

Hey guys. This is the next chapter of *King of Champions*. I've Grammarlied a bit of it, hence the indented format for those of you who download one of the two versions. I might return to it tomorrow if I get the chance, but I also need to push hard to finish Harry Sawyer, so... that's rather doubtful...

More importantly, *HP-DG-AP-PN-RG-NR* was able to go over it for me. Without his efforts this chapter would have been entirely unreadable.

Chapter 13: A Cavalcade of Errors, Part 1

Roman Torchwick bit back a sigh as he found one of his hideouts once again invaded by a faunus, only this time, it was someone he couldn't just brush off or threaten with the hidden guns. No, Adam Taurus was far too dangerous and far too important to the White Fang for him to get away with that. *How long has he been in Vale, damn it? How long has Buzzsaw or Hackwad, whatever his name is, kept him hidden? And why.*

Instead of making a show of being the one in charge or with more experience as he had with the White Fang lieutenant before this, Roman gestured the man to take a seat, keeping his normal suave, debonair attitude in place. "Adam Taurus coming to visit little old me, my, I have gone up in the world. Although I wonder if your presence has more to do with the rumors of the White Fang having gotten a major shipment of weapons lately than just coming to see me. Please, take a seat. I'd apologize, but no one called ahead, and I normally don't need to welcome a whole group of terrorists, just one or two. The rest of your people will have to wait outside."

This meeting was happening in the onsite office of a construction company, one of those small trailers that were routinely placed within a construction area where the supervisors and workers could meet, keep their food and so forth. Thus, Roman was actually telling the truth on that score. With Adam, his lieutenant and four other White Fang Members crowding in, there was hardly room to spare for the furniture, Roman and Perry.

What Roman wasn't mentioning was the fact that his chair was over a hidden drop, a segment of the floor that would allow Roman to drop down under the trailer directly into an open manhole. There were also two IEDs situated in the ceiling. If Adam meant to attack him outright, Roman was confident enough that between them, he and Neo would be able to move fast enough to escape. *Even if those explosives probably won't do much to someone like Adam. He's supposed to be a bit of an aura monster, although I'm not sure I believe that.*

Adam glared across the table at Roman, then over to the only other person visible in the trailer, Perry, the deer faunus that had become Roman's chief aide among the White Fang. That

worthy was already busying himself at a small table set along one wall, making coffee. He handed a cup to Adam first, then Roman, but then moved over to lean against that same wall, watching.

Adam took a single sip, and that was only because Perry was another faunus, before setting the cup down as he took the seat across from Roman. Behind him, four of the White Fang that he had come into Vale withstood, waiting for his dismissal, glaring hatred at Torchwick. Many of them blamed him for what had happened to so many of their compatriots during the disaster on the docks, which simply added to the general hatred of the White Fang had for humanity. These spider faunus, Roman thought, was particularly gruesome looking.

Each of the Faunus with Adam looked like some kind of special trooper, their uniforms showing marked differences between them, unlike the regular uniform, the rest of the White Fang wore. Two were women, and two were men.

One was a Beacon-aged girl with gray-blue hair and black veins showing on her face, forearms and neck. What type of Faunus she was, Roman couldn't really tell, although he reckoned her animal type had something to do with her hands given how she was hiding them behind her back or her mouth. Regardless, her gray-blue eyes were remarkably dead-looking, locking on Roman with unerring intensity behind her half-mask.

The second woman was very obviously a tiger faunus. Middle-aged, she had massive arm muscles showing in a muscle-t, with eyes that were the most cat-like Roman had ever seen. She also had claws, although Roman wasn't certain if they were natural or not, as they looked like they were covered – or made – of steel.

The third faunus was a rare amphibian type, with webbing visible between his fingers and light blue skin. He seemed to be some kind of shark, or at least wanted to appear like one, if the way he'd filed his teeth to points was anything to go by.

The last faunus following Adam was easily the largest of the six, standing so tall he had to stoop to enter the trailer, his weight making the whole trailer creak alarmingly. He was a rhino faunus, and his skin was gray and leathery, his head dominated by a large rhino horn that thrust out from his head, the entire thing capped in some kind of dark metal, contrasting sharply with the Grimm-white mask he wore.

None of them moved, simply waiting silently, staring hatred at Roman. *Oh, well, I didn't think their leaving was likely, anyway. So, a power play, then. How predictable, yet boorish.*

"Give me one good reason why I shouldn't lay the blame for what happened on the docks at your feet, Torchwick. Keep it simple. After all, as you so routinely point out," Adam said,

baring his teeth at the human under his half-mask, his voice coming out in a low, dangerous rasp. "I'm only a simple animal. I can't be expected to understand anything too complicated."

"Please. Do you think that I only insult you White Fang because you're faunus? I will admit I tailor my insults to the individual I'm insulting, but you're not alone in being the recipient of my witty repartee," Roman waved that off. "I taunt and deride anyone I work with until they prove they're competent. Your lieutenant proved he was competent as a blunt object. Fine. Perry over there, he's proven himself a dab hand at organization. Do I tease you, Perry?" Rowan asked, acting almost affronted as he addressed Perry.

Perry was about to shake his head when Adam growled, the sound causing the deer faunus to freeze as Adam leaned forward. "Answer the damn question, Roman! Why shouldn't I take out the displeasure of the White Fang for losing so many of our brethren out on you, the organizer of that whole disaster?"

"I don't know. Should I also be taking the blame for one of your own going rogue?" Roman shot back. "The little kitty cat, Belladonna, led Arturia Arc right to us. I still have no idea where the rest of those hunter teams came from, but that part I'm sure of given how the altercation happened."

Seeing Adam grow even angrier than he should have at the simple mention of a traitor, Roman filed that away. It seemed as if rumors that he, or rather Neopolitan, had heard from the White Fang he'd already been working with were true. There had been indeed something personal going on between Blake Belladonna, late of the White Fang and now a Beacon student, and Adam Taurus, one of the most bloodthirsty commanders among the White Fang.

How cute. Right now, though, pushing that particular button was probably not going to be very smart going forward. "As for how she knew we were there, I think that was either deduction and guesswork, or she was already staking out the dockyard area for some reason. Why Arturia Arc was there, well, probably the same reason. That shipment of fire dust came from her hometown, too, so maybe she was just checking on it."

"..." Adam scowled. "Fine. If we accept the fact Belladonna and Arc being there, along with this blonde traitor, was based on simple deductive reasoning, did they then call in the other Hunters, or was it a setup from the start? You're the one that's supposed to have a vast network of informants. You tell us."

"None of the people who leaked the information about that delivery would have turned around and then led to the fact that we were going to try and steal it," Roman snorted in derision. "After all, the informer would still've been implicated either way. No, when I find someone to suborn, they stay suborned, if only out of a sense of self-preservation, because I

make it clear to them what will happen if they double cross me. The entire thing was simply a random disaster from the get-go.”

Other than Belladonna already looking for the White Fang for some reason, but since I don't know what sparked that, I'm surely not going to bring it up right now, Roman reflected.

After a few long, tense moments, Adam stared at Roman, then he slowly shook his head. “For my part, I suppose I'll have to take your word for it. Yet, there will need to be some kind of reckoning. Arturia Arc and the other hunters there, they will have to pay for killing some of our members. That is one of our most basic tenets. Strike at one White Fang and feel the bite of the other Fangs.”

“That's up to you. Personally, I took it as a sign to tighten security and to add more randomness to our operations,” Roman drawled. “I've also been keeping away from the docks every time I've been out looting a dust store or getting Perry and his crew to do it.” He smirked, shrugging. “And we've kept such attacks random. That way, there's no pattern someone like Belladonna can use to try to get ahead of us.”

Roman watched Adam grind his teeth angrily, one hand dropping to the hilt of Wilt, one of his swords. The information on Adam had been very clear on what he called those blades, and what he could do with them. Hence, Roman went on, seemingly without a rush, but quickly enough that Adam didn't have time to work himself up to attack Roman for mentioning his ex-girlfriend again.

Besides, time and prior planning had allowed Roman to have the perfect bone to throw this particular dog. “And it's also why tonight's expedition, which, admittedly, your arrival is quite timely for, is going to come as such a shock. And be big enough that we'll recoup our losses in dust, at least from the attack on the docks in a way the small-time attacks I've been doing since haven't.”

Those words caused Adam to rein in his temper, and he narrowed his eyes behind his half-mask. “What do you mean by that?”

“Oh, I think you and all your troops will like this one.” Roman stood up, keeping his hands in view, and Melodic Cudgel by the desk as he moved over to a sofa to one side, picking up a scroll there.

He tossed it at Adam, who caught it, glanced down at the information showing, and went silent completely, going still beside a slight, sadistic-looking smile crossing his features. “Really?”

“Really. The Schnee dust company has no wish to lose more of its profits to the Fire Dust out from Evig Låga. They expedited that shipment, and it carries even more dust than a normal

shipment would. They want to make certain the Vale Council understands that Norssken can never match the output of SDC and hit Norssken's reliability internationally. They even accepted a contract with the Vale Council to guard the dock area while some of their ships were in port. That ship's bringing guns and armor for that security force."

This shipment was actually one that Roman had been planning for months. The move on the fire dust shipment from Evig Låga had been a more spur-of-the-moment thing, acting on information that had fallen into his hands recently, as well as a request from one of his normal informers to attack that shipment. This shipment was coming in faster than Roman's original plan allowed, and with the docks still being heavily watched, Roman had to change his plans because of that, too. But even there, Roman's numerous connections and Neo's abilities had allowed Roman to gather enough intel to make it a viable operation.

"That's not nearly as important as it would otherwise be given some of our mutual backer's resources," Adam said slowly. "Still, if you have the route of this ship, then..."

"I have the route. I have a cargo manifesto, as I just proved a moment ago. Do keep up. I've even created a few engine issues for the two port authorities combat ships." No city-state had a real navy, per se, but they had port authority ships, which could be trusted to guard ships coming in and out of their ports for several days in either direction. "So long as we attack quickly enough, that will be enough for us to get away clean, ship and shipment alike," Roman smirked. "Although I will say that a part of me set this up because engaging in an act of piracy is something on my personal bucket list I've never had the opportunity to do before."

Adam actually snorted in good humor at that, and Roman could tell that the other White Fang in the room had also calmed down or, rather, had turned their anger toward a very familiar target. If there was one thing Roman could count on, it was the hatred that the White Fang had toward the Schnee Dust Company, overriding anything else. *Funny, at this point you'd think someone would realize that Schnee Dust Company's policies are doing more to drive faunus into the White Fang's arms than anything this side of Atlas. Oh well, certainly makes my job easier.*

"Excellent. I will provide the forces. Do you have someone on your payroll who will be able to captain the ship?" Adam demanded. "My people need something to do, and I've got dozens of troopers who have suffered at the hands of that damn company."

"So long as you can provide deckhands, yes and gunners, yes." Every ocean-going ship needed to be able to defend itself with guns and bursts of speed. Even cargo containers like the one they were currently talking about attacking would be as heavily armed as a gunship, with anti-air guns designed to shoot at any Grimm that came to the surface and depth charges.

"The man will want payment in alcohol once you get to port wherever you want to take that shipment," Roman continued. "And please, don't try to kill him afterward. I gave him my word that he would live to drink his payment."

"So, we can kill him after he's done getting drunk?" The spider faunus said, sneering.

Roman stilled, his hand resting lightly on the desk near where Melodic Cudgel's handle sat. All the faunus were watching him like so many cats waiting for a mouse to pop out of its hole, and Roman simply let his hand rest there as he spoke, his voice a mix of someone trying to talk to a particularly dull child and cold disdain. "That would be following the letter of our agreement versus the meaning, my dear creepy crawly. When I make deals with other criminals or informants, they know I will scrupulously keep to any agreement made. I don't look for loopholes like that, go back on my word or try to simply follow the agreement word for word rather than the intent. If we're going to keep doing business with one another, then you--"

"That remains to be seen," Adam interjected, cutting across Roman's voice and holding up a hand to the spider, who had snarled in anger at Roman's tone. "Our mutual patron is incredibly displeased with you, Roman. And you know full well why."

"We lost the bubble when we were fighting Arturia. We weren't keeping a lookout for anyone else coming after us," Roman said, making his voice both serious and apologetic. Not sad, as he doubted that Adam would believe he was actually sad about the passing of that little bitch Emerald, but as if his professional pride had been piqued by mistake. "I make no excuses for that. When she came after us, I saw an opportunity to turn the tables, to remove one of the most dangerous huntresses from the world and from everything going on here in Vale. I'd warned Cinder about Arturia Arc before that. She proved just as dangerous as I expected, but we were wearing her down and would've finished her off if not for her sister arriving to give her some help. Worse, I'd wager anything that the Dark Queen won't be that arrogant ever again."

"I'm not so worried about Arturia myself," Adam said coldly. "I'm more concerned about her presence here in Vale And what that might say the opposition knows about our own operations. You wouldn't have any idea about that, would you?"

Adam knew the accepted reason why Arturia was there, thanks to Apacci, who was more than happy to tell him and the rest of the White Fang anything about Beacon he could. But if that was the total reason, then it really felt as if chance had turned against them, and Adam was always someone who would look for conspiracy rather than chance.

However, Roman's answer was pretty much the same. Two of her siblings were at Beacon, and Arturia had decided to live in Vale for a bit to be close to them. "I will tell you the same thing I told Cinder. I know where she lives, but the security in that place is good enough that anyone but Neo probably won't be able to get in. And Neo alone isn't strong enough to kill

Arturia. Not even in her sleep with how much Aura that woman has. If you want to set up an ambush there, that's going to take some doing and a lot more firepower than I had then or am willing to expend now."

"It's a possibility. We'll see about that score. So long as Arturia's presence isn't the sign of larger issues, like someone in the know trying to play both sides." Adam repeated his earlier line of attack, demanding that Roman refute it.

"If anyone knows what's going on with Cinder's plan and everything else, if it's still viable without Emerald anyway, that didn't come from me or my contacts here in Vale," Roman answered firmly.

Adam's sneer told Roman precisely what the bull faunus thought of that endorsement, but he said nothing, glancing down at the scroll information on the SDC ship, the sight of that information and what it implied calming him down like a dog given a treat, Roman thought with some amusement that he carefully kept off of his face. Roman had made a living since he was in his teens on being quick witted enough to know precisely how far he could push. And now, that was not very far at all.

"Funny that it was only Emerald who died when Arturia's sister showed up on the scene like that," Adam said instead, further impugning Roman's trustworthy nature and attacking a route where he was even more vulnerable.

Because it wasn't exactly impugning but accurate. *Yes, Neo and I killed Emerald when we saw we had a chance, and we took it to weaken Cinder's position. Although I sure as hell won't share that with anyone.* "The area we were fighting and also had a hand in what was going on. I don't think Tia Arc knew Emerald was even there. Emerald was hiding herself from Arturia's senses. Tia attacked my original position when she arrived, and Emerald was just between the two of us. She was blasted backward off the roof and into some mangled, sharp-edged metal girders..." Roman shrugged. "The terrain can often be extremely deadly after all."

Once more, Adam and Roman became locked in a staring contest, but Roman had been in these contests more times than he could count, and eventually, Adam decided to give it up. Intimidating Roman beyond a certain point just wasn't worth the effort, and it wasn't like Adam cared about Emerald all that much, either. Cinder had brought him in to lean on Roman, and that was fine as far as it went, but he didn't care about Emerald, only the losses the White Fang itself had taken while under Roman's command.

He slowly pushed himself to his feet, a dangerous, threatening snarl on his lips. "The White Fang are not disposable peons, Roman. You fled without even trying to organize a general retreat. You left my people in the lurch once. Do it again, and you'll answer to me, no matter how important you might be for Cinder's plans."

Roman nodded, and Adam continued. "Furthermore, all future operations, even ones that involve hitting small-time dust stores, are to be run through me. You use White Fang troopers for your footwork, which means we get to be in charge of what goes ahead. You pick out the operations, you provide Intel, and I have the final say. And from now on, I want you to spend at least half your time looking for leaks in your intelligence network."

"Oh, how diplomatic, you didn't even say 'I'm in charge' or anything like that," Roman answered caustically.

"You're a sharp human, after all. I didn't think I had to spell that out to you," Adam sneered. "But if you want it plain, then yes. I'm in charge of this joint venture we've got going on."

"Hah, until Cinder arrives. Then we're both just dogs on leashes, aren't we?" Roman shot back. "I wonder what your higher-ups think about you doing her bidding?"

"Seeing how many weapons she's been able to funnel to us, the rest of the White Fang doesn't care," Adam said, although he had taken great pains to actually make certain that no one else beyond his own supporters within the White Fang understood where he was getting most of that material from. As far as the rest of the White Fang knew, his band of troubleshooters weren't any more well-armed than any other, they were just much better at scrounging during operations against their enemies. Kali, in particular, had no idea of the amount of hardware that had somehow wound up in their hands from Atlas.

Looking at Roman, Adam smiled thinly. "And you are so quick to mention Cinder, I did say that she's furious with Emerald's death. And it certainly won't be me she'll be angry at about that. I'd be very, very incentivized to have something to placate her with, were I you."

Threats delivered, Adam turned to go, asking over his shoulder, "We're hitting that ship tonight, right?"

"That's what my plan called for," Roman said, relighting his cigarette that he'd put out when Adam and his entourage had come in.

"Good. It is time to once more put the fear of the White Fang into the humans of Vale. Taking such a huge shipment of dust and your own smalltime thefts will do that," Adam said, ushering the rest of his people out in front of him. As he did he looked at Perry. "Keep working with that human. If I have to stomach more of his so-called wit, I might just cut out his tongue. Then he and Neopolitan can be mutes together."

Perry nodded, and Adam leaned in close, his voice a harsh whisper that didn't carry more than a few inches away from his mouth. "And just remember, he might be letting you live the cozy life, but you're White Fang, and you're faunus. Remember whose side you're on."

The deer faunus nodded rapidly and remained where he was watching them leave. He looked over to Roman, but Roman simply waved him off. "I just sent you a copy of that information on your scroll, Perry. You did a bang-up job in making certain that the Coast Guard's ship's engines weren't going to be up for anything, and even made both look like quality control issues so they won't be looking for trouble until it's too late. You've earned the day off. If you want to go with them, go or just head back to the other office for now. This one will be shutting down before I meet with your fellows tonight."

Perry nodded and without another word, exited the trailer. A few seconds passed, and then the silence of the trailer was broken by the sound of shattering glass as Neo appeared on the sofa where Roman's scroll had been. She made a throat-cutting gesture, but Roman shook her head. "We've no idea what their Semblances are, and everything we do know about Adam Taurus tells me he's a tough nut to crack."

He sighed then, resting a hand on her stomach. "Besides, you know as well as I do that my tentative overtures to the Black Widow and Don Giovanni didn't exactly go anywhere. And given everything that the Bitch is getting out of Atlas, going there might just put us further into her power. No, we've weakened her by removing Emerald, but that's made you even more indispensable to her plans. Whatever those are at this point. And that means her boot's still on our throat."

Roman smirked then, pushing himself to his feet and moving around the desk to sit next to Neo, where she lay out on the sofa. "That is unless we wish to go legit for a few years or hideaway in the boonies somewhere on Anima? Doing nothing that could bring her attention our way?"

The look of sheer horror on Neopolitan's face had Roman snickering. "Yeah, I didn't think so either. So, we have to ride this Tiger for a little while longer. Although, just because the ride isn't over, doesn't mean that I'm not going to try to plan how to get off at the end."

And if I have to go informer to the powers that be, so be it. Cinder's reach might be exceptionally long, but even she has limits, Roman added mentally, while Neopolitan nodded firmly in agreement. *But I don't have to make that decision yet, thankfully.*

Scene break

It was raining again outside, and according to the weather report that Adam had watched, it would be raining all day long. That suited his mood, and thankfully, this kept most of the foot traffic off the streets for the day as he headed out from the hideout to meet with Bonesaw at the place he was using to run the rest of the White Fang in Vale currently.

Currently, this included doing a bit of research on Beacon's supply routes. Getting into Beacon, even with all of the information they had from Apacci, would be an issue, considering that Beacon was on a mountaintop in relation to Vale, with little to no road-based traffic. And of course, there was also the issue of the fact that it was a school for Hunters, and Huntsmen of all sorts were troublesome to deal with.

"Have you got all the weapon caches stored back where they belong in Mountain Glenn?" Adam demanded, grimacing as he looked around at the room that Bonesaw was currently using as his base of operations. To even call it an office was a bit much. It was simply a small security station in a rundown faunus-only apartment complex.

Adam wanted to believe that no one in this building or in the surrounding tenement halls would ever even dream of turning any of the White Fang in. But for someone like Bonesaw, especially after his involvement in the disaster down at the docks, it was better to keep him out of sight entirely. All it would take would be one human, or worse, and Adam's opinion, someone like Blake Belladonna to see him to have the authorities on their trail again. That would be inconvenient in the extreme. *Still, I'm glad he's not claustrophobic. Being stuck in this small room for very long would drive me crazy.*

Bonesaw grimaced a bit. "We did. But I gotta say, that was fucking creepy, boss. Even with that thing we were given to keep the Grimm away, being so near those damn monsters is just..."

"Aww, is the big bad Bonesaw afraid of the Grimm?" The shark faunus snickered, his voice high and reedy, and not because he was making it that way. Beyond his gills and teeth, Adam reflected that Deitrich Seagreen had one of the more annoying voices that Adam had ever heard.

"I don't see you volunteering to be out there with the rest of the boys," Bonesaw growled.

"I know it's harsh, but Mountain Glenn's an excellent place to put the weapons, especially with the plan still calling for us to reopen the underground tunnel into Vale," Adam commiserated, sending Deitrich a glare that caused him to fall silent, cowed. *A useful and loyal fighter, but damn if he doesn't need some more people skills. And this is me saying it, blast it all.* "I know it's creepy, but Cinder's abilities with Grimm, well, they are a game changer in our war against humanity."

"Yeah, but she's human, what does she—" the tiger faunus, Greta Sakhan, a cousin of Seinna who thought she was far too soft even now, began, before cutting herself off. "Or is she?"

“Who knows. But the bags of pheromones or whatever Cinder gave us is enough to keep the Grimm away. That at the moment is all that matters. Remember, we’re both using one another. That doesn’t mean we trust her, or vice versa.” Adam shrugged, looking over at Bonesaw again. “And you did it with just the people I brought in and your own cell?”

“I didn’t bring in anyone associated with Perry’s team,” Bonesaw agreed. “But are you sure you want to keep him out of the loop?”

“With what we know of Neo’s Semblance, it’s probably impossible to keep secrets from her for long, and what she knows, Roman will know soon. Case in point, Roman already knew about the fact we brought in a shipment of arms. Perry and his team are the ones that work with those two closest, and consciously or inadvertently, they might be passing on information to them we don’t want either human to know,” Adam answered. “That’s also why I told you to pass on to Apacci that he should stay at Beacon for a while.”

“Right. And I don’t trust Beacon’s network security. Well, you know what I mean,” Bonesaw said, snorting in humor at his choice of words while Adam agreed. The Beacon network security was probably very, very good, which meant that using it to reach out to Adam wouldn’t be good at all for them.

“We’ve got another bit of good news,” Bonesaw went on. “Gerome Redgleam reports that feeling among the faunus population here in Vale recently took a major blow due to a new regulation that the Council is talking about demanding IDs from all faunus showing their faunus status and linked to their past histories. It isn’t ratified yet, but the news about it broke last night and has got a lot of people up in arms about it. All want to read more into it to see if that hanger will have any staying power going forward, but we might be able to run a recruitment drive sometime soon. And we’ll have a lot of goodies to bring in the faunus who haven’t yet developed enough of a spine for the real work.”

“Sounds good, but keep my name and the faces of our team out of it entirely. In fact, get Roman involved. Some of our brethren are sure to ask where we’re getting the goods, and he makes for a good, obvious source for that kind of thing,” Adam mused. “That will also put an even bigger target on his back.”

“When is your next meeting with Apacci supposed to be?”

“Wednesday night. Are you going to be informing the witch about him?” Bonesaw asked, keeping his voice level, showing no sign of interest one way or the other.

“Hell no!” Adam snorted in laughter, smacking the other man on the shoulder. Unlike several of his other followers, Adam actually got along with Bonesaw to the point where he would call the other man a friend. They’d served together almost as long as Adam had been in

the White Fang, and both believed that the only way their war ended was in the faunus on top, with the humans below them. “No, I’m not going to tell Cinder about Apacci, or the information he’s funneling to us, or my plans for Beacon. She’ll do her part in making certain those plans succeed, whether she knows about them or not.”

Bonesaw nodded firmly, turning his attention to two pictures on a nearby wall. One of Weiss and one of Blake. “A traitor and a Schnee all at once. That’ll be a fine feather in our cap, Boss.”

“Indeed, it will, and speaking of feathers and caps, Torchwick had a plan for a target tonight. One I think is actually a good one. But I want you to be in charge of the follow-up. I’ve got other plans for Trifa, Enrico, Deitrich and Lorgar. And frankly, even if I didn’t, you’re better at leading other people than she or the others are.”

Trifa and Deitrich, the only two of Adam’s foursome there currently, nodded. It was true, after all. They were enforcers, assassins and elite infantry, not leaders.

“I’ll go in with the attack team along with Lorgar. But afterward...” From there, Adam explained the plan for that night as well as a few other missions he wanted to send his team on now that it was time for them to start acting, and Bonesaw began to smile. Things were truly looking up.

Scene break

Harry woke up feeling a certain part of his body was already wide awake, sandwiched between two soft mounds and his own body. Even without opening his eyes, he could tell who he would find, as he could also feel two even softer, much larger globes pressing into his back. One arm was also under some kind of weight, while his other hand was currently squeezing another soft, if smaller globe with a small, hardened point in the center.

With all these stimuli, Harry could easily picture the circumstances that he would see when he opened his eyes and was not surprised to find that Tia was hugging him from behind while Pyrrha was his own little spoon, so to speak, when he opened his eyes. Harry’s chin was gently resting on Pyrrha’s shoulder as Tia’s chin rested a bit heavily on the back of his head, her arms around Harry but her hands resting on Pyrrha’s stomach.

Over the nights since the date at Arturia’s, Tia had thrown out the idea of sleeping in the dorm room assigned to Team GART. Harry had tried to argue with her on that point, saying that even at home, they’d not slept together every night after hitting puberty. She’d responded by stating, “But then we thought we were simply family. Now we are dating. And I sleep better when I hug you anyway.”

When Tia gave him those soulful eyes and her small, loving smile, Harry would have put the moon back together. Caving to let her sleep with him was a small change in comparison. He had only been able to weakly protest at that point, asking, "What about your teammates? What will they think?"

"That they have more room to spread out," Tia had answered deadpan.

This proved to be the case. When told of her partner's decision, Sung-Sun had simply sighed, shook her head, and asked, "Can I have your dresser space?"

Mila had shrugged, saying that if any of her family was around, she'd probably want to stay with them, too. "Although sleeping in the same bed as a guy at our age, Tia? That's a bit much, girl."

Apacci had not been there at the time to give his opinion, doing some remedial training with Professor Goodwitch. His girlfriend, who the rest of his team had yet to meet, had lit a fire under the man's ass, and he'd put his nose to the grindstone over the past week rather nicely.

Thus, he and Pyrrha had made some changes. Originally, the townhome had four, albeit very small, bedrooms, with small cots, small dressers and little else. Now, the cot and dresser was gone from Harry's room, removed to Pyrrha's, which had lost its hammock and had become a changing area for the trio of students. Instead of the dresser and cot, a series of large pillows covered the floor, giving room enough for three people, if they were very close, to sleep together, and the hammock that Pyrrha had in her room was set up in one of the corners.

Harry, Pyrrha and Tia were very close. This morning's positioning wasn't all that unusual, and Harry smiled as his fingers began to play with Pyrrha's nipple. *Hmm...the three of us haven't done anything too sexy together yet, but I think it's only a matter of time. Not that we have time to experiment this morning.* It was, after all, a school day.

With that in mind, Harry stopped his more pointed attention on Pyrrha's nipple, going back to simply squeezing her breast lightly. *It's a damn shame that Arturia had to head home,* Harry reflected. *Even with Tia and Pyrrha both here, I've missed her. There are just some things, strategy, team logistics and the future of Evig Låga, that I can talk to her about in more depth than I can either of my other girls. Tia doesn't care, and while Pyrrha tries, she's a natural tactician, not a strategist.*

"Mmm... Harry," Pyrrha murmured, waking up in turn under his ministrations. Turning her head, she smiled over her shoulder at him, jade meeting emerald, a silly-looking smile on her face that Harry knew mirrored his own. Regardless of the fact he'd woken up with Pyrrha in his arms for more than a month now, neither had gotten used to it or the sheer delight they took in one another.

Pyrrrha's eyes tracked upwards from Harry and her smile shifted into a more mischievous one. "Tia. I know you're awake, dear. You have precisely forever to move your hand from where it just shifted."

In response, Tia hummed, the sound causing a shiver to go through Harry. Opening her eyes, Tia smiled her faint, warm smile down at both of them but disdained talking for action, simply leaning down and kissing Harry when he turned his neck toward her, then kissing Pyrrha. After a second, she sighed, pulling back. "UGH."

"I know, all those stories have lied to us for years," Harry commiserated as Pyrrha used her polarity powers to bring a small pill tin toward them. Inside were several breath freshener-type lozenges, and all three took one before the kissing resumed for some time.

However, Harry's internal clock (not his dick) had woken him up for a reason. Soon, he pulled Tia into a hug, then rolled over her, aiming for the door. This didn't work very well as Tia just held him in place, her breasts pressing into his chest as her tongue sought out his, but with Pyrrha's help to tickle Tia into submission, he was soon up and moving, heading out the door to make the trio and their friends breakfast.

Sung Sun, Mila and Apacci joined them for the meal as usual, although Apacci didn't help, sitting at the table and reading something from his scroll, making notes in the notebook that Harry knew he used for match class. "Still having trouble with some of the latest assignments?" he asked solicitously.

"Yeah. Damn it, I might have promised to raise my grades, but I didn't think it would be this hard," Apacci grumbled. *Fucking hell, if Bonesaw hadn't told me why I needed to start putting forth more effort, I'd be way happier just doing the bare minimum. But he was right. Doing that brought more attention to me from Goodwitch and the other professors, not less. Now they know I'm putting in the effort. They're not looking in my direction nearly as much. Hell, they don't even call on me in class as often!*

Tia wordlessly handed over her own notebook, patting him on the shoulder while Sung-Sun smiled proudly. "We've all been helping him, and even Mila to an extent, to bring up their grades. It's actually helped us come together better as a team, as has Tia moving out. Not needing to share the dorm between four people has removed a bit of the tension we were all feeling."

The bustiest of the Arc girls had moved most of her stuff into Pyrrha's old room in the townhome, splitting it up between the two dressers that now resided there, admittedly taking up more space in Harry's old dresser than his own stuff had.

Apacci smiled, the smile a bit false, but none of the people around him realized that. "Yeah, there's that, and, well, getting laid on the regular has taken away a lot of my tension, heh."

The others all groaned, even Nora and Ren, who had been up late the night before, working with Ruby over at the smithy. Twin Flowers had developed a loud clicking noise, and Ren had decided it was time for an upgrade. Even Nora, the bundle of endless energy that she was, had come back from that looking haggard and drowsy despite having developed a few new grenade types to use with Magnhild.

"Changing the subject before Apacci gets thwacked upside the head for being a perv, what everyone's plans for the day is? Besides class, that is?" Ren questioned.

"Hey now, you and Nora and you and your partner, Harry should understand more than anyone what I mean, getting laid is..." was as far as Apacci got before Mila did indeed smack him, lightly for her, over the head.

"Tia, Pyrrha and I will be coming back here before lunch." For the two girls, that was free time, while Harry would have usually had class with Professor Olive. "The twins scored A's on their tests last week and will be allowed to stay up late to talk to us for the first time in a while. Saphron's also home for the first time in a while and she wants to... well... tease me in front of Pyrrha, basically."

"Mm." Tia agreed, then added, her voice muffled as usual by her mouth-obscuring scarf. "Baby pictures were mentioned, as well as pranks."

"That, and the twins are both major fans of the Invincible Girl," Harry snickered, causing Pyrrha to blush.

"Neither of the twins have ever treated me like the more rabid type of fan I dealt with so often, but yes, they, um, they both are big fans of mine. I'm personally happier that they want to get to know Pyrrha, their big brother's girlfriend, than Pyrrha Nikos, the Invincible Girl."

"Beyond that, we have that exam with Professor Peach coming up, and I think we should all spend some time studying up for it," Harry concluded, and the morning for the two teams continued, none of them aware that elsewhere, events were in motion that would once more interrupt their normal school life. And that much of that would be because of one of their own.

Scene break

While Harry and the rest were having breakfast in Vale, it was early evening in Mistral. As the shadows lengthened on the ground, Cinder and Mercury walked into a small alleyway in the Jagged Rouge district in Mistral. This was an area of the city that was almost entirely run-

down and semi-abandoned at the base of the tall caldera that housed the city, built at the feet of that self-same caldera, stuck in the no-man's land between the port and the city proper. Several buildings all around had built up over time to cover this small area almost entirely hiding it away from the sun.

However, Cinder could make her own light and did so, her entire arm lighting up in flames. "Tyrian, I know you're there. If you attempt to jump-scare me, I won't be held responsible for what happens to you."

"Fine, fine, ruin my fun. Just as always, just as always, no one understands Tyrian. Only the mistress, only the goddess. But it is the goddess who sent me here, yes, yes. To offset your bungling loss of little Emerald, yes, yes. She's not happy with you~," a manic voice said from the darkness in front of the two terrorists.

"What happened to Emerald was entirely out of my control. Mistress Salem understood and accepted what I had to do to deflect further interest toward me and mine," Cinder said, scowling angrily. "You do not get to dictate to me what Mistress Salem is feeling or not feeling. That is only for her to decide."

"The **goddess**, not the mistress!" The voice said, now sounding almost rabidly angry as well as simply insane. "You, all of you, never giving her the reference that she deserves!"

A moment later, Mercury's semblance activated, and he twitched around, lashing out with a kick that impacted a scorpion stinger as it came from out of the darkness toward them. "Now, now," he taunted. "That's not how you greet allies, Tyrian."

"And if I have to burn that tail you're always so happy to wave around into so much slag to get your attention on task I will, Callows," Cinder growled, launching a fire lance in that direction. With only a portion of the maiden's powers within her, purloined thanks to the little gift that her mistress had given her that now nestled into the back of her neck, Cinder couldn't use the full maiden's powers, but she could create several fireballs every day on top of using the flame powers to heighten her own heat-creating powers immensely.

Her attack nearly hit the man hiding in the darkness, Cinder's senses up to following his movement once he had attacked Mercury. Now, finally moved into the firelight of her hand, revealing himself entirely.

Tyrian Callows was a pale man with almost disturbing gold eyes, with long, dark brown hair worn in a ponytail braided to look like a scorpion's tail. His chest was crisscrossed with scars shown by the sleeveless jacket he wore open. This was paired with white pants and a cummerbund, over which his tail curled, resembling a belt. The cummerbund was supported by gray leather suspenders, with a third strap running across his chest, meeting at his back.

His arms were covered with cream-colored bandages and brown fingerless gloves, only his middle fingers being covered by the glove. Over these, he wore brown leather vambraces. On each earlobe, a silver, ring-shaped earring gleamed in the light of Cinder's fireball, with a third near the top of his left ear nearly invisible in the darkness of the shadow he'd been hiding among. His weapons, called the Goddess's Servants, which rather told you everything you need to know about the man's personal flavor of insanity, was a pair of clip-on dual wrist blades that resembled a scorpion's claws, the mouth replaced by small caliber machine guns.

Luckily, Tyrian wasn't so insane as to use them. The noise of their use would spread quite a ways. And he hadn't been serious in his attacks on Mercury and Cinder anyway.

"Fine. I am here now to help you. To help you in the way that my goddess has demanded, to kill those you designate. Do so the moment we get to Vale. I have no desire to work alongside you for a moment longer than I have to, oh mighty Queen," Tyrian sneered.

Cinder twitched but said nothing, even though she normally would've taken great pride in being called by the chess piece that Salem had described her as when Cinder had come up with her plan to ambush Autumn, the Autumn maiden. Now, though, she knew it was being used as an insult as recent setbacks threatened the overall plan and Cinder's plan to gain the other half of the magical power that should rightfully have been hers all along.

"I wouldn't want you to work alongside us for long, either. But remember, you are going to help us keep Neopolitan and Roman Torchwick in line and assassinate a few select targets for the betterment of Mistress Salem's overall plan. That implies that you will be working with us more closely than either of us would like. If you're not willing to put up with that tell me now, and we can part ways, and you can return to Mistress Salem and inform her that you're not willing to carry out the tasks assigned to you."

The fact that it would be his fault for not working with Cinder and that Tyrian would have to tell the mistress this was enough to further calm Tyrian down. It was also enough to make him glare angrily at her, but Cinder could deal with his anger, so long as it was controlled, along with his insanity. "I will obey the order of my goddess. She has ordered me to work alongside you, so I will."

"In that case, here." She pulled out a scroll, and Tyrian did the same. She sent over several files, each one dealing with some of the hunters and huntresses that had been involved in the debacle on the docks. "Arturia Arc is going to be your primary target. Her two siblings are secondary, as well as the rest of the Huntsmen involved in this battle, although ironically, you might be able to take them out before she returns, as I understand Arturia Arc is back in Evig Låga at present. Regardless, you'll want to know what you're dealing with. Arturia Arc is the one who supposedly killed Emerald, so she is not to be underestimated by any means."

“Bah, as if I ever take anything assigned to me by my Goddess lightly,” Tyrian scoffed.

“Good.” With that, Cinder turned, leading the way through the warren, decrepit passages and ruins in the low-end district of Mistral. Soon, the group were out in the main streets, where she hailed a taxi as Mercury bought Tyrian a bag of cookies. The assassin had a heck of a sweet tooth for some reason, as well as a liking for lemons and limes. Buying him a sack of each would keep him happy for the trip over to Vale, Cinder hoped. *Damn it all, why couldn't Mistress Salem have assigned Hazel to help me rather than Tyrian? Yes, Tyrian's Semblance makes him the perfect assassin, but he's so hard to control at the best of times away from the Mistress.*

Several hours later, they were through security. Cinder and Mercury's brand-new identities, which they'd paid Lil' Miss Malachite, the local crime boss, a considerable amount for, had passed muster as they should have. Since exchanging money from one bank to another was simply a case of electronic X's and O's, money didn't matter at all to any of Salem's followers, thanks to Dr. Watts. The man had embedded a subroutine in the SDC Towers, letting the group skive off a few cents of every electronic transaction around the world.

Yet, looking down at her ID, Cinder was anything but happy about this aspect of the new, exceptionally tentative plan having gone the way it should. Cinder's original ID had been a work of art, tied into the overall background she'd spent years preparing for her, Emerald and Mercury's eventual infiltration of Beacon, something that could have fooled a professional paranoiac. That had always been a separate plan from the assault on Autumn. The fact Cinder hadn't been able to reclaim all her powers from the other woman had simply given her a second target to look for during the infiltration. The original mission of infiltrating Ozpin's school and undermining it from within was still there.

However, Cinder was no longer a student. She wasn't even a Huntress. They'd only given Lil' Miss Malachite a bare five days to come up with some new identities for Cinder and Mercury that had nothing to do with their past ones. There had been no way even a crime boss like her could come up with two new Huntsman IDs. Those things were incredibly hard to duplicate. So instead, Mercury was Mercury Indigo, a wannabe tournament fighter who had lost his attempt to find a sponsor for the Mistral Tournament.

And Cinder...she was now a thirty-something businesswoman. The paper trail prepared for anyone who looked into it would see a social climber of the first degree, a woman who was as ruthless as any when it came to getting what she wanted in the realm of business. That part Cinder was ambivalent about. What irked her now, and had since they got the IDs was the glaring 33 next to her age.

Really? Thirty-three? Do I look thirty-three? If Mama Malachite and the rest of humanity weren't already going to die off thanks to the Mistress' plans, I would make a point of making certain her death was long and excruciating for that! In fact, I still might if I have the time and opportunity.

In actuality, Cinder was twenty-four. She'd taken quite a bit of pride in being able to come off as a much younger eighteen-year-old. Now holding an ID that said she was middle-aged was a massive annoyance.

Having gotten used to how Cinder had been in a bad mood since they had received their IDs, Mercury made himself scarce the moment they were past security with the ease of several days of practice. Leaving Cinder behind, he moved over to hit on a few girls who were apparently going to be on the same Intercontinental flight to Vale as they were.

For his part, Tyrian had finished the bag of sweets that Mercury had bought them earlier and had gone off to buy his own. Having eaten enough cookies to give a herd of children sugar highs, his attitude now far more normal. Better, the man himself was far less dangerous with his weapons, hidden away in a special compartment in their luggage that wouldn't set off any alarms either here or when they arrived in Vale. Similarly, his tail was now fully wrapped around his waist, the stinger hidden behind the tail's own folds. It was almost scary how well a deadly scorpion tail could look like a belt.

Left alone, Cinder carefully hid most of her anger underneath the surface but apparently was still letting loose enough irritation that no one was willing to sit near her save for a group of pimply-faced youths across the way who were leering at her legs. Noticing them was enough to at least bring her momentarily out of her anger. She sent a look their way, a look full of feminine malice and confidence, that caused all of them to flinch, and she stood up, snorting and moving off, hoping to find something to occupy herself with for the next few moments before they had to board the bullhead.

She headed toward one of the small stores and paused at the headline flowing across one of the TVs outside a restaurant. "...has no comment at this time. Why the Port Authority ships could not respond is already being looked into, but no information is yet available on that score. Nonetheless, this was a vast conspiracy to spill hundreds of millions of credits worth of Dust from the SDC and further prove how feckless the Vale Council is. I for one am willing to demand action!" Lisa Lavender stated firmly, looking into the camera with all the earnestness she could muster.

Beside Lisa's face was the image of a huge cargo hauler. On its side was the symbol for the SDC. That, even without the pallets loaded on the ship from one side to another would've

told Cinder what kind of ship it was. *Oh ho? I wonder what Roman has done now. Something very interesting it seems.*

“Excuse me” she said to the man behind the cash register, interrupting the man’s discussion with the customer. He looked turned to her, a bland look of annoyance on his face, which drained out of him as he stopped, staring, his eyes flicking up and down Cinder’s body in a way that the eyes of nearly all men who met her did. “Might I ask what newspaper would be covering that report? It looks fascinating.”

The way she used the word fascinating caused both the man at the register and the man he’d been speaking to gulp, and he hesitantly raised her hand and pointed. “The Vale All-Star Miss. We print it out here in Mistral at around the same time it hits the public in Vale. It should be covering that story, although there aren’t many details just yet,” he added, trying to be helpful.

“Probably not, but it will give me something to read over at the very least.” Moving in that direction, she grabbed the specified newspaper and then, with the man’s former customer bowing quickly and moving aside for her, paid for it and left the shop. She gave her hips just a little extra swing as she went to further mesmerize the two and thus, quixotically, make them forget her actual words and facial features. *Men are so easy to manipulate it feels almost like cheating sometimes. But then again, if you aren’t cheating, you’re not trying.*

Soon, she was back sitting down where she had been moments before, the newspaper open in front of her, smiling faintly behind it as she read. *I wonder if Adam did this, or Roman. Perhaps he thought that he could use this to get back in my good graces? If not for the fact that I’m pretty certain he killed Emerald, he might’ve been right. He will still pay for that down the line, but he and Neopolitan are even more important to the plan now without Emerald around than before. I can’t make too much of an example of him when I arrive. I’ll simply put the fear of me into him again, with a good deal of relish,* she thought before shaking her head, concentrating on the information in the report.

A Schnee Dust Company vessel had been emergency loaded in Atlas and sent to Vale several weeks ahead of when it was originally scheduled to arrive. This was ostensibly done to help combat the rash of dust thefts, which had continued even after the battle at the docks and the loss of several pallets from the shipment from Evig Låga. The SDC had made a point of that, either in a show of support for the Vale Council and its latest round of security measures designed to combat the White Fang threat or as a way to thumb its nose at the company that was cutting into its fire dust sales in Mistral, Vale and Vacuo.

It went on to say that news of the attack getting out had caused riots because, apparently, White Fang had been reported boarding the vessel and killing the crew, leaving their

bodies in the ocean behind the vessel. Rumors abounded that faunus had apparently been the reason why the Coast Guard hadn't been able to respond quickly. Riots and reprisals against the faunus community in Vale were expected in the next few days, and police were out in force to make sure that nothing of that kind lasted for long.

Fear, hatred, rising tensions, all the bad feelings that bring the Grimm must be raised throughout the city. The Dust is but part of the plan going forward. A plan that is going to have to be more of a blunt object than a scalpel without Emerald around to help, Cinder mused before standing up once more to throw out the newspaper and purchase a book for the journey.

Scene break

That same morning in Vale, Blake looked down at a scroll copy of the same newspaper report that had made Cinder pleased, which her scroll's search engine had grabbed for her attention. While Cinder was pleased, Blake was anything but. No, she was utterly furious. *Dammit! I told Ozpin everything I could, and he said the police were on it. He said that he had informants among the faunus that would try to turn the local population against the White Fang. Does this look like they're working against the White Fang? Does this look like the authorities have been able to do anything to stop him?*

Blake scowled, keeping from voicing her displeasure aloud with some difficulty. *If anything, it looks as if they're getting more brazen, not less. As if the battle on the docks didn't mean anything, as if their losses didn't mean anything. No, the White Fang are stronger here in Vale than ever.*

She shook her head, still scowling as she pushed herself off of her bed, turning her scroll off and sliding it into place on her belt. *Well, if Ozpin's not going to do anything, then I will.* With that, Blake left their room, ignoring Weiss's shriek of, "All right, which one of you stole one of my spare binders!?"

She didn't notice Yang looking after her, her eyes narrowed. Blake still wasn't used to thinking Yang was so observant under her party-girl exterior. This trend continued for the rest of the day during classes. Blake didn't notice her taking an occasional look in her direction. Blake didn't even notice Yang talking to Ruby or Ruby bringing in Weiss. She was too focused on looking up maps, looking up information on the dust thefts, Roman Torchwick and what little was known about his diminutive companion when she really should have been paying attention in class.

When the last class of the morning ended, Blake automatically rose with the rest of the class, intent on heading to get some food and then heading to the library to continue her research. This plan was stalled when two powerful arms wrapped around her middle, lifting Blake off the ground. "Wai, what the? Yang! What are you doing? Let me go."

"Nope. Sorry partner, it looks as if we're going to need to have a talk," Yang said, with Ruby nodding in agreement beside her.

Weiss nodded firmly. "Indeed. You've been out of it all day, something that bothered you this morning, and it's been bothering you ever since. We are a team, Blake Belladonna, and I refuse..."

"We all refuse," Ruby interjected hastily, although she was smiling happily at her partner as she did.

"To let you mope around the place without discovering the reason," Weiss finished, leading the way toward the door, throwing her hair over her back haughtily.

"I wouldn't have used the word mope. In fact I'm not certain I know many people who would," Yang teased Weiss slightly before moving forward herself, still carrying Blake locked in a bear hug. "I said you were picks and brooding. And I'm not going to let you keep whatever's bothering you inside, Blake. Who knows, letting you get lost in your own head may just make you run away again."

Blake barely kept a twitch from appearing at that and couldn't keep her ears, no longer hidden under her bow, from doing so. That hit far too close to home for her to be comfortable with. After all, even if it was for a good cause, that was precisely what she had been thinking of doing: leaving her team behind to head off on her own personal crusade. *But that's just it. It's my crusade, and it's personal!*

"And if you're about to open your mouth and give me something about how I wouldn't understand, or it's not my business, I'm going to start shaking you until your brain comes back online. It works on scrolls all the time, it should work on you all the same," Yang warned, half-joking, half-serious.

That caused Blake's ears to twitch upward again in, but this time it wasn't from shock or chagrin at this time, but fear. "Oh, hell no! I'll go with you, just let me go. I'm not going to let you shake me Yang, I saw what you did to that poor junior the other day when he tried to 'accidentally'" Blake made air quotes, "stumbled and tried to faceplant into your chest."

"That **was** one of the more obvious ways of trying to feel me up I've seen lately. I honestly gave him a few points for being brave enough to try something," Yang said with a laugh, sitting Blake down.

To one side of the taller blonde, Ruby crouched just a little bit, staring at Blake intently. It was very obvious that, like her sister, Ruby was afraid that Blake would go off on her own again for some reason. But this time, the red reaper was more than willing to chase after her with all of her might.

And of course, Ruby's speed is far better than the straight-ahead speed my own Semblance can give me. If we were in a forest, I might have a chance because Ruby's not agile. Here thought, that was a different story. So, my choices are dying tired or simply be dragged to my doom, Blake reflected, shaking her head and sighing. "Fine, I'll go with you."

Soon, Team RWBY was back in their dorm room. They sat on the lower of the two pair of bunkbeds, the other three all looking at Blake expectantly. "Spill it, Blake, what's up with you?"

"It probably has something to do with a reprehensible attack on SDC property late last night, correct?" Weiss asked shrewdly. "I must admit to some... annoyance and fury with that activity myself, but I felt we should've expected Roman Torchwick to plan something grandiose. After all, he needs to get his... what did you call it, Yang?"

"Street cred. He needs to make people think that he's really a big bad thief, whatever happened. Especially after getting his clock cleaned by Arturia and Tia enough to run away like a little..." Yang was interrupted by an elbow in the side from her sister, who pouted at her adorably, knowing precisely what the older woman had been about to say. Or rather, what word she'd been about to use there. "Well, anyway, yeah, come to think of it, that's probably what you're upset about, isn't it, Blake? The report that the White Fang were involved."

"Not just a report, a certainty. The SDC released some video footage forwarded from security cameras on the ship itself when we were in history class," Blake admitted, looking away from her partner's knowing gaze.

"Blake?! Does that mean you are actually watching that rather than taking part in the class," Ruby asked, shocked. "That's your favorite class. Damn. This must be serious."

Blake flushed a little at that, but it was true, and she nodded. "Well, I think it is, yes! And I don't think anyone else is doing enough to stop it, either. The White Fang is up to something. Their agreement with Torchwick, it's not natural. Bonesaw, especially. He hates all humans. Why would he work with someone who denigrates and derides faunus like that? No, they're doing something, and I need to find out what, I need to stop them."

Looking at Blake, Ruby cocked her head to one side. "Why?"

Blake scowled. "What do you mean, why!?"

Her diminutive team leader didn't seem to be bothered by Blake's scowl or the vitriol in her voice. "You've already proved to all of us that you're not with the White Fang any longer. You're no longer hiding your cute cat ears. You helped stop a huge Dust theft. Why do even more? I thought you wanted to leave the White Fang behind."

"I, I did, when I saw that the way they were trying to fight for faunus rights was, was doing more damage than good. But now, looking back on it, seeing what's happened to them, I feel responsible," Blake stammered, her tone firming as she went on, but visibly startled at the simple blunt question. "I'm a Belladonna, the daughter of the chieftain of Menagerie, and I stayed with the White Fang initially when they left because I thought that the White Fang's new way, the way of physical resistance, that fight for freedom was the right way to go."

Blake scowled, starting to recriminate herself. "But I never tried to be a leader, never tried to be an example others could follow. Maybe if I had, things would've been different. Maybe if I hadn't simply followed Adam around, he would've been different. I can't go back and change the past, but I can get involved now and make certain that they stop making even more mistakes. Stop Adam from lashing out, stop them from--"

"That is so much crap, I gotta ask if your ass is getting jealous of the shit that's coming out of your mouth," Yang drawled. Normally, she was very good about not cursing in front of her sister, and in fact didn't really curse all that often, even if she gave the impression that she could at any given moment. But her deliberate use of curse words, as well as the image she just conjured, cut through Blake's diatribe easily, causing all three of the other ones to look at her as Yang stood up, reaching across to grab Blake's shoulders.

At first, Blake feared that she was about to be shaken like that second year she'd mentioned earlier that day had been and was prepared to try and break out of the blonde script. Instead, Blake found herself pulled across the intervening area between the two pairs of bunkbeds and into Yang's chest. A rapid blush and stammer began to leave her lips, Yang's arms went around her shoulders and held her there firmly as Yang spoke.

"That is so much crap. I don't know what all you went through with the White Fang. I don't know what all you did with tall, dark and supposedly broody. But you're not responsible for anyone else's actions, Blake. You're not responsible for his murderous tendencies. Adam's to blame for all his own actions and his own choices. You didn't enable him! That's not how a relationship between equals works. If it was ever equal, and he wasn't the one dictating terms to you."

Blake tried to say something, but Yang continued, holding her still and glaring down at the top of her head, as most of Blake's face was buried in Yang's chest. While having less up top than Tia Arc or Mila, Yang still had enough to cause a man or woman to asphyxiate in the most glorious manner. "Yeah, you may be the daughter of the leader of Menagerie, but so what? They were elected to that position. It's not hereditary. Did they ever train you to be a leader, or did you decide to run off to the White Fang before they could? No Blake, the White Fang **isn't** your problem. At this point, it's acting more like your obsession."

That caused Blake to twitch, but Weiss hummed in possible agreement while Ruby looked on, shaking her head at Yang's actions. "You want to redeem them because doing so will prove that you, running away as you did from Adam, was right to leave the ass and that his way was wrong," Yang continued. "Newsflash girl, you've **already** proven that. Adam's still continued his murderous ways, causing trouble between faunus and humans instead of solving them, and you're here fighting the good fight, learning how to fight the real enemy, the Grimm."

"Xiao-Long's right, although I could've done without the initial burst of vulgarity," Weiss drawled. "Honestly, Yang, why do you have to couch everything in such disturbing terms? As for you Blake, I know that meeting you and the other faunus here in Beacon did more to change my opinion of faunus than anything the White Fang have been doing over the past few years. I knew before coming here that indentured servitude was horrible, just a step above serfdom, yet that was a far cry from feeling true empathy and understanding that you faunus were more than the White Fang."

Although Weiss stumbled a little bit at the end there, that was simply because her feelings toward faunus and White Fang were extremely complicated, a mix of familial indoctrination, true hatred created by the White Fang's actions toward the families of acquaintances board members and even a few people she had called friends at the time. This was contrasted by her meeting with Blake, with Mila, Velvet and others and then seeing firsthand how Weiss' own misconceptions and ingrained bigotry had driven her friend to run away.

"Yeah! Remember what Harry's always saying. With the Grimm out there, humans and faunus should never be fighting one another. They're the real enemy," Ruby said, nodding her head firmly. "I get why you want to do something, to be out there trying to, you know, combat the bad feelings that the White Fang is causing between humans and faunus. But I agree with Yang too. They're not your responsibility."

"I, I, I, darn it, Yang! Will you let me go already?" Blake said, trying to pull herself out from Yang's hug by pushing against Yang's stomach as hard as she could, but with about as much effect as pushing on a house would have gotten her. The other girl was simply far stronger than her.

"Sure, so long as I don't hear any more of this self-condemnation crap out of your mouth. And even then, I might be hugging you again at some point," Yang laughed. "I'm all about positive reinforcement ya know? That, and watching your ears twitch from that close is cute as hell."

Ruby nodded her head sagely. She'd gotten in her head pats, hugs and ear-touching with Blake over the days following the battle down at the docks, and could attest to her sister's

words. Weiss also looked a little guilty, having succumbed a few times to her own interest in Blake's ears.

Rolling her eyes and trying hard to keep a flush from her face, Blake looked back at Yang as she sat down once more on the other bed. "I know that intellectually, but not in my heart. And I don't, I can't just sit on the sideline watching, knowing that I could do a better job than the police and find the White Fang."

"Go to the Headmaster. Tell him all the things you know about the White Fang, let him help the police. Surely, Headmaster Ozpin would get other huntresses involved. If he can get Arturia involved when she returns from her visit home, the Dark Queen would surely be a match for any of the White Fang." Weiss frowned a little even as she mentioned the Dark Queen, who had quickly become something of a role model for her in many ways, even if their combat styles could not be more different.

Her frown had nothing to do with the fact that Arturia was away. Rather, thinking of Arturia reminded her of her father's orders to her to try and dig up some dirt on the Arcs or about Evig Låga. That was simply in keeping with the man's business practices, but both the order, the emotional blackmail and then coercion by way of threatening her monthly allowance had both appalled and infuriated her. That 'conversation' had been more than a week ago, and she knew that Jacque would probably be calling her again any day now to follow up.

Even as the thought of that future conversation caused her some internal distress, Weiss shunted it to the side to concentrate on Blake's distress instead as Ruby followed up on what Weiss had said. "Heck! Ozpin has to know at least a few other hunters and huntsmen who are between missions, right? We also know that there are whole teams of huntsmen and huntresses who routinely work with the police on criminal cases instead of against Grimm."

"Yes, but none of them are up to taking on Torchwick, and Bonesaw is about as tough in a fight. Not to mention it that multicolored hair girl that was with Roman." Blake winced a bit in remembered pain. Her Aura did not lend itself to defense overmuch, and several times in that fight it had been broken from successive strikes, mostly at the hands of that little bitch. She rallied, then gritting her teeth before the next words burst out of her. "As for Ozpin himself, he doesn't seem to be doing anything!"

The force of that shout caused all three of her listeners to twitch, and Blake hastily apologized, lowering her voice and reaching to the side to squeeze Weiss's hand in apology even as she looked over at the two sisters. "I, look, I **already** told him everything I knew about the White Fang here in Vale after we returned from the docks. I, I even warned him about Adam and... how he might come after me once I started to go around openly as a faunus."

Yang winced. "You mean you had to explain your relationship with Taurus, one of the world's most wanted terrorists. Ouch, girl. Why didn't you say anything?"

"Because it was embarrassing and painful enough already. And, and well, I didn't want to keep pulling off that particular scab, especially considering how much Weiss and I needed to bury the hatchet," Blake answered, sighing.

"And not in one another, thankfully," Weiss snarked, squeezing Blake's hand back thoughtfully for a second. "But you say that Headmaster Ozpin's response to this has been lacking?"

"I mean, he hasn't done much of anything. I've got my scroll set up to search for stories on the White Fang, anything posted about or by the police, and anything doing with faunus human relations. As far as I can tell, Ozpin hasn't even shared much with the police. And then there's the Vale Council and this new law they're thinking about passing. Special IDs for faunus, restricted access to areas of the city, and special powers for the police?" Blake shivered. "That kind of thing is precisely what the White Fang was first created to fight. It's a throwback to the time before the Revolution."

Ruby blinked at that, frowning in confusion. Yang though nodded. "You need to keep up with the news, sis. Although, come to think of it, isn't that ass hat Cardin's father supposedly on the Council? Ugh."

Weiss hummed, pulling her hand away from Blake's to bring it up to her chin, tapping it lightly. "I have not studied the Vale Council enough to say much about their personalities, but it seems they are quite reactionary. Such people are normally easily influenced by events, and often overreact. We can hope that saner heads will prevail there."

"Um, didn't Professor Goodwitch have to cancel Monday's this coming Friday's combat class? Ooh, and Harry said she canceled on him, you and Pyrrha again this Wednesday. I think he said something about wanting to make her a special dessert, um as an apology for d, dealing with dorks," Ruby stammered, looking anywhere but at her teammates.

"Dorks is not the word Harry used, sister of mine," Yang drawled. "But yeah, he said that. You don't think..."

For a moment, all four members of Team RWBY reflected on the scariest professor in Beacon and how exactly she would deal with people who were acting foolishly. Would adults, even politicians, be treated any better? Upon reflection, the group thought not, but none could say they were sorry to hear about it.

With a slight shiver, not of fear but of somewhat sadistic pleasure at the image of Goodwitch ripping into a bunch of fat cat politicians, Weiss turned the attention back to the

headmaster and his lack of action on Blake's information. "There are two possibilities as to why Ozpin hasn't acted on what you told him. The first is if there wasn't anything specific."

"There was. I told the Headmaster a lot about the White Fang here in Vale, named a few faunus that could maybe pass on information so long as he was discrete, and a lot about the way the White Fang recruits members," Blake answered promptly, internally wondering how this conversation had shifted from talking about her and her desire to stop her former brothers in the White Fang from continuing to make the issues between humans and faunus worse, and analysis of Ozpin.

"Then, corruption in the ranks, perhaps? Worried that any information shared with the police will get back to the White Fang or I, and I apologize for this Blake, more likely Roman Torchwick."

Blake shrugged it off. In her research into Vale, she discovered that there weren't any faunus among the police, so wouldn't be involved in any investigations or have any abilities with them if they did. "No offense taken. It's true though, and... that's a point I hadn't thought of. But still, Ozpin has other resources," Blake quickly rallied. "Like Ruby says, there are Huntsmen teams that work with police on criminal cases. Why aren't they involved with the investigation side of things at least? They wouldn't need to face Bonesaw or Roman alone, they could call in help from someone like Arturia if they ran into trouble. But they're not. There's no movement I can see for Ozpin. It's as if he's just watching, waiting for something else to happen."

That confused all three of her listeners, and truthfully caused Ruby to droop in dismay, wondering what the headmaster, a man she looked up to the most in this world, was doing. In the silence, Blake continued on. "I need to do something. I can't just let the White Fang, let Adam just continue to kill people. I know what you're saying, that it isn't my fight alone, but if no one else is standing up and doing anything, I can't just stay here and watch."

Ruby and Yang exchanged glances, followed by the two diminutive members of the team glancing at one another. After a moment, Ruby nodded. "Okay, but we're not going to let you do anything on your own, Blake. We're a team, and we care about you too much to let you just run off on your own. So, we need to have a plan, okay?"

Eyes widening (and although she would never admit it, feeling the start of tears in her eyes at her friend's words) Blake smiled wanly. "Th, thanks girls. I..." Before she went on, Blake heard something and twitching, she turned to look at the window having heard the sound of something tapping against glass. When she did, Blake stared, causing Ruby, Yang and Weiss to turn toward the window as well. "What in the heck..."

Outside the window, Sun Wukong hung, grinning cheerily in at them, waving his free hand while the other hand gripped the top sill of the window.

Seeing that, and eager to lighten the mood, Yang smirked. "Damn, monkey boy seems just a little desperate for your affections, Blakey. Throw the poor boy a banana, why don't you?"

While Blake rolled his eyes and tried hard not to giggle at the joke despite it being a little racist, Weiss huffed, a rune of ice appearing in one hand. "I rather think that disabusing a stalker would be a better idea than giving them more fuel for their obsession. Honestly, the way he's been following you around since being forced to attend classes here until his team arrives is rather disturbing. Say the word Blake, and I'll freeze him where he is."

"Let's not. If you did that, Sun'd be stuck there looking into our room, which is the last thing I want," Blake murmured.

"Yeah, but we'd get some eye candy too. You can't deny those abs are really nice, Blakey," Yang teased, causing Blake to blush even though she couldn't refute that point. Sun's body was quite nice, after all...

"Do You, do you think he heard what we were talking about? How long has he been out there?" Ruby questioned tentatively.

At those words, Yang's teasing smirk disappeared, and she moved over to the window, opening it up and reaching forward, grabbing Sun by his throat. Normally she would've simply grabbed him by his shirt, but Sun did not believe in the existence of shirts or anything else that covered his chest. Normally Yang wouldn't complain about that, as the boy did have a magnificent set of abs, and eye candy was always appreciated, including the floor show that occasionally occurred when Professor Goodwitch saw him around with the school uniform he'd been forced to wear while waiting for the rest of his team to show up open in the front tie loose around his neck. "All right you, what did you hear?"

"That Blake's getting a little antsy waiting for news about something being done about the White Fang, and that it sounds kind of interesting," Sun answered shamelessly, grinning at his fellow blonde as if he wasn't in danger of being throttled. "You're not thinking of leaving me behind on this, are you? I mean, having another faunus around might be a good idea if you're going to look for the White Fang, right?"

"Aren't you already in enough trouble with the professors?" Weiss pointed out caustically. "I believe Headmaster Ozpin passed on that you and your whole team would be penalized in some fashion for your criminal activities, and now you want to add on more punishment."

Sun drooped, allowing Yang to pull him off of his perch into the room without protest. "Yeah, none of us are allowed to enter the singles competition at the Vytal Festival. Not that any

of the others really cared about that, Ozpin and Headmaster Lionheart hit **me** where it hurt, damn it! I was supposed to be one of our primary champions in that area.”

“Judging by how poorly you’ve done against Harry, Pyrrha, and Yang, I rather doubt you’d have advanced very far,” Weiss sniffed.

At that, Sun twitched while Yang grinned viciously. Yang was, well, frankly, her Semblance was basically a hard block against most of his abilities. He could outlast her if he simply dodged everything she threw at him in turn, but simply being on the defensive like that wasn’t his style at all. As for Pyrrha, she was as fast as he was. He was a tiny bit more acrobatic if he had things to work with, but in an arena without objects to dodge around, that didn’t matter. Pyrrha was also far more precise, and he could never land a clean hit on her even if she allowed him into close combat range or was fighting with the handicap of not using her Semblance.

Something that frankly, kind of pissed Sun off whenever he thought about it.

As for Harry, they’d fought once and Harry had simply outlasted him with his horrendous amount of aura. While his close combat skills weren’t anything to write home about to Sun, that damn sword of his had nearly sliced straight through Sun’s weapons more than once. *And don’t get me started on when he isn’t being penalized by the rest of his team to not use his semblance. Telekinetic powers are like damn cheat codes in a game!*

“Yeah well, maybe. But that doesn’t mean that I don’t want to get involved with this,” Sun rallied quickly. If the four of you are going to go out like Scarlet Hood and fight the evildoer, I want to come along.”

“Just because you use a pair of sticks doesn’t mean your Father Rock or Small Jeff,” Yang said, while Ruby squealed about the idea of being called Scarlet Hood. The heroic cartoon figure of the honorable woodsman had been one of her favorites when she was growing up even though his use of a simple bow and arrow annoyed her. The hero had fought Grimm on a daily basis to defend his town, then fought against corruption and crime at night, stealing from the rich to give to the poor.

“Still, some backup could be helpful right? And so would keeping an eye on me so that I don’t blab about what you are up to,” Sun stated innocently. “I mean, even I know I ain’t the best at keeping secrets.”

All four girls stared at him deadpan, then shook their heads, agreeing with his statement but not willing to verbalize it aloud. “Awesome. So, what exactly are we going to be doing?” Sun questioned with a grin.

"We haven't really decided yet," Ruby said, looking around at her team. "Blake, are you sure you can't let this go?" When Blake shook her head, Ruby sighed, wondered again what the headmaster was up to by simply waiting, before saying aloud, "Fine. Like I said earlier, we're with you regardless. But before we go off, we need a plan. What exactly are we going to be doing? Just looking for the White Fang? Or looking for why they're working with Roman Torchwick? Or just looking for him?"

"Or what they need all that dust for," Weiss pointed out. "Hmm... come to think of it, that could be an angle I can follow up on." *If I can do without it getting back to my father, and his once more demanding I find him some dirt on Harry or the other Arcs.*

Ruby's stomach chose that moment to begin to rumble, and she twitched upright, nearly banging her head on the upper bunk for second, before pointing toward the doorway grandly. "But first, sustenance. Food before the mission is a must."

Blake smiled slightly at that as she and the others stood up and followed Ruby out. "Never change, Ruby."

"Heck yeah, I'm always in the mood for more food," Sun stated with a grin. "Oh, and one of my teammates is due to arrive today and might even be there now. I'll introduce you to him. He's very literally the definition of a cool guy."

"So, he uses an ice or cold based semblance?" Yang asked with a laugh, causing Sun and the others to snort.

True to Sun's prediction, his teammate was at the cafeteria, or rather outside the cafeteria, tapping one foot on the ground impatiently as he glanced around. Unlike his companion, this youth wore a uniform that was unlike the beacon uniform in color and cut, with burgundy and white instead of black, red and white, marking him out as a student from Haven, and one that was supposed to be here, rather than someone who'd stowed away rather than wait for the Haven student's actual transportation to Beacon.

Something Weiss pointed out now, causing Sun to whine a little even as he moved forward, throwing arm around the man's shoulders. "Ugh, everyone's picking on me today. Anyway, guy's, or rather girls meet Neptune Vasilius. He's my partner on our team, SSSN."

"Please, don't blame either of us for the name. I'm afraid Haven doesn't go into finding nice, catchy names for our teams, sadly," Neptune deadpanned. "At any rate, to my never-ending disappointment and shame, yes, Sun's my partner... and our team leader, for our sins."

Neptune was much thinner in the shoulders than Sun's. He was built more for speed, perhaps, his body something like the never-missed Sky or Dove in size, although he seemed a little lighter on his feet than either of those. Neptune was also far more handsome, in Weiss's

opinion. He had deep blue hair which looked well taken care of, with a pair of goggles riding high on his forehead, wore the uniform of Haven in a quite dapper fashion, and his smile was warm and refined.

“Ladies, I hope that this ruffian hasn’t given you all too horrible of an impression of Haven students. We’re not all like him, trust me. His Vacuan heritage lays heavily upon his shoulders,” Neptune said, bowing from the waist toward all four of the girls, although his eyes were locked on Weiss. “And who might you be, Snow Angel?”

“Weiss, charmed,” Weiss said, holding out her hand, and then flushing a little as instead of shaking it, Neptune turned it and kissed the back of it gently. “And what horrible circumstance forced you to work with this rascal?”

“Unfortunately, at Haven, we’re paired together by the teachers after they see a combat assessment of us in simulated combat against robotic Grimm. One close-range specialist is almost always paired with one long-range specialist. In this case, a close-range specialist like Sun was paired with a skirmisher, IE, me,” Neptune admitted while Sun mouthed ‘hurtful’ beside him. “I’ve heard that Beacon does it differently and that while your combat ability isn’t as good as ours to start out, your unit cohesion is far superior by the time you graduate. Although I would say partnering with someone like you would be far better, regardless of combat style,” Neptune said, bowing again.

“Hey, no teasers! You’ll have to wait for the Vytal Festival to see what any of us can do,” Ruby said, and hugging Weiss in the side, causing Weiss to lean into her for a moment, then attempt to push her away. “You’re not going to get any of our secrets out of us just because you’re pretty.”

“Oh-ho? He’s pretty, is he?” Yang wrapped an arm around Ruby’s shoulder, pulling her into a protesting hug. “Have you finally discovered boys, little sister?”

“He looks like he just stepped out of a boy band poster. Don’t blame me for that!” Ruby protested, waving her arms wildly.

Blake and Yang laughed at that, while Neptune looked mildly affronted, and Weiss rolled her eyes. It was true in a way, but that just meant he was handsome. With a smile on her face, she gestured toward the cafeteria doors. “Would you care to join us?”

“That sounds cool, as is getting to know you better,” Neptune said, smiling flirtatiously at Weiss. Weiss’s cheeks pinked a little, but she allowed him to walk beside her as they headed toward the cafeteria.

“Now see, that guy, he’s a smooth operator. Not sure I like that, really,” Yang finished in a mumble for a second, staring after the pair, then down at Ruby, still holding her in her hug,

before shaking her head and grinning over at Sun. "See that? Women like to be wooed. You're not going to score any points just by flashing your chest all the time, Sun."

"Yeah, but it doesn't hurt, does it?" Sun shot back, gesturing down to himself. "Besides, I think it'd be a crime not to share all this with everyone."

Blake forbore to comment, moving ahead with the others, causing Yang and Sun to fall behind for a second before they rushed to catch up. Entering the cafeteria, they found Nora, Ren, Sung Sun, Mila and Apacci all sitting down at one table. There was a chess set between Sung Sun and Ren, with Mila and Apacci sitting beside them, making it seem almost as if it was a boys versus girls' match, while Nora lounged nearby, perking up instantly as she saw their friends. Sending small droplets of syrup in different directions. Luckily, they hadn't hit anyone yet.

"Why chess, why not Remnant: The Game?" Ruby asked quizzically, sliding in next to her fellow team leader.

"We couldn't interest anyone else in a game," Ren confessed.

"I'm not interested, and Mila has never played," Apacci stated. "I'm not all that interested in any strategy game really. Sign me up for first person shooter though, with some heavy metal mixed in."

Sun nodded in agreement, reaching over to fist bump the other faunus, while Yang just shook her head. Even though there was something a bit off about the other guy, a feeling like Sun had met Apacci somewhere, he still seemed a fun guy. "I like some of those games, but only if they give me a shotgun. I like to challenge myself to finish the entire game using only the shotgun once I have it. That's always fun."

"Where are the two Arcs and Pyrrha?" Yang asked.

Nora explained about the twins and Harry's oldest sister wanting to talk to 'Pyrrha, their brother's girlfriend'. "The kiddies apparently scored really well in some tests and their parents are letting them stay up tonight. Time zones are so weird, I mean, isn't it the same time everywhere?"

While the others tried to figure out what Nora meant by that Ren smiled, not looking up from the chess set as he contemplated his move. "That's Nora for you. Accidental Existential questions found in the bottom of a pile of pancakes."

"Yep! I'm a deep thinker, Renny, and you know!" Nora cheerfully threw an arm around Ren's shoulders. "Like why we can't have pancakes for every meal, or determining exactly why bagel lovers are fundamentally evil."

The others all laughed at that while Ren didn't react at all, his concentration entirely on the chess game. Unfortunately, after a few seconds, he was forced to concede, shaking his head and looking over at the others. "Anyway, yes, that's what is going on. I believe that baby pictures were also mentioned. Somewhat odd coming from younger siblings rather than parents, but the Arcs are not a normal family."

Neptune and Sun shook their heads. Even Sun, who still harbored a bit of a grudge toward Harry for how he'd help the police to capture him, could tell the horror lying behind such simple words for their fellow man.

"Eesh, I wonder if that's going to be worse than when Tia and Arturia grilled Pyrrha about the relationship? That whole thing seems a little backward to me though," Ruby confessed. "I can't imagine having so many sisters. Seven of them!"

"Normally, it's the boy who's getting grilled by his girlfriend's family," Neptune supplied before going on hastily as he felt Weiss's stare on him, as if judging whether or not that was something he had personal experience with. "That's the way it is in a lot of sitcoms and romance novels anyway. So, tell me about yourself, Weiss. What is it like being on a team with three other girls? I've got two sisters of my own, and they fight like nobody's business whenever they need to share anything..." he paused, Ruby's last words having had time to percolate through his mind. "Wait, did you say seven sisters?! Brothers help his sanity."

This seemed to appease the Snow Angel, and soon Weiss and Neptune fell into a semi-flirtatious back-and-forth. Ruby and Yang continued to wonder about what embarrassing things Pyrrha was learning about Harry and whether or not that was better from his perspective than Tia and Arturia threatening Pyrrha. Considering the set-to that Arturia and Pyrrha had when Arturia first showed up and the fact Professor Goodwitch had decreed that Tia and Pyrrha could no longer spar with one another in combat class without both of them suffering under a handicap, it was a toss-up in Ruby's opinion.

Ren, who had conceded the chess game, stayed silent. He had noticed several times there were some very... interesting... undercurrents between the quartet before Arturia had left to head back home. Even before the older sister had shown up, he had felt that perhaps Tia, at least, felt far more than familial love toward Harry.

Yet it wasn't his place to comment, especially considering he had heard about the rigmarole about Harry being a foundling. That removed the only moral objection he would have to anything in that area. Thus, so long as everyone was happy, that was fine by him. Sung Sun took his thoughts away from that issue by an offer of another game, and he accepted quickly.

Apacci, Mila and Blake became embroiled in a semi-biting discussion about music and which type of music their professors would like. Blake felt that Goodwitch was an opera type of

woman, Mila insisted that she was into heavy metal. Apacci, meanwhile, felt that Ozpin was the one to be into opera and orchestral stuff, while Peach, “Gives off this feeling of a Goth chick who never went the full tattoo route, and then got out of the Goth stuff when she hit college.”

To one side, Nora and Sun were getting along just as well as they had from the first. Both of them loved a good time, disliked being serious for long periods, and felt body, food and fart jokes to be the height of comedy. Within minutes, the pair were flicking blueberries across at one another, catching them in their mouths talking about different pancake recipes between bites.

Alas, this was followed by Nora tossing bits of pancake toward Sun, who grinned and returned the favor. When it came to catching the pancake bites, Nora was sublime, shifting this way and that so fast she almost seemed as if she had borrowed Ruby’s semblance, picking each bite of pancake flung into the air out of the air easily. This was a direct contrast to her luck with blueberries, which had been very hit or miss, the blueberries bouncing off nose, chin or cheek to the annoyance of the others at the table.

Sun on the other hand, had done better with the blueberries. Yet, not powered by whatever pancake-infused power Nora had, he missed several. Almost inevitably, he accidentally smacked one of them sideways with his lunge forward, the bit smacking off his chin and directly into Yang’s hair.

Ruby’s eyes widened as she stared across at her sister while Weiss broke off from her own conversation and Blake looked up from where she had fallen into another broody silence after losing the argument two-to-one about Peach’s choice of music. “Nora, what in th—oh, no.”

A second later, Yang’s eyes turned red, and chaos erupted.

Scene break

Pyrrha, Harry and Tia walked side-by-side along the walkways of Beacon, with Harry flinging his arm around his sister while Pyrrha was still chortling occasionally at the final joke that Saphron had told her a few moments ago at Harry’s expense. Just as Ren had told the others, Harry’s youngest siblings had wanted to get to know Pyrrha the girlfriend, and Harry had also wanted to talk to his parents and Arturia. Arturia was due to start back to Vale that very night, having accomplished several goals during her week back home at Evig Låga.

He smiled to himself as Tia leaned more heavily into the hug, her own arm around his shoulders. *Although that probably looks far more natural than the opposite considering the difference in our height*, he reflected. “Did you have fun?”

“MM. It’s always nice to hear from home,” Tia said from behind her scarf. Earlier, she had pulled it aside more than once, but in public, it was back where it was and would remain there. She

paused, then seemed to smile under her scarf, her eyes gleaming with even more love than normal. "Teasing you is always fun, too. Saphron's still the best at that."

"That wasn't so very fun for me," Harry snorted dolefully.

"Still, your family is utterly delightful," Pyrrha said, smiling widely. "I've talked to them all now, and there isn't a one I wouldn't call a friend."

Tia nodded firmly, reaching over and pulling Pyrrha into a hug as well. "Our family likes you, too. That's always good."

"Mmm... I can tell Mom's still a bit ambivalent about multi-relationships in general, but she's also happy you and Arturia aren't trying to kill one another for my affections. So, she can take the bad with the good." Harry snorted. "As for Mom's opinion specifically of Pyrrha, that hasn't changed since I first introduced her as my girlfriend: getting another daughter-in-law is always fun for someone like Mom."

Pyrrha blushed rosily at that. They hadn't really talked about marriage, although admittedly, the Oath she had given to him and that Harry had accepted had meant that they would be bound for life regardless of their actual relationship status. But they **had** exchanged words of love several times over the past few days. Still, thinking of that kind of thing was somewhat too far into the future for Pyrrha. "Yes, well, I also think that the conversation you had with your parents was quite interesting."

Despite this being one of the most blatant attempts to change the subject that Harry had ever heard, he still smiled, and, shifting away from Tia, held his hand out to Pyrrha. A sheepishly smiling Pyrrha took it, and the two public lovers walking openly hand-in-hand while Tia walked beside them as they turned their feet toward the cafeteria to meet with the rest of their team. "I agree. I wasn't exactly happy with all they had to share, but I suppose that's to be expected."

"Maybe, but I didn't like hearing about all the, the political chicanery going on behind the scenes. Do you, do you believe your father when he said that there seemed to be some kind of covert move to stop your shipments? I really don't want to feel as if Mistral would be involved in that," the Mistrali native confessed. "I know our relationships with the outlying towns are sometimes strained, but surely that's a bit much."

In Atlas, Vacuo or Vale, anyone living in any of the outlying towns like Evig Låga or Chian, where Harry and Pyrrha first met, would be called citizens of Mistral. That was the way outlying villages and towns were treated elsewhere. But on Anima, that wasn't really the case. Mistral was indeed a city state in its own right, and the only one on the continent. But Evig Låga wasn't the only town outside Mistral's outskirts that viewed itself as largely independent from the larger city state.

In Vale, every outer town or village was tied into the central city's economy at a local level, with a lot of back and forth. Vacuo, well Harry wasn't certain what went on there, or if there were even enough outer villages to matter. On Mantle, every town or village was a part of Atlas, and had local overseers chosen by the Atlas government. They could be removed, ostensibly, but Harry had never read even one instance of that actually happening.

In stark contrast to this, most of the towns and villages of Anima were based around different racial or historical groups that had split off in the past from one of the other city-states, or, as in the case of Evig Låga, could trace their history to past the creation of Mistral or any of the others. These societies prided their independence regardless of what other societal mores set them apart from one another.

Yes, they paid taxes to Mistral, and yes, they were afforded **some** of the same protections as Mistral itself in terms of anti-Grimm defense by Huntsmen employed by Mistral. Yet most, like Evig Låga, had their own local Hunters. Many had their own local industries, and nearly all were fiscally and agriculturally independent, unlike in Vale or the continent of Mantle.

And now, Evig Låga's ruling assembly was making deals with Vacuo for weapons, and money and other resources with corporations in Vale. The money that they were getting from the Fire Dust sales was extremely lucrative, and Evig Låga was still labeled as a farming community, thus paying a far lesser amount in taxes than Mistral felt they should at this point. Evig Låga in contrast wasn't willing to pay more, and wasn't exactly hiding the fact that it was trying to become fully independent. That was causing a lot of waves, and now more than a bit of pushback, social, political and, apparently underhanded.

"I think that some of it is coming from Mistral's government. The strikes amongst teamsters that coincide with ships carrying our Dust being in port, the number of Huntsmen who have tried to stop by without any real reason, the price our food gets on the market in a few of the other towns plummeting. That I would lay at the feet of the Mistrali council. Mind you, I'm only getting half of the story."

"But your father, mother, Arturia and the rest of the council are good enough sources. Especially that short fellow with the, um... the distracting eyebrows."

"Pierre Gröntumme (Greenthumb), the leader of the farmers. Even my father listens to him when he talks food or farming, and his family's farmstead is even larger than ours," Harry supplied, before smirking. "But yeah, he's got distracting eyebrows."

Harry became serious then. "I don't see Mistral's government being involved in trying to drive down the prices of Fire Dust, and only Fire Dust, in Vacuo. Or the defamation of our product that's going on in other smaller communities across Anima and here in Vale. That and the new

tariffs that we've been forced to pay to Atlas certainly feels more like it's something coming from some other corporation. I'm not going to point fingers like my father did, but it's possible."

"You don't think Weiss would be involved in that, do you?" Pyrrha asked frowning pensively. "I really can't see it myself, but your mother, well she wasn't exactly happy to know we were friends with a Schnee."

"Yeah, my mom has always been the one to hold a grudge. I don't know what happened personally between her and some Schnee in the past, but I assume it was something important," Harry admitted, before shrugging. "And then there's the past incidents between members of our disparate families, which I do know and are kind of messed up. As for Weiss, she's said she has no say in the running of her family's company. Weiss even being here in Beacon in Vale is a rebellion against her father regardless of anything else. No, I don't think she's involved in that, and I'm not going to ask her. I'm not involved in that aspect, and I don't think I need to be."

Tia made an interrogative noise, and Harry shrugged. "The SDC is a monopoly, sure, in fact it's got two monopolies, Dust and communication as it was SDC funds that helped build the Coms Towers. Yet they can't mess with that, as, if they do it even once, General Ironwood will move in and take the Coms network over, while hitting the SDC with so many fines it would make Jacques Schnee's head explode."

"That makes sense." Everyone knew that the SDC's Coms network had to be open for everyone and correctly transfer both data and communications. If it didn't, even once, and could be proven to, Ironwood and the other leaders of the world would have no choice but to step in, no matter how minor the problem, no matter who the lie, mistake or what-have-you might have benefited. "But there's the Dust monopoly," Pyrrha pointed out.

"A monopoly that's never been challenged before, for very long," Harry agreed. "Few other companies have ever been able to go for a few months before SDC buys them up. But..." and here Harry smirked. "Evig Låga's goals are not such that we would be open to being bought out for any amount of money, and they aren't the kind of thing the SDC is able to help us achieve even if they could figure out what to offer."

Harry shrugged laconically. "As for extra-legal means? The SDC doesn't have enough of a military, unless they get Atlas to do their work for them which is doubtful, to force things. Vacuo is likely to tell them to fuck right off if they try to play games with the Dust distribution. Our popularity in Vale right now is too high for them to make overt moves here. Mistral might side with them, but that would look very bad for the other small towns and villages, and might cause more problems than it's worth. And then there's the newest group we've begun to talk to."

Pyrrha nodded thoughtfully, but had to point out, "Yes, but that's going to bring its own problems, you know."

"With Atlas, certainly. They've always been convinced that Menagerie's is a White Fang fiefdom. With some reactionaries here in Vale yes. But not openly. Menagerie's supposed to be a sign that faunus and humans are equals, that they too can build a nation. It's something of a careful lie, of course, but unless they really want another war with the faunus both in Menagerie and within their own borders, no one can object too loudly to what we've been doing."

Tia spoke up, changing the subject, looking between the redhead and her Harry. "More importantly, Arturia's due to return tomorrow. Will we have time do you think for another group date?"

While Pyrrha wildly looked around to make sure no one was overhearing, Harry simply smiled and nodded. "Although, I thought that last night watching that romance movie you chose and simply cuddling the night away was a quite nice date for the three of us, wasn't it?"

Tia nodded, then gave Harry a look that sent a shiver going down his spine, before looking over Pyrrha with the same look. "This time though, maybe all three of us together?"

Harry and Pyrrha could not miss her meaning there if they tried, and neither was willing to do that regardless. They looked at one another, then nodded. "T, that sounds nice," Pyrrha practically squeaked, still unused to talking about this kind of topic despite having dated Harry for more than a few months now.

"*AHEM*. Um, in that case, why don't the four of us go out to a nice restaurant this coming weekend, and then maybe down to the club for dancing? After that we can all retire back to Arthur's for the rest of the night," Harry suggested. "Although Arturia and I will have to be careful to not seem too romantic in public unless we can disguise her as we'll have to you, Pyrrha."

Even though his family didn't have much problem with his polygamous relationship, Harry and the girls weren't in any hurry to be open about it, and thus come under public scrutiny. Tia could literally not care less, yet the other three knew how much the public turning against them would hurt in the long run. Especially with the Invincible Girl being so popular around the world.

While Pyrrha made a moue of annoyance, Tia nodded firmly at the idea, then paused, reaching out and taking Harry by the shoulder, holding him still, looking at him. She didn't say anything, just looking at him, and Harry smiled gently, reaching up to take her hand and squeeze it, the most romantic gesture he'd allow the pair to do while they were out and about. "Don't worry. I won't favor one of you over the others."

“MM.” Tia hummed, looking between them while Pyrrha nodded understanding. Although she rather reflected that she and Tia would probably favor Harry over one another. They liked one another well enough, and they’d actually gone on a few dates of their own, here in Beacon. They’d even exchanged a few kisses and more while Harry wasn’t around. But that was a minor candle to the flame of their affection toward Harry.

Their walk continued, with Harry and Tia agreeing to meet up the next day for a run around campus in the morning. Pyrrha and Harry would meet up that night for a date just between the two of them.

They were still arguing about what movie to watch when the cafeteria came within sight. A second later, there was a loud crash then, and they stared up at the ceiling, where Yang could be seen having been smashed up and through it. Ren was next, though thankfully he had apparently been smashed through the hole that Yang’s body had already made.

Looking up at the two as they started to fall back down to the earth, Pyrrha looked at Tia and Harry. “I was going to say Nora did that, but...”

“Hmm, you’re right. There’s something more going on in there than Nora going mad due to lack of pancakes. And,” Harry pointed ahead of them. “Professor Goodwitch looks like she’s on the warpath. Ozpin, eh, I can’t tell from here.”

Tia nodded thoughtfully, but hadn’t stopped moving forward and was right behind Glenda and Professor Ozpin as the pair entered the cafeteria, with Harry and Pyrrha hurrying to catch up. Harry watched as, with a wave of her riding crop, tables were returned to the proper position, plates pulled out of the air, reformed, and were stacked on the floor and freshmen students, nearly the entire grade, were pulled up off of the floor and shoved toward the outer walls, where they stuck for a second, held there by Glynda’s power.

“Watching you do large-scale things like that is always impressive professor,” Harry said with a smile. *It’s like watching Dumbledore at his showman best. Although admittedly, I could probably do the same thing if in a different way.*

“While a compliment is always welcome Mr. Arc, I would prefer that you control your team members better,” Glynda growled, looking sideways at him for a moment.

“I only have two team members who could possibly have been involved with... whatever this is,” Harry said, scowling a little as he took in the amount of food smashed, flattened or otherwise ruined around the area, with food splatters nearly everywhere, including on almost all of the students. “Pyrrha is with me. How exactly could two individuals have caused all this?”

Glenda huffed, but didn’t answer, stalking forward, flicking her riding crop upwards to catch Yang midair, tossing her to land at the feet of the rest of team Ruby. Seeing she was in no rush

to do the same with Ren since his team was here and free to do it, Harry quickly raised the ground up toward Ren, letting it fall back away from them a bit once the other youth fell into his arms.

"Thanks, Harry," Ren grumbled. "Ugh. Even for me, this was an event of memorable proportions."

"And that's saying something considering you've been friends with Nora for years," Harry quipped. The two boys fell silent, then as Glynda glared their way, gesturing Ren to stand front and center in front of her. Noting that He, Nora, the three members of Team Garnet present, the two from Haven and team RWBY wore the most food splatters, she gestured again, pulling each of the other students out of their places in line around the outer walls until all of them were front and center.

"You know, given the age at which education begins here in Beacon, I never thought I would have to say this, but you all should know better than to play with your food," Glynda growled, staring between the students angrily. "Now, who among you started this?"

"Glynda, please. I rather think that who started it isn't really important at this moment. Let them clean up this mess, and that should be enough of a punishment don't you think?" Ozpin said from behind Glenda, sitting at his perennial coffee cup as he did.

"Sir! They destroyed school property. Just because I can fix all of this is no reason to forget that. Besides, with all of the students they dragged into it, the work to clean up wouldn't be a proper punishment," Glynda argued back.

"Perhaps, perhaps not. Regardless, one shouldn't lose one's cool about something like this. It is an incident caused by the students that only has affected the students themselves. Let them clean it up. Let them be children, the life of a huntsman will turn them into adults far too soon," Ozpin said, reaching a hand forward to gently touch Glenda's shoulder.

Yeesh, giving me some very mixed signals here, Ozpin, Harry thought sarcastically. First, we have to be adults to understand your little speech prior to Initiation and you expect us to be adults and solve our in-team problems ourselves. Then there's the whole journey to Mountain Glenn, and our own little meeting. For someone who wants us to be children, you're all too quick to treat us as things to be used up or discarded. No, I'm not buying this Good Cop, Bad Cop routine.

While Harry was watching Ozpin intently, trying, once more, to figure out what made the older man act as he did, Glynda sighed, glaring at the students in front of her for one more moment, then gestured around them. "I will be calling the janitorial staff in moments. They will be dropping buckets and mops and other cleaning utensils outside the door. Until this place is

spotless, not a one of you is to leave. There is also to be no use of Semblances to hurry the work. Understood?"

"Might I make a suggestion professors," Harry stood forward, going on before either professor could respond. "It seems as if only those who are truly splattered by the majority of the detritus here who should stay to clean up. Ren, can you tell us what happened here?"

Ren nodded, ignoring the looks of pleading from his friends and even Nora. Just like Harry, he felt it was time for some tough love. "The incident began when Sun Wukong missed a bit of pancake dipped in syrup thrown his way by Nora. The pair of them had begun to do that when catching blueberries began to be too boring. Nora caught every bite tossed her way," Ren's voice made it seem as if this was something to be admired, causing Nora to puff herself up in glee, before his next words brought her down to earth with a thump. "But Sun could not. He hit one into Yang's hair, and as everyone in the school knows by now, messing with Yang's hair is a bit of an explosive issue."

"OY, I... er... you know what, yeah, that's fair," Yang's shout of betrayal ended in a mumble as Glynda turned the full power of her glare on the younger blonde.

"I did my best to try and calm things down but after Apacci tossed a rasher of greasy bacon at Team Ruby, things escalated. At that point, Neptune tried to hide, but Sun... well..." Here Ren hesitated. "Um, I suppose Nora started to follow his orders as the two of them, Mila and Apacci squared off against the girls of Team Ruby and Sung-Sun."

"YOU. HIT ME WITH A PIE TO THE FACE," Sung-Sun practically snarled, still trying to get bits of peach cobbler out of her hair as she glared at Mila, who had the grace to look abashed, although the fact her lips were fighting to not twitch into a grin was not doing her any favors. Nor was the sight of the look of glee on Apacci's face as he grinned at Weiss and Blake.

Huh, okay, going after Weiss can be a holdover from the time when she was somewhat anti-faunus. But Blake? What's up with that? Filing that away to come back to later, Harry listened as Ren continued to describe how the rest of the freshmen present had been dragged into the food fight, naming only a few others who had willingly chosen to participate rather than simply being caught in the crossfire. In the end, Ren said simply, "While I was not actively part of the start of this, I did eventually join in, and accept my punishment."

"Well, I won't," another voice said, a blue haired youth Harry had yet to make the acquaintance of holding up a hand from the side. "I just got here today Professor Goodwitch, and while Sun might be my partner, but that doesn't make me his keeper. I didn't do anything but duck and cover."

"A part of me wishes to point out to you Mr. Vasilius, that leaving your partner in the lurch like this is not a good idea. On the other hand, Harry's suggestion of leaving those of you who were simple victims to leave without taking part in the punishment makes good sense to me," Glenda stated.

"As it does for me as well," Ozpin mused, looking at Harry thoughtfully as he always did when the two of them were in one place together.

Harry gazed back at him for a few seconds, wondering about the other man, about the secrets that he knew Ozpin was hiding just as surely as Harry was hiding his own, before turning away, gesturing the blue haired youth over to him. "Come on man, if you just got here, I doubt you've actually been shown anything around the campus. This is Pyrrha and Tia, my girlfriend and sister respectively. We'll get you to our townhome and some clean clothing, then show you around campus."

Sun wasn't the only one to shout betrayal at this. Sung-Sun and the rest of Garnet tried to argue that Tia should join them, while Nora whined that Harry and Pyrrha were leaving her and Rennie in the lurch. "Betrayal, betrayal most foul, I say! How can you turn your backs on the Pancake queen!?"

While Harry simply rolled his eyes, Pyrrha looked apologetic, and promised Nora that she would get her some ice cream that night when she and Harry went into Vale. This did not mollify Nora, but was better than Tia's simple, "You made the mess, you clean it up. Mother always told us that when we were younger," addressed to the rest of Team GART.

Neptune didn't bother looking back at him, simply miming an apology toward Weiss, who huffed, rolling her eyes. Yet she could not exactly argue with the fact that if she had the chance to get out of this, she probably would.

The group of four followed the other students who seemed to be somewhat less splattered than the others, out of the cafeteria, with Ozpin chuckling as he followed behind them, although not before he glanced toward Blake, his eyes narrowing thoughtfully for a second. *Let us hope that my manipulating up her newsfeeds a bit has the desired result. Qrow's continued absence pursuing the one lead we have in the form of that emerald-haired girl has forced me to use only our local resources, and that is simply not enough. I must get to the bottom of who is behind this alliance between Roman Torchwick and the White Fang. It is far too important to let lie fallow for any longer. The opposition will regain the initiative if left alone for too long. Indeed, with this latest assault, they undoubtedly have already. It will be up to our little belled cat to lead us to some more targets.*

Outside the cafeteria, Neptune turned to the others, trying hard not to gape. *Fucking hell, the Invincible Girl's just as good looking in person as she is in the advertisements, but what the hell*

do they feed them wherever the Arcs are from to let this girl grow that big? And, um, tall, too, I suppose. Reminds me of that time Sun made fun of Sage's fetish for Dommy Mommy types.

Showing such thoughts on your face wasn't cool. So, Neptune didn't do so now, instead addressing Harry. "So, you'd be Harry Arc then?" Neptune asked.

Harry's eyes narrowed. "I don't think I'm exactly famous. And you don't come from Evig Låga. Wait, let me guess, you're a Pyrrha fan boy?"

"You might not be personally famous, but yeah, you're kind of notorious back in Mistral because you're dating our wayward princess over there," Neptune shrugged, how else, coolly. If you ignored how much food splatters covered his modified Haven Academy uniform, anyway. "I'm not a fan, although I've followed her career a lot. She's not my type, but I gotta admit, if I was a fan, I'd probably be raging at you right now."

"I don't think I'm going to even try to appear sorry," Harry said with his own, admittedly much less cool, shrug. "Although maybe Pyrrha will, considering she likes to apologize for things that are completely out of her control sometimes."

"I'm getting better at that," Pyrrha pointed out, her tone that of a whine, yet also oddly proud of the fact she was indeed getting better at, well, not being so nice all the time.

"So, what do—" Neptune's words were interrupted by his stomach growling, causing the cool-obsessed youth to twitch. "Aheh, um, sorry about that, I know that wasn't exactly cool. But I actually didn't get to eat much before Sun and the rest started the food fight."

"Heh, talk about water everywhere, but not a drop to drink," Harry snickered. "Well, you're in luck. I wasn't planning to, but I can whip us up something to eat."

Tia, who had been moving off, suddenly perked up and turned right around, grabbing Harry's arm and tugging him along. They soon left a chortling Pyrrha and a blinking Neptune behind, who looked over at Pyrrha. "Um, I guess that means his food's pretty good, then?"

"You have no idea," Pyrrha laughed. "Honestly, you don't."

Scene break

Going out on a Date, the kind that deserved to have the term capped, with a regular girlfriend usually took some prior planning to get it right. When the girlfriend in question was a celebrity like Pyrrha, that took the need to plan to the next level. Thus, the two of them headed to the bullhead together, with Harry carrying a backpack filled with the necessary tools to give Pyrrha a bit of a makeover. This they accomplished in one of the bathrooms that the bullhead port contained, with Pyrrha using her Polarity power to lock the door so no one could enter.

"Have I ever thanked Arturia for demanding you learn how to change someone's hair color and so forth?" Pyrrha murmured, leaning her head back into the sink. The setting wasn't anywhere close to romantic, of course, but feeling Harry's fingers moving through her hair, no matter how clinically he was doing so, was still nice. *And the idea of going around with Harry freely, of being able to walk side by side in public without being mobbed, is even nicer. We haven't had any truly public dates since that first aborted one we tried to have where we were forced to run away. And hoodies have never been my thing.*

"Hah, remind me to tell you about the first time I tried and the hash I made of it when we're at the restaurant. You'll get a kick out of it," Harry joked. He had created a relatively nice chair out of the floor for Pyrrha, but knew it actually wasn't all that comfortable. "Now, as to our date, I thought we could walk around the Vale Gardens for a bit. I've got a restaurant booked for us nearby, but we've got a few hours before then. Anything in the city you want to see?"

"An anime store," Pyrrha announced firmly.

Harry had heard that term a time or two back in his old world, and although he had no idea of whether or not the kind of animation it referred to was the same here in Remnant, he was still amused that the term seemed to have crossed dimensions. "Really? You like anime?"

"Not so much anymore. I like live action movies these days, but anime was a kind of guilty pleasure when I was younger," Pyrrha admitted. "I know that sounds almost stereotypically Mistrali, but I can't help it."

"How about an AVM store then?" Harry proposed, naming Remnant's equivalent of an MGM studios store. "I know where one of those are, but I have no idea about an anime store."

Pyrrha smiled. "I downloaded a full map and directory of Vale to my scroll."

"That works. Now, let's see if your hair comes out as dark as I want it to be. Then we'll need to put in your contacts, and then the change of clothing you brought along. I'll wait outside for that, though, I want to be surprised."

Surprised he was a moment later as Pyrrha came out dressed like she had gotten advice from Coco and Blake alike, coming up with a chic punk look. Her jeans had holes in them in several places, hanging loosely on her. Up top, she wore dark black hoodie, with bits of leather sewn into it as it covered holes in the original fabric. Her hair was done in an intricate spiral braid, the black locks falling down one side of her chest. Pyrrha had on a small choker with the word 'Queen' written out on it. The hoodie was tight on her frame, showing off her chest in a way that Pyrrha's normal clothing didn't. A pair of large headphones, the same type Ruby used, sat on her shoulders.

‘Well, what do you think? I got advice on changing my appearance from Coco, and then Ruby let me borrow her headphones,’ Pyrrha asked, proving Harry’s two guesses right.

“Wow. You look amazing, Pyrrha, but I’d say that if you were in a burlap sack.” Harry held out his hand, pulling Pyrrha into a light kiss, before turning them around to head out into the city.

What followed was even better than their first, aborted date, in Pyrrha’s opinion. For one thing, it was much earlier in the day, allowing the two of them to see more of Vale proper in the light of the sun, including several areas of the city that were predominantly for small, local businesses. A few were built in really old homes, with neat little nooks to explore, which Pyrrha greatly enjoyed. She also loved talking to some of the people they met without her public persona looming, taking everyone’s attention. Here, she could just be Pyrrha, Harry’s girlfriend.

Eventually, they moved on, finding some of the anime stores Pyrrha wanted to visit. There, she enjoyed explaining her childhood hobby/escape method to Harry, excitedly spending money on a few DVD sets that she felt their team would enjoy. This included one about a magical girl who wielded a hammer and enjoyed ultraviolence that had both her and Harry wondering if Nora had somehow been used as a template for the character without her knowing. She also enjoyed talking to some of the younger kids in the shop, who seemed delighted that an older girl enjoyed the same hobby as they did.

As they left the anime store and bought some soft pretzels to tide themselves over, the pair linked arms, heading to the famous Vale Gardens. This was a fifteen-acre area in the heart of the city. As they walked, Pyrrha sighed a bit, noting that someone had put up posters for the Vytal festival on the tree. “Ugh. I don’t approve of putting up posters on trees in the first place. To see it be about the Vytal Festival is somehow worse.”

She paused, looking over at Harry. “Speaking of, as Team Leader, have you submitted our plan for the Vytal Festival? In fact, what have you decided we’ll be doing?” *I suppose I’ll have to enter the singles tournament*, Pyrrha thought, her feelings somewhat like that she always felt when she thought of fighting someone one-on-one, a mix of joy at the idea of fighting, sadness at how limited that format was, and intense dislike, even loathing at the idea of being on display again.

“I haven’t submitted anything of the sort,” Harry shrugged, smiling at Pyrrha kindly. “I’ve never been all that interested in showing off for the masses, and I thought you wouldn’t be interested in it either.”

Pyrrha stumbled, staring at Harry in shock. “Wh, wh...”

“What?” Harry asked innocently as if they were talking about something utterly unimportant. “I mean, I haven’t talked it over with Ren and Nora, but neither of them have brought it up either, other than Nora asking if there was any kind of monetary prize. When Ren and I told her that

the only prizes were trophies, she lost interest pretty quickly. I have no desire to let more people know about my magic, and I know how uncomfortable you are about your whole Invincible Girl moniker, even after it's been disproven. So wh—"

That was as far as he got before Pyrrha kissed him. One arm wound around his waist, while the fingers on her other hand wound through Harry's wild, unkempt hair, pulling him into the kiss. A kiss that quickly grew heated, their tongues dancing in first Harry's mouth, then Pyrrha's as she gave Harry what she felt his consideration was due. Eventually, as parents started to cover the eyes of young children when they passed by, the two had to pull back to breathe.

When she did, Pyrrha leaned her forehead against Harry's, her currently black eyes glimmering. **"THANK YOU**, Harry. I, I hated the thought of once more fighting for the joy of a crowd, of being on display like that again. I love to challenge myself against strong opponents, to grow stronger, but to once more become the so-called 'Invincible Girl', to need to play to the crowd again, take on that role? I would have done it if I had to, b, because that is what I thought the school would want of me, but being free of that scenario is, it's..." Pyrrha lunged forward again, kissing Harry again, much to the annoyance of a young mother with a curious ten-year-old boy who she had to drag away.

Pulling back from the kiss, Harry chuckled wryly, keeping his hands where they were on Pyrrha's back with some difficulty. "Heh, I, um, I wish I could say that decision was made because I wanted to save you from that, Pyr, but I didn't. I figured we could take that time to have the whole team come back to Evig Låga with me. We could be a big help there, and I'm not just talking about my Semblance, but all of you as well."

"That sounds grand!" Pyrrha answered enthusiastically, even as a part of her twitched at the shortened form of her name. They'd decided on that name while out on this date, but it still annoyed her a bit. *Getting out of being a circus act and actually doing some good, sign me up!*

Harry chuckled at that, then leaned forward, kissing Pyrrha in turn before pulling back. "Come on. There are supposed to be a few out of the way hidden spots in this park where couples can find a bit of privacy. We've got forty minutes before the reservation I made, and we're within five minutes' walk of the restaurant."

Not twenty minutes of heaving petting and making out passed before Harry blinked as a buzzing noise started to get through his lust-induced haze. Something was also vibrating in his pocket in a very strange manner. Slowly pulling back from the kiss, he stared down at his pocket as a scowling Pyrrha did the same. It took a few seconds, but eventually Harry figured out what that had to be and reached into his pocket, pulling out his scroll, an eyebrow cocking in surprise.

"Sorry love. I put it on silent, so if a call still come through, it must be a serious one. Although if it's a telemarketer or something else, I'm going to find them and torture them just a little bit."

"I'll help," Pyrrha said, growling a little as she started to push her shirt back into her pants, her hoody having long since been discarded.

The image of the bookseller Tukson appeared a second later. "This is Harry Arc, right?"

"If you've forgotten what I look like in a month that might not be a good sign for your overall memory considering what we talked about, Old Man," Harry grumbled, shaking his head, even as his heartbeat began to pick up again, and his eyes narrowed, taking in the worried, harried look of the older faunus in an instant. All his irritation at the interruption vanished, he asked, "What's wrong?"

"I, you know I was making plans to leave for, er well you know. But I'm afraid I need to step up those plans a good bit. Maybe even change them entirely," Tukson said obliquely.

That was enough for Harry though, who well remembered the hints that Tukson might've been involved in some not-so-legal things a time or two, and how he had been hoping to leave town when Harry and Ren met him at his store. "All right. We'll want to know what's going on, and perhaps a little bit more besides, but I'm willing to help you."

Looking up, he found Pyrrha already had pulled up a map on her scroll, holding it up in front of him. She still looked a bit furious at their date being interrupted, but also understanding, as Ren and Harry had told her and Nora about the bookseller. "Close up shop and wait until I get there. If I'm reading this map right, I should be there in around forty minutes."

"Huh? That quick?"

"You interrupted a date, Tukson. We'll be there in forty minutes," Harry drawled, before hanging up. With that, he looked over at Pyrrha. "Sorry love, but--"

Pyrrha reached up with a finger, placing it against Harry's lips. "Shush. I'm not happy, but I'm not going to object to helping someone who is probably a good man get away from the mistakes of his past.

Harry smiled at that, wrapping his arms around Pyrrha's waist, kissing her again, "I love you, Pyrrha."

Pyrrha leaned into the kiss, grinning as she murmured those words back to Harry.

They were still smiling and holding hands by the time they arrived at Tukson's bookstore. Harry led Pyrrha around to the back of the shop, knocking on the door there, as he pulled up his scroll, calling the number that the faunus had used back. "Tukson, it's me."

A moment later, the door opened, and the man's eyes flicked to Harry, relief filling them until he saw the curious redhead behind him, whereupon he just stared. "Er, hello. Um, you sure as heck aren't the boy that Arc was here with when I first met him."

"I would hope not." Snickering, Pyrrha held out a hand. "I'm Pyrrha, Harry's partner."

"Huh... partner in all things, I take it?" Pyrrha nodded, smiling a brilliant smile, and Tukson slowly turned to look at Harry, then gazed between them, then back at Harry. "Have you ever wondered if perhaps you're a little too lucky in this life, Arc?"

"Often," Harry answered dryly, gesturing over Tukson's shoulder even as he fought back the urge to laugh, while Pyrrha giggled, knowing how oddly apt for Harry those words were. "Now, are you going to let us in and tell us what's going on?"

Whatever Harry had thought of Tukson's past, he had never really thought the man would've been a member of the White Fang in good standing. That he was one of a few others in Vale that tried to keep the police informed on any violent White Fang activities was also somewhat surprising, as Harry well understood what happened to traitors. Knowing that Roman had somehow cottoned on to where the information the police were getting was coming from was another thing entirely.

"Anyway, one of my contacts in the White Fang warned me they were going to make an example of me sometime tonight or tomorrow, and, well, here I am. I'd not ask for help, but my own exit plan isn't ready yet, and the White Fang would know precisely how I'd try to hide on my own, so..." Tukson trailed off, shrugging. "You, you might be my only hope. The White Fang are ruthless on their own, but whoever they're partnering with, they are even worse."

He hummed thoughtfully to himself, looking around the bookstore, then over at Pyrrha. She shook her head, though. "I know that look Harry. You're thinking about somehow setting an ambush or something. But we don't have our weapons on us, and the weapon lockers are far too inaccurate to call in this part of the city."

"Yes, but I don't need my sword to be deadly, Pyrrha." *Now, if I could place a tracking charm on someone and have it last longer than a few minutes, a full-on ambush might not be necessary but as it is, yeah, waiting for whoever's going to silence Tukson is a good idea.*

"We don't even know how they would go about silencing him. They might attack him here; they might attack him..."

"I live up above the store miss. And I would really prefer not to have it destroyed, not after I already sold it," Tukson answered.

Harry shook his head. "I think rounding up some more White Fang is worth a little collateral damage, let alone whoever else could be sent with them." *Removing someone as dangerous as that emerald-haired girl or Neo would be worth it. Although fighting Neo isn't going to be fun.*

"If your store gets wrecked, I'll pay the new owner the price to repair it." He looked Tukson thoughtfully, then smirked, holding up the bag which contained all the stuff he had bought to disguise Pyrrha for their date. "Now, are you ready for your makeover?"

Moments later, Tukson looked entirely like someone else. His hair color had changed to a dark black, Harry had shaved his face and Pyrrha had volunteered her colored contacts, making his eyes black instead of the normal faunus yellow. A pair of gloves finished the image, hiding his other faunus features for the moment.

Harry stepped back, surveying his work, then looked over to Pyrrha handing over a credit card. "Find him a hotel near the bullhead port. See if they can bump your time up a few days if you ask. If it's a matter of money, use that card, then get back here."

Tukson nodded, while Pyrrha gave Harry a hug, and warned him to be careful. Moments later, the pair were gone, and Harry moved over to flip the sign on the door around, declaring the store open once more. He then moved back to the cash register and made himself busy, cleaning up a bit.

He was still there several hours after Pyrrha had called saying that the international bullhead company had basically tried to overcharge Tukson several times over for trying to change to the next international bullhead out rather than the one he'd signed up for, and that Harry's card hadn't gone through, at first. Harry wonder if maybe that was someone messing with him because he was an Arc and thus part of Evig Låga, but after getting a call on his scroll from his credit card company he was able to sort it out.

Worse, though, was that Pyrrha had seen several faunus who seemed to somehow figure out that Tukson was a faunus as well, and was hiding his animal traits for some reason. A few even went so far as glaring at him as Pyrrha helped him get a hotel room for the night. Hearing that, Harry had told Pyrrha to stay with Tukson for a few hours, just to make certain there was no trouble from that quarter.

Glancing at the clock, Harry saw that there was still another hour before the place was supposed to close, and no one had shown up, much to his chagrin. A few people had come in and purchased books, asking about Tukson, but none of them had seemed all that interested when Harry had replied with a bland family emergency. *It will take Pyrrha longer to get back here than it will for the shop to close. And no one's shown up. Sad.*

He looked up as the door opened, the jingle of the bell now somewhat irritating him. A young man walked in; his entire attitude somewhat lazy, almost jaundiced as he looked across the store at Harry cocking an eyebrow. “Yo, got any comics?”

Harry pointed him toward the appropriate rack, saying, “And I won’t even bother you if you read just one before buying a few others.”

The other young man snorted at that, but didn’t reply, and Harry went back to being a little bored, watching the door for a few more moments.

Mercury Black was startled, astonished, and worried all in one. Harry Arc featured in one of the dossiers that Cinder had given him leading into this operation, and to find him here of all places was beyond startling. It was downright worrisome. *What the hell does this mean? Tukson is supposed to be passing on White Fang secrets sure, but to the police, not to some external power like Harry Arc and his connection to Evig Låga.*

Thanks to Hazel, Cinder and Mercury had seen all he had gathered on what was going on and Evig Låga while they waited for Tyrian to arrive. Harry Arc was part of the somewhat ruling family, if it could be called that, of Evig Låga, and that Harry might even have been the one to convince the rest of the ruling party (Mercury wasn’t certain if it was a council or not) to try to expand. But what the heck he was doing here working at a bookstore owned by a White Fang traitor, Mercury couldn’t understand. *Unless maybe he reached out through Tukson to the White Fang at some point, but then, why wouldn’t Adam know about that? And why would he have done that in the first place?*

Regardless, Mercury’s plan of quickly killing the mole and earning himself some points with the boss and with Adam, their resident wild card, had run into an unexpected pothole. He was floundering, wondering what to do. Eventually though, an idea crystallized. There was no way that Harry knew who Mercury was, thus, he could fish for a little bit of information.

He walked over to the cash register, carrying a few comics. Placing them on the counter, he cocked his head quizzically. “Yo, no offense man, but why are you working here? I mean, I know this place is owned by an faunus, and with all the tension around it just seems weird.”

“Why are you shopping in a place owned by a faunus?” Harry retorted.

“I’m new to Vale, and was walking around and saw the store yesterday. Thought it was a cool little gimmick you know, home of every book under the sun. Although I doubt it’s accurate,” Mercury answered glibly. While he wasn’t really able to change a plan on the fly, he could exchange repartee with the best of them after working with Emerald for more than a year.

Harry nodded, then shrugged his shoulders. "Tukson's kind of a friend of the family, and when he had a family emergency, I volunteered to finish out the day for him. And I've never bought into that whole faunus/human racism, whichever way that particular river flows."

"Good to hear. I prefer to take people as they come, you know? Being racist toward someone because they have an extra set of ears or can see in the dark is about as stupid as hating people with freckles or something."

Harry laughed at that, and Mercury asked if the shop would be open in the next few days. "I might need a few actual books to get me through the next few weeks."

Looking at the young man, Harry frowned, wondering if this guy was part of the White Fang, but he couldn't see any telltale animal traits on him. There was something off about this guy, something a little too cool and calmly collected, speaking of more experience than his body seemed to indicate. But Harry decided to set that aside as paranoia. *I could wish I had an idea of how big Roman's gang is, but I don't.*

That doesn't Mean I will give him any straight answer though. "Sorry man. Tukson had a family emergency. He's going to be away for a few days and I only volunteered to take over for this evening."

Nodding, Mercury paid for his stuff, and headed for the door waiting for well. He didn't go far though, instead circling the area, keeping an eye out in the direction of the shop, watching the comings and goings for a bit as he pulled out his scroll. "Cinder, I've got a problem and an opportunity here..."

Having gone out to Mountain Glenn with Tyrian and a thoroughly cowed Roman to meet with Adam in what he probably thought was his seat of power, all the better to make sure he didn't get too used to charging around on his own without her orders, Cinder scowled in frustration. Mercury didn't realize it because Cinder had not told him some of the information Salem had passed on to her, but Harry Arc was actually just as important, if not more of a target, than Arturia. The Dark Queen was a clear and present danger to Cinder's plans for Beacon and Vale. Harry Arc, on the other hand, was someone that Salem felt was using magic. Magic like the Maiden's power that was Cinder's by right.

A chance to kill him was not one to pass up, but Cinder herself, Roman and Tyrian, easily her deadliest asset were out of position to be used in any such attack. *Yet... discovering what all he can do is also a chance not to be missed. Salem was not as specific on that score as I could like. Even if Mercury... yes, and Neo, fails, information is a goal in and of itself.* Neo had been left behind to help keep an eye on the gangs that Cinder had recently taken over. *And we have several gangs under my thumb now. I had hoped to use them to stoke the racial tensions*

between faunus and humans even louder, but using them to gain information and, perhaps, point Ozpin in a different direction than the White Fang.

Quickly, Cinder put together a plan with the limited resources available. “Mercury, listen to me very carefully. I want no slip ups. We cannot afford for you to die on this mission, but it is important enough for us to take a chance. But we need to set it up so that either way this goes, we win.”

Mercury listened for a good fifteen minutes, smiling thinly. Then he stood up and moved off, eager to set everything up he needed to.

Scene break

Harry sighed, closing and locking the back door of the bookstore as he had already done the front. That included pulling down security screens over the windows at the front, putting the money from the cash register into the safe, and that was it. No CCTV, no security on the safe other than the combination lock and the safe itself.

Not that there's much money in there. Which is probably the reason for the lack of other security features, Harry reflected, looking down at his scroll and seeing Pyrrha's location. As team leader, he could see anyone's location so long as they didn't turn that function off for some reason, or if their Beacon-issued scroll was broken, as had happened to Nora when it had been scrapped off her belt as she practiced moving through the trees. Harry also shared his location with the others. *I suppose even here in Vale a small bookstore owned by a faunus isn't going to be a big draw. Sad.*

He snorted. *Even sadder is what a waste of time this was. No White Fang gang showing up, no subtle assassin sneaking in. I suppose that they could be planning to come by later, but I wasn't that invested in this impromptu ambush to wait here the entire night. Hmm... maybe come back and place a little surprise for anyone trying to get into Tukson's apartment? Something to think about after I meet up with Pyrrha. I didn't expect us to be separated this long, or else I might have not gone through with this plan.*

Walking through the nighttime streets in this area of the city was a lot quieter and far less busy than in the areas of Vale Harry had previously seen at night. Mainly a residential district with small stores like Tukson's, Harry only saw a few people around. They didn't hurry along to get inside or anything, it was just there weren't all that many reasons for people to be outside around here once the stores closed. Altogether, it was a peaceful, calm area of the city.

Which was why it took Harry completely by surprise when a fire dust round slammed into the back of his head. “Gah!”

His passive Aura defended him, but Harry stumbled, his eyes widening as two grenades were rolled out from a doorway nearby, exploding at his feet before he could react. Harry hastily created a shield to defend himself from the blast, but he didn't look away, which was bad, as the grenades weren't the explosive type, rather they were flashbangs.

The next second, Harry was blind, and raised a hand up to his eyes, the automatic human reaction to being blinded. He stumbled back, and more fire dust and even more esoteric dust assisted rounds slammed into him, including one freeze round that hidden in the lower leg, freezing his leg to the ground for a second. *Fucking hell, Harry you've gotten soft if this lot were able to sneak up on you like this.*

A heavy impact slammed into the side of his head, and Harry barely registered the sound of shotguns going off as the blow landed. For a bleary instant, Harry thought perhaps he had been just ambushed by Team RWBY, the combination of having one leg dozed to the ground and the shotgun shells reminding him of Weiss and Yang. Yet that could not be further from the truth. Instead of facing two of his acquaintances, Harry was facing what quickly felt like two dozen attackers.

In the next few seconds, more dust assisted rounds slammed into him. Some small caliber, a few large and in large numbers to boot. It was like being attacked by a group of soldiers who hadn't passed their marksmanship or ammunition conservation courses. Over the noise of the rounds smacking into his Aura, Harry could hear many voices whooping and shouting.

"That's the way!"

"Down with the Huntsman!"

"Fucking Aura, break it down! Daddy needs a new set of tats!"

"Bah, I need me access to some tits, and money'll do me just fine there."

"It's open season on the Arcs boys, Dig in!"

That last came through clearly from nearby as Harry's hearing started to return along with his sight, and another shotgun blast went off against his passive Aura. Harry could feel his Aura starting to break under that hit, and he rolled desperately to one side, slamming his hands down the ground. But instead of creating a dome of stone, Harry created spikes, lashing out in every direction around him, taking a page from his older sister's Thousand Thorns attack.

A series of pained screams, a few of which cut off abruptly, and a curse followed. The curse came from the same voice as who had said it was open season on Arcs. That voice was synthesized, coming through a voice filter, and as his eyesight returned, Harry wasn't surprised

to see that one of the attackers would been able to dodge his frantic attack had a full mask covering his face, including goggles for the eyes.

Across from his target, Mercury gasped, thanking his Semblance for giving him the few seconds necessary to dodge that attack. *Aura might help sure, but damn if that spike wasn't aimed right for my junk!* Now he flipped himself backward putting some more of the stone spikes that Arc had created between himself and his enemy.

From on high several dozen shooters continue to fire down at Arc, but he had recovered from the flash bangs, and now walls of stone and scintillating shields of energy appeared, defending him from further attacks. As Mercury watched, Arc also returned fire, a blazing spherical red circle of energy flashing up toward some of the attackers. It hit them, causing them to collapse off of the roof, falling to their death.

A cutting energy spell was sent his own way, and Mercury rolled forward under it, kicking a portion of stone that it'd cut in its wake toward Harry, who hastily dodged. This allowed Mercury to close, but Harry got his arm up in time to block his blow, or at least, not be beheaded by it. Still, Mercury heard the telltale crackle of Aura breaking as Harry was flung backward into the wall.

The same circular kind of red energy blast lashed out at Mercury at the same time, but his precognition didn't kick in, meaning it wasn't a lethal attack. Indeed, it washed over Mercury, doing nothing and allowing him to get in another kick that caught Harry in the side as he tried to push off the wall.

Sent tumbling sideways, Harry cursed, wishing he had his sword, now reflecting that Arturia was perhaps not the only Arc who could fall into the trap of arrogance. Grimacing, Harry flung a spell in the face of the primary attacker, which exploded with all the force of several dozen flash bangs, having closed his own eyes a second ahead of time.

Now it was Mercury's turn to curse and scrabble at the goggles protecting his eyes. Even through those visors, tinted as they were, that had hurt and blinded him. The next second, he felt himself being lifted off the ground as something slammed into him, and then he was sent crashing back into the opposing wall on the other side of the street.

Meanwhile, Harry had continued to take fire from the remaining shooters above, and several others were now coming out of alleyways, standing in the open and pouring it on. Harry's passive Aura still continued to defend him for most of their shots, but he wasn't willing to bet on that lasting. Harey fought defensively for several seconds as he tried to look for a way out of the ambush, returning fire only sporadically. However, when he did, practically every blow he landed was lethal. The only attacker who seemed to have Aura was the one who had closed with Harry initially.

A stabbing sensation from behind caused Harry to twitch around, lashing out with an elbow, gasping a bit as that blow had gotten through his Aura entirely, slicing along his side.

He could feel blood beginning to flow down his side from that cut, even as his blow landed and he heard the sound of glass shattering before he could even see who had been there. *NEO! That girl from the club! This just went from dangerous to downright lethal.*

Neo smirked as she flipped up and over the beleaguered Huntsman, out of the way of a few more bullets coming from the gangsters that Mercury had gathered for this attack. They been given guns from a White Fang supply here in Vale, and were doing their level best to unload every magazine they been given into Arc. But as Neo had expected his passive Aura was large enough to absorb those attacks, a pretty amazing feat, frankly. Neo knew that without using her Semblance to dodge and duck away, she would never have been able to survive the hail of bullets that had hit the Arc boy in the first few moments, let alone the rest. But his Aura had been battered down enough for Neo to get through once, and she thought she could get to again.

She landed in the alleyway, hiding herself there in the darkness and with her Semblance for a second as she watched still more of the attackers die under Harry's return fire, and Mercury, who had just come back into the attack, be batted aside by some kind of explosive energy that detonated directly in front of him, hurling the man backward. That was interesting to Neo too, as it didn't seem as if Mercury's sixth sense or whatever had activated just then.

But that was an observation for later. Right now, Neo had an assignment to finish off. *I'd say this isn't personal, but since your older sister put Roman and me in a wringer, I'd be lying*, she thought. But then she paused, staring to the left as there was a loud wrenching sound.

The next instant, two of the streetlights just past the ambush point in that direction were wrenched out of the ground by some unseen force. Their bases sparking and sputtering, one lamppost found itself launched upwards at the few remaining attackers on the roof as the other swept forward along the street at waist height as Pyrrha arrived. Her red hair flowing behind her like a dark crimson wave in the dark and with her emerald eyes looking like chips of green jade as they reflected the light of the ongoing assault and the streetlights, she looked like an avenging Valkyrie.

Pyrrha Nikos certainly hit like one in the next few seconds. The lamppost slammed into several of Harry's attackers with body-breaking force, hurling them along with it as Harry dropped to his stomach, letting the bar of metal pass by.

Mercury's Precognition had thankfully given him enough time to duck into a doorway out of the way, but looking back out, he decided that this operation was done. Most of his assembled gangsters were down, mostly dead, and the Invincible Girl was on the board. *And damn it if it*

looks like Arc's only a bit battered, He thought, kicking backward and shattering the door behind him before ducking around the doorframe to dodge another attack from Harry. This one seemed to send a small drill-like bolt of energy or something toward him, gauging out the wall on the other side of the women's clothing store he had ducked into. *Shit, it's like fighting the fucking White Witch is supposed to be like.*

"With me, Pyrrha!" Harry shouted, wincing slightly as he used an Episkey on his side, closing his wound. "Neo's around here somewhere, and her Semblance is tricky to deal with at the best of times."

Pyrrha nodded, her face a rictus of rage, trying to sense where all the metal around her was outside the houses surrounding them, knowing that would tell her where the attackers were. She reached to one side, feeling out what felt like a small dagger there, hiding in an alleyway before feeling two large sources of metal moving within the store where one of the attackers had taken cover. Doing this without visual sight of her target was hard, but Pyrrha was furious at the attack on Harry and cursing herself for having left him earlier that day. It was only the fact his position hadn't changed in a few minutes that had warned Pyrrha something was going on, and she had hurried to meet up with him.

Now she reached out with her powers, grasping at that large source of metal within the women's clothing store as well as every other weapon she could sense and wrenched.

For Mercury, it felt as if a giant had suddenly grabbed his legs. His precognition had blared a warning, but there was no visible threat around him that he could see, and the next second, his legs felt as if they were being pulled out from under him. *No, not just pulled out from under me*, he realized with a rising sense of horror, *fucking hell, they're being pulled apart. Some kind of magnetism power?*

Thanks to Beacon's network security, the truth about Pyrrha's power had yet to go very far beyond the freshman class. Even within Beacon, most people had no idea how powerful Pyrrha's Polarity was.

Small nuts and bolts were pulled out of position or simply torn entirely off his legs, causing them to sputter and emit smoke and electricity and Mercury launched himself toward the door desperately trying to get out of the range of whatever attack that was. Rolling, he found himself outside, where he grabbed at a manhole cover. Wrenching it up he launched himself down, uncaring of the fall thanks to his Aura.

Thankfully, either distance or the amount of stone and earth between them was finally enough to cut off that attack. Just as the foot of one of his feet was wrenched up and off entirely, coming apart just above the ankle.

Barely grunting at the impact as he hit the floor of the sewer tunnel, Mercury watched as it flew up into the nighttime sky and then toward whoever's semblance that was, before slowly pushing himself to his knees, and starting to pull himself away.

Thankfully for Mercury, something else had grabbed Pyrrha's attention. Because as she had pulled at the metal of his legs, and the dagger to her and Harry's other flank, Pyrrha saw the body of one of the attackers who had been smashed by her initial lamppost attack. This man had been kneeling on the road, and had been at head height when the lamppost had flown through.

That meant that the same attack that had crushed ribs and nearly broken other people in half had smashed his head like a grape. The sight was horrific, and Pyrrha stumbled, losing control of her Semblance, her attack faltering, sending the foot that she had torn off Mercury tumbling down onto a roof rather than into her hand, the same going for the knife.

Staring, Pyrrha fell to her knees, then her hands as she began to retch, her eyes never leaving the body of the man she had just killed. Dimly, she heard Harry's words, but Pyrrha continued to retch, horror filling her. Only his touch on her shoulder, his arm around her shoulder brought her back. "H, Har, Harry..."

"That's it, Pyrrha, let it out," Harry soothed, pulling her head, puke-stains and all, against his chest, ignoring the groaning of the wounded or the sirens in the distance. He had someone far more important to concentrate on right now. "Let all out, Pyrrha. Killing is... it's something that should never be easy, but the first time is always the hardest."

"H, how d, do you..." Pyrrha weakly stammered, gesturing all around them.

"How do I deal with it?" Harry chuckled wanly, leaning down to whisper into her ear as people began to stick their heads out of doors along the street now that the sounds of combat had faded. "Remember, this isn't exactly my first time around."

Through the haze of shock and horror, Pyrrha realized that Harry meant more than just this attack. Rather, he was reminding her of the secret he'd shared a little over a week ago now with her, Arturia and Tia. "D, did anyone..."

"Help me through it? No. It took weeks for me to even realize that I had killed Quirrellmort. Even longer to reconcile with that fact. But when I did, it came down to a simple thing Pyrrha, a thought that I've carried ever since. It isn't easy to think about, but sometimes, it really is just as simple as us versus them."

Pyrrha looked up at him, and Harry smiled sadly. "Yeah. Just that simple. Here, this group ambushed me with the intent to kill me. I don't know why, although like I said Neo was here, so it might be in revenge for what my sister did to them down at the docks." *Although I note that*

this group is all human, rather than White Fang. “But regardless of the reasons, they came into this fight with a willingness to kill someone else. Maybe some of them have done it before. Who knows? But in instances like this, if push comes to shove, it comes down to a simple thing. Do you want to live? Then someone else may have to die.”

His smile warmed, and he leaned down, kissing her lightly on the forehead. “I’m not saying it is an easy choice. It should **never** be an easy choice. Humans, faunus, we have souls, we are truly living people, not Grimm. But in the end, they are the ones that chose violence here. Feel guilty about it, Brothers, be horrified that you had to fight them as they were fighting us, but never let go of that one solid fact. You weren’t the one to initially choose violence. They did. And when violent people come against nonviolent people, others must defend them.”

Here, Harry gestured, and Pyrrha looked around at several people who were hurrying out of their houses. A few were even moving to perform first aid on some of the wounded attackers, while a man and a woman were hurrying Harry and Pyrrha’s way, looks of concern on their faces. “You and me Pyrrha, we can make that choice, we can choose to become warriors, to protect people like this from those who always see violence as a solution. And it is in doing so that we set ourselves apart from the barbarians at the gate.”

Pyrrha took in his words, slowly, pushing the shock and horror down, using those words as a lifeline, and finally, as the middle-aged pair reached them pushed herself to her feet. “I, thank you for that Harry. I, I think I need to wash my mouth off, and then, and then I think I really would like some hugs. But I will get through this. You’re right. We didn’t start this fight. We only ended it. And they attacked you, my Rigas. I was simply doing my duty as your shield.”

“And more importantly, you stood with me as a friend,” Harry said, giving her another kiss on the forehead, causing her to smile and lean into his shoulder.

Scene break

While the police arrived and began to round up the gangsters, Mercury made very slow progress through the sewer. He had to be careful to keep his still sparking, sputtering footless leg out of the water of the sewer, which, considering the direction he had to go, was far more difficult than it would have otherwise been. It was also cursing himself. “We had him, I know we had him. A few more moments of that heavy fire coming down on him, maybe me getting in close a few more times, we would’ve had him!”

A shadow shifted ahead of him, and he paused, staring as Neo poked her head out the side of another sewer tunnel, smirking at him. She held up a scroll, on which the words, “you know talking to yourself is the first sign of insanity. Right?” were written.

"Oh, shut up, I'm just fucking furious," Mercury growled back. "Did you see what that bitch did to my leg! I can barely shift both of my legs at the knees, the grinding noise of my thigh is getting to me on one side, and on the other, I don't have a fucking foot! Worse, I left the scroll behind, meaning, I don't have anything but my own observations to go on as to what powers Harry Arc has. Fuck if I could tell you what his Semblance is, though. Arc was manipulating the ground, sending out energy attacks, shielding himself, and I'm not talking about simple energy attacks either, it was like he was manipulating the energy of each attack he used."

Neo nodded, having run into something similar, if on a far more limited scale during her battle alongside Roman against Tia and Harry in Junior's club. They'd been in no position to do much but walk away from that fight, and Roman hadn't even asked Junior for the recordings of the fight, knowing how he was on thin ice with the crime boss. Now, she grinned, twisted her scroll around, and typed in another message. This time it was several emojis in a line, a series of hands clapping, confetti flying, and in the center, a little ice cream cone signifying Neo herself.

"What's all that..." Mercury trailed off as, theatrically, Neo pulled out another scroll. His scroll. Which he had set nearby further down the street to record the ambush. "You were able to pick it up?"

Neo nodded, tossing the scroll to Mercury, causing him to flail for a second as he caught it. When next he looked up, she was holding her umbrella, then mimed tossing it into the air for a second, reaching out and grabbing something, before coming back for her weapon.

"The redhead, that was the Invincible Girl, right? She was using polarity, but she couldn't sense you, only your weapon. So, you dumped it, then came back after? They didn't see you? Wait, stupid question, don't bother answering that one," Mercury said, not wanting to give Neo another moment to be smug about.

It didn't work, and Neo simply smirked at Mercury, the condescending, 'I'm better than you' smirk on her face that was habitually at home on a Roman's face. That was until Cinder wiped it away at a flick of her fingers. Mercury though, especially considering his current condition, needed to play nice. *Which isn't even considering what Cinder and I think happened to Emerald is true.*

For her part, Neo looked Mercury up and down. At first, she was going to demand that he carry her on his back through the sewers, it being rather smelly, dirty and not a place for a lady down here. But considering how slowly Mercury was moving, and his whining from his legs, that wasn't going to work. Instead, Neo tucked her scroll away, and gestured with her parasol down the sewer tunnel she had come from. Then she mimed climbing a ladder before turning around and leading the way off.

Behind her Mercury scowled, wondering if he was about to be let into an ambush, the earlier thought of Emerald making him suspect the diminutive girl in front of him even more than normal. He hesitated a few seconds, then reluctantly followed his equally reluctant ally through the sewers, hoping that Cinder would be happy with the information they gathered. *What did she say, 'if I have to sacrifice pawns to accumulate knowledge of the true power of my opponent's Knight, it will be well worth it' or something? Well, I hope she still thinks that after with this.*

Scene break

It took barely an hour for Harry to clear up what happened with the police, but with a few of the locals having actually watched everything from behind curtains, and the number of bodies, unconscious and dead, the police couldn't exactly argue that it was Harry who had started everything. With that, and with Pyrrha being who she was, the police were only too happy to wrap everything up as a self-defense case, which, not incidentally, took out the majority of the fighters of two different gangs in the area.

Harry filed that little bit of information away, as well as a comment made from by one of the police who said that they were both normally anti-faunus', who rarely if ever attacked other humans as viciously as this. That, and the weapons they'd been using. A lot of dust rounds, and a lot of guns, pistol sized machine guns like twin flowers, rifles, even a sniper rifle, although thankfully the moron with that gun hadn't understood how far away, he could be with it and still be effective.

No way should common street thugs have had guns like that, not in Vale. Vacuo, sure, maybe some of the communities on Anima or that little island off Mantle's coast I can never remember the name of. But Vale's supposed to be one of the more law-abiding places on Remnant. Where'd they get that many guns?

Harry kept those thoughts to himself for now, turning most of his attention to keeping Pyrrha company. She'd gotten over most of her shock at killing the man with the shattered head when the police had run his prints through their system and listed the number of crimes he had committed, but she was still looking a little fragile.

He only took his attention off his girlfriend when they arrived back at Beacon, well past curfew, to find Ozpin waiting for them at the Bullhead landing zone.

"Mr. Arc, Ms. Nikos. I understand you have had a most eventful night," Ozpin stated, looking between the pair shrewdly. "I don't suppose you have anything you would like to tell me about?"

“Not at present, Headmaster. I was attacked by someone shouting about how it was open season on the Arcs. I don’t suppose you would know much about that, would you?” Harry shot back, staring hard at the older man as his girlfriend leaned into his side, also looking at the older man thoughtfully. “Beyond that, it’s been a surprisingly trying night when we were not expecting it to be, and I would like to get my girlfriend to bed, if you don’t mind.”

“Of course. And Ms. Nikos, if you wish to talk to someone, please, talk to either Glynda or our on-campus advisor. Dr. Birchwood will help you come to terms with what has happened,” Ozpin answered affably, his eyes locked on Harry’s. “But you were certain that Neo was involved in the attack on you? It was Roman again?”

“Roman wasn’t there. Someone else was, a person who used a similar weapon to Yang’s. I think they were connected to his legs, but that’s about all I can say. That, and they were heavily armed and human,” Harry’s tone sharpened as he went on. “I don’t suppose you have any information on that score you’d like to share?”

“I am a mere headmaster, Mr. Arc, there is only so much information I have that doesn’t come from the police reports they graciously share with me,” Ozpin demurred. “As for Roman and his antics, I know precious little beyond what you have learned from your sister’s actions and that of tonight.”

Harry scowled, telling Ozpin without words that he didn’t believe that for a minute. He then turned away, shaking his head. “In that case, I think we’re done here, Headmaster.”

I don’t think Ozpin set me up for this ambush, that’s far too random. But I can’t shake the feeling that he knows more than he lets on, and that he’s searching for specific information. Our talk a few weeks ago also hasn’t exactly filled me with trust, Harry reflected.

Ozpin frowned slightly, watching the pair go for a moment as he sipped at his ever-present coffee mug. Just as they were almost out of earshot, he called out, “Mr. Arc.”

Harry paused turning around to look back at the headmaster, as Pyrrha did the same. *Yes indeed, Ms. Nikos is no longer a good choice for the Aura Transfer plan. I will have to look into using either Ms. Rose or Ms. Xiao-Long. I do not think that any of the other ladies in the freshman class are strong enough or suitable in other ways. The same goes for most of the rest of our older students.*

Setting that observation aside, Ozpin spoke. “To trust one must give some trust. A hand extended, so to speak. When enemies are at the gate, it does not behoove those within to fall to distrust of one another.”

Harry gazed at him, then smiled thinly. “You first, oh Lord of the Ivory Tower. Just don’t focus so much on one tree, you miss the Grimm sneaking through the forest, hmm?”

With that, he turned away, leaving Ozpin sighing faintly behind him. *Well, it would seem as if leaving the Knight to make his moves on his own has worked well enough, if not to the degree I could wish. Still, we know now that at least two of Autumn's attackers are here in Vale. The third has yet to be spotted conclusively. Perhaps my ploy with Ms. Belladonna will give us that final bit of intelligence, and we can finally start to act, as young Harry so obviously believes I should be. We will see tomorrow, I think.*

Scene break

Early the next day, despite the adventure of last night, Harry met up with Tia in the early morning. After hearing what had happened, Tia spent a few moments kissing Harry ardently in the middle of the kitchen, making certain that he knew how grateful she was that he had survived. This was followed by a smack upside the head for getting into trouble without her or his partner around.

Eventually, though, Harry had appeased the wild Tia enough and the pair headed out to jog. They went at it for several miles racing around the campus, until they finally began to slow down. At which point, Tia pulled Harry into a secluded corner of the campus for another make out session.

As they kissed, Harry reflected on the differences between his three lovers. Arthur was an almost aggressive kisser, practically wishing to overawe him with her passion. Pyrrha was sweet, lingering, always urging Harry on with little mewls and gasps. Tia on the other hand, despite how demanding of affection she was, started every make out session by being a little passive at first, making Harry do the work for a little bit.

Shaking such thoughts out of his head, Harry began to feel up and down her back, pulling her deeper into him, as Tia hummed in approval. *Stop comparing your girls, Harry, in that way lies madness. And matrimonial problems.*

They kept on making out for several moments there, then Tia's scroll beeped at her. Instead of being a call as it had with Harry's the day before, though, this was an alarm to remind her that she had an appointment later that day with Professor Easterton. He was an expert at helping people whose Semblances impacted their minds, and Goodwitch had demanded that Tia go to him for help in controlling her bestial urges when using Harribel.

At that, the pair pulled back, with Harry sighing a little sadly. "One of these days we're going to have several days off, no school, no disaster, no nothing. The two of us, Pyrrha, and maybe even Arturia, are just going to lay about and spend the day together doing whatever the heck we wish."

Tia paused in the act of pulling up her scarf to look at Harry, her eyes gleaming. "Whatever the heck we wish?" she repeated, a finger trailing down her body to her privates below.

Staring back at her, Harry shivered, completely understanding what that look meant. "If that's what you want? I'm never going to push you to go further than you want to go, but,"

"We promised Pyrrha," Tia grumbled. "She gets to do everything first. Still over several days? Who knows?"

Harry laughed at that, and the two began to move again.

They resumed their run back toward the main campus area, only to pause as they saw Blake, Sun, Neptune, and Team RWBY heading toward the bullhead landing area. "Why do I distrust that group suddenly?"

"Because it seemed as if Neptune didn't want to have anything to do with the others after that whole disaster in the cafeteria, but now he's walking with them, looking very shifty." Tia stated, frowning as well as she looked after the other huntress team. "Should we follow them?"

"Call Easterton and give your apologies. Something is telling me that whatever that group is up to, it's going to be interesting. And after last night, I am in the mood to misbehave, on my terms this time," Harry answered, causing Tia to smile behind her scarf. Moments later, hidden by Harry's magic, the two of them entered the bullhead heading into Vale, watching the larger group of teens closely. A hasty scroll message to the rest of Harry's team would have them on the next bullhead into Vale, just in case, along with Sung-Sun. Apacci had gone into Vale that morning to be with his girlfriend, and Mila had wanted to see if she could scrounge some tickets to an upcoming Achieve Men concert.

On the bullhead, Ruby grinned at the others around her, feeling very much like she was leading a hero team in one of the shows she had always enjoyed watching. "Okay, so does everyone know the plan?" she asked, one hand sliding into the hiding place of Crescent's Rose's travel form.

"You, me, Neptune and Weiss head to the CCT tower first. The nerds get their nerd on there, looking for international news and information on Roman, that emerald-haired chick and the half-pint," Yang said, smirking, enjoying this little mission of theirs just as much as her younger sister. "Meanwhile, me and you hit up a few haunts I know around Vale."

"I refuse to believe that criminals as combat capable as that pair seem to be came out of nowhere," Weiss said in a far more restrained tone. While she was more than willing to help Blake get some closure in terms of the white fang, she was only really along because of team solidarity, believing firmly that it was best to leave such things to the authorities. Well, that and it could be quite pleasant to spend time with Neptune.

“And Me and little miss ex-terrorist will check out some White Fang haunts,” Sun continued cheerfully.

Blake stared at him deadpan, and he shrugged. “Too soon?”

“I prefer the term freedom fighter, actually. Although admittedly the White Fang as it is far more like terrorists than freedom fighters,” Blake drawled before sighing. “And it isn’t White Fang Haunts we’re going to check on, its if there is a recruitment drive going on. We show up at one of those, I might be able to learn something about why the White Fang is working with Roman. I’m not saying he’s the only problem with what they are up to these days, but that alliance is a major reason why the White Fang is so free to act as it is, and so well armed too.”

“Are you sure they won’t have changed how they go about setting up such things?” Neptune asked. He had been roped into this operation a bit late, but given what he had learned that sounded farfetched. “I mean you’ve been open about your heritage since the fight at the docks Sun told me about ad nauseam, and surely the survivors of that fight will have spread the word that you were involved.”

“I’m positive. The White Fang will have changed code phrases, bases and so forth sure, but not how they go about gaining recruits, showing where faunus who want to ‘fight the good fight’ can sign up. It would take way too long for word of mouth to changes to that to get out. Trust me, after a few passes through the faunus dominated areas of Vale, I’ll know where to find them,” Blake said firmly.

“Good. Just remember, if any of us get into trouble, we’re all a scroll call away, okay?” Ruby demanded, and everyone nodded. “And everyone turn on your locaters, now.” She normally didn’t bother with that, thinking it kind of intrusive even for a team leader, but at the moment that seemed to be a good idea.

Blake scowled a little, not liking the idea, but agreed. And back in Beacon, Ozpin looked at a small notification on his own scroll, smiling faintly.

As the sextet split off into one team and a pair, behind them Tia hummed, leaning away from where she had been snuggled into Harry’s side. No point in wasting her time just watching the other six people on the bullhead, after all. “What now?”

“Hmmm... we’ll follow Blake and Sun. With how hot tempered she is when it comes to the White Fang, she’s the mostly likely to get over her head. Keep an eye on them for now while I call the rest of our team and tell them what to do,” Harry ordered. “If we run into trouble, I mean to bring the hammer down.”

End chapter.

This was supposed to be around 15,000 words longer, but I realized looking back through the story that the confrontation with Pyrrha's parents already happened via scroll. Can another one occur, sure, but not without some buildup. I also was ambivalent, when it came down to it, to recreate the fight in the cafeteria, which is right up there with the best RWBY's ever shown. Because of this, I think the Harry central parts until the date with Pyrrha are a bit lacking. But I hope the rest of the chapter made up for that lack, and that you enjoyed part one of, well, two groups of people flailing at one another trying to figure out the other's abilities/resources/goals while Ozpin looks on from on high.

Salem and her plans for Evig Låga and learning more about the source of Harry's magic will continue, but not in the next chapter. I mean to keep the action close for a while longer, but when the Vytal Festival comes around, Harry and co will go on to start having their own, Vimesenthusiast-type adventures.

Hope you have a Happy New Year, Guys and girls.