

CHAPTER ONE



“You can stop laughing, Coco.” Sun sighed. “Anytime.”

“I’m not laughing,” Coco said, innocently sipping her coffee.

It was surprising when Team SSSN joined Team CFVY for breakfast in the lower courtyard before class, but she was glad they had. Velvet told everyone about their misadventures the night before, and Coco would not have missed it for the world.

“Okay, stop *smiling*, then,” Sun said.

“I thought boys liked it when girls smiled.”

“For some reason when you do it, it isn’t friendly. It looks like a threat.”

Yatsushashi nodded solemnly.

“You have to admit,” Neptune Vasilius told Sun, “you getting beat up by three random thugs, on your own turf, *is* pretty funny. Wish I’d been there.”

From the hard edge in Neptune’s voice, Coco wondered if he meant he wished he’d been there to *watch* more than help. But she doubted Sun had the awareness to see that. And from the way Sun’s other teammate Sage Ayana was glaring at him, she guessed that he understood where Neptune was coming from. Last night wasn’t

just about Sun being wacky old Sun—it was another example of him putting himself before his team.

“I’m telling you: There was something really weird about those guys!” Sun protested. “They were unbeatable.”

The news that Velvet and Yatsunashi had saved Sun had pretty much made Coco’s morning. It restored some of the balance that had been lost since Team SSSN had come to Shade, gloating that they had rescued CFVY on their mission last month.

“Rescued” was a strong word, Coco thought. They had certainly *assisted*, and she was grateful. But SSSN’s bragging had not only taken the shine off CFVY’s reputation—it had fed brewing resentment that Coco and the others had been getting from some students at Shade. Despite CFVY’s reputation and demonstrated awesomeness, the native Vacuans called them weak for abandoning Beacon Academy. Now it felt like CFVY had to prove themselves with every assignment, every mission, and SSSN didn’t make that any easier.

Coco was more than a little hesitant to accept Sun’s offer to help them track down the Crown. He had a habit of attaching himself to better teams, like RWBY, to make up for the fact that he and his own team were mediocre at best. They had potential, Coco thought, but they needed a strong leader—and Sun wasn’t it. What kind of leader abandoned their team, especially after what they’d been through at Beacon?

Sun was too unstable, too unreliable, for her to want to partner with him and his team. She didn’t even like eating with SSSN, usually. Team CFVY worked best on their own, because they trusted one another completely.

“Look, Sun, I’m sorry about your missing friends,” Coco said. “And I appreciate your offer to team up. But the only help we need right now is from Headmaster Theodore and Professor Rumpole.” She was certain that was the best way to track down the Crown, if the two of them would ever respond.

Unfortunately, Rumpole, Theodore’s right hand, had been brushing off Team CFVY lately. After their mission debriefing last month, Coco had requested a meeting with the headmaster to discuss the Crown, but they still hadn’t heard anything. Either Rumpole hadn’t passed on the message or Theodore didn’t think it was worth his time. Coco was trying to be patient, but Team CFVY wasn’t waiting around.

Scarlet David lifted his head. He’d been listening, not saying much. Coco got the feeling he wasn’t particularly enjoying being at Shade. Vacuo was a bit of an acquired taste and took some getting used to, especially after everything he’d been through—losing both Beacon and Haven to the same people, whoever it was who had been working with the White Fang.

This enemy was a threat, clearly, but so was the Crown. Why couldn’t Theodore see the urgency?

“Hold on,” Scarlet said. “Are you saying you don’t have permission to investigate the Crown?”

“We don’t *not* have permission,” Fox Alistair said.

“We don’t have explicit orders to pursue the Crown, no,” Coco said. “But I see this as an extension of our original mission to support the Schist refugees. It’s unfinished business.” Carmine and Bertilak were still out there, and the Crown—if that’s who they were working for—still posed a danger.



Why did the Crown need so many people with powerful Semblances? Coco wondered. She doubted the Crown was collecting them to perform petty crimes. And it was taking away people who could become valuable Huntsmen one day—people who might be needed if there was ever a full-on attack on Shade.

“But it is *our* business,” Coco added. “We don’t need you. No offense.”

Scarlet stood. “Why would I take offense?” he asked. “Just because you think you’re too good for us.”

Coco glanced at her team. Velvet avoided looking at her, which meant she wasn’t on the same page this time. Yatsunashi looked uncomfortable, but he kind of always did during personal conflicts. And Fox—

“It wouldn’t hurt to have some reinforcements,” Fox sent, using his telepathic Semblance, presumably just to her.

“I don’t disagree,” Coco sent back. *“If it was the right team.”*

“That’s fine. We hadn’t even discussed this yet, since Sun only sprang the idea on us this morning,” Scarlet said.

Coco blinked. Sometimes it took her a second to process things when she was having a telepathic conversation with Fox in the middle of a regular conversation with other people. Was Scarlet saying Team SSSN *wasn’t* offering to help? Did SSSN even have a plan?

“We’ll let you know when we need backup,” Coco added. “This is a major problem, and I don’t understand why Theodore and Rumpole don’t see that finding the Crown should be Shade’s biggest priority right now.”

“Theo has a lot on his mind,” Sun announced.

“Theo?” Coco repeated incredulously.

“Headmaster Theodore,” Sun said.

“I know who you meant. I *didn’t* know that you were on such familiar terms with him. You just got here.”

“*And you’re not exactly the best and brightest student at Shade,*” she added silently.

“*Harsh,*” Fox sent.

Okay, so she hadn’t thought it silently enough.

“*But fair,*” Fox added.

“When we arrived, Theodore wanted an update on everything that went down in Mistral,” Sun said. “He asked why we came to Shade instead of waiting for Haven to reopen.”

“I’ve been wondering that myself,” Sage said quietly.

“Hey, I agreed to come because you talked up how much fun Vacuo is,” Neptune said.

“Has Vacuo been fun so far?” Sage asked.

“Not really.” Neptune’s eyes widened. “Sun *tricked me?*”

“It wouldn’t be the first time,” Scarlet said.

“Look, we need to get ready for whatever’s coming,” Sun said. “This is the best place for that.” His tail swished angrily.

It pained Coco to admit it, but she agreed with Sun. Just this once.

“There’s a difference between the *best* place and the *only* place,” Scarlet grumbled. “Beacon’s gone—”

“For now,” Velvet said.

Scarlet rolled his eyes—or at least, the one eye that wasn’t covered by his red hair. “Sure. And with Atlas’s borders closed, Shade Academy is the only place to train. I wouldn’t call that a choice.”

Sun rose from his seat and faced Scarlet. “You do have a choice. You can stay or you can go.”

"I'm not the one who has a problem staying in one place," Scarlet retorted.

"*Harsh,*" Fox sent again. This time to Coco, Velvet, and Yatsuhashi.

"Come on, guys. Can we not do this?" Neptune said.

"At least not in front of other teams," Sage muttered.

Yatsuhashi pushed his plate away, most of his breakfast still uneaten. Velvet's ears wilted, matching her downcast expression.

This was no good, Coco thought. Team SSSN's dysfunction was affecting her team's morale.

"Can we get back to Theodore?" Coco said. "Sun, why do you think he isn't worried about the Crown?"

"He's focused on the bigger picture. Shade could be attacked at any moment."

"Keeping us in the dark isn't going to help anyone," Coco said.

"You keep forgetting," Scarlet scoffed. "We're just students."

"We're already better than a lot of trained Huntsmen," Coco said.

"But we still have a lot to learn. And we've already failed to defend one school."

Coco corrected him. "We were all taken by surprise. Haven fared better."

"Most of us weren't even there, and I still wouldn't call that a win," Scarlet replied.

Coco shook her head and repeated her point. "We need to see the headmaster. He may be too preoccupied to look into the Crown, but he also can't ignore it. He just needs to take us seriously."

"I'll see what I can do," Sun said.