my replenished reserve, I forced it to expand into a prismatic inferno that blocked off the tunnel completely, the air seeming to twist, then clear, finally clean, even as I could feel a strong, invisible wind from inside press against it, trying to smother it. I let it go, and when it breached the wall of fire, I winced as the ***stench*** slammed me in the face, the others gagging.

“Ugh, what *is* that?” Nora demanded. “It smells like stinky feet and *despair!”*

I shrugged, it was more like rotting yams and nihilism to me, but to each their own, “It’s Grimm. You know. The reason I *didn’t* want to come down here?”

The others just stared at me.

“Well, let’s keep going,” I said, turning and walking forward, letting my Flames die out, the *oppressive* feeling of the place settling back, pressing in on my skin, but I ignored it, forging on ahead. Again, I got the faintest sense of Deja-Vu, as if I’d done something like this before, and the oddest thought that killing our way in instead of needing to sneak in was *so* much easier.

*Well, yes?* I thought, but focused on the here and now, rapidly approaching the blue glow, emerging out of a hallway, the others behind me, onto a landing three fourths of the way into an enormous room. Walking up to the edge, I glanced upward, noting the ceiling, then down, and had to stop and stare, as did the others around me.

The room seemed to be a colossal staircase of sorts, winding around a central open space. At the bottom was the largest crystal I’d ever seen, floating free over a pedestal, slowly spinning. It was exquisitely cut, hundreds of facets forming spiral patterns up its length, the flat top inscribed with an enormous snowflake design.

Glancing back, the Grimm Stream turned the corner, following the outside wall as it went down the spiraling stairs, and out of sight. Three rotations down, and on the other side of room, I spotted another few Grimm slowly making their way up. Flicking my weapon into its rifle configuration, I made sure it was set up for semi-auto fire, as I called out, “Ruby, Pyrrha, three down. Snipe the Grimm. Blake, Ren, Yang, watch the stairs in case we miss any.”

The others were snapped out of their awe, moving into position, and soon enough our shots rang out, taking out Grimm as the noise snapped the monsters out of their stupor. Thankfully, they were dumb as a bag of rocks, so we’d taken out over a dozen before they realized what was happening, and started charging up at us. *One* made it to us, Yang running ahead of the other two and meeting it mid-swing, blasting its head off in a single shot-assisted punch.

“Meet you at the bottom,” I told them, after we all waited for several seconds without another sound being heard. It was easy enough to jump up to the ledge and leap off, manifesting my wings, coming down in the center, but *not* above the crystal, spinning as I did so, gun trained on the stairs to see if we’d missed any.

We hadn’t, but when I reached the bottom, there was a large hallway leaving the room where a pair of sleepwalking Beowulfs shambled forward, and were put down with three shots, the second one missing, as I wasn’t the shot Pyrrha or Ruby was. Keeping guard, the others jogged down the stairs, Pyrrha giving me a reproachful look when she arrived, but one she didn’t explain, as the others turned the floating crystal I’d, for the most part, ignored.

“Wow,” Ruby said, staring up at it. “I’ve never seen a Dust crystal this big!”

“I have,” Weiss shrugged, though she still stared at it, frowning, as she slowly circled around it, camera out, recording it from all angles.

Blake scoffed, disdainfully, “Of course you have.”

The Schnee heiress, showing how distracted she was, nodded, “Indeed, though something this size would normally be rendered down into something more usable. To keep it like this, as a decoration, seems so *wasteful*. You wouldn’t even see something like this at one of my father’s parties.”

Looking to Pyrrha, I gestured to my eyes, and the hallway, and she nodded, taking up my guard position to look around. I smiled in thanks and approached the crystal. “Shouldn’t it be cold?” I asked, Weiss giving me a look that screamed ‘Are you really that stupid?’ “I know they’re not when they’re inactive,” I added, “But this seems pretty active to me. Shouldn’t it be freezing in here?”

Biting her lip, Weiss nodded. “Even if it’s not being fully actualized, there should be *some* level of effect,” she admitted, finishing her walk around the crystal, pointing her scroll’s camera downwards to light up the base. “I don’t recognize this language.”

Walking up to the metal base, the *first* bit of metal I’d seen the entire way down here, I looked down, and saw what she was talking about. Unfortunately, it wasn’t even in English letters, or ‘common’ as it was called here on Remnant, the lack of *other* languages meaning it was rarely an issue. The script was made up of odd, flowing letters, like cursive but exponentially more elegant, never stopping, with no break to indicate words, or sentences. It was beautiful as it was alien, to both my memories and Jaune’s, and *that* fact worried me.

“Weiss,” I said quietly, Ruby, Nora, and Yang’s quiet conversation about how big of a boom a crystal this size going off would make going silent at my prompting. “You’re classically educated. More than any of us. Maybe more than all of us *combined*. Have you *ever* heard of *anything* like this?”

The girl on the spot, looked up from where she’d finished her recording the base. “I. Um. Well, *no.*”

*“Shit,”* I swore, looking around the feeling of unease growing.

“I’ve seen some!” she quickly added. “Bits of inscriptions, like this,” she said, waving to the pedestal. “But never in this good condition. Other inscriptions, like the one near vale, were different. Individual sigils. But, yes, a find like this is *unprecedented!”*

“Pyrrha,” I said, and she nodded.

“We should leave,” she told the others. “*Soon.*”

“But we just got to the good part, big red,” Yang argued, waving around herself. “Oobleck might be so jazzed he’ll give us an A in his class without even having to go!”

“Send my scroll a copy of what you’ve found,” I ordered Weiss. “Mine has more memory, in case something happens.” The white haired girl frowned, but nodded, forwarding it to me, the Scroll’s wireless capabilities letting peer-to-peer connections form easily. I turned to Yang, adding, “That’s the point. Finds like these *don’t happen.* So either we’re *that special*, or they *have* happened but the people that did it *didn’t survive long enough to report back.*”

The fact that I was getting *serious* Mountains of Madness vibes from this place wasn’t helping in the *slightest*.

Frowning, I tried to open a portal Home, if only to reassure myself that we had an escape route. Thankfully, it opened, just as it always did, which helped my nerves, but only so much. Pyrrha glanced at it, but I shook my head minutely, dismissing it, and she nodded in understanding.

Weiss considered that, and presented her own counter-offer. “That. . . has some merit. We came here following the Grimm smoke. What if we went in another direction? Most would follow the same trail, not break off.”

“No,” Pyrrha insisted, shaking her head. “I’m sorry, but we should leave. Now.”

“Maybe a little,” I said, my partner shooting me a confused look. “She’s not *wrong,* but. . . but only a little.”

“Jaune, *no,”* she insisted.

“We’ll do it as we backtrack,” I promised her. “I saw a lot of other hallways, on the way down. We’ll poke around *them* ***as*** we leave. I don’t care if I have to literally drag you out of here, kicking and screaming,” I stated.

Yang, frowned, gesturing down the wide open hallway in front of us, hints of metal shining, “Why can’t we just look a bit that way?”

My gaze was cold, “Because, I’m putting my foot down on this. I’m not the leader of team RRWN, but I *am* the leader of ABGN, and Pyrrha and I *will* knock the four of you out and carry you to the surface *ourselves* if that what it takes. I’m *not* going to have to go to your father and inform him he’s lost *another* woman in his family, Yang.”

It was a low blow, I knew it, but we’d gone *far* past the point of civility here. The girl in question flinched, then started to rally, her face shifting to a snarl, but Ruby interrupted her. “We-we should go Yang,” she said, tugging on her sister’s jacket. “I didn’t realize it before, ‘cause it was new, and exciting, but, I *really* don’t like it here.”

“I, fine,” Yang said. “But that wasn’t cool.”

“Neither was ignoring me to come here, but we can discuss this when we’ve *left,”* I told her. “Now, let’s get the hell out of here. Pyrrha, you take point with Blake and Yang, I’ll take the rear.”

She nodded, and I watched the open hallway, easily fifty feet across, as the others started to ascend the stairs. As I did, I caught a flicker of *something* in the distance, dark grey against the monochrome white of the floor. Instead of going ‘oh, it must be nothing,’ I immediately spat a globe of Flame into my hand, shaped it into a javelin, and *hurled* it down the hall, feeding it from my reserves as it fought against the invisible wind that ran through the place. It flew right, my experience watching Pyrrha helping me aim true, past the range of my vision, before it hit *something* that shrieked in agony, a squat, black form burning in an instant, leaving my Flame behind.

Reaching out to it, I made the dying Flame *explode* into an inferno, highlighting *dozens* of spiders, all skittering towards us silently, the fire catching on invisible webs that crisscrossed the space, a vast network that crossed the entire space. With a wave of my hand, I half-shaped the distant Flame, still part of me, swirling it out to cover one end of the hallway, then another, making a blockade of prismatic fire. However, I knew it wouldn’t be one I could keep up for long.

“Jaune?” Pyrrha called, looking back, but looking at her, I saw more spiders starting to creep across the very top of the room.

“*Run!”* I yelled, kicking myself for not having checked the higher up areas. I’d been so damn interested in the glowy crystal that I hadn’t bothered to check the room properly. *What am I, a fucking moth?* “It’s a trap!”

Turning my sword-rifle up, I shot at the spiders, so many of them up there that I still hit something when I missed, flicking to full auto after a moment, kicking myself for forgetting about *that* to and hosing them down.

“What?” Weiss demanded, screaming in fright when it started raining Grimm. They weren’t Shelobs, unless they were *really* young, their bodies too squat and their legs too short to be that kind of forest-dwelling Grimm. And there were *far* too many of them. More started descending on thin webs, with even *more* coming.

Looking at the floating Crystal, I charged it, yelling, *“Run, damnit!”* Reaching the crystal, I slammed a hand on it, trying to use it like I would any other Dust crystal, but nothing happened. I could *feel* the energy in it, but it seemed to be sleeping, distant, unreachable.

*Then I need to wake it up,* I thought, pulling deep, and considered reaching for the Magic that dwelt within, but Oz’s words rang in my ears, and I instead covered it with prismatic Flame, trying to infuse the Crystal with it, just as I’d tried to do to my weapons and armor. It’d make it a Beacon to Grimm, but *we were kind of already past that point.*

Under my hand, though, the Crystal seemed to greedily drink my Flame, and I poured more and more into it, a fourth of my reserve, before it [*clicked*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KhDldATuFQ4) and the faintly glowing crystal blazed to life, the Grimm, halfway down, and almost to my friends, already swinging over to latch onto the ledges, shrieked in surprise, and. . . *pain?*

I didn’t know what was happening, nor did I really care, reaching *into* the Crystal, trying to use it like I would Dust, but there was something *more* to it, that took my desire to stop the Grimm and *molded* it, firing, not a blast of icelike I’d wanted, but a pale blue beam of concentrated ***FREEZE***.

The room lit up brightly, the crystal’s hum rising to a song that seemed to carry with it the essence of cold, of winter, of ***Ice***, in all its forms, and it resonated deeply within me.

Above me, though, the spiders froze solid, the descending ones turned into grisly chandeliers, some falling to crack apart, while others were stuck to the walls, the ceilings, *everything.*

I wanted to stay here, to study this thing, to take it as *Mine*, in an unfamiliar, but not unnatural, urge I shoved down. This was certainly a treasure, but it was useless if I died, and I would trade it for the lives of *anyone* on my team without hesitation.

Pulling myself away, I flapped my wings, rising up, careful not to touch the beam of light that still rose from the snowflake glyph up to the ceiling. From the side corridors, more spider-Grimm poured out, though the ones that came to close to the ledge, and the shining blue light, froze solid. But the other spider-Grimm quickly used their iced-over brethren as shields, blocking the area between railing and the start of the next floor up’s staircase with their dead, forming corridors of safe darkness. These Grimm *weren’t stupid,* and that, more than anything else, pushed me to fly even faster.

Rising up, my team were fighting their way through the tide, Ruby’s Scythe, Nora’s Hammer, and Yang, wielding my shield, bashing their way through the Grimm that tried to keep low, still slowly icing over, but not as quickly as those directly exposed.

I used my own rifle, in burst mode, to destroy the iced-over fortifications the spiders were building ahead of them, casting pale blue light on the hordes, ahead of them, that had prepared, clearing the way as my team rose higher and higher. Seeing our exit, the only hallway *not* disgorging spiders, I took a moment to blast apart the stairway past it, freezing the Grimm laying in wait, and flew for the exit, a niggling sense in the back of my mind prodding me to act like a true dragon and breath a wave of Flame that preceded my landing.

As I did so, invisible webs burned, and, as I took hold of the Flame and shoved it down the hall, *continued* to burn, until the way was clear in truth. Another burst of Flame up the stairway held off the incoming swarm, as my team reached me, a look of relief on Pyrrha’s face as I waved them in.

The others thundered past me, *all* of them terrified, and I took the rear, shifting the fiery barrier from the upwards stairs to fill the hall as I ran after the others, bit of remnant Flame left behind lighting the way. We turned the corner, the tunnel upwards in sight, when, beneath our feet, the ground itself gave way, falling into a yawning pit.

I was able to grab Ren and Nora, flapping wings to keep them up, and Pyrrha, from sheer instinct and will, twisted around, her shield glowing darkly with her own power, keeping her aloft even as she reached back, trying to grab Yang’s hand, but the girl had already turned, trying to catch her sister, all of team RWBY falling down into a hidden tunnel, disappearing even from my monochrome sight.

I landed at the edge of the tunnel with Ren and Nora, and, once more, I was faced with a choice. The *same* choice.

Save myself, and part of my team, or risk us all to *save* us all.

“Ren, Nora,” I commanded. “Head back up-”

“We’re coming,” Nora informed me, in a tone that brooked no argument.

“Pyr-” I started to say, not even finishing her name before she cut me off.

“Where you go, I go. Into the breach,” she declared.

I could here the skittering legs of the spiders, my Flame wall breached as my reserves started to run dry.

There was no time.

I opened my wings wide.

This was going to *suck.*

“Pyrrha, hold onto my front, Ren, my back, Nora, my back over Ren and make sure he doesn’t fall off,” I ordered, considering shifting to my mid-form, but I had no way of knowing that I wouldn’t get stuck somewhere. The others clambered on to me, their weight negligible to my Aura-enhanced draconic muscles.

“Hold on tight,” I said, as the spider-Grimm rounded the corner, and flapped once over the abyss, before I dropped down, diving headfirst into a deeper darkness.