

RWBY

AFTER the FALL

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Based on the series created by MONTY OUM

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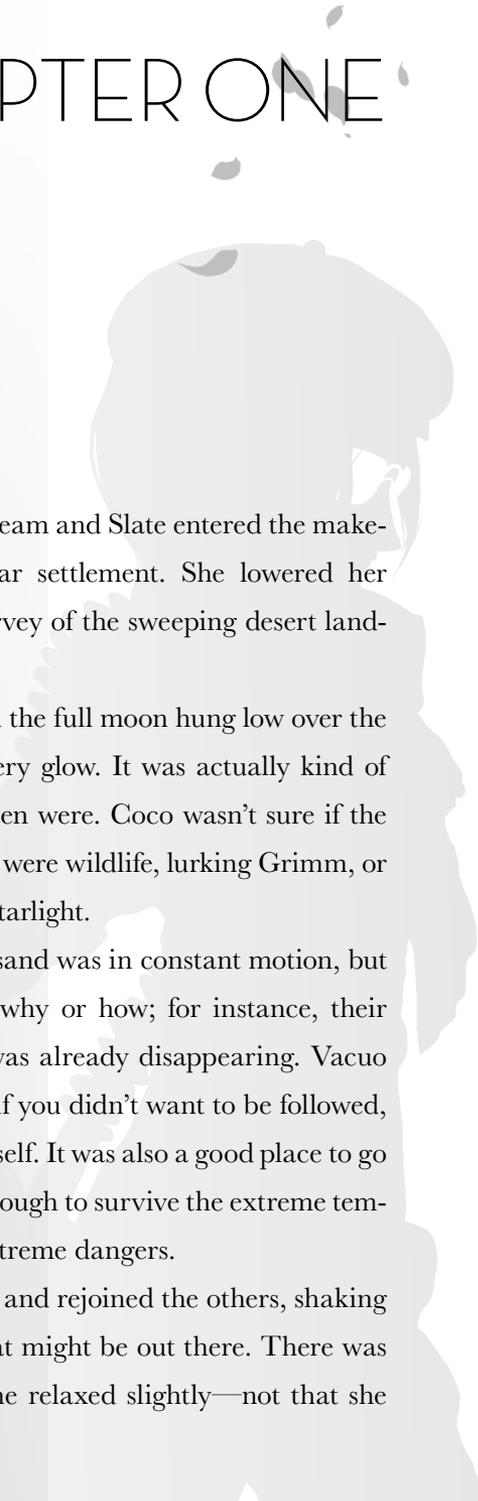
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CHAPTER ONE



Coco stayed back until her team and Slate entered the make-shift walls of the Feldspar settlement. She lowered her sunglasses and took one last survey of the sweeping desert landscape behind them.

It was just past twilight, and the full moon hung low over the horizon, giving the sand a silvery glow. It was actually kind of pretty, but dangerous things often were. Coco wasn't sure if the moving shadows in the distance were wildlife, lurking Grimm, or the desert sands shifting in the starlight.

Coco had learned that the sand was in constant motion, but even Fox didn't know exactly why or how; for instance, their trail, only a few minutes old, was already disappearing. Vacuo seemed like a good place to go if you didn't want to be followed, if you wanted to disappear yourself. It was also a good place to go to die, unless you were strong enough to survive the extreme temperatures and the even more extreme dangers.

Coco pushed up her glasses and rejoined the others, shaking off her apprehension about what might be out there. There was always something out there. She relaxed slightly—not that she

would let anyone notice—now that Velvet, Fox, and Yatsuhashi were safe inside the nomadic settlement. Of course, “safe” and “inside” were relative terms, she realized as she took in the makeshift village.

Coco’s dark glasses made her seem casual and aloof, but that couldn’t have been further from the truth. Her whole appearance was carefully cultivated to give her an edge over opponents and classmates alike while, of course, looking fashionable. She liked that the glasses hid where her attention was and what she was thinking until she wanted someone to know. Plus, they looked damn good on her, though didn’t everything?

But underneath all that fashion, Coco was studying everything around her; silently sizing up everyone, sometimes not so silently. And Feldspar was a dump.

The so-called settlement consisted of scattered tents, trucks, vans, and squat adobe homes haphazardly arranged without any visible defenses. There was no way it could ever compare to Beacon, let alone any village in Vale; there wasn’t even a lookout tower, or any sign of guards patrolling. Well, that was what Huntsmen were for, right? That was why Team CFVY was there.

Coco nodded. She always felt better when there was a job to do.

Then it hit her, what was so odd about Feldspar. A moment later, Fox’s thoughts echoed her own.

Where is everybody? Fox asked.

The sand was smooth, packed down from the collective weight of people walking over it all day, every day, for months.

But fresh footsteps were visible, suggesting people had been here recently and cleared out in a hurry.

Coco held up a hand and looked around. Fox, Yatsunami, and Velvet nodded at the familiar signal to stop and listen. They froze. Then, in the still night, they heard a slight rustle of clothing. Gentle breathing.

"They're all around us," Fox sent to the team. Coco caught Slate's eye and moved her hand in a circle.

Here we go, Coco thought.

"Come on out, folks," Slate called out. "These are my friends. I vouch for them. And they're Huntsmen to boot. Good ones."

They waited. Slate raised her walking stick.

"Slate!" an excited male voice called out. And in a blink, the courtyard was bustling with people, swarming toward Slate.

"You're alive, you old so-and-so." A tall man with dusty hair, dusty skin, and dusty clothes grabbed Slate in a bear hug.

"She seems popular," Fox sent.

"So why'd they leave her?" Velvet asked.

"Bast, put me down or that situation might change," Slate said in a strained voice.

"I'll put you down on the condition that you never pull a stunt like that again," Bast said with a laugh.

"You know I don't like conditions," Slate said. "And I break promises like I break wind. Sometimes you just can't help it."

"Slate." Bast rolled his eyes and then lowered her gently. "You certainly have a way with words."

"What? Everyone does it."

“Which? Breaking wind or breaking promises?”

“Both. And it’s polite not to call either of them out when it happens.” Slate patted the dusty man affectionately on his broad arm. “How’d we do?”

“Everyone got away, thanks to you,” Bast said.

Coco narrowed her eyes behind her glasses. “Why do I get the feeling there’s something you aren’t telling us?”

Bast turned to Coco and appraised her and the rest of the group quickly. He seemed to make a snap judgment that they were worth talking to. That was the way of all Vacuans. The fact that they’d clearly just survived a fight, and were bringing back the spoils as well as one of their own people, likely spoke in Team CFVY’s favor.

“Slate here saved the lot of us. Again,” Bast said.

“Alabaster—” Slate said sharply.

“She never wants any credit for keeping us alive, but you should have seen her. She held off that pod of sand crabs while the rest of us escaped. We got worried when she didn’t catch up to us, though.”

“Just doing my job,” Slate said.

“Are you a Huntress, Slate?” Velvet asked excitedly.

“She’s better. She’s our mayor,” Bast said.

Coco’s eyes widened. It wasn’t every day that someone surprised her.

“I didn’t think nomadic settlements had mayors,” Coco said.

“Every group needs a leader,” Fox said. “Especially when the group settles down for a while. We need someone who doesn’t get

complacent, who keeps everyone ready to move on at a moment's notice. That person doesn't always get a formal title."

"Titles are meaningless, anyway." Slate turned her attention to Fox. "You're from here. Who's your tribe?"

"I'm from Kenyte," Fox said. "But it's been a long time."

"No matter how long you've been away, you're always part of your tribe, and your tribe's always part of you," Slate said.

Fox smiled.

"Kenyte is a great distance from here, but last I heard, they're thriving," Slate said.

"As well as anyone can in the desert," Bast added.

"Slate, so you were mayor of . . . Gossan?" Coco asked.

"It doesn't matter anymore," Slate said. She wasn't playing at being humble, or feigning discomfort. She really didn't want the attention.

"Slate is mayor of Tuff. That was the name of our original settlement, and it's what we call ourselves," Bast explained. "Wherever we go, wherever we settle, we call that place by our name—unless we join permanently with another tribe of nomads. We've had to move a few times now. Grimm. They always seem to find us, but more quickly lately. Something strange has been going on."

"Like I said, just doing my job. A job no one else wants," Slate says.

"Including me. I'm glad you're back, Slate." Bast lowered his voice. "Like Gossan, Feldspar has weak leadership. They'll be happy to have you."

Coco looked around. It was impossible to tell apart the recent Gossan refugees from the Feldspar tribe. Maybe some of them were slightly less rumpled and dirty than the others, but that could have just been a matter of personal hygiene.

“The politics here can get interesting. Like I said, most tribes and settlements don’t have elected officials,” Fox sent. *“As a general rule, we don’t like rules. It’s even more unusual for a tribe to have a leader that they trust and like, especially after they’ve connected with a larger group. Slate must be really good.”*

Coco licked her dry lips. She was actually starting to like the bitter-tasting sand, but it was no replacement for her favorite lip gloss, which she had run out of a year ago. The boutique that made it had been trashed along with the rest of Beacon.

“I doubt they elected her, but it sounds like no one else was in the running,” Coco said. Slate seemed like the kind of person who stepped up when she had to, and most people are naturally inclined to be followers.

“Speaking of jobs,” Slate said. “Where are Bertilak and Carmine? They were supposed to be fighting those Grimm.”

Coco raised her eyebrows. “There are other Huntsmen here?”

Slate shrugged. “Sort of.”

“I’ll find them.” Bast ran off.

Slate called out to a few boys on the edge of the crowd. “Hans, why don’t you and your friends make yourselves useful? This here is fresh sand crab. Take it to the mess and make sure it gets rationed. You three take an extra share for your trouble.”

One boy with a dirt-smudged face nodded. “You got it, Ms. Slate!”

“It’s just Slate, kid.”

Hans and his two friends grabbed the cloth-wrapped bundles of crab meat from Yatsunashi and Fox.

“Why didn’t you mention that you sacrificed yourself to save your people?” Velvet asked Slate.

Slate gave her a penetrating look. “Would it have changed anything? It didn’t seem relevant, and you were just as eager to save me when I was some defenseless old woman, which, thank you again, by the way. Fortunately, I didn’t end up dying after all. This time.”

Slate crossed her arms and looked around. “These aren’t *my* people, either. They’re just people. Good people. And I believe in helping others when I can. I don’t care who they are or where they’re from.”

She’s incredible, Coco thought. She saw why everyone rallied to Slate, and it wasn’t just because she helped organize and protect them. It was because she cared more about them than she did herself, and that was a rare quality in Vacuo. As Slate herself had implied back in the desert, it was the kind of quality that eventually got you killed, unless you were also very lucky or very strong.

“Why don’t we go to the saloon for a drink and some of that food we brought back,” Slate said.

Coco hid a smile. Slate was deft at making an order seem more like a friendly suggestion.

Slate led them to a one-level hut built from sandstone, canvas, and good intentions. It was remarkably spacious and clean inside, and pleasantly warm. The night was gradually getting

colder, as it did after the sun went down in Vacuo, but the saloon had a number of roaring fire pits. The laughter, conversation, and music stopped when people spotted Slate.

She smiled and waved. “Can’t get rid of me that easily.”

Several people called out well-wishes to her, or banged their clay mugs against the long shale tables.

Coco thought Slate would pick a table in the corner for some privacy, but she walked right up to one in the center. CFVY followed her and sat down. The rest of the restaurant soon went back to their business as if they weren’t there. Coco figured it was naïve to think they were really being ignored, though; people in Vacuo didn’t trust strangers easily, and CFVY had a way of attracting attention wherever they went.

A perky Faunus waitress with a pig snout came over. She rattled off the offerings: “Today’s specials are crab burgers, crab steak, crab cake, and crab rangoon. All very fresh.”

“This one’s on me,” Slate said. “I’m gonna need an ale, Topaz. Make it two to start, and keep them coming. And as much as I love crab anything, I’ve been dreaming about your spicy bat stew for days. Got any of that left?”

“For you? Anything,” Topaz said.

“And get these folks whatever they like. They earned it.”

“Coffee,” Coco said. She madly needed caffeine, and she also liked to stay on brand. “And I’ll try the crab burger.” *When in Vacuo.*

Yatsuhashi ordered the crab steak and desert lotus tea, and Fox ordered fried crevice worms, lightly toasted cave beetles, and water.