

Howdy all. I lost the weekend again, despite my parents finally being in town. But hey, I finished it, and the chapter didn't balloon too much. I had a devil of a time getting the discussion between Harry and Ozpin right.

This has been looked at by HP-DG-AP-PN-RG-NR. He helped out with the aforementioned segment, and spotted several odd sentences.

Chapter 15: A Cavalcade of Errors, Finale and Consequences

In the distance ahead and to all sides of where Arturia, Yang and Ruby had just begun to wonder about why there was no one on the streets around them, several police cars had long since pulled up to block the main streets leading into an area around three blocks in every direction, including behind where the trio were. These police cars had arrived about an hour before, setting up roadblocks and diverting cars and pedestrians away from the area.

This was something that one of the police officers grumbled about to his companion as a hotrod turned away, the passenger giving him the finger for shutting down what had apparently been a hot date. "This is so damn sudden, it's going to snarl up traffic in this area of the city for hours. Did Captain Fresno actually tell us what this was about?"

His fellow shrugged his shoulders, scowling a little bit as he tugged at his thin goatee. "I don't know. I talked to his secretary, he got a call about forty-five minutes ago, called us all in, and sent us out to do set all this up almost immediately. I'd bet it was a call from the higher-ups about something going down."

"Talked to Fresno's secretary, did you?" The first policeman to speak snickered, holding up a whistle and directing another car away, while nearby, one of their fellows finished shutting down the light at this intersection, making it go from green to red, where it would stay until whatever was going on was done. "How'd that go?"

"Shut up, it wasn't like that," the second policeman blushed, shaking his head, moving forward to help roll out some construction tape to block off the sidewalk near them. "Though I agree, whatever is going down, it was almost last-minute. Could be something to do with a White Fang hangout being found and Huntsmen being brought in to hammer them under, or, considering this is his territory, it's more likely that the higher-ups are sending people to 'talk' with Junior. Could be he stepped over the line finally or got in deep with those assholes."

Hei Days was one of several clubs/bars in this area of the city. The area wasn't the biggest nightlife-type area of the city, but it was still popular, and paired dance clubs with regular dive bars and a few twenty-four-hour restaurants.

Most of the police force of Vale knew about Junior and his club, but they also knew he was the next best thing to an honorable criminal in that he very rarely murdered people, and when he did, they were mostly other criminals or corrupt officials. Junior didn't deal in slaves, didn't sell drugs to kids, and, although he didn't stop the street-level gangs from acting up often, Junior did do so occasionally and was more than happy to drop a few hints in order to help the authorities hunt down serial killers or rapists if such occurred in Vale.

More importantly for the police force, obviously, was that Junior had never actually been caught with anything incriminating. None of his people ever gave up anything about him, no one undercover had ever been able to get past his legitimate businesses, nothing had been made to stick to the oddly sneaky man, not even tax evasion. Which was immensely annoying to any straight shooter among the police force.

Although it had to be said, Junior also allowed all the boys in blue to eat and drink free at his club or any of his other establishments, which was definitely a bonus.

All three policemen paused what they were doing, turning to stare in the direction they'd just closed off as the distant sound of gunfire, a sound that every policeman could identify in their sleep, reached them. A whole lot of gunfire and multiple calibers to boot. The police all looked at one another, and the man who had been working on the light shook his head. "So, White Fang?"

"Yep." The other two chorused, and very, very quietly, the first policeman to speak up said, "Funny they set up so close to Junior's place, maybe it's a two birds, one stone thing? Whatever the case, better someone else than us. The phrase might be don't stick your dick in crazy, but I prefer not fighting crazy, too."

"Oh yeah, no shit. Let the Huntsmen and their fancy shit handle those rabid animals," the second policeman replied, while the third simply nodded, before taking him to task for his automatic racism.

OOOOOOO

In terms of don't fight crazy, regardless of what the police of Vale thought, the typical White Fang trooper was only about a four out of ten. Even most of their enforcers and specialists, like Lorgar and the rest of Adam's action group, only rated an eight at best. Unless there was a Schnee involved, then the crazy needle broke the dial.

However, the individual who had set up the ambush that had just clamped down on the two sisters of team Ruby lived on the other side of ten on that scale. He was just sane enough to actually cooperate and be around other people, if barely, and think things through on his own up to a certain degree that didn't involve mayhem or violence. However, that was as far as

Tyrian Callow's sanity could take him. Thus, most of the planning for the actual tactics of this attack came from Mercury.

Most of the buildings around the ambush site were empty thanks to a few fake badges and Mercury's general demeanor, which had convinced most of those places to close for the day. Those that hadn't been so convinced had been knocked out and dumped in the back rooms, tied up and gagged, along with a large number of former customers. A few had been fed to Tyrian and some of the drugged-up gangsters that Cinder had allowed Mercury to use for this ambush as a way to distract and wear down the Dark Queen.

As the ambush began, Mercury, like any good leader should in his opinion, was staying well back from the actual action for a moment, observing as a good number of headbangers opened fire from the rooftops and several of the buildings around the trio of huntresses. "FUCK YEAH, kill the bitches!"

"Head shot, oh come on, they've got that cheating ass bullshit Aura-whatsits!" Complained one of the shooters, firing off a machine gun with such a lack of aim and control that any soldier would have shot him on general principle, even as Arturia stumbled a bit from the bullets impacting her head and chest.

Mercury had been somewhat annoyed at how much effort it took to think an ambush like this through, being far more used to working on his own, and moreover, by the seat of his pants, uncaring of civilians because he had never needed to remove such a high-profile target before. He'd even been forced to ask for some help from Roman in order to use the man's contacts on the police force to turn away traffic.

Not that Mercury really cared about civilians dying or anything. In fact, if the plan had called for it, he would've cheerfully been willing to shoot through crowds at Arturia Arc, such was the woman's reputation. However, surprise and getting his erstwhile ally close enough to do what he did best meant they needed a goodly bit of prep time, which in turn might well have warned his targets. That, and Mercury was in no way willing to get close to Arturia. Tyrian might be agile enough to maybe get away with it, but Mercury liked not being turned into greasy mist way too much to chance that.

Around thirty gang members opened fire on the three huntresses from the rooftops and the windows of the buildings that had them, both from above ground and on ground level. The group hadn't quite entered the kill zone yet, the Dark Queen having realized that something was going on too quickly, so only a few shooters were behind them. Despite that, the trio were out in the open and were taking heavy fire from above, on either side, and in front of them.

Yet as Neptune watched, the young gal Mercury recognized as Ruby Rose opened fire in turn while Arturia lashed out with a massive beam of raw Aura that erased the rooftop of one of the buildings directly above them. “Well, fuck. Next groups, go!”

At Mercury’s order, two cars drove out of side streets in front of the embattled trio as they rushed into cover at last. The two cars slammed to a halt in front of one another, and their passengers and drivers opened fire towards the trio of huntresses.

Arturia grimaced as bullets slammed into her, doing no damage yet, but annoying her as she hammered Rhongomyniad’s point into the ground, shouting, “Thousand Thorns!” At that, her energy manipulation Semblance surged ahead of her in a thin cone.

“What the AGGH!!!” The seven gangsters who had just begun firing at them from directly ahead screamed as thorns raced towards their position. Several on the other side of the cars were able to back away rapidly enough to save themselves, but the gangsters who had been in the cars facing towards the trio of huntresses screamed as those energy thorns slammed into and through the car, perforating both cars and people.

Ruby raced to one side, ducking behind a trash can, only to yelp as someone began to lob grenades down towards them. She raced to the other side of the street, then the entryway of the building, where she began to fire over her head into the building, grimacing as she heard screams of pain erupt. “Is it White Fang?! How did they know we were investigating them?!”

“Identify the opponents later, deal with them now,” Arturia growled, lashing out towards one of the taller buildings around with an Excalibur strike that removed several of their attackers and the building’s fourth and third stories. “We are boxed in here!” she twisted, and a wide-angle Thousand Thorns strike exploded outward and through the first story of the buildings all around them, killing several more of the attackers and dealing. “Yang, deal with the attackers from behind.”

Yang turned and noticed a large pickup truck had pulled up behind them. Most of the people within were armed with shotguns, but even as several dozen pellets began to slam into her, Yang returned fire, her solid-state slug slamming into one man and sending them back in a welter of blood. The sight of that caused Yang to blanch, realizing that none of their attackers had their Aura activated. But this wasn’t the first time she’d seen that kind of thing. Most of the White Fang grunts they had fought on the docks a while ago hadn’t had their Aura activated either.

Charging forward, she got into the face of two of the other fighters, slamming a hard punch into one that shattered his jaw and also most of his teeth, before whirling into a kick that sent another man screaming as he collapsed around his **very** personal agony. A second kick sent

the newly created eunuch into a third fighter even as the third fighter tried to turn to follow her movement with his shotgun.

The driver of the truck opened fire on her from the side, hitting her several times with a large caliber pistol of some kind, sending Yang stumbling.

Even as more fire rained down on her from on high from someone using a machine gun, Yang grabbed at the door of the car, tearing it off and using it as a shield from that fire, before using her other gauntlet to send out a shotgun blast that slammed into the face of the driver. The other gunman near the car's rear hit her again with his shotgun, but he was still firing scattershot, and her return fire nearly blew him in half a second later.

Turning, she saw that Ruby had killed at least a few of the shooters from on high and was zooming around the area, but as she watched, a grenade landed right in front of her. With Crescent Rose in another position, Ruby couldn't change direction in enough time, and her attempt to zoom through and over the grenade before it could actually explode failed. The explosion caught her in the back of her legs, upending Ruby and causing her to tumble up and over and end with a howl of pain.

"Ruby!" Yang snarled, racing towards her only to pause as Arturia got there first. Well, that, and several more grenades falling all around her and near the two other Huntresses was enough to cause Yang to flinch away.

Arturia stood there, protecting Ruby with her body as she stood over the girl, lashing out with another Excalibur towards a second rooftop above them, removing still more of the attackers. However, there were a lot of them in the windows, and for fear of civilians being somewhere within them, Arturia wasn't willing to simply delete the landscape any further than she was already in bits and pieces. *And I might have already killed some civilians with my last Thousand Thorns assault, blast it!* "Ruby, keep to the side of the streets and keep the suppressive fire coming on the shooters above us," she ordered. "Use the wrecked buildings as cover!"

Wincing a little and realizing this was a time when her Speed Semblance wasn't going to get to get her out of this, Ruby pushed herself to her feet. While her Aura did not lend itself at all to defense, it had still held up long enough to protect her from most of the blast of the grenade, and her legs were both in one piece, although cut in several places.

Calling on her semblance, Ruby raced back down the way she came just as two more grenades fell on top of Arturia's position, sending her stumbling but doing nothing more than causing some pain from the flash. The next second, she used the recoil of Crescent Rose to leap upward, but found herself taking more gunfire, enough to push her sideways.

Another explosion went off, this time from a rocket launcher, hurling her back to the ground, where Ruby used Crescent Rose to slow her descent. "Ooh, right, let's not do that again." The next second, Ruby was off, hiding in one of the buildings, a restaurant that Arturia had already gutted. From there, she fired up where the grenade launcher had been. "Take that, you meany!"

Behind the man using a rocket launcher, Mercury breathed a sigh of relief. *That was too damn close. Whoo, so glad I gave these thugs the orders to concentrate fire on anyone trying to get into the air.* A moment later, Yang tried the same thing, only to be treated in much the same way, cursing volubly as she was hurled downward again.

Arturia did not try to gain the air. While she was more than mobile enough to try, Arturia's Aura did lend itself somewhat to defense. Nowhere near as much as her sister, but almost as much as Harry, so simply standing in one place and bringing the fire down on herself was a good idea for now. She grimaced as still more explosions caught her in their midst but lashed out with a point-blank blast of Excalibur again, removing a third rooftop from existence along with a grenade that was lobbed down at her, the grenade disappearing in the beam of soul fire.

"Send in the hand-to-hand fighters," Mercury said, twitching a little as his eyes twitched to the side where the rooftop directly to his right had just been turned into so much melted concrete and vapor. "Tyrian, I'm going to try to push them in your direction. You better be ready, you crazy ass!"

Two more trucks of gangsters appeared on the scene from behind the area where the battle had been contained until this point. One of them smashed into and through the two stopped cars in front of where Arturia was standing, attempting to run her over, but Arturia was able to leap away, rolling as she hit the asphalt.

Looking up, she saw more than a dozen people leaping out of the truck, firing pistols or other handguns as they came at her, wielding swords, daggers, clubs, and still more makeshift weapons. One man in particular with a billhook was in the lead, and lashed out with the weapon at her head, but Arturia caught it on her lance, then riposted, taking the man in the center of his chest with the tip of Rhongomyniad, hurling him back into several others.

From behind, Yang, who had been ignoring the fire coming towards her to look towards Ruby to make sure she was okay, turned just in time to see another two truckloads of attackers arrive. "God dammit, where are these people all coming from! I thought Junior had cornered the market for mooks!"

"Doesn't look it, does it?" Ruby quipped as she raced past her, getting close with several of the attackers, Crescent Rose transforming into its scythe form, allowing her to lay waste to

several of the attackers quickly, before she raced back and away, firing up at the gunners above them who were still firing down at them.

“They just keep coming!” Ruby shouted, her voice quavering.

Yang knew this wasn’t because of how close she’d come to having her Aura shattered not once but twice already in this fight. Ruby was the next best thing to fearless when it came to personal danger. Something Yang often lamented. No, Ruby was almost certainly having issues right now because they were fighting people rather than Grimm.

The fight at the docks had been one thing. Those had been terrorists, and Ruby had been able to compartmentalize it away. These guys, they were just gangsters, regular people, a few of whom had their Aura activated.

Yang knew this because one of the people she had just struck had survived her hit, only being sent sideways into his fellow rather than folded in half. But the others? Well, killing up close and personal like that was way harder than killing from a distance with the rifle or watching people and portions of the buildings around them disappear.

Other attackers with their Aura unlocked dove at Yang, while still others tried to pile on top. More than a few of those people died from her shotgun shells, but she didn’t have time to switch out from solid shells to pellets, which would’ve been much more useful at the moment, before one of the men with their Aura unlocked tackled her, grabbing her around the waist and taking her to the ground.

His head buried in Yang’s cleavage, the gangster shouted out delightedly, his eyes wide and manic as he moved his head this way and that. “Hell yeah, did you see that, perfect spear baby! And I got a motorboat in BLBLGLL!”

“Well, here’s what you win, bitch!” Yang howled, bringing both of her fists down into the man’s head from either side, overwhelming his Aura and turning his entire head into mush with a dual blast from Ember Celica.

Most of his brain and blood splattered on her, but she didn’t pay that any mind as she tried to roll out from underneath the man’s body before other weapons began to hit her. “Watch out, a lot of these guys are hyped up on some kind of drug. They might have a way higher pain threshold than you think!”

The group that had closed with Arturia was doing a better job of shielding her from their fellows’ fire than anything else. Rhongomyniad’s tip stabbed, Rhongomyniad’s butt slammed, she kicked, punched, and, despite Yang’s words proving true, she was able to keep most of them at bay and kill one here or there. Noting which of them had their Aura unlocked and singling them out, she slammed Rhongomyniad into the ground in front of her once more, and all

around her Thousand Thorns erupted, slaying the majority of the attackers directly around her person.

“That is somewhat typical of gangs like this when they attempt to challenge hunters! Simply take it as a given that you will have to kill a vast majority of them to put them down,” she ordered grimly, as she finished off the last attacker fighting her in hand-to-hand before turning around, ready to lash out above them once more. There were still shooters on the rooftops and the windows.

As she did, from out of the darkness of an alleyway, Tyrian leaped. Wasting no time to grandstand or anything similar, this was a mission from his goddess after all, and he never really got into that kind of thing anyway. His Semblance was already activated as he closed with Arturia from behind and to the left, his eyes and hands glowing a dark sickly sickly-looking purple as Aura Negation activated.

Despite Tyrian coming from her blind spot, Arturia somehow sensed him coming, experience or sixth sense honed to a fine point as it was for any Huntsman. But she turned too slowly to avoid his touch entirely. Even as her arm battered aside the new attacker’s wrist blade, a strange purple energy slithered over Arturia’s arm, and she felt something shift. Again, it was something only experienced Huntsman would understand, but it was as if something had disappeared, or her balance had suddenly changed on a spiritual level. *What by the Brothers?!* Trying to ignore the feeling, Arturia brought up her Rhongomyniad in a roundhouse blow.

Tyrian blocked the blow with one of his wrist blades, the Queen’s Servant stopping the strike, although the impact sent him stumbling. He used this, though, bringing his other hand up to fire one of the mini machine guns in his Wrist Gauntlets. Like Storm Flower, the guns were made to put out a lot of small-caliber bullets in a very short amount of time.

Arturia ducked, instinctively taking the near point-blank machine gun fire on her head rather than her arm, and lunged forward, slamming into her attacker with the shoulder of the arm that Tyrian had struck. She grunted on the impact, having felt that far more than she should have, but it caught the man with enough strength to lift him up off the ground and hurl him backwards.

Yet even in midair, Tyrian struck. One of his blade gauntlets thrust out to the side, firing at an incoming Ruby who had come out of her cover to try and help. This stopped Ruby in her tracks, and Crescent Rose blasted, turning her momentum toward the side, forcing her sideways into an entryway of a bar instead of dodging the bullets from the machine gun on her Aura.

At the same time, Tyrian’s tail whipped up and around from his waist, slicing into Arturia’s chest and shoulder. While the initial strike didn’t even send Arturia stumbling, his Aura

Negation had infected Arturia's upper arm and her shoulder, which was ripped open by the scorpion faunus' stinger. "Scream for me, bitch!"

"No," Arturia snarled back, biting her lip and lashing out with a kick that caught the scorpion faunus in the chest. Yet even as Yang hurled one of the people she was fighting up and over Ruby's position towards the newcomer, having seen this guy attack and figuring that he was the most dangerous threat right now and thus forcing him to dodge away, Arturia stumbled, suddenly overcome with a bout of dizziness. She pushed through it, though, lashing out with Rhongomyniad again, this time blasting out a thousand thorns attack directly at the feet of the recovered attacker.

The scorpion faunus leaped upwards just as the attack began, showing he too had incredible instincts. This let him avoid two of the thorn tips, while only one of them scraped across his back and another his side. His Aura protected him as he landed and clung to the side of the building, before leaping away from her, even as he fired at Arturia with his machine guns. One of the bullets hit her already wounded arm, and she grunted in pain as the bullet went straight through her upper bicep. Arturia had been unable to dodge the strike due to a second bout of dizziness hitting her, and now paid the price.

Twice now I have been targeted, and both times by people with unique, deadly Semblances. I am beginning to sense a pattern, Arturia snarled internally, even as a spike of pain went through her mind.

Using the recoil of Crescent Rose, Ruby bounced up and over Tyrian even as he came in for a landing, switching Crescent Rose into its scythe form to block his tail, blinking in surprise when her scythe didn't go straight through his tail. As more bullets hit her from above and behind, she dodged to the side again as the scorpion faunus brought her under fire with his machine guns. She ducked to either side, using the recoil of Crescent Rose to become almost like a ping-pong ball for a few seconds, dodging incoming fire.

This kept a lot of the unnamed fire from hitting her, but it still kept her moving, and the man's attention on her while Yang dealt with the final of the close combat attackers around her with the simple expedient of, again, hurling one of them in the scorpion faunus' direction.

"Ahaha, that's a fun game, idiot tossing! But too slow, too slow, going to die for my goddess!" Tyrian cackled as he ducked underneath the hurled body, going almost onto his chest on the ground for a second before rolling to the side and then leaping upwards, machine guns firing again.

Sighing faintly, Mercury shook his head, pulling on a facemask, half mask, half armored helmet as he sighed. "Well, if you want something done right, you gotta do it yourself. Well, once the fodder's begun to disappear like freaking sand on the wind."

With that, he jumped down, almost surprising a stumbling Arturia with another kick to her wounded arm. She twisted around, taking it on her chest, and lashed down at him with an overhead strike from Rhongomyniad, which Mercury rolled away from, kicking up and into the downward blow with one of his metal legs. The shotgun blast nearly had Arturia's lance out of her arm, such was the wave of weakness that was starting to overcome her, and she reeled back, allowing Mercury to continue to flip backwards and away from her, before lashing out with a kick into Yang's side that she barely got Ember Celica up to block.

Her eyes glowing a deep red, she lashed out with a punch that Mercury barely dodged in time thanks to his Future Sight. "Bad move, asshole!" The next second, Mercury was being pushed back by a furious charge from Yang, while Ruby found herself unable to reload Crescent Rose thanks to needing to dodge the fire coming down above her from on high and Tyrian's machine guns being added into the mix.

Another Excalibur strike removed the last group of shooters on the rooftops around them, but that still left at least five shooters within the upper stories of the buildings around them who had survived up to this point. More attackers were now coming out of those buildings in twos and threes, survivors of Arturia's attacks or gangsters who had gone through their ammo.

Seeing this, Yang had only one thought: *Fuck me, but we might be wiping out a lot of the street-level gangsters here throughout the entire damn city!*

At the same time that Ruby activated her Semblance and darted towards one such group, Tyrian twisted away from Arturia and leaped towards Yang, cackling in delight as he once more activated his Semblance. "Now for you!"

Yang had gotten too close to his position in her charge against Mercury, and Mercury ducked and rolled away as the scorpion faunus touched her chest with one hand. Aura Negation activated on that touch, but even as it did, Ember Celica's last holdout shotgun shells crashed into Tyrian, hurling him backwards and away.

The next instant, Ruby's eyes widened as her sister took a strike to the chest from the silver-haired attacker, and blood gushed out of her mouth as she was hurled backwards and away. Her eyes were still crimson, and she leaped to her feet, but she had no more Aura defending her chest, and Mercury pushed in ruthlessly. Two more strikes had blood practically gushing from Yang's mouth, even as she returned to blows that caused Mercury to grimace, some of the blow's power getting through to his body. Thankfully, like Tia, Mercury's Aura lent itself more to defense than anything, although he had nowhere near the reserves that the Arcs could call on.

Cackling and knowing that the blonde was being dealt with by his temporary teammates, Tyrian turned back towards the target of this assault. Having taken the time to reload a second ago when Mercury vantage of the opening Tyrian had made for him on Yang, he opened fire with both of his wrist blade/machine guns.

By this point, Arturia's Aura had recovered enough to cover her arm again, and the wound to her bicep from the bullets that had hit it had slowly begun to repair itself. However, the gash across the shoulder had not. Rather, the skin around the wound was now a distinctly dark green and purple color, showing the effects of Tyrian's poison just as much as her bleary eyes and stumbling steps.

Yet she was still on her feet and raised Rhongomyniad to block as Tyrian closed, only for Ruby to appear behind him suddenly. Ruby leaped up off the ground, her scythe lashing out not towards Tyrian, but towards the tip of his tail. Tyrian somehow sensed her coming, though, and was already ducking forward, causing her attack to miss, and bringing Tyrian closer towards Arturia. Her attack lashed out above his head, the Excalibur strike slamming into and through yet another building behind them, taking out still more of the shooters there, while Ruby landed in among a group of gangsters who charged out of the building to engage the trio and close combat once they ran out of bullets.

All three of her attackers went down, but she looked over just in time to see Arturia gasp and jerk weakly away from the scorpion faunus as his hands and eyes glowed that sickly looking purple black color again as he rolled past her. The next second, Arturia was too slow to dodge a strike from his tail, which stabbed deep into her thigh where the man had touched her a second ago, pumping her with still more of its poisonous venom.

However, Tyrian was just a bit too slow to dodge an overhead strike from Rhongomyniad. He barely got an arm up, and his wrist blades cracked as the blow slammed down into him with concrete-shattering force, driving him into the ground for a moment. "You bitch, you, that weapon, Queen's Servant, a gift, you, you destroyed it!"

But the damage was already done. Arturia stumbled, going down to one knee, leaning on her lance and glaring hatefully at her opponent even as he cackled, pushing himself to his feet and bringing his scorpion tail up over his head again for one final strike. "Well, I suppose if I bring her your head or heart, I will be forgiven!"

Ruby darted in, blocking the blow with Crescent Rose, then several more as Tyrian turned to her in a fury, lashing out with his one remaining wrist blade and tail. "You, you get out of my way, you little whore! I must have her blood, I must!"

For several seconds, Ruby and Tyrian exchanged blows, as behind Ruby, Arturia slumped, collapsing onto her side, keeping awake against the rising tide of venom in her system through

willpower alone. With Crescent Rose's magazine empty, and needing to stop this madman from attacking Arturia again, Ruby was pinned in place, only using her Semblance to dodge in small increments, which actually took it out of her legs and Aura reserves more than a single use going in one direction with her speed Semblance.

For a few seconds, Ruby's speed held Tyrian at bay, then there was a loud *BANG* as another blast got through Yang's defenses to her stomach, where her Aura had yet to appear again. Without even a whimper, Yang fell to her knees, blood frothing from her mouth, and Mercury turned, racing toward Ruby.

"Finish her off, Tyrian, and we can get fucking out of here before..." Mercury slowed, staring upwards for a second. "Daa---"

A Booming noise blasted out from above, then there was ice turning several of the attackers into statues and a squawk, half-admonishment, half gut-wrenching fear of, "Honestly, I can't take you anywhere, can I?!" Weiss shrieked as she leaped down to the street from a bullhead that had just zoomed over the battlefield, Weiss's shriek having worked hard to be heard over the sounds of the bullhead's engine.

Tyrian leapt aside as ice appeared in the air above him, slamming down with bone crushing force. This was followed an instant later by fire from on high, as Martina and Sung-Sun led the group from the SDC Tower into the fight. It had taken them a while to realize what was going on, but the bullhead Weiss had rented for them had gotten them to the battle mere minutes afterward.

"Rachel, Erica, cover fire, finish off the remaining shooters, then back us up. Lethal force authorized. Weiss, crowd control, finish off those clumps of fighters that are still coming out of the buildings and help Yang. Lee, Eliza, close with that silver-haired fellow. Neptune, Sung-Sun, with me! Ren, get to Arturia!"

Weiss gestured with Myrtenaster, and a glyph appeared, creating a wave of wellness and energy that washed over Ruby, replenishing her Aura to a certain extent, as well as physical endurance for a few moments. This was followed by a strength and durability glyph. Both of them were new glyphs that Weiss had only begun to come up with during her training under Goodwitch.

Even as her glyphs helped Ruby recover, Weiss charged into close combat with a group of injured attackers who had been moving to finish Yang off when the silver-haired attacker turned to help the scorpion faunus against Ruby. But any quip that Weiss might've made about riding in to save the day died on her lips as she saw how badly wounded Yang was. Seeing Yang go down from above was one thing. Seeing how her stomach was almost spilling out of a large

hole in her side and her chest had literal craters gouged out of her breasts, caused Weiss's eyes to widen and her gorge to rise, her attack on one of her opponents nearly faltered.

Just enough to not take him in the throat anyway, the tip of her rapier still took him in the upper chest. He also wasn't one of the attackers who had Aura. None of the jackals attempting to finish Yang off did. Yang had dealt with the last one near her with Aura before Mercury had put her down in turn.

With that group of attackers dealt with, Weiss knelt down beside Yang, Myrtenaster clattering away from her, her wavering as she tried to think of what to do. "W, we need some medical help here!"

Hearing that caused Ruby to stumble at last, but Tyrian's tail strike was deflected away from her by Neptune, who tried to take the attacker's feet out from under him with a strike from the butt end of his Guan-do, a heavy-bladed spear weapon that specialized in slicing. But the scorpion faunus dodged around the strike, his tail coming up in a smash that took Neptune off his feet.

The blue-haired youth rolled with it, and Tri Hard shifted into a Trident, which stabbed out, catching Tyrian in the chest, causing him to stumble away and causing Martina's saber strike to miss. She did hear Weiss's shout, however, and reached her pouch. One of the ideas that she and Harry had talked about was how Hunters should always have some kind of medical aid on their person. Buying such, though, was beyond the scope of Beacon's budget. Martina was the only person on her team who had decided to add to her Huntress outfit with a few pouches.

This might be because those pouches actually worked well with her regular pirate-like Huntsman outfit, but at the moment, that didn't matter. "Eliza! Get this over to Yang!" she shouted, turning to throw a pouch she'd just ripped off her belt towards her teammate.

Eliza ducked under a blow from Mercury, then yelped as his knee came up, almost slamming into her face. She was still able to push off that with one hand, though, her other hand flashing up to stab at his face with a dagger that forced Mercury to flinch backwards. "Damn, you're fast!" she hissed, but Mercury didn't reply.

A second later, in a move they had practiced dozens of times since being put on the same team, Eliza twisted around Lee, the two of them working well together as Lee's fists slammed into Mercury and released his Semblance, which he called Critical Strike. Like the attack of the same name in an RPG game, Lee's Semblance essentially allowed him to release the energy of five or six punches all at once, although it drained his reserves, and he would barely be able to lift his arms for five minutes afterward.

While he was able to dodge one punch thanks to his own Semblance, Mercury couldn't dodge both, and the student's fist shattered Mercury's mask, striking with enough momentum to send him flying sideways into a building. It didn't quite get through Mercury's Aura, but it still sent his head to ring.

The next second, Eliza twisted around, catching the flying pouch out of the air with her Small Time TK Semblance, which allowed her to manipulate items she could see that were within a certain weight limit, not above or below eight ounces and two pounds. The next second, the pouch zoomed towards Weiss, Eliza's TK cutting out within a yard from Weiss, but having given the pouch enough momentum to carry the rest of the way.

Weiss almost fumbled the catch, but caught it before it could land on Yang's already horribly wounded chest and stomach area. She quickly began to wrap bandages around the girl, having next to no idea other than trying to stop the bleeding. Luckily, Huntsman-level bandages were not normal bandages, being treated with a chemical compound that quickly glued to the skin and could absorb a lot of blood before being soaked through. Yet such were Yang's wounds that within a second, even as Weiss continued to patch Yang's wounds, the first few bandages were nearly red with blood.

"Fuck, damn, shit," Weiss cursed, losing control of her tongue in a way that would have had her older sister washing her mouth out.

An idea suddenly occurred to her, and she quickly grabbed up Myrtenaster. She flipped through its cartridges for a second, then tapped it down on Yang's side, the Ice dust letting her freeze the blonde's body. "Colder, colder... come on, put her into a cryogenic freeze, come on," Weiss hissed, hoping that she had enough dust. *If I can stop her body from functioning at all but the most basic level, then she shouldn't be losing as much blood, right? Please let this work!*

Neptune's strike had sent Tyrian into the wall of a building on the far side of the street, and he raced forward, Tri-Hard in its rifle form for a moment. His bullets slammed into Tyrian, but despite being slammed into the wall, Tyrian was able to get his one remaining wrist blade up and firing in his direction. While Tyrian had an okay Aura reserve, Neptune was somewhat equivalent for his team to what Ruby was for RWBY in that he didn't have much Aura in comparison to the others, and his Aura didn't lend itself to defense very well. He quickly dodged to one side, and Tri-Hard became a trident again.

Ice Dust flared, creating a shield of ice that flashed out from the trident's points up and down to create a wall, and with a grimace, Neptune pushed out Tri-Hard's entire reserve of Ice Dust, creating a wall between Tyrian, him and Arturia.

Martina and Ruby charged around in either direction from the ice wall. Sung-Sun leaped up and over it, somehow making the move look ladylike even as she opened up with Snake Bite.

During their time at Beacon, Sung-Sun, like many freshmen, had begun to change her personal style. For her, that meant experimenting with advanced Mecha-shift weapons and working with Ruby to replace one of her elegant punch gauntlets, hand-me-downs from her grandmother. Snake Bite was a thin gauntlet that shifted around her hand or could grow out of her wrist to fire projectiles. It wasn't a final product by any means, but it gave Sung-Sun a mid-range punch, if somewhat limited in its ammunition.

Tyrian's eyes flicked from one side to another before he ducked under Sung-Sun's fire with a fluidity that caused the Vacuan 'noble' lady to stare in shock. He then charged Ruby, deciding to take on the attacker whose abilities he had begun to get used to, while he fired almost blindly towards Martina, trying to slow her down.

This didn't work, as the pirate-themed Huntress-in-training lashed out ahead of her with her blade, slicing several of the bullets out of the air, and letting the others slap into her body harmlessly. "You'll have to do better than that!"

The next second, Sung-Sun, who had changed direction midair, reached Tyrian, just as Ruby ducked under a blow from his stinger again, lashing upwards and into the tail with Crescent Rose in scythe form. This batted Tyrian's attack away, but Tyrian moved with it, whirling in a circle to bring his tail around towards Sung-Sun, who was forced to duck, before his other hand's wrist blade stabbed towards Ruby, his eyes and hand glowing with Aura Negation.

"Don't let him touch you when his hands are glowing!" Ruby shouted as she ducked to the side and then charged forward into Tyrian with her shoulder, using her Semblance to slam him into and through the ice wall as Neptune's technique canceled out. "RAGGGG!!"

The next second, Martina's saber took Tyrian in the back, even as he recovered and tried to stab at Ruby before she could disengage. But his Aura held, and putting several bullets into Ruby even as she zoomed away, he flipped himself over and away from Martina again, lashing out towards Neptune with his machine gun. Neptune grunted, but as Sung-Sun darted forward to stab at Tyrian, he twisted around, lashing out towards where the silver-haired youngsters had just landed a blow on Lee that had sent him flying, while Ruby and Martina closed with Tyrian again.

In return, it was now Mercury's turn to find himself in the air, and he desperately dodged this way and that, twisting his body in every direction he could to avoid the assault of Eliza's daggers. Of which there were now nine diving at him from all around and two more helping to defend her. "Where the hell were you even keeping those!?"

Eliza smirked, but didn't reply, simply whirling away from a blast from his shotgun leg, her skirt momentarily flaring up and around her for a second, showing where several more daggers were hidden. As Mercury watched, they lifted up and out of their holsters under her

mind's direction to launch themselves up towards Mercury, a few other daggers collapsing to the ground around him.

He desperately dodged again and again, wincing occasionally as a dagger stabbed into him, his Aura barely deflecting them now after the punishment he'd already taken in this fight. Ruby's body slam and rifle rounds when he had almost finished off her sister had taken it out of his Aura reserves, and now he was very definitely feeling it. "Tyrian! We need to get out of here!" He shouted, forgetting for a second time the need to keep their names secret along with his face. This was bad, although not quite as bad as Mercury's face being revealed in this battle thanks to Lee, something Mercury had also forgotten about right now.

However, Tyrian had no interest in retreating. His eyes were wide and manic, and he shrieked every time he lashed out at Ruby, Sung-Sun or Martina. "Yes, yes! More dead, more dead for my goddess, more killing for my goddess! Die for me, die! For the goddess!"

Ruby gasped as his stinger found her side, although thankfully, he hadn't been able to use his Aura Negation on her. Evidently, the man couldn't use it through his tail, only through his hands, but the sheer blunt force of that hit still drove the air out of her lungs. However, Martina's saber chopped down, stabbing into his tail as she shouted, "Vibration Wave!"

Martina's Semblance allowed her to impart a certain amount of vibration to anything she was touching or her hands themselves. It had made for a lot of... personal fun times when she hit puberty, but it made her Saber insanely deadly. Vibrating her blade quickly gave it a cutting force that could slice into concrete or metal like it was made of liquid. Tyrian had also taken a few nasty knocks, and now her saber's cutting edge and the vibration were able to allow her to cut straight through his tail near the end of the stinger.

"ARGGGHHH!!!" Tyrian howled in agony. Whirling, he slammed his elbow into her chest, sending her backwards. But Martina rode it and shouted, "Now!"

Rachel and Erica had been busy suppressing the last of the shooters in the buildings around the Huntsman, but twisted quickly, ranging down onto Tyrian as one. Several bullets slammed into his head and upper chest, and his Aura finally gave way. The next second, one of the bullets went through his eye into his brain.

Mercury scowled angrily as he saw Tyrian go down, but knew a losing battle when he saw one. The new Huntsmen teams (fucking two full teams of fresh freshmen-type Huntsmen, damn it all) on the scene had turned the tide, and he was in no rush to become a martyr for a cause he barely knew anything about. Instead of dodging the next strike from Lee, he let it hit him, riding the blow backward, before jumping up, grabbing a windowsill. Even as the two snipers hit him in the back with more than a few bullets, he flipped himself upward and into the building.

“Lee, Eliza, with me! Sung-Sun, Neptune, help with the wounded!” Martina said, scowling as she raced towards the building. *Hopefully, with Fen’s stasis ability, we’ll be able to keep the two of them from dying, but by the sunken remains of the Hood, that did not look good.*

Leaping upwards, Martina landed on Lee’s shoulders, pushing up and off them and up into the same window that the last attacker had entered, while Lee barreled into the entryway of the building. Racing forward, Lee passed through the clothing store and into the back room, where he found several civilians tied up and gagged, as well as stairs leading upwards. However, as he raced upwards, several pellets flew at him. “What the--?”

The small pellets exploded in midair, releasing gas that quickly began to spread. Martina’s shrieking in her native language on the floor above him told Lee that she hadn’t found their quarry, and he lashed out blindly, hitting nothing but feeling something go past him to one side. “Martina, he’s here!”

Lee tried to shift sideways fast enough to pin the person trying to get past him against the wall, but found his leg hit by a kick that brought him to his knees, before an elbow smashed into his face, sending him hurtling backwards. “UGH!”

Still more pellets dropped all around Lee, and then the other man was gone.

Martina slammed into him the next second, pushing up and off of Lee, flipping through the air to land in the storage area below, her eyes searching in every direction, trying to peer through the smoke. She then raced towards a back door as it opened. A kick back into the door sent it flying into Martina as she closed, causing Martina to stumble back, before he was gone.

The next second mark Martina and Lee pushed their way through the door, only to see an empty alleyway.

Shots flashed up and over the rooftops above, as Erica’s voice shouted into the comms, “I’ve got him! He’s escaping south-southeast, over the rooftops now. Damn! He just ducked down into an alleyway. I think we hit him a few times, but I don’t know if we got through his Aura.”

A few of Rachel and Erica’s bullets actually had gotten through Mercury’s aura, and he groaned as he pushed himself to his feet, staring upwards as he heard the sounds of incoming bullheads. Still staring upwards, he ducked deeper into the darkness of the alleyway, staring as several Atlas Military bullheads raced overhead towards the disturbance. “Well, talk about good damn timing. My night was about to go from bad to truly up shit creek.”

Scowling, he pulled out his scroll, trying to ignore the sheer agony coming from his shoulder and hip, as he tried to figure out which of the three safehouses that he and Cinder had

within the city was closest, then he began to limp on, hoping that he could stay on the side streets as much as possible. *That, and that my legs are so well armored. Fucking hell, that bullet would have put my whole leg out of commission.* Like his father, Mercury's legs had been replaced by robotic legs in which two shotguns had been built.

Back at the center of the conflict, Erica and Rachel checked fire as they looked upwards, then exchanged glances, the two Siamese twins shaking their head as one, "About damn time," they said in stereo, before a bullhorn sounded, the shriek of it sending both of them reeling. They weren't cat faunus, but that had been extremely loud, and they briefly had a moment to thank goodness that they weren't Fen, before someone shouted into the bullhorn, "This is the Atlesian Army! Drop your weapons and raise your hands into the air! Anyone not complying within two seconds will be fired upon!"

Martina huffed at that, then shrugged her shoulders and sheathed her weapon, not dropping it as ordered, before leading Lee back to the others. "Well, it seems as if the Atlas Military has decided to ride like the cavalry to save the day, only to get its timing utterly wrong. Why am I not surprised, those damn passo dell'oca (goose steppers)."

She passed where Weiss and Neptune were now on their knees to either side of Yang, kneeling down beside them. "How is it going, you two? Is Yang going to make it?" Judging by the damage to Yang's chest, Martina was fearful that the girl had lost too much blood already for any kind of help that they could give.

But Weiss shook her head. "I think her Semblance helped Yang deal with a lot of the damage even after her Aura was... overcome... Broken? I'm not certain. Regardless, she should be dead five times over from the injuries she took. Yang's got broken ribs, she's missing chunks of her body which, which is a phrase that I really never wished to say, but we stopped the bleeding, and between Neptune and me we got her body cold enough to stop her blood flow as much as possible."

Weiss paused as several dozen Atlas robot soldiers dropped from their bullheads, landing easily, the servomotors in their legs taking the impact as they crouched for a second, before rising to their full height. Guns aimed towards everyone as the voice from on high shouted again. "Hands where we can see them! Weapons will be on the ground!" the droids announced in robotic tones. "We will fire at---"

"Oh, shut up, you, you jumped up bits of scrap iron!" Weiss stood up furiously from Yang's body, growling angrily as she shouted up at the bullheads above them. "My name is Weiss Schnee! And if you don't get down here what right this instant, with medical aid, I am going to break every single one of your tin soldiers and bill you for the damages!"

Several of the robot soldiers had moved to take Fen under custody despite Ruby and Sung-Sun's protests. Before anyone else could do anything, Weiss lashed out with Myrtenaster, creating a spiral of lightning that shot through them one after another, shorting them out and sending them to the ground in pieces. "Furthermore, Fen Greenfur is a fellow Huntsman, and I will not stand by for any of your anti-faunus stereotyping! His Semblance is the only thing that is keeping the Dark Queen alive right now!"

For a moment, the men above were silent, then two of the bullheads touched down, and several soldiers marked with the Red Cross of medical professionals raced out, heading towards the Dark Queen. One of them scowled angrily at Fen, but Ruby got in between them, shouting into the man's face. "Fen has a stasis Semblance that's keeping the poison that's in Arturia's system from finishing her off! She needs help, but so does my sister, and unless you've got enough anti-scorpion venom on hand, go and help her!"

Neptune nodded, also moving to stand beside Fen, as Erica and Rachel glanced at one another, then surreptitiously crouched, grabbing up the rifles just in case the soldiers started to take being ordered about wrong. They all were kids after all, still students of Beacon, not certified Huntsmen just yet.

However, Weiss's ultimatum, and perhaps her flash of temper, had cowed the soldiers on the scene. The two medical orderlies turned and raced towards Yang, while behind them, two robot soldiers moved towards Arturia with a stretcher between them. With Fen still touching her uninjured shoulder, the robots got Arturia onto the stretcher and lifted her up, heading back towards the Bullhead with Fen beside them. The soldier in charge of the two bullheads that had headed towards this particular disturbance saluted Weiss, then gestured for her and their friends to follow him back towards the Bullhead. "On orders of General Ironwood, we're to take all of you to Beacon. Although given the nature of the wounded, we'll make a stopover at Vale Central Hospital."

Ruby nodded and thanked the man, staring at her sister, then Arturia, almost immobile for a moment as the adrenaline finally began to leave her body. Martina, seeing Ruby's face start to crumble, gathered her into a hug, lifting the short girl up into her arms as Ruby's legs gave out. The next moment, the fifteen-year-old began to cry, barely able to stumble along with Martina and Weiss helping her after the rest of her team into the Bullhead.

OOOOOOO

There was no big mystery about why the Atlas Military had shown up like this. The talk between Ironwood, Ozpin, and Glynda had segued into more of a planning session by the time the first reports of something happening in Vale reached them around fifteen minutes into the ambush on Arturia, Yang and Ruby. It took Ozpin a few moments to realize that there were

actually two battles going on in Vale, which caused him to frown in confusion. One Ozpin had anticipated with his attempt to use Blake as a scout. *What could this other battle be about, I wonder? Still, thanks to Ironwood, we have enough force to see to both. Without leaning on the police...*

Ozpin's thoughts trailed off, and he frowned, looking at some of the reports. "The reports I'm seeing here are of some kind of giant robot smashing through the abandoned industrial district. I think you should send the majority of your troops there, James. But make certain that you send someone else to check on this other area of interest," Ozpin murmured, before sending James an image of several police cars pulled up well away from wherever the fighting was going on, blocking the traffic. "In fact, General Ironwood, I request as Headmaster of Beacon, send one of your chief officers down there to the secondary site to talk to the policemen that are keeping the civilians away from the area. They look as if they have been there for a while, which is very odd."

Ironwood frowned, and Ozpin flicked his scroll around to show them what he had been looking at. Glynda looked at it too, and she frowned. "Fake policemen? Wasn't there a bank heist a year ago or so where the thieves dressed some of their personnel up as police, complete with cars?"

"Perhaps, but real or fake, we will need to question those policemen closely. If they are real policemen, they won't try to run when James' troops arrive, but they also will quickly close ranks. It will not matter if they are there because of an honest mistake or because someone higher up ordered it. The police will stonewall any questioning due to a feeling of solidarity and the desire to clean up their own internal messes, no matter what," Ozpin reflected.

"Loyalty to one's comrades is well and good, but taking it so far as to defend them from the price of corruption is ridiculous," Ironwood snorted, his face shifting into a mask of anger at the idea of police on the take. He loathed the very idea of anyone willing to set aside their duty and principles for any reason. "Get me jurisdiction to enter Vale and I'll have Ciel and Penny see to it."

At present, most of the armada that Ironwood had brought along had camped out in Beacon and the forest around it rather than the city itself. There was politics involved in that. "I brought her and Penny along so you could meet and vet Ciel personally if you didn't have a candidate for the Aura Transfer process. Penny will be able to hack their systems and backtrack any orders they've been given and from where given time."

Nodding, Ozpin let Ironwood to his task, frowning pensively as he began to try and make sense of that bit of violence before shifting back to the other bit of violence, which was now being recorded by a news bullhead keeping well away from the violence. Whoever was on that

bullhead was well aware of the danger of getting too close, thankfully. Civilian casualties were so messy to deal with.

A moment later, Ozpin's eyebrows rose in surprise, speculation, and finally, amused delight as he watched a woman dressed in a skintight black catsuit and mask toss out a fireball and then a lance of cutting wind that exploded a large portion of a wall. *My word, I do love it when a plan performs better than anticipated.*

OOOOOOO

Not twenty minutes before James began issuing orders to his troops to move in and quell the violence, Cinder snarled as she raced along the nighttime streets. Frustration and anger boiled in her, demanding to be let out in the way of a good fireball or tongue of flame. Of all the setbacks her plans had been forced to endure, the shifts in objectives, the loss of Emerald and her need to abandon entirely her first plan to sneak into Beacon, this was the most humiliating. Needing to retreat like this, admitting defeat against an admittedly large team of freshmen Huntsmen was galling to her.

Twisting around, she leapt from one rooftop to another without even looking. Such was her training under Salem that her general dexterity and mobility could put most Huntsmen to shame, which at this moment allowed her to stare at something that was also irritating her. *Piloted at present by a man who is almost certainly a fucking enemy in the future.* "Roman, ditch the paladin. We're almost near the normal areas of the city, and hiding will serve us better than that giant piece of scrap," Cinder ordered.

Indeed, the Vale Highway, a series of roads raised over the majority of the city to allow for faster travel, was barely a few blocks away. Cinder could already see cars pulling to one side and gawkers appearing, staring towards where the Paladin zoomed along.

"Oh really, I hadn't noticed. I was too busy watching our backs and trying to figure out a way to set this thing to self-destruct. We don't want anyone capturing it intact after all, especially with the onboard computers still in one piece. They might be able to glean far too much information about our activities with it," Roman retorted.

Actually, Roman wasn't just thinking about destroying the Atlesian Paladin that Cinder's mysterious (and probably scary) backer had somehow gotten his or her hands on and transported to Vale thanks to Roman's contacts. He was thinking about how it might be time to finally turn on Cinder. *Without Emerald and with Mercury out on another assignment, we might not get a better chance than this.* And when it came to a fight with Cinder, Roman wanted a lot of armor between him and her, thank you very much.

Ironically, Cinder was wondering the same thing, although if Roman thought that the Paladin would help him against her, Cinder would happily disabuse him of that notion. Indeed, it was not the mech that was causing Cinder to think twice about killing Roman right then; something she very much wanted to do in retaliation for his almost-certain murder of Emerald, which had thrown all her long-term plans. Neo's presence was. Neo's Semblance not only made the pink-haired girl far more necessary for Cinder's plans going forward than Roman, but would be very hard for Cinder to deal with on her own, when she was the only target for her.

For her part, Neo ran along the other side of the badly battered giant mech as they moved through the mostly abandoned industrial sector, but of the three, she was the only one not thinking murderous thoughts about her two partners at the moment. Rather, she was simply concentrating on running, trying to wipe at her eyes and nose. The use of what Neo assumed might've been some kind of anti-riot, nonlethal crowd clearance grenade round had proven far deadlier than Neo had expected, never having run into such things before. *Who knew that I needed to be able to see clearly in order to use my Semblance*, she thought, scowling a little as her eyes finally began to stop watering.

Instincts blaring, Neo twisted her head this way and that, looking all around them for a second, then looking back behind her just in time to see a black shadow appear coming up from between buildings. She barely had time to fully turn towards this threat before Blake Belladonna opened fire with Gambol Shroud. Shifted into its sickle and semi-automatic pistol formation, she opened fire, sending Neo sprawling to one side as she tried to avoid the shots, unable to call upon her Semblance to help.

Several bullets spanned off the back of the giant mech, and Roman turned the Paladin around. The mech's one remaining arm flashed out in a roundhouse punch that Blake dodged by leaping up and over it, at the center of the mech where Roman sat in the cockpit.

Racing forward and around Roman's Paladin, Cinder lashed out towards Blake with several small blasts of wind and fireballs, only for them to dissipate as Blake shot through them with Gambol Shroud. The next second, she leaped up and off the rooftop and down into the area of alleyways below. Here in this portion of the city, there were few working lights any longer, beyond the lights on the nearby highway and the darkness as the fireballs dissipated served to allow Blake to hide for a second.

The next second, Blake appeared again. Her catlike grace and silent steps had allowed her to maneuver around Cinder without her or her temporary partners tracking the movement. Now she attacked Cinder from behind, but Cinder rolled forward as she felt the air move behind her. This kind of subtle power was a part of the Maiden's magic she had absorbed: she could feel the air all around her to a certain degree, almost as if it were a sixth sense.

Dodging a subsequent strike that would've slammed into her shoulder, Cinder lashed out with a kick that Blake had to jump over. A mule kick was blocked by Cinder's weapon, Midnight, shifting into a shield form. Midnight was made of Dust-infused glass, which could be melted and reshaped with her original Semblance, Scorching Caress. This was a powerful heat control-based Semblance, which allowed her to both heat something to an incredible degree and to instantly cool it back down.

She pushed against Blake's feet, sending them upwards, causing Blake to flip in midair, but Gambol Shroud mecha-shifted into its kusarigama form to block the blow coming her way from Cinder's Midnight as a portion of it broke off into a sword, the shield heating to a melting point and then formed into a sword by the movement of the heat through the weapon under Cinder's control. It had taken Cinder years of incredibly painful, demanding training under Salem and her former master to get that good with her Semblance, but now she could do it so automatically that it was a natural part of her combat style.

The next second, both Blake and Cinder were forced to leap backward away from one another as Roman brought a fist down on where she had been a moment ago. He wanted to conserve what little ammunition the mech had left, but the next moment, even as Blake tried to jump away, the floodlights on the Paladin came on under his direction, catching Blake and nearly blinding her for a second, causing her attempt to jump away to stumble to a halt. This allowed Neo to leap up and strike at her with Blush, her parasol-dagger weapon, even though Blake was still somehow able to get Gambol Shroud up in time to block the attack.

A kick sent Blake staggering into a strike from Cinder's weapon, which slammed into her shoulder and side with enough force to send Blake crashing into the protective wall of the rooftop they were currently fighting on. The concrete cratered a bit around her, although thankfully for Blake, her Aura didn't break, saving her from losing an arm at best from that strike. She moved with the impact against the wall, letting it bounce her forward a little, before rolling, and bringing up Gambol Shroud again in its pistol form, using the sickle edge to block a blow from Cinder, and fire randomly in every direction around her, forcing Neo to back away even as one of her glass clones shattered under the impact of a bullet.

For a second, Cinder and Blake locked blades, and Blake looked hatefully at the woman who wore a White Fang mask, but very obviously did not have any faunus features. "It's you!" she nearly snarled. "You're the one behind the White Fang becoming so corrupt, becoming so violent! You're using them, you're using us!"

Cinder laughed coldly. Normally, she wasn't one to banter with her enemies, but the night had frayed her self-control, and this mask came complete with a voice changer, so she took the chance. "Oh, please! I might be directing some of their actions better than they could

themselves, but the hatred was always there. As was the desire to simply be on the top of the food chain rather than the bottom.”

Hissing like an angry cat, which caused Cinder to smirk briefly behind her mask, Blake broke the deadlock, creating a shadow clone for a second, which took the brunt of the punch that Roman landed on the rooftop, even as Cinder had to jump away from the same assault, snarling angrily at Roman. “Watch where you’re aiming, fool!”

Gambol Shroud’s clothlike segment wrapped around the arm of the Paladin as Roman raised it again, using the motion to flip herself upwards and over the group, firing down with Gambol Shroud again after taking a brief second to reload. Doing so in combat was still a tricky maneuver for Blake, but the time she spent basically suspended in midair before gravity took over was enough.

Neo and Cinder were forced to dodge in separate directions even as Roman twisted the Paladin, protecting the damaged parts of the main body of the mech with his one remaining arm. The bullets couldn’t do much damage normally, but there were several bits of the mech that had

While she wasn’t as good at it as Ruby, Blake was still able to use the recoil from her pistol in order to push herself towards where Cinder had landed, and brought her weapon down as it began to finish shifting into its next configuration, a short cleaver-sheath combo. She kept in close, believing that Roman wouldn’t try the same trick again after nearly clipping the woman she was currently fighting a moment ago.

For a few seconds, the two of them exchanged blows in close, with Midnight shifting into two Dirks in Cinder’s hands, glowing briefly as they shifted form before solidifying instantly as she sucked the heat back into herself. “I’m going to take you in, and you’re going to confess everything! The White Fang will...”

“Will what, you foolish, naïve little girl!” Cinder taunted. “You are truly blind to not see what was always there! You never saw the true festering hatred beneath the fight to achieve equality, did you? Not even from Adam. Why would a man like him not want to get his own back, not want to wield the whip hand, when he has been marred so deeply by humanity? Why would he not give in to hatred? Or do you truly believe that old homily about two wrongs never making a right? I would say it does make right, especially when you get to be the one on top.”

Cinder twisted her head sideways to dodge a stab from Gambol Shroud’s sickle form, before twisting away out of the way of a strike from the sword form, blocking a third strike with one blade of Midnight while the other sought Blake’s chest, crashing into it hard and sending her sideways, her Aura minimizing the damage and causing the hits to act more like a blunt force trauma than a stab. “What your people want now isn’t equal rights, but special ones, to be

the ones on top. Getting there by violence and fear is simply a means to that end, one your White Fang has enjoyed using for a long time.”

“You’re wrong! The White Fang just needs to be reminded of what we’re really fighting for, and it certainly isn’t becoming that which we hate!” Hissing again like the cat she so often resembled, Blake attacked furiously, but in her fury, she left herself open a second later to a stab that caught her in the side.

This time, Blake’s Aura couldn’t stop it. Midnight stabbed into her side, and with a twist and shift of her arm, Cinder tore Midnight’s seax-like blade out of Blake’s side. Coughing blood, Blake stumbled, her eyes going wide, then she was sent flying backwards thanks to a kick to the forehead from Neo just as Roman was about to bring his fist down again.

Thinking quickly, Roman plucked Blake up out of the air. As he held her in the air, Blake’s blood began to drip down her legs and to the ground below through the fingers of the mech. Not in little dots, but almost like a small stream, thanks to the wound that Cinder had just given her. “Well, I can cheerfully say that I think curiosity killed this cat,” he said with a wicked grin, as he tried to crush the girl.

However, Blake’s decision to run off on her own had actually served a purpose. Her fight with the trio had slowed them down, kept them in one place long enough for Harry, Pyrrha, and Tia to catch up to the point where they could actually see the trio, partly thanks to the fact that Roman had yet to turn off the floodlights on his Paladin. “Tia, fastball special!”

Tia grunted at that. She had dialed back on Harribel by this point, as her bestial armor didn’t actually make her able to run very quickly, but she was still dealing with the mental impact. Still, she knew what Harry wanted, and she leaped into the air, pulling her legs up and curling around them as if she were doing a cannonball into a pool. Harry whipped one hand back and forward, launching a spell at Tia, a simple repelling spell, the opposite of an Accio, which hurled her forward, battering-ram style.

Tia flew through the air, keeping herself curled up in a ball for the moment as even Tia didn’t want to take the full force of the upcoming impact despite her durability and mostly defensive type Aura. As she flew, a brief grin appeared unseen by any under her scarf, a thought occurring despite the fugue of animalistic instincts still inhabiting it. Still smiling, she whispered, “YEET.”

The next second, Tia crashed into the side of the droid on the opposite side of the arm currently holding Blake in the air. The strike cratered the Paladin in a wide area around where she struck, nearly destroying the mech’s thigh and waist on that side while crushing a large area under the armpit of the still-sparking wreckage where its arm had been. This impact caused it to crash into a building to the side as the Paladin lost balance.

Tia careened away, but grabbed onto the edge of a roof, flipping herself upward only to eat a fireball from Cinder, which blasted her entirely off the roof, causing Tia to hiss in real pain for the first time that night. Her Aura had been diminished badly from the fight earlier, but even if it had been full power, a fireball like that would still have hurt. Aura would protect her skin from being set on fire, but it certainly wouldn't protect her from the heat of the flame. *I would have to call on Harribel again to deal with too many such attacks, blast it!*

Before Cinder could capitalize, she had to twist out of the way of incoming rifle rounds from Pyrrha.

His Paladin groaning and creaking all around him, Roman turned the mech around with difficulty, before he began to fire at the incoming Harry and Pyrrha with his gatling gun, also launching the last of his onboard rockets. Both newcomers shielded themselves differently, but they crouched in place to do so, which was fine by Roman.

Groaning, Tia pushed herself back up out of the wreckage of some kind of hut that had been built up between two buildings. Growling and fighting the urge to use Harribel again, she launched herself forward, slamming into the mech again, her fists pummeling its already battered side and tearing at several cracks in its armor, peeling them open further through sheer strength alone.

This forced Roman to turn his attention to Tia, and the paladin began to hop around under his efforts to dislodge her. "Get off, you freaky ass blonde! What in the name of the Brothers are Glynda and the rest feeding you at Beacon?!"

Even as Cinder transformed some of her clothing, which was made with Dust and crushed glass into arrows, this let Harry get a cutting spell off that took the Paladin in the wrist. It couldn't quite cut all the way through thanks to how tough the material was, but it did cut in enough that the finger actuators lost power, causing the servomotors to go slack. This dumped Blake to the ground, but she was already unconscious as she fell boneless to the ground.

"Neo, pull back and start using your Semblance!" Cinder ordered, looking over towards the highway, where still more cars had stopped. "We can't afford to fight them when police are almost certainly coming our way." It wasn't the police so much as the Huntsmen they could call in, but explaining that would take too long.

Neo was having none of that. She was a woman on a mission right now. Between one second and the next, her Semblance activated, and an illusion of Neo continued forward, as another illusion covered her, rising up into the air. Blush in parasol form allowed her to almost hover in the air for a second before she fell towards Harry and Pyrrha as they closed. An unseen smash from the parasol as it closed saw Pyrrha stumbling to one side as a kick caught Harry in

the face, sending him reeling back. She used that kick, lashing out again with Blush, causing Harry to grunt as it caught him in the shoulder before she landed.

The original illusion shattering behind her as another took her place for a second. The next second, Neo ducked to one side and stabbed forward, the tip of Blush extending into a dagger tip, which caught Harry in the side in a slash, opening up a small gash there. Neo's ability to cover her blade with sufficient Aura to overcome her enemy's Aura at a specific point had once more shown itself.

Even as he folded over the blade, though, Harry's free hand flashed upwards, and the same spell he had used in the battle earlier to such good effect against Neo blanketed the area. The smell hitting her nostrils, Neo panicked, flipping away rapidly. She almost dropped Blush for a second while her other hand tried to pull her shirt up over her nose and mouth as much as possible. Even so, Neo's eyes began to water, and she backed away further, Blush swiping all around her.

Harry pushed in, Caliburn lashing out in a series of controlled slashes and thrusts which Neo barely dodged, almost losing Blush again as the ancient blade of the Arcs cut into the folded parasol segment, almost undoubtedly ruining its ability to open. "No Semblance for you!"

Neo ducked under a slash, then batted aside another one with Blush, her mouth, currently unseen, twisting into a furious snarl even as her eyes continued to water to the point she could no longer use her Semblance for anything large. Ducking almost to the point she was lying on the roof, she stabbed upwards, her weapon seeking Harry's face, which caused him to raise Caliburn to block. This opened Harry up for a low strike, and Neo's foot caught Harry in the balls.

"OOOF!" Harry groaned, going down to his knees for a second. *Fuck me, hits to the wedding tackle hurt even with Aura!*

The next second, Neo's weapon crashed into his shoulders, chest and head in quick succession, nearly carving through his Aura before Pyrrha's shield smashed into the side of Neo's head, side on, sending her sprawling.

Growling angrily at being ignored by the diminutive murderess, Cinder lashed out towards Harry and Pyrrha with spears of flame, but Harry slapped the roof, which rose in front of the pair, creating an earth wall that defeated Cinder's fire.

The sight of someone else, some random man using magic as if it had not largely left the world, caused Cinder to nearly scream in anger and jealousy. *Damn it, the Maiden's power, it should be mine, magic should be mine!*

It wasn't rational, but anger and hatred often weren't.

Lashing out again and again with bolts of wind and spears of flame, Cinder charged forward as Midnight shifted in her grip once more. "Neo, pull back! Use your powers the instant you can!" She shouted again as she got in close with the two Huntsmen. A kick to the thigh sent Pyrrha almost down to one knee. But the Invincible Girl shifted, rolling to the side of the knee that Cinder had struck, using the motion to bring up Milo in spear form before slashing it across Cinder's stomach. Only her Aura stopped Cinder from being disemboweled instead of simply being sent stumbling.

Caliburn nearly caught her in the side, forcing her to block with Midnight, before Pyrrha's shield slammed front-first into her chest. This opened Cinder up to a strike from Pyrrha, but she was instead forced to block a stab from Neo.

Thank goodness for my metal sense, Pyrrha thought as she pushed back against Blush, causing Neo to twirl away, disappearing into an illusion for a second before Milo stabbed it and whirled to the side where she knew the real Neo was. *I wouldn't be able to keep up with this girl otherwise!*

For several moments, as more and more cars in the distance on the highway began to pull over and watch events, the fight shifted between one two-on-two battle, and one practically armless Paladin against Tia, who quickly began to get the better of the mech now that it had run through its onboard ammunition stores. Finally, she was able to get close again, and a powerful punch finished off the Paladin's knee, dumping the droid chest first into the ground.

She was surprised a second later as Roman hit the ejection button. The ejection seat sent the top of the Paladin towards Tia, smacking into her and hurling her backward, followed by Roman, who flipped up and out of the ejection chair, which also hit Tia. Landing nearby, he turned towards her, Melodic Cudgel raised to point her way. A small dust-infused round flashed out from his weapon, crashing into and exploding on impact with Tia's chest, slamming her off her feet.

Even as drained as she was from Harribel and the battle before this, Tia was able to ride the blast, stumbling backwards a few steps, then charging forward, Tiburon raised and lashing out, causing Roman to curse. "Fucking Arcs! It should be illegal to have as much Aura as you lot do."

The pair exchanged blows. Roman was faster and his technique far more refined than Tia, who, although well-trained in unarmed combat, wasn't nearly as good at it as Pyrrha, Yang or Ren. But she was good at dodging, even if she had rarely needed to after her Aura had awoken. The years prior to that had taught her that while she was immensely durable, her

Semblance showed itself even before she could activate it, but even so, she had learned how to dodge well enough to keep up with Roman for now. It was her offense that sucked.

Seeing the girl who he had thought would fight like a mindless brute dodging his blows and bullets, Roman scowled. But he had another tool on hand in the form of a dozen small, hidden vials underneath his suit's jacket. *After all, there's an upside to stealing as much Dust as me, Neo and the White Fang have over the past few months.*

Working Tia around until her foot went into a pothole in the road, Roman capitalized instantly. Tossing up a Fire Dust vial from his free hand, he aimed for Tia's chest (which was quite a big target in his opinion). The subsequent explosion sent her flailing backward but did not knock her off her feet. "What are you made of?!" Roman grunted as he landed several hard strikes with Melodic Cudgel onto Tia's head, stomach and chest.

Tia recovered faster than he anticipated, and before he could dodge, a kick caught Roman in the chest with enough force that it nearly shattered his Aura in a second. Despite that, Roman rode the blow, tossing another small dust vial in Tia's face. This one was an Ice Dust vial, and when it exploded, it created frost in an instant, all over her face, closing one of her eyes and causing Tia to groan a little in pain at the sheer cold of it.

Several more bullets from Melodic Cudgel caught the girl, tossing her backward, and then Roman turned, hopping up onto a nearby building as he reached for his scroll, pulling it out for a brief second to hit a button on the screen.

Tia had barely cleared her eye of the frost fusing it shut before the Paladin exploded next to her. The explosion was big enough to smash the walls of more than a few buildings around them and send Tia flying with a cry of pain.

"Hahaha!" Roman laughed, shaking his head cockily. "That will teach you to underestimate your opponents, little lady! That seems to be a problem running in your family."

"Takes want to know one!" Harry shouted as he came down on top of Roman, Caliburn seeking Roman's head. He and Cinder had been exchanging long-range spells and element attacks, but even while she was busy with Neo, Pyrrha had nearly taken Cinder's foot off with a bullet, letting Harry turn to engage Roman.

To Harry's astonishment, Roman was able to get Melodic Cudgel up in time to block the strike, although Roman's eyes widened as he saw his Aura shattering around the blade from that one blow. *Fuck, I can't afford to directly block any more strikes like that!* Roman thought as he lashed out with a kick, then a punch, then an elbow strike that Harry blocked, having dodged the previous two hits. Melodic Cudgel and Caliburn batted off against one another, with Roman being very careful not to allow Caliburn to strike cleanly against his combat cane after seeing his

Aura crack again. Using small tricks, little fillips in order to trick Harry, he was able to make Harry's strike be just a little off each time.

A punch caught Harry in the chest, but in turn, Roman was forced to dodge a point-blank Semblance-based attack of some kind that nearly caught him in the head. The next second, he leapt upwards as he felt the material of the rooftop below him shifting, reaching up for his legs.

A bullet caught Harry in the face at the same time, causing him to stumble back, the impact almost making him go cross-eyed despite his Aura, but Roman couldn't follow up as a shield of energy blocked his next attack. "Wh, what the hell is your Semblance anyway, punk!? I've seen it twice now, and there's no underlying pattern!"

"That's for me to know, and you to never find out," Harry taunted. "And what is up with you anyway? I kind of got the impression you were going for the gentleman criminal theme, but here you are, helping terrorists and whoever the woman in the catsuit is.

Before Roman could retort, Tia closed in again. Risking her mental faculties, she had called on Harribel, covering her arms and fists with her Grimm-like armor along with her chest and lower face, much as she had done against most of her opponents in training class. With her Aura reserves having taken such a hit throughout the battle and her use of her Semblance, this still left her feeling drained, but she could sustain it for a while.

Roman barely got Melodic Cudgel up in time before Tia lashed out with a blow that would otherwise have folded him in half, Aura or no, had he not seen it coming. As it was, he was able to redirect the blow, although he still took a hit from Harry, a kick catching him in the forehead and sending him sprawling. Rolling away, he dodged a heel stomp from Tia as it slammed into the ground with enough force to carve into it, but was hit by a spell from Harry that sent him flying back.

Meanwhile, Pyrrha had been having one of the toughest fights of her life and enjoying every moment of it. Rarely had Pyrrha met anyone who was more agile and mobile than her, but **both** of her attackers were. Neo was exceedingly so, able to dodge strikes and shift position so quickly that it was like fighting a ballerina mixed with a kickboxer. Meanwhile, the other woman, her face obscured by her mask, fought with such economy of movement, dodging just enough to avoid Pyrrha's strikes, it threw Pyrrha off.

This was the kind of style that Glenda had been pushing Pyrrha to, pushing away from her gladiatorial roots, but she wasn't there yet. Similarly, Cinder didn't have any metal on her, and her odd weapon was something that Pyrrha had not seen before. *I have seen someone use a water-manipulating Semblance to create weapons, but this is different.*

Ducking under a strike from Neo, Pyrrha was able to turn and get her shield up in time to block a few arrows shot at her from point-blank range, the arrows shattering only to melt together under a fireball, which continued, catching both Pyrrha and the shards of the arrows. The catsuit-wearing woman charged into and through the flame as Pyrrha, grimacing at the pain of the fire, flipped away. The woman came after her, her somehow reformed the shattered remnants of the arrows into her second sword, only for Pyrrha to carry her sword to one side with Milo in xiphos form, returning a strike quickly.

The blow caught Cinder across the middle, hitting with enough force to send her stumbling back and for her Aura to noticeably deplete to the Salem-trained warriorress. Such training had included a great deal of meditation and communion with self, allowing her to have a better feel of her Aura than nearly any Hunter, and Cinder knew that she was starting to really feel it after this fight.

Neo lashed out towards Pyrrha, but Pyrrha ducked around the blow, shifting Milo into her spear form, while using Akuo to block the blow from Cinder at the same time. However, Neo had pulled her own strike back, and now smashed down at Pyrrha's weapon, hammering Milo into the rooftop below them, darting under Pyrrha's range with an elbow and then a palm strike to the chin. Pyrrha shifted with the motion of the blow, her mecha-shift weapon shifting back into xiphos form as she did, lashing out with a knee to the side of Neo, which Neo was able to dodge at the last second.

This time, though, she couldn't dodge the follow-up strike from Pyrrha's sword, which crashed down onto her shoulder, driving Neo into the ground.

Cinder caught the next strike from Pyrrha's blade on one of her own, carrying it up high and lashing out with her second seax in a move that forced Pyrrha to awkwardly bend backwards with one leg already up in the air and her shield out of position.

She did so and brought her shield up and around to smash into the side of the woman's weapon. This carried it to one side, and before her attacker could recover, Milo slammed into her side. Even as she felt the woman move with the blow, Pyrrha was forced to use her polarity powers to redirect another strike from Neo, but she was able to send Neo's blade almost into the catsuit wearer's side in turn.

Gaining some distance and shifting Milo into spear form, Pyrrha blocked the other woman's next few strikes, as well as one from Neo, before hurling Akuo off her arm and into Neo, who had ducked away out of range of Pyrrha's spear. The surprise move caught Neo in the chest, sending her stumbling.

Grimacing under her mask, Cinder twisted around, lashing out towards the shield with one of her blades, smashing it out of the air before Pyrrha could grab it with her Semblance.

Pyrrha couldn't concentrate on trying to return her shield to her as the catsuit-wearer's next strike nearly took her in the throat, followed by Neo pressing in again, pushing Pyrrha to the point that she flipped off the roof.

Following Pyrrha proved to be a mistake as a spell from Harry, who had twisted away from where he and Tia were dealing with Roman, caught Neo in the side before she could use her Semblance, hurling her sideways in an explosion of energy and force. This was followed by a spell that created a series of rising spear tips from the ground, which nearly slammed into Roman despite his best efforts to dodge and opened him up to a strike from Tia that caught him in the side, hurling him sideways into and through the side of what might have been a small warehouse at some point.

Even as he felt his Aura shatter under the blow, followed by a twinge that said he'd just sprained something, bullets flying from Melodic Cudgel at both his attackers and Pyrrha, having gotten enough range to hit all four of them. Harry created a shield around himself and Tia while Pyrrha dodged or redirected the bullets coming her way, crying out in pain as a fireball crashed into her a second later. Growling, Harry waited until Roman's cane rifle stopped firing for a second before canceling the spell and charging forward, not towards Roman, but towards Neo and the unnamed woman working with Roman and his original diminutive partner.

Cutting and element-based spells lanced out towards the black-haired woman, who ducked, dodged, and then lashed out in turn with a blast of wind that caught a spell from Harry, some kind of spherical black energy attack spell. By that point, Harry had closed, lashing out with Caliburn and a stone spike spell, pushing the attacker away from Pyrrha.

Cinder hastily blocked the blow, watching as her weapon began to crack at a single strike from the ancient sword. A bit of heat into the blade allowed her to reform it, but she was unable to get the blade out of the way before Harry's next strike carved into it, cutting through the molten glass with ease and nearly catching Cinder in the chest. A spear of wind to Harry's face sent him tumbling, breaking his Aura for the first time in the fight and breaking his nose under it, and a whip of superheated flame appeared in her hand, flicking out towards Harry, catching him in the chest with as much heat as an acetylene torch, only much bigger.

While Harry hadn't taken as much of a battering as his sister, his Aura also didn't lend itself to defense nearly as much as Tia's. Under the element user's attack, his Aura broke again, and he howled in pain even as he dodged to one side, lashing out with a lightning bolt that caused the fire wielder to halt her attack.

But Harry was unable to follow up, something searing into his side still, the heat of it scalding his skin despite his Aura. Pausing his attacks for a second, he hastily reached inside his

shirt, yelling in pain before hurling away his scroll, which had taken the brunt of that near plasma strike, melting and coming apart.

Harry might have tried to put it back together with a spell, but he was forced to dodge a strike from the woman's seax. Another blow nearly took him in the neck, but he brought Caliburn up into a strike that caught her in the center of the chest with enough force to shatter her Aura and hurl her away with the cry of pain.

Groaning, Cinder rolled as she hit the road, and a fireball appeared in one hand, the use of flame and heat coming to her far easier than anything else. She was able to launch it back towards Harry before Harry's next spell took her in the center of the chest, the explosive spell hurling her away up and over Neo and Pyrrha's embattled heads as Tia exploded out of the side of a nearby building, following after Roman.

For the next several moments, all six combatants exchanged hits and strikes, locked in close combat.

Tia, Pyrrha and Harry worked extremely well together. The time spent since arriving at Beacon allowed Harry and Pyrrha to work like a well-oiled team, while his time living and training with Tia for more than a decade allowed Harry an even better connection with her. Pyrrha and Tia's own teamwork faltered occasionally, their blades hitting one another rather than striking at their opponents as their opponents dodged or even bumping into one another, but thanks to Pyrrha's adaptability, such moments were few and far between and Harry was ready to shield them, if need be, although all three were beginning to feel it from the fire attacks from the masked woman.

Neo and Roman worked well together. Both of their Aura reserves were almost down to nothing at the moment, with Neo husbanding hers to use if they got a chance to break away, having realized quickly that Pyrrha could track her somehow. Despite that, they were able to defend one another and use their weapons to such good effect as well as simply dodge that neither of them took hits in the next few seconds while Cinder, the odd woman out, took several more, her Aura breaking more than once, and her helmet shattering under a blow from the side of Pyrrha's shield.

For a second, Harry stared, taking in the features of the woman behind the mask. A part of Harry's mind, a primitive male part of his mind that even in combat was still active enough to realize such things, acknowledged that the woman was beautiful.

Her face was like that of a model, up to and perhaps exceeding even Pyrrha's or Tia's in appearance, right up there with Arturia. Her black, nearly raven-wing dark hair encapsulated her face, the paleness of which was offset by that hair to an incredible degree. She had hazel or almost golden eyes, unusual in a non-faunus, a small, button nose, and sultry, kissable lips done

up in crimson lipstick despite having been behind a mask. Those lips and her overall face somehow gave the woman a beauty that was more sensual and more obviously sexual than any of Harry's girlfriends, even Arturia, although the sneer on those lips and the hatred in those eyes certainly detracted from the impact of it.

In that brief second before everything went to hell, anyway. Because as the portions of Cinder's mask fell away from her face, floodlights blared down at them from on high. None of the combatants had noticed three Atlas military bullheads coming towards the conflict up until right now, when their floodlights turned on, and a voice shouted through a bullhorn, **"Everybody freeze or you will be fired upon!"**

Instantly, Roman acted, reaching into and pulling out the hidden belt of Dust vials he had under his clothing. He tossed them into the air, with one of them losing its cap as he hurled it up.

Harry and Pyrrha were the closest as the Fire Dust vial caused the others to explode, fire, lightning, frost and water all flashing into existence one after another, hurling them away.

Neo also took the opportunity and, as Harry and Pyrrha and Tia, with Tia even going so far as to raise a hand to her eyes, flinched, she dropped Blush, leaped upwards and away, avoiding the fire that began to rain down on not only her but everyone else at her movement. An illusion appeared of her heading in one direction, along with one of Roman and another of Cinder, each of them racing away like rats.

Rolling with the explosion better than Harry, who found his face and upper arm frozen over for a second, Pyrrha tried to train Milo on one of the fleeing criminals even as bullets began to rain from on high on everyone involved. A final blast of wind caught Pyrrha in the center of her chest, hurling her sideways into Tia.

Despite that, Pyrrha still fired, and one of the images of the fire wielder was riddled with bullets, causing Pyrrha to curse luridly. The real Cinder had been back beside Roman as he was covered by Neo's illusion, and now she and Roman raced away together, as infantry droids began to drop all around them, stopping Harry and the others from trying to find where the trio had gone.

But even if they had, the lights from above and the explosion had given Neo more than enough cover for her Semblance. And even Penelope would've been thwarted as she and Roman had left their weapons behind. The trio was gone, and Harry could only stew in fury as he glared at the bullheads above him, a feeling of regret and annoyance filling him. *We went into this whole battle hoping to keep Blake and Sun alive, and we've done that. Yet even so... this feels like a defeat, damn it all.*

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Being under one of Neapolitan's illusions felt as if you had a faint sheen of cold water on you. But given how much sweat, dirt and grime had accumulated on her bruised body, it took Cinder a few seconds to realize that the illusion had ended. Well, that and the fact that as she looked down, she saw several large gashes appear on her dress. *I'm very glad my clothing's dust-infused, or else the various element attacks that Arc brat hit me with would have turned it into ash, even if the fire-type attacks wouldn't have bothered me.*

Thankfully, Neo had kept it over herself, Cinder and Roman for several city blocks, first covering them with an illusion of nothingness that moved with them, then covering the trio with an illusion of different people as they moved into areas of the city where there were still people around. A lot of those people were civilians who had come out of their homes, bars or various twenty-four-hour stores, to stare in the direction of where the Atlas bullheads were hovering.

Which made it all the easier for the trio to make progress for a bit until Neo canceled her illusion.

The three of them ducked into an alleyway from a road that would eventually lead up and into a more well-to-do area of the city, from the area they were currently in, a somewhat rundown, crowded suburban area. There, Cinder paused, leaning against a wall, breathing deeply and touching her chest and stomach for injuries through the cuts in her clothing. She'd been battered and bruised a lot, and her clothing was barely hanging on, giving a Roman show that at any other time, Cinder would have been furious about. She was a seductress and had occasionally used her body to get her way, but most of the time it was simply a hint rather than a promise.

To her surprise, when she looked over at Roman, though, he wasn't gazing at her with interest, amusement or simply just taking her in as so many men did. Instead, his eyes were locked onto hers, a faint sardonic smirk on his face. "Well, tonight did not go anywhere near as I had thought it would. But into every storm comes a silver lining." His smirk shifted into a snarl as he went on. "We're done with you, Cinder."

Next to him, Neo nodded firmly as Cinder gaped, her frazzled brain taking a moment to understand before a flash of rage went through her. "You, you..." She seethed, trying to call upon Scorching Caress, only to feel her hands heat up a little bit. She might have enough Aura to maybe use her weapon, but nowhere near enough to call upon her half-maiden powers, and she knew she would need to in order to have a chance of beating these two, especially as battered as she was.

Both of them were in similar straits, although Roman looked a little better, having not taken any direct hits prior to his Paladin failing under him. It looked as if he was favoring his side, but if he still had enough Aura to actually take hits, that put him above where Cinder was at the moment. Similarly, Neo looked ready to throw down, although still exhausted. She was also limping a little bit, but her eyes were locked on Cinder, and an almost evil smirk crossed her features as she cocked her hands, cracking her knuckles lightly.

Roman continued, putting Cinder's own thoughts into words. "The way all three of us are battered. You might be able to land a killing blow on one of us, maybe, but not both, and you don't have even Mercury around to help you here, let alone Emerald, thanks to yours truly."

"So, you did kill Emerald. I knew it," Cinder growled. "I had hoped to get you back for that before you admitted it, Roman. You're running away will only make me want to kill you more. My people and I are not the type to deal lightly with betrayal!" Cinder ground out her teeth, nearly clenching so hard she felt her jaw start to become sore.

"Oh, that is just it, Cinder, darling. How can you find what you can't see?" With that, Roman bowed, and he and Neo's body both shattered into glass.

Cinder nearly howled in fury as she looked around wildly, biting her lip and letting out a keening noise of pure frustration. But she couldn't even see any footprints, let alone any other sign that the pair of them had ever been there.

In the distance, she could see the bullheads starting to land, and she scowled, moving away, looking down at herself for a moment as she thought about what to do. *I need to get out of here, need to get to one of the safe houses that I haven't used before this and regroup with Mercury and Tyrian. Hopefully, they'll have had a much better night than me. After that... I will have to inform Mistress Salem about events here. That isn't going to be pleasant, even if I have firsthand knowledge of Hadrian Arc's magic.*

Cinder leaned against the wall there for a moment, gathering her energy before moving off, leaving the area where Roman and Neo had disappeared behind her.

Soon after she left, there was a sound of cracking glass as a second illusion faded, and Neo and Roman stepped out of the small doorway where they had been standing for a moment. As they did, Roman kept his arms around Neo's shoulders, one hand dipping down below to grip her rear hard, eliciting a little gasp from the diminutive woman, even as she wiggled in place in delight. "Well, that's us out of it. No one ever thinks you're still in the area once you do that trick. Gets them every time."

Neapolitan silently chuckled, then looked up at Roman quizzically. Roman interpreted that look easily, and his hand on her rear gave it another squeeze, ignoring the way his side

twinged when he did. "We'll lie low for a few days, heal up and then reach out to Junior via one of our burner scrolls. We'll need to stay in hiding for a good while until the heat dies down, regardless of where that heat comes from. We might be able to mess around with the White Fang a little bit, use Junior as a go-between, but that's for the future."

At that, Neo shook her head, reaching up and grabbing one of his arms and very firmly pressing it on her breasts, which were a bit larger than one would have assumed given her size. Fighting, escaping, and threatening people always got her a little horny, although not as horny as killing someone. Still, being free of the witch was more than enough to celebrate, in her opinion.

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Cinder kept to the alleyways for a few moments until she was in one of the slightly better-off areas of the city, where there was still a bit of car-type traffic going on even this late at night. Not much, and Cinder had to wait around twenty minutes before she spotted a car with only one passenger. By the light of the lampposts, he looked like a young man dressed for a night on the town, thankfully, which would make this easier.

She stumbled forward, not as if she was injured, but rather acting as if she was drunk, holding up her clothing with one hand as she reached out for a lamppost with her other. Deliberately missing, she then collapsed onto the ground and rolled into the roadway.

The man driving the car screeched to a halt just before he could hit her, and shouted, "Hey lady! Watch where you're... Oh God, what happened!"

Cinder had put enough space between where she was currently and the rundown, abandoned area where the battle between her, Roman, Neo and their attackers had been that the man didn't automatically wonder if she had been involved in that. Moreover, looking at him through half-lidded eyes, Cinder realized the man looked as if he wasn't a deep thinker anyway.

He reached her, and slowly helped Cinder to stand, babbling questions at her, and very obviously copping several feels of her chest, bare stomach and ass as he did.

"I, party, some asshole, roofies, others tearing a, at my clothing," Cinder mumbled, thankful that her clothing had mostly withstood the battle except for Harry's cutting spells. Thus, it looked as if someone with a knife had gone to work on her clothing for ease of access. Something, the man was taking advantage of even as Cinder spoke. "Took purse but, g, got out of there on foot."

Muttering under his breath about sloppy seconds, which Cinder ignored for the moment, the man pulled Cinder to her feet and helped her around his car to the passenger side.

“Well, miss, let’s get you to the police. They’ll be able to help you. Unless you just want to find someplace to sleep it off, and then go to the police in the morning? I know a place...”

Having had the time to look around and make certain that none of the streetlamps or buildings around them were fitted with exterior security cameras before this, and not having seen any other cars pass them since this man had stopped, Cinder struck. She reached up with a delicate hand, as if to caress the man’s face, looking up at her with a smile. Then she gripped his chin with one hand hard while her other hand broke his grip on it, coming behind his head. Before the man could react, Cinder snapped his neck like a dry twig.

Murder accomplished, Cinder pushed the ‘good Samaritan’ into the car, then went around to the driver’s side and hopped in, quickly putting the car into motion just in time as several more cars appeared from both directions. *I’ll need to find a dumpster quickly for him, but there should be a grocery store around here that has one. I just have to hope that I can find one before anyone can see into this car.* Soon, she was on her way, hoping that luck would be with her for the first time that night as she sped on.

OOOOOOO

Blake groaned, her eyes fluttering up, before closing rapidly as a shout from nearby nearly sent her back into unconsciousness from the pain of it hitting her ears. “Blake’s awake!”

“Nora, don’t shout, please!” Blake groaned, something that several other voices agreed with over the next few seconds. Several of those voices she remembered having seen the owners of earlier that night. They were her classmates who had astonishingly come to her and Sun’s aid when the White Fang had turned on her.

That fact caused Blake to groan again as she remembered how badly her attempt to go undercover had gone. The White Fang had been ready for her, with several enforcers on site, Lorgar among them. She and Sun had barely been able to get out of the rundown factory, only for the White Fang to be attacked from behind as Harry somehow showed up along with a large team of other freshmen.

“Given the pain suppressants the soldiers gave you when they took you aboard, you shouldn’t be able to feel the slice that fire user took out of your side, Blake. Thus, I assume that groan is a groan of ‘oh I screwed up’ rather than actual pain, right?” Harry’s face followed his voice a moment later as he peered down at her, a sardonic smirk on his own.

Harry had been going around the Bullhead, checking in with each of the other freshmen, making certain none of them had been injured. He and Tia were actually the most injured beyond Blake, having taken several fireballs, although bruises and a few pulled muscles abounded. Sun also might have a minor concussion, as well as a sprained wrist, but that was

about it. *Aura is truly magnificent stuff, right up there with the element of surprise, and an overwhelming skill advantage*, Harry thought, shaking his head. *If all of the White Fang had fought like that one enforcer, or if there were more of them on hand like him, this would've gone much worse.*

"I, hah... I suppose you could say that. And having you be the one to ride in to save the day isn't exactly making me any happier, given our last conversation about this kind of thing," Blake grunted, before blinking. "I mean I..."

"The stuff they've got you hopped up on also makes you a little blunter and more willing to speak, apparently. I'd recommend not letting any of the Atlas soldiers start questioning you about anything. We're being transferred back to Beacon, so that shouldn't be much of a problem. You're injured, but the nurse there apparently will be enough to see to you. The Atlesian soldier who examined you says it isn't life-threatening, although you'll be stuck in a bed for a while."

Deciding that groaning again simply wouldn't do, Blake began to bang her head back down into the pillow until it actually started to hurt her neck a bit. Then she stopped and slowly shook her head as she stared at him. "Well, did you at least see Roman Torchwick and the other two, the woman with fire powers?"

"You must've fallen unconscious when Roman picked you up in that Paladin's hand. Tia, Pyrrha and I were on their heels right behind you. If you had waited until we closed enough to engage, then maybe you wouldn't be so injured," Harry remonstrated mildly. Honestly, he thought that it had been Blake's attack on them that had slowed the trio down long enough for him and his two lovers to catch up, but he wasn't going to admit that right now.

"Now, I'd like to ask you what the hell you thought you were doing," Harry said. He was still smiling, but the humor had vanished from both his tone and his eyes as he looked down at her. "I would very, **very** much like to know why you, **again**, tried to take this all on yourself. Why the hell you thought only one person was good enough backup? And what the actual living fuck sparked this one-woman crusade? **Again!**"

Despite feeling somewhat hypocritical, as Harry Potter certainly did much the same thing several times in his past life, Harry railed at Blake for a few moments on how she had put herself and Sun in danger by rushing in like that. He growled out that at the least she should have had Yang, Weiss, Ruby and Neptune nearby like Harry and his group had been.

Blake tried to fight back, but not much. She knew that if Harry hadn't decided to stick his nose in, or indeed if he had not done so in such an organized manner, she and Sun would both be dead or captured. What the White Fang did to collaborators or traitors these days was horrifying to Blake, who had seen that happen twice before.

Eventually, she caved. Blake explained how she had been hoping for several days that Ozpin or someone else would follow up on the information she had given them about the White Fang. Blake then explained how she kept seeing more and more news about the White Fang acting out in Vale on her scroll. How, eventually, she had decided that if no one else was going to do anything, she had to. "It can't be called taking the law into my own hands if no one else was doing anything with it!" she snarled.

Frowning, Harry shook his head, reaching for where his scroll should be, before remembering what happened and wincing a little. "Can I see your scroll?"

Blake frowned, but nodded, wincing as Pyrrha, for proprieties' sake, reached under her shirt for the special pouch where most Huntsmen kept their scrolls. She handed it over to Harry, moving to look over his shoulder. Harry quickly began to flick through some tabs and icons and then looked at her newsfeed. All of it was dominated by the White Fang, just as Blake had said.

But looking at the search engine and then looking at the responses he got from using Pyrrha's scroll, Harry frowned. "Blake, did you ever change your search functions to look specifically for White Fang, or to remove the bias filters?"

"What, no. I always want to see both sides of any issue. That's like only watching Liza Lavender and assuming her words are gospel," Blake scoffed, her voice coming out much stronger for a moment before she winced again at the pain from her side. "And, and don't think for a moment that I, I have just been looking at one source or something like that. Or, or caring about the obviously biased conspiracy sheets."

"Wasn't going to say that, no, but even so, there's a lot here, isn't there?" Harry mused. He went around the room, using the scrolls of his companions for a time, but only Blake's search turned up so much about the White Fang.

He also realized that Blake's wasn't running a tracking function that Tia's, Ren's or Nora's were. Those tracker apps were part of the probation they had all been put under since the fight at the docks. Blake's had been turned off. *Well, that's two*, he thought grimly.

Harry continued to talk to Blake for a few minutes before letting her fall back asleep. When she did, Harry turned his attention to Sun, speaking to the other youth for a time. By the end of that talk, Harry was almost certain.

*Ozpin set Blake up, Harry thought furiously. He goaded her into action through her scroll's news feeds, turned off the tracker on it, and let the rest happen. But **why**? Why didn't he or the Vale police act on the information she shared before this about the White Fang? Even more importantly, why weren't forces nearby to help her and Sun? What was so important that*

Ozpin would let a freshman student act out like this for a second time, and then not have backup nearby?! Are the police here in Vale that corrupt, or is Ozpin worried about something else entirely?

At that, Harry paused. I wonder if he's made the same connection I did, that someone was pushing for a race war for some reason, as well as maybe a lot of other acts, in order to cause fear and confusion here in Vale. Trying to smoke that conspiracy out, I could see that as important, certainly, but to use Blake in an attempt to draw them out? Harry's face firmed. *No. That's a Dumbledore move if ever there was one, up to and including not having nay backup nearby. If I'm right, Ozpin's got a lot to answer for.*

Twenty minutes later, the Atlesian military-style bullheads landed at Beacon. Exiting the bullhead, Harry saw Ozpin, Professor Goodwitch and a man he recognized from Arturia's description of the man as General James Ironwood, semi-dictator of Atlas waiting for them. *It must be nice to be able to call on an entire other nation's military for simply friendship's sake,* Harry thought with an inner snort, the sight not bringing him any comfort, rather simply making him angrier for some reason he couldn't quite place.

Could Ozpin have thought to use them to back up Blake? If so, why weren't they in Vale? Politics? With as much power as he has Ozpin should have been able to bull through that without the clear and present danger of the fight to spur things on, surely. And I will not accept the idea it could just be a timing issue.

"With me, team. Mila, Tia, you're with Tristan and Beth," he said aloud, letting a faint smile cross his face as he looked at the other team leader and his girlfriend. "Let's at least act as if we're Huntsmen returning from a proper mission, yeah?"

The two teams, even if one of them was ad hoc, fell into step with Harry, with Nora talking excitedly to Beth as she imagined how much extra credit they might have earned from the night's business. Harry didn't have it in him right now to burst her bubble, but judging from the faces of the two educators ahead of them, he very much doubted that extra credit was what they had in mind. Regardless, Nora fell in line next to Beth and Ren, with Tristan moving to flank Harry opposite Pyrrha a step behind Harry.

At a gesture from James, his soldiers turned to return to their bullheads. They would join the rest of the fleet James had brought along elsewhere in Vale. Meanwhile, Ozpin observed the faces of the teens. All of them looked battered, but Blake, who was being carried on a stretcher between two of James' androids, was the only one who looked badly battered, although Tristan had a makeshift bandage on his shoulder and seemed to be favoring that arm.

Letting his coffee cup fall away from his lips, Ozpin made to speak, but Harry spoke up before he could, not addressing Ozpin, but Ironwood. "Normally, General, I like to see cavalry

rushing to my aide. In this instance, I have to wonder are all your people as gormless and pathetic as the troopers you sent our way when it comes to identifying friend from foe?"

One of the human troopers grimaced, and James scowled, but Harry went on, ignoring their ire. "Not only did your bullhead pilots almost instantly start to shoot at everyone, but they also didn't even try to figure out who was who first! We had Roman, his accomplice Neo, and a woman with an insanely powerful element-based Semblance dead to rights! But then the Atlesian military showed up to screw the pooch without a hint of lube in sight!"

"Language, Mr. Arc!" Glynda barked, but Harry ignored her, glaring at James.

For his part, James regained his self-control with the ease of someone who knew all too well the feeling of being screwed over by orders from on high, not taking Harry's anger personally just yet. "You'd be Hadrian Arc, then? If things went down as you say, your anger is justified. However, we were acting on what intelligence we had on hand prior to contact. I am sorry about how it must seem to you that my men tried to steal your glory only to let the enemy get away, but nothing could be further from the truth. Your fight had reached the area of the city where actual civilians were in danger. Would you have wanted us to wait if doing so cost innocent lives?"

"No, although I would argue we still had at least a block before that would have happened," Harry answered, calming down a little bit in the face of James' words. "And, if you had no idea we were the ones doing the fighting, I can see why your troops decided to shoot first, identify after. But then to keep shooting when our enemies were already breaking off!?"

"Ah, well, that, I will deal with," James grunted, looking towards his troopers. All of them stiffened, but he waved them off for now. "Later, though."

Here, Ozpin spoke up, gathering the attention of both Harry and the other teens easily. "I am glad to see that the trip here has allowed you to calm down at least a bit, Mr. Arc. We need to deal with what is, not recriminations." Ozpin glanced at Blake, who had been carried to one side by two of the Atlesian androids, her hissed orders the only thing stopping her from being carted off to the nurse's office. "As such, perhaps we should ask why this entire battle occurred in the first place, along with what you all know about the second fight that flared up elsewhere in Vale."

"It, it's my fault," Blake said, responding before a frowning Harry could ask what second battle Ozpin was talking about. She tried to push herself up on the stretcher, but Sun reached over and pushed Blake back down. Given her stammering, Harry had to wonder if her pain medicine was wearing off already or if it was a bit of blood loss getting to the cat faunus. "I, Sun and I, we, we couldn't just sit back and do nothing, not after the attack on that SDC shipment, not after the rumors about the White Finag building up to some huge attack, we, we..."

While the weak, wounded Blake spoke, the other teens stood. Most began to slowly quail, looking less and less like conquering heroes and more like worried students under the gaze of Goodwitch, which did not dissipate as Blake's words sputtered out. Only Tia completely ignored those looks as inconsequential, while Harry stared back at Ozpin, whose own eyes were on Blake.

Examining the Headmaster's expression, Harry couldn't see anything. No tells, no surprise, nothing and not just because Ozpin kept sipping from that damn cup. No, Ozpin was a master of self-control, and Harry couldn't read him at all. *Although, that itself is a tell*, Harry thought, a tiny bit of sadness going through him as he knew that his concerns about Ozpin having somehow set Blake up to act were somehow correct.

That much self-control when you're hearing about your students, freshman students, mind you, getting into a life-or-death battle against terrorists is not natural. It reminds me far too much of Dumbledore. It's the expression of a ring master standing back and just waiting for something to happen because you think you know how to let people's freewill direct them in the direction you want them to go. But he didn't at the end, and I don't think you do, and you don't care about how deep the pool is you just let Blake wade into, do you?

"I see...well, Ms. Belladonna, I would have hoped you had realized the foolishness of acting on your own, or even with the assistance of your team. I would further have hoped you had passed onto me any information you had on the White Fang," Ozpin intoned, interrupting the tale before it could get to the outbreak of violence. "Indeed, you did do so. Now I have to assume you kept some back to let you act unilaterally again."

Taking a sip of coffee, he let his words settle into Blake's mind before going on. "On the other hand, I can understand not wanting to betray a movement that you had been so devoted to."

Another sip, and Ozpin spoke again. "What I cannot overlook is how much danger you put yourself and Mr. Wukong in. I do not think I can fault you for the trouble Ms. Xiao Long and Ms. Rose discovered alongside Arturia." Harry and Tia both blinked then, their brows furrowing, but Ozpin went on unhurriedly, reasoning they hadn't learned yet of the other battle that had been going on in Vale tonight. "But I can fault you for your own actions, and for not thinking for a single moment you could be over your head. As you so demonstrably were."

In reality, Ozpin was somewhat concerned about that, although not because Blake and Sun could well have died if not for Harry and the... oddly effective and well-organized backup he had brought together to follow Blake. While he would have grieved their deaths, Ozpin had seen so many young Huntsmen come and go two more would not weigh heavily on his shoulders. No,

what concerned him most was the way Blake had seemingly been mouse-trapped by the White Fang.

That showed a level of intelligence he would not have expected those zealots to possess. Not because he was racist, simply because he had assumed that none of the White Fang leadership would think in terms of counterintelligence operations. *Salem's group might have far more control over them than I had thought*, Ozpin mused, leaping to what he felt was the logical conclusion. *If Salem can change the White Fang into more than a blunt object, they will truly become something I will need to concern myself with.*

Staring at both faunus students Ozpin shook his head, setting aside such thoughts for now. "I will take into account the fact you had no idea the White Fang might be waiting for you when addressing your punishment, however, given the severity of the wounds you took, Ms. Belladonna, and the sheer amount of damage done to the, admittedly, semi-empty former industrial district, I think you will be looking at a month, at least, of detention once you are released from the nurse's tender mercies. There will also be team punishments handed out in some fashion."

Blake made to protest but Ozpin continued unhurriedly, his tone not even hinting at his real feelings on this score. "The moment they learned you were going to act so unilaterally, Ms. Rose and the others should have stepped in, or at least told us here in Beacon so we could have backup ready for you. As good a job as Mr. Arc and his impromptu company did, official backup would have been far better to have on hand."

Ozpin noticed how Harry's eyes had narrowed at that, but he ignored that reaction for a moment, turning his attention to Sun Wukong. The monkey faunus looked as if he was only aping being worried, a sly smile on his face as he looked away. The punishment for the events down at the docks had already blocked Sun from the one thing he seemed to think Ozpin could do to punish him, a student of another academy. *Well, except for minor things such as not being able to order pizza in the cafeteria or some such.* That sight made Ozpin really want to bring the book down on the young man's head, as it was obvious that even with Blake's injuries, he wasn't taking this nearly as seriously as the other teens.

"As for you, Mr. Wukong, I am afraid that I must simply pile on the punishment I have already given you. Instead of you no longer being able to enter the singles tournament, your entire team will no longer be able to represent Haven in the upcoming Vytal Festival," Ozpin said, smirking behind his coffee mug as Sun's eyes widened and he seemed to wilt in place, already anticipating how Neptune and his two other team members would react to being dragged into this. "You can, however, keep Ms. Belladonna company as she goes to the nurse's office."

"W, wait, I should be here when my team arrives!" Blake said, coughing up blood even as she tried to struggle against Nora's gentle hand on her shoulder. "I, it's my..."

"I assure you, unless the White Fang have begun to make deals and agreements with street-level gangs composed mostly of humans, the injuries your team sustained have nothing to do with you, and everything to do with proximity," Ozpin said circuitously. He didn't want the young woman to get even more worked up, nor did he want to hint at the idea that there was a secret cabal manipulating the White Fang. It would undoubtedly feed into Belladonna's delusions about her former companions.

That was enough, however, for both Harry and Pyrrha to suddenly frown, with Tia and Ren frowning a moment later, followed by Tristan. They would not need to wait for long for more information though, as Ozpin knew the bullhead bringing Sun-Sun, Martina's team and Neptune back to school was due any moment. Ozpin knew that the other three members of Team RWBY were at the hospital with Yang Xiao Long.

"I am certain your team members would prefer you start to get some real medical aide rather than continue to abuse the admittedly amazing pain suppressant you were obviously given. You will be able to speak to your team in the morning. I am certain I can get the rest of tonight's story out of Mr. Arc and your other saviors."

He turned his gaze to Harry, who was nearly glaring back as beside Ozpin, Glynda spoke up, scowling angrily at the young man. "Indeed, Mr. Arc, it will be fascinating to hear how you both organized such a large force to act as backup for Ms. Belladonna in case of trouble, and why you decided to do so rather than just telling us of your concerns."

"Because I wasn't certain Ozpin would do anything other than continue to watch and wait," Harry answered crisply, his lips twisting into a near-sneer. "Nor do I trust the police to be able to deal with Aura-awakened criminals. I also have to wonder how Blake's actions could take you by surprise at all, Headmaster, considering her past actions and the fact she was under probation."

Even as she was being led off Blake had to wince at that, while Tristan fought to keep a frown off his face. *Is Harry still angry about how those tin soldiers messed things up, or is there something else going on here I don't know about? I know he talked to Blake and Sun a lot on the bullhead, but what could they have told him to make Harry so angry?*

"We tend to believe our students learn from past mistakes, Mr. Arc," Ozpin answered dryly. "It is not our job to watch your every move as you work towards becoming official Huntsmen."

“There is a difference between giving students autonomy and allowing them to run headlong into trouble. Especially, as I said, when Blake was already on probation. Which means she had a tracker on her scroll that should have told you she was in Vale.” Harry shot back. “A tracker that was turned off, and not by Blake or any of her team. Without that, it looks like you just let Blake and her team run around without any oversight.”

While James’ eye narrowed, Ozpin frowned behind his mug as that shot hit far too close to the truth. Still, he remained silent as Glynda upbraided Harry for his confrontational attitude. “One living in a glass house shouldn’t toss stones Mr. Arc. After all, if you—”

“Hadn’t what?” Harry interrupted her, glaring now at Glynda. “Are you telling me that you had backup equivalent to the company my friends and I put together near enough to help Blake? They certainly didn’t step in once we did! And judging by your earlier words, the rest of Team RWBY has also run into trouble. Which the rest of our group also probably stepped in to help with, and you did not!”

Deciding to speak up before Glynda could continue attempting to tear off a strip of skin from the angry young man, Ozpin held up his non-coffee mug carrying hand, waving his cane around. “Enough. I understand, Mr. Arc, that you are frustrated at the fact you could not capture Roman and his two companions, but you are attempting to blame Blake’s unilateral decisions on our allowing her too much freedom. I understand it, but once you calm down, I think you will understand why that is a false argument. Right now, I believe the bullhead that is coming in should have the rest of your merry band, and you might wish to listen to what they have to say.”

*As will I, Ozpin mused, having, in his opinion, marginalized Harry’s anger for the moment. I had **almost** put down the attack on Harry as being from Jacques Schnee or some enemy of his family, given the lack of White Fang involvement. But now with the attack on Arturia, I am wondering if the Schnee patriarch has really declared clandestine war on the Arcs, or if this was an attack to weaken Beacon by attacking a few of our promising young students and the Dark Queen. It would certainly make sense. As would, perhaps, the attack on Mr. Arc also being from the same people who work for Salem. I haven’t yet had time to look over the pictures of the dead that Jame’s troopers gathered, but it feels likely given the brief report of the enemy’s Semblance I skimmed when the Atlesian soldiers first started reporting from the scene.*

Harry grumbled, but his good manners returned to him for now. He quickly apologized to Glynda for his heated words, although when he looked at Ozpin, Ozpin decided the young man’s eyes were a little too discerning, a little too suspicious.

There’s something else other than our simple inability to bell the cat behind his concerns. I don’t think he’s holding our past conversations against me either. This is something new.

Perhaps based on the fact that, if he hadn't acted and created such a powerful company, Blake at least would be dead. As would Yang and his own sister, although he might not know that just yet. I wonder what has sparked this anger I see in him?

For a moment, the group fell silent as the bullhead came in, landing easily. Martina and Sung-Sun hopped out, followed by the rest of the other half of the makeshift response team. Harry and his friends instantly noticed that none of WBY were there and all of the teens who looked worried and distraught.

This was compounded a moment later as Martina rushed over to Harry, looking between him and Tia. "Harry! I am so sorry, we have been so busy since we first responded to the attack, and when we sent you that initial report, you didn't respond. I tried to send you a message again when we turned for Beacon, but you still didn't respond, and the Atlesian vaffanculos (fuckoffs) didn't tell us anything."

"Sorry about that. My scroll died during the fight, which we were still in almost forty minutes ago. Although you could have contacted Pyrrha, Tristan or any of the others," Harry chuckled. Although it was quite forced as he was feeling a knot of anxiety growing inside him at the look Martina and now Sung-Sun were giving him and Tia in particular for some reason. *What the hell?* "What happened?"

"We met with Arturia at the SDC tower. While we stayed with Weiss to help go over some research into the movements of the White Fang and the Dust they've stolen, and oh, my do we have things to tell you there," Martina announced, looking between Harry, Ironwood and Ozpin, "Arturia decided to go off to um... to try and stop Yang from..."

"Being Ms. Xiao-Long?" Glynda guessed, rubbing her forehead tiredly. "I understand. Did Arturia succeed in doing so, at least?"

"Well, I think so? The ambush happened after they left the place Yang had hoped to go to in order to acquire some clandestine information," Sun-Sun stated before shaking her head, reaching over to grip Tia's arm. "But... Tia, Harry? During the ambush, they, one of the attackers somehow got through Arturia's Aura. And, and poisoned her. Scorpion venom."

Harry's eyes widened, and then his face shut down as Tia grabbed Sung-Sun's arms. Lifting her off the ground, Tia's eyes narrowed in sudden worry as she the shorter, far less built girl. "Is she okay!?" Tia growled out.

"We don't know," Martina answered as Sung-Sun was being shaken too hard to form a coherent sentence right now. "They were keeping her alive, and trying out various anti-venoms on her to see if one stuck and the doctors seemed hopeful, but I—"

Tia set Sung-Sun down and, ignoring everything else sprinted towards the bullhead intent on heading right back to Vale and the hospital to see her sister. Harry moved after her until a gentle touch on his shoulder caused him to whirl around, his hand raised and a furious expression on his face. "What!?"

Ozpin stood there, shaking his head, although he did back away a bit. "Mr. Arc, while I can understand your concerns for your sister, there will be nothing you can do in the hospital other than wait and worry. Let Ms. Arc go to check on Arturia, and you remain here to give us a precis on what has occurred tonight. The sooner we have everything in order, the sooner the Vale Council will have some actionable intelligence, and we can make the Vale police stop sending me scroll messages."

"Funny, you and they already had a lot of that already from Blake's information and the fight at the docks," Harry growled, glaring at Ozpin then over at Ironwood. "But fine. There's some things I need to say to you anyway. "Tia, text Pyrrha, Nora or Ren if the hospital needs anything or Arturia's conditions worsen. I'll be along later."

"I'll have one of my bullheads waiting to take you," James agreed, both because he was concerned about Arturia, who he still hoped to recruit to Atlas, and because he understood Harry's worries. "It will be well past the last time the regular bullheads are scheduled to run."

That reassured Harry and he thanked the older man, although he was still leery of Ironwood's presence. *Where the hell did all those weapons, including two **Atlesian Paladins** come from?*

Gripping his self-control and his worry for his older lover with both hands, Harry looked over at Sung-Sun, watching over her shoulder as Tia clambered onto the bullhead that had brought Martina and the rest back to Beacon. "I take it that someone on Team Ruby were also injured in this attack?"

Someone able to cancel out Aura would be a deadly anti-Huntsman assassin, Harry thought worriedly. As much grief as I gave her over running after Roman and the others in the battle of the docks, Arturia's not alone in thinking Aura will protect you a lot of the time. Fuck, I can't think offhand anyone other than Tia and me, and me far more than Tia, honestly, who has ever trained to fight without Aura. Flipping hell. And poison, I, I really hope that the hospital can help Arturia. I don't have any magic that can help with poison. I never needed to worry about that kind of thing after my run-in with Slytherin's basilisk.

"Indeed," Sung-Sun said, speaking both for Harry's benefit and the headmaster both, not knowing what reports the older man had already seen. "From what we saw when we arrived, the man, a scorpion faunus, channeled his Semblance into his hands. When he touched Arturia, her passive Aura around the area he touched failed, allowing him to stab her with his poisoned

tail or the blades of his matching wrist blades. I'm uncertain which as by the time we arrived she was already down. Despite being stabbed twice, though, Arturia was somehow still alive when we arrived on the scene."

Her words did nothing to calm Harry's concerns but Sung-Sun continued without pause. "Yang was badly wounded as well, when Yang's Aura was canceled over her chest. She had... lost large chunks of her stomach and the side of her chest, but I believe that with sufficient surgery she should pull through."

Glynda looked sick at that, while James grimaced, reaching to tap one of his legs for a moment as Harry and the rest of Yang's friends all blanched, shuddering. Even Harry felt shaken at that, although not nearly as much as he had been about Arturia's wounds.

Ozpin did not. Instead, he concentrated on the individual Sung-Sun had just said was behind Arturia's current straits. Because that description sounded remarkably like a murderer from Atlas who had been captured in Anima over a decade ago, only for him to be freed when being transported to Atlas to answer for his crimes by a flock of Grimm. Even now, Ozpin could remember that moment, for it was the last time Ozpin knew, conclusively, that Salem had acted on her own in the past hundred years.

An attack by Grimm, the prisoner mentioning something beautiful, and the pilot screaming 'what are you' in terror was certainly conclusive, He thought, a bubbly feeling of triumph going through him. *It seems my students might have cost my opponent a valuable piece.* "Excuse me, but did this assassin get away?"

"No sir," Rachel answered, with her twin nodding fervent agreement. "We put a few rounds into his head after his Aura broke fighting Boss Lady and the rest. Put him down permanently."

"I will schedule you both, indeed all of you, some sessions with Dr. Inasa," Glynda murmured, making a note of it while Ozpin exulted inwardly.

Dr. Inasa Whitebreeze was Beacon's psychologist, a man who blended into the background so well that few if any of the students on campus had ever seen him. Indeed, he spent most of his time in his office, but despite being an introvert's introvert, he was remarkably good at helping people talk through their problems.

The twins though just shrugged. While they were Vale natives, and Vale was normally a very peaceful kind of place, it was very obvious they couldn't care about the fact they had killed someone. Training to be a Huntsman had already hardened them to the idea of taking lives, much like Yang and a few of the others after the battle at the docks.

"I think at this point the rest of you can head to your dorms to take some downtime. Tomorrow will be soon enough for you all to learn about your punishments and rewards for tonight's activities. Right now, I only need to speak to your team leaders and get their immediate impressions," Ozpin stated, making the words an order that few could ignore with the ease of many lifetimes.

At this, Harry began to glare at Ozpin again, even though he agreed with what the headmaster had just said. *Being cool and collected can only cover so much ground before it seems to become a lack of concern or care. And your words just now rang about as hollow as any of the times Dumbledore told me everyone deserved a second chance.*

The others all turned, and after a few moments of backslapping and hand shaking moved off, but Pyrrha remained behind for a second, holding Harry's hand, not coincidentally keeping him upright after Nora's backslap had him nearly faceplanting, having taken him by complete surprise. She waited until he had straightened up, then cupped Harry's face with her other hand, leaned in to give him a kiss near his ear before whispering, "Calmly, my Rigas. You look a second away from blowing up. But being calm in an argument is always better than blowing your top. I know whatever is going on between you and Ozpin has been building for a while, and I know your concerns about Blake. But lashing out will get you no where."

"Heh. Thanks Love," Harry whispered back, wanting to kiss Pyrrha, but knowing that she wouldn't really like that given how public it was right now. "Let me guess, something you learned in the Mistral Tournament or dealing with all the promotions and stuff?"

"Both." Pyrrha laughed, and Harry laughed with her, once more in control of his emotions although still intending to let Ozpin have it with both barrels if he could. "You have no idea how many times being tranquil and smiling helped me out with photographers and managers alike, including my parents. Or how often that same serene, smiling attitude got under the skin of my opponents."

Harry chuckled with a nod, and then kissed her on the cheek. "Go on, love, I'll see you tomorrow. I'll be returning to Vale to be with my sisters in the hospital tonight, but I'll stop by to talk with you before heading off."

Pyrrha nodded and turned away, moving to catch up with Nora and Ren, who was stoically putting up with Nora badgering him for "Special Midnight Victory Pancakes!"

Soon, Harry, Tristan, Sung-Sun, and Martina stood in front of Ozpin's desk.

Staring across his desk at the four freshman team leaders, Ozpin slowly sipped his coffee for a second setting it down on his desk. "Given the violence that erupted in the streets of Vale and the fact that, in the short time it has taken us to walk from the landing area to my office, I

have received twelve more missives from the police demanding that I 'help their inquiries' into the group of freshman Huntsman-in-training who have caused several million lien in damages while taking the law into their own hands, I do not think I need to go over how you illegal the actions you all took tonight will truly were."

Most of the teens in front of Ozpin looked worried by that as he thought, but for some reason Harry's eyes narrowed. His face gave nothing away, but Ozpin could still tell he was furious, and those words had made him angrier. *Hmm... interesting.* "You will all, and your teams, be punished for that," Ozpin continued. "Yet, I can also not argue with the outcome. To start with, however, I would like to ask how this organization of yours came about."

Ozpin instantly noticed that the others all looked at Harry just like Tristan had earlier. For his part, Harry simply shrugged and gestured for Martina and Tristan to explain. "Honestly, I didn't have much to do with recruiting our little company, just leading it afterward."

Sung Sun, Martina and Tristan quickly explained how Nora, warned by Harry that there might be trouble brewing in Vale, had asked all of them if they wanted to come along, and the other two teams, along with Mila and Sung-Sun, had agreed. Here Glynda shook her head, looking at Martina and Tristan in particular. "Sung-Sun being pulled into this I can understand, but how did Nora convince you to join this madness?"

"I wouldn't call it madness considering without us, Arturia, Yang and Ruby would have died, and Blake and Sun might have done so as well," Harry barked before either of the other teens could reply causing Glynda to stiffen.

As annoyed at Mr. Arc's tone as she was at that moment, however, Glynda couldn't argue with the point. "I did not mean that, Mr. Arc, although if you raise your voice to me again I will make you regret it. I merely reiterate that if you had seen Team RWBY going off as they did and overheard things to make you believe they were going looking for trouble, you should have worked through official channels."

Harry simply looked at her for a moment, then shrugged, completely unperturbed by her words. That caused Ozpin to frown. Up to this point, it had seemed as if Harry Arc was more susceptible to the female voice of authority than the male. Not to the point of passivity but certainly being respectful and easily cowed at times. *His anger is overriding that natural inclination. That is worrisome.* "While I agree Glynda's word choice was unfortunate, I would still like an explanation, Mr. Arc, as to how you convinced your fellow freshmen team to join you in this."

Frowning, Harry flicked his gaze to Ozpin but eventually shrugged. *I don't think Ozpin's behind this conspiracy, as much as I think he used Blake to bring it into the open.* "I think there's

some kind of conspiracy going on in Vale, headmaster. I don't know the goal, or much about who, but..."

As he listened, Ozpin smiled thinly behind his coffee mug, amused at how much Harry had put together. It seemed as if Salem's agents had overstretched in terms of finding other groups to help commit acts of violence when they reached beyond the White Fang. Tying it into the attack on Harry was something he had already done, believing it was Salem's agents wanting to remove someone who was seemingly using magic, which obviously, Harry was unaware of. *If only you were willing to show me you were trustworthy and able to be led, Mr. Arc. You would be a magnificent asset.*

With his explanation of what he thought was going on in Vale out of the way, Harry got to the point where he had organized the teens into two ad hoc squads. One of which followed Tia who in turn had been following Blake.

"Truly?" Glynda blinked. "Not Mr. Lie?"

"I had Tia start tailing Blake and Sun before Nora and Ren arrived in Vale with the rest of our friends, Professor," Harry answered formally. His earlier anger had seemingly faded a little, but it was still there, Ozpin could tell. "My sister can be surprisingly stealthy at times, although, I doubt she would've been able to trail Blake if Blake was prepared to be followed."

The other team had been sent to the SDC Tower. Here, Martina and Sung-Sun took up the tale, how they had first met Artura Arc and Weiss and Neptune how they had worked with Weiss for a time on some of the information they had been able to gather, whereupon Martina looked at all three of the older folks across the desk from her worriedly. "During those investigations, we discovered precisely how much Dust the White Fang and Roman alliance have been able to steal, and it's far, far too large a number."

"We will talk about that after you submit your after-action reports. Suffice to say that the police and I are not ignorant of how much Dust has been stolen and accumulated over time, to say nothing of the major theft of a full SDC cargo ship," Ozpin stated, shaking his head slightly, unaware that was giving Harry still more ammunition for his distrust of the headmaster. "We are simply having trouble figuring out where it is being hidden."

"Jacque bleated about the assault on 'his' cargo ship in my ear for long enough right after it happened. You would've thought the man had just lost his wife, or maybe firstborn," James drawled, shaking his head, looking at Harry with a smile. "As impromptu as this organization was, I have to commend you. You did a good job both in terms of rolling with things once Ms. Valkyrie brought you so many allies, you took action, and you were decisive."

Harry simply nodded, unwilling to be thawed out from his cold anger by such words, while the other team leaders all smiled at the praise before Glynda, acting the bad cop as it were, shook her head. "That might well be acceptable, but all of it also speaks of a great deal of prior planning. I will reiterate my earlier point. Once you were aware that Blake might be investigating the White Fang on her own, you should have called in to us here in Beacon. Indeed, it could be argued you had a duty to do so. We could've had several teachers following her. Instead, you all raced in to battle on your own, without full Huntsman licenses to shield you from the illegality of your actions."

She shook her head, allowing a smile to cross her face. "I agree and applaud your investigative skills, Mr. Arc. I even approve of how all of you were willing to work together. If you were all juniors or seniors, this kind of action would have gotten you extra credit from me in my class, and from Professor Ozpin in his Tactics course. But as it is, the onus for your actions falls on Beacon. Indeed, even if you had just called in the police once you found the White Fang recruitment center, that half of the violence Vale experienced tonight could've been avoided."

"Avoided for now maybe, but police and Huntsman both have channels they need to work through," Harry countered, his eyes locking on Ozpin for a moment, causing Ozpin to frown pensively at the almost knowing looking in Harry's gaze while he did not react at all to Glynda's words of praise. "Judging by all the White Fang activities, and the fact that Roman has been able to get away with so many thefts, it's pretty obvious that either Roman or the White Fang have been able to create enough connections within the Vale government to be aware of any such movement."

Harry shrugged. "I will admit that thought only occurred to me after we had organized our new squads and that my first thought is to always do what I can rather than rely on someone else, but frankly, considering how our side of things didn't deal with a single death thanks to Fen and Weiss, I think we did a much better job than the Vale police could have if we had called them in."

Sung-Sun nodded. "Even you all here, the Huntsman on staff at Beacon, are almost certainly routinely watched, your movements noted by both the powers that be and the criminal element. Whereas we freshmen, we're all relative unknowns, and no one's watching our movements as closely as you, Professor."

Ozpin had to admit that Harry and Sung-Sun had a point, though he did not like how close her words came to why Ozpin had hoped to use Blake's determination to do something about the White Fang in the way he had. Ozpin knew for a fact that Glynda, Peter and himself were indeed on a watchlist whenever they went into Vale by the criminal element. The Vale government also watched their comings and goings, although not for any duplicitous reason,

simply wishing to be ready to back them up in case they were pursuing some Huntsman-style mission or other.

His deputy headmistress though didn't seem so willing to accept that and opened her mouth to either lay into Harry or simply take umbrage with how cynical he was, but James held up a hand, waving his scroll lightly with his other. "They're right, Glynda. Penny's first report is already on my scroll, and she confirms that the police we saw manning barricades around the ambush sight where Arturia and the two young Huntresses in training occurred."

"The, they weren't fake!?" The professor looked almost incandescent with fury now as she voiced an idea that, honestly, Ozpin hadn't ever thought would accurate, and her riding crop slapped into the palm of her free hand in a way that made everyone bar Ozpin jump, with Tristan even going so far as to take a step back along with Sung-Sun. Martina simply looked intrigued as Glynda went on. "Are you saying that whoever was behind that attack had sufficient pull on the police to make them dance to their tune!?"

"Or at least a contact within the police that could reroute police assets," Ozpin said, far more philosophical. *This is why I trust so few people after all. They're liable to betray you for a bit of silver in the hand, never seeing the big picture.* "Look at it this way, Glynda: we can use the fact that they were seen doing it as a means to cut those threads. In fact, in that kind of light, this seems... rather shortsighted of whoever was behind it."

"Or uncaring," Martina said, shrugging her shoulders. She looked over at Sung-Sun, who backed her up with a nod. "If the assassin was the one who was behind the attack on Arturia, Yang and Ruby, then, well, he sounded a great deal like some kind of psychopath, with a heavy leavening of religious fervor. He shouted about serving some goddess, their deaths serving her, Arturia's blood being his offering to her."

Watching Harry's lips peel back in a snarl at that, Ozpin decided he wanted to move away from that topic, as none of these four were ready to be in the know about Salem. "James, since Ms. Polendina's report has already been sent your way, may we ask her to follow up on the police side of things? It will be best to start cutting such threads immediately, before whoever is behind the web knows we are doing so."

"Already done. I have Ciel helping her. You could also let me rouse Professor Oobleck to help," James agreed. "He's good with numbers and investigations, and that man lives off caffeine anyway, so the lateness of the hour shouldn't bother him."

Smiling faintly at that, Ozpin reached down for his own coffee, taking a sip of it again, grateful that his mug had a self-heating regulator within it. "Please do so while we continue to talk. Having heard Mr. Arc's reasoning, we will not overly punish anyone here. As Glynda said, this kind of action is something we like to see in our older students. Team RWBY, Mr. Vasilias and

Mr. Wukong are another matter, and you will still be liable for the damages done to the city, which we will take out of the stipend Beacon sets aside for all your training, ammunition and weapons needs.”

“Actually, Tia and I will be willing to help pay for damages to the area where Arturia, Yang and Ruby were attacked,” Harry waved that off as if it was of no moment, which it wasn’t for him. “The other segment of the city we fought in, well, it was abandoned anyway.”

“True. We will work on the paperwork for that after you all have submitted full AARs. For now, let us skip straight to the battles,” Ozpin ordered. “First, let us take the one with a known factor in the White Fang and this strange criminal group that has apparently begun to work with them. Then we will talk about the other half of this conspiracy.”

Once more, the young team leaders looked at Harry, who nodded and once more began to talk for them, talking about how they had organized the battle around the recruitment center. “We made the basic assumption that Blake would indeed stir up trouble in some fashion. Unfortunately, we were quite correct on this score. What we were wrong about was the amount of firepower the White Fang would have on hand.”

From there, Harry explained about the weapons that the criminals are used, up to and including the two paladins, his gaze locked on James now rather than Ozpin. “I have to wonder General, if those weapons are what brought you here to Vale. Were you somehow following the trail? Because if not, it really seems to me as if a major portion of the White Fang’s newfound strength is coming from Atlas and you would be better served there than here getting in the way of my company.”

While Tristan, Martina and even Sung-Sun smiled at Harry’s words, rather than taking umbrage at the debacle his troops had caused at the end of the battle in the old industrial sector being brought up again, James simply looked furious. “I assure you Mr. Arc, that the moment I’m back in Atlas I will start a thorough investigation on how we lost two Paladins,” he ground out, shaking his head.

“I thought at first the reports about there being wreckage of a giant mechanical creation of some kind was the sign of a White Fang knockoff. But the weapons you described the mechs use, their maneuverability, everything else, yes those were two top-of-the-line paladins, weapons platforms that we’ve only barely begun to manufacture in any kind of large-scale capacity. Two of them finding their way into the hands of criminals and terrorists is unacceptable!”

“That cannon and the other weapons also did not come into the hands of the White Fang through the... the common channels for such things,” Sung-Sun said, coughing delicately into one of her long sleeves and looking as innocent as she could. “There is absolutely no

evidence of any criminal organization in Vacuo being a part of their creation or sale, nor any transportation group being involved in moving them.”

Vacuo was the next best thing to a lawless city state, although it was somehow still one that functioned, a fact that many outsiders just could not quite understand. Regardless, it was known as the manufacturer for criminal weapons and other things of that nature, and the only real international criminal empires were based out of Vacuo. Ozpin, however, knew that such criminal enterprises had **very** strict rules on what they would and would not be involved in. Even the worst such criminal empire knew that Grimm were always a threat, and anything that allowed the Grimm to gain still more land from humanity was just not worth the lien.

And while a few of those criminal empires did supply the White Fang with weapons, they were always secondhand and weak weapons. Certainly not top-of-the-line, nothing like the two paladins or the weapons used by the White Fang in the battle tonight.

“Is that what you were investigating at the SDC Tower, Miss Greenscale?” Ozpin inquired, causing James to frown pensively, before nodding in recognition.

He recognized the name. The Greenscale Mafia was one of the oldest and most respected criminal groups out there. Sung-Sun, if he remembered correctly, was the youngest daughter of the current Don. From the reports James had seen, Sung-Sun was something of the apple of her father’s eye, even if her desires to become a Huntsman had thrown the family for a bit of a loop.

“It is sir, and I helped Weiss correlate the numbers when it came to following up on the sheer amount of Dust that has been stolen,” Sung-Sun said, shaking her head, still somewhat bemused at how well people here in Beacon took the semi-secret fact of her family’s historical activities. “I don’t think we are nearly as worried about that aspect as we should be, sirs.”

“Let’s take your word for it on that point and set aside for now the investigation into where those weapons came from. If you have left enough of the Paladins intact for James to start his own investigation there, that is enough. Go back to the battle itself please,” Ozpin ordered.

Harry nodded, a previous conversation he’d had on the bullhead with Sun letting him describe loosely how he and Blake had been outed by Roman almost immediately, and that the White Fang had seemingly been prepared for some trouble, perhaps even Blake-shaped type trouble. From there he described the battle as it began all the way up to the end where the Atlesian military had turned up.

Near the end, he handed over Pyrrha’s scroll, on which a sketch of the woman in the catsuit sat. Harry watched as Ozpin nearly grabbed the scroll out of his hand, staring at it avidly.

At that, Harry decided to take a shot in the dark. “That’s the woman with the fire powers. The incredibly powerful fire powers, I might add. I wonder how Aura Measurement and its Underlying Physics, the pamphlet you showed me, would have to say about that.”

Ozpin could not quite stop his eyes from narrowing for a brief second as he looked up from the image. “Undoubtedly like yourself, there are other people who are beyond the curve of normal Aura consumption,” he said blandly.

Ah, now we get to it. You do know something about her, don’t you? About what’s going on here. Harry leaned forward then, almost tempted to put his hands on Ozpin’s desk to glare across it at the headmaster. It was time to set aside talking about the fight itself and move on to how the fight had occurred in the first place. I.e. how Ozpin allowed Blake to run free as she did.

“It’s clear that Blake and Sun both would have almost certainly died tonight. Or been captured in Blake’s case, which might well have been even worse. So, I have a question for you Headmaster,” Harry said, deliberately using the term headmaster rather than the more friendly ‘professor’ that Ozpin seemingly preferred as part of his learned man bullshite. “Was Blake being used as a canary in a coal mine, and did you even care what happened to the canary after it began to smell gas?”

The other teens all looked confused for a moment, but Sung-Sun frowned, her brows furrowing as Harry went on, looking between him and Ozpin. “I find it strange that so many weeks have gone past since Blake and the rest fought down at the docks without **any** kind of movement from the Vale police or the Huntsman of Vale, all of whom answer to you. Then, after the attack on the SDC cargo ship, still more time went on without **any** movement from anyone in a position of power in Vale. I find it **fascinating** that Blake’s search engine, and **only** her engine, came up with so many interesting answers. That Blake had a tracker on her scroll, but that it had been turned off.”

Sung-Sun blinked, her contemplative frown turning into something more like a scowl as she realized that if Harry was telling the truth, it was indeed... odd. It sounded almost as if someone had allowed Blake to act as she did.

Glynda scowled, but couldn’t quite meet Harry’s eyes, while James frowned angrily, but Harry didn’t think he was involved in this anyway. Ozpin, on the other hand, kept on sipping his coffee, staring across at Harry. *Now, is this his distrust of me coming forward, or does he have actual evidence I wonder?* “You seem to want to blame Ms. Belladonna’s activities on me, Mr. Arc. I assure you, I did not encourage her actions, nor do I have any idea how the tracker on her scroll was turned off.”

“No, not her activities. The fact Blake was so able to carry them out,” Harry corrected, eyes flashing. “And funny how you use the word blame. A guilty conscience, perhaps? Blake was

on probation still. None of her friends have any kind of skill with hacking or programming. So how did Blake's scroll beacon get turned off?"

"I have no idea what you are implying, Mr. Arc. You seem to be leaping to conclusions with little facts," Ozpin allowed a bit of warning to enter his voice. "I say again, I am in no way in control of Blake's actions. Blake must have found someone else to turn the tracker off for her."

"And I haven't said you are. But you don't have to be in control of someone to direct them," Harry drawled, shaking his head. "I could almost understand why. If you thought that the Vale government was so badly inundated with corruption you couldn't trust your own communication network or feared that any movement on your part would lead to an ambush like that which my sister ran into, then using someone who is unknown to your enemies is a smart decision. However, you didn't work **with** Blake, you **used** her."

"Mr. Arc that is enough! Your accusations have no--" Glynda growled.

But Harry ignored her, speaking over Glynda in way that he would normally never have done but he was furious right now, and desperately worried about Arturia. Those feelings were making him far more aggressive than he would have been otherwise. "When we talked privately, you gave me the impression of someone looking down from on high, someone who thinks he knows more than he lets on. All the facts I found out via looking at police reports, at putting information together, you have all that information at the tip of your fingers. You know some kind of conspiracy might be going on. But instead of warning Blake, you did **nothing**. Which, in turn, made Blake want to take the law into her own hands."

"On the contrary, I had anecdotal evidence that someone new was backing the White Fang and that someone else might be arming the various local anti-faunus movements," Ozpin stated, deciding he needed to at least somewhat combat Harry's accusations. "However, that is a far cry from having what is called actionable intelligence. I had only the vaguest hints of any collusion, and even with this sketch and the description of the young man with gray hair Ms. Greenscale and Ms. Azure, we still lack any idea of how big this conspiracy is, or how powerful. Nor does any of that have anything to do with Ms. Belladonna's unilateral actions."

"And if I have ever given the idea of looking down on you Mr. Arc, I apologize. But when you have as much experience as I do, it often comes off as being more aloof than you might wish to appear," Ozpin went on. "It is that experience which has made me leery of acting too quickly, or too strongly and scaring my opponent back into the high grass."

"Someone who lashes out without knowledge might be foolish, but someone who refrains from acting is equally a **buffoon**. It is allowing the enemy to retain momentum and the advantage! I agree it wasn't time for big hammer, but there's a vast difference between that and being totally docile. There's also a big difference between having subordinates act on their

own cognizance with all the information you can share, and just letting someone act like a loose cannon and hope they come up with something!” Harry snarled. “So, either you didn’t care what happened to Blake, or the whole ‘wiser than thou’ thing is a lie. Tonight could have been a complete disaster!”

“But that didn’t happen, Mr. Arc,” Ozpin answered, although inwardly, he was grateful for Harry’s actions. *I did not anticipate Ruby and her other friends splitting up so foolishly. If Blake and Sun simply disappeared, I would have been none the wiser. To say nothing of losing the second silver-eyed warrior in as many generations for no return.* “And even if Ms. Belladonna had been forced to run away, sometimes mistakes tell us what we need to know even more than successes.”

That was a minor slip, but Harry pounced on it. “And Blake’s death and that of Sun would have told you what you wanted to know? You didn’t have **anything** in place to back Blake up! You didn’t even have anyone present in Vale at all. Without my team, without the company my friends and I put together, Blake would have died. Sun would’ve died, and you would have learned nothing. Worse than that, they would have been sent into that ambush without any of the information you did know before this: that the White Fang might have advanced weapons!”

Placing his hands on the desk, Harry continued. “So did you just not consider how badly this could go, did you think the Atlas military would react faster, or did you plan to let Blake act as she did, assuming that keeping secrets was more important than any other goal, including keeping her and Sun alive? We are students, not fucking mushrooms, Ozpin, to be kept in the dark and fed on shit!”

Sung-Sun reached forward, taking Harry’s arm, making Harry remember the audience that they had for the first time since he and Ozpin had begun to argue. He blinked then calmed down slightly, looking around the room before staring back at Ozpin warily, his anger having burnt itself out, now being drowned by returning worry for Arturia. “I wonder why Ironwood is here, if that was your backup. I wonder what your end goals are, Headmaster. I don’t have any idea why you think your ‘extensive’ experience means you’re infallible, why you act as if you have more information than anyone else in the room. I wonder all of that, but I know one thing. I no longer trust you...”

He glanced over at Glynda, looking a little apologetic. “Nor this school. My sister and I will be removing ourselves from this school as soon this first semester ends or sooner.”

Ozpin looked at the young man thoughtfully, then sighed faintly. “I am sorry that your paranoia has grown to such an extent that you assume so much about me and my ability to predict the future, Mr. Arc. I am uncertain what I could say to offset this odd opinion of me you have built up if you are not willing to reach out to me in turn.”

He laid that out easily. If Harry was willing to share some of his own secrets with Ozpin, then Ozpin might think about doing the same. At least when it came to the woman whose sketch he was still holding in his hand, and the Maidens. Probably not Salem or Ozpin himself, of course.

But when Harry simply glared back at him, Ozpin went on. "I would urge you to wait until your temper has cooled and your anxiety about Arturia has been assuaged, as that is undoubtedly fueling your current paranoia. But if, after you calm down and talk it out with both your sisters, you still think that leaving Beacon is the best choice, I will not argue. I will be sad to see you go, of course, as well as your sister, but it will not be the first time that students have walked away from Beacon for their own reasons."

Harry ignored the last portion of what Ozpin had said, shaking his head. "You know what, I am certain that you do feel sorry that I'm leaving. But I really doubt it's for the right reasons." With that, Harry turned away, heading towards the elevator without waiting to be dismissed.

The other three team leaders looked back at Ozpin. They had been watching this one-sided shouting match with interest and confusion galore, not certain what they thought about it. Sung-Sun seemed the most thoughtful, her face now opaque, as she looked at Ozpin, her hands folded in her long sleeves, but Tristan and Martina definitely looked both confused and horrified.

"I will expect your After-Action Reports to be done within forty-eight hours for all three of you and for you, Mr. Arc," he said a little louder. "Whatever your future plans, you are still a student here after all."

Harry didn't bother replying, simply punching the elevator door controls and stepping in. He did wait for the other three to catch him up, however.

They were silent as they stood in the elevator and headed out of the Clocktower. There, once the night air was playing over them, Sung-Sun spoke up, looking at Harry very thoughtfully. "That was very interesting. Do you really think Ozpin would've left Blake and Sun to die?"

"Am I the only one who noticed how his face seemed to light up when we showed him the sketch of that woman who fought beside Roman and the girl with the illusion powers?" Tristan added, also looking at Harry.

Harry nodded in his direction but addressed Sung-Sun's question first. "I don't think Sun even entered his mind. As for Blake dying, I don't think Ozpin planned for it or cared one way or another. He would've been appropriately sad about it, but do you agree with me that the way that Blake was able to act so freely is..."

"Oh, certamente. Blake was definitely still on probation from the battle down at the docks," Martina murmured quietly, glancing over her shoulder at the Clocktower, confusion and concern in her eyes. "Her movements and everything else should still be monitored like you said, il mio capitano (my captain). And you're also right about the fact that neither the Vale police nor Ozpin had previously followed up on what happened down at the docks or the assault on the STC ship prior to this."

"Put like that, it does seem as if Ozpin was being fairly deliberate about **not** acting. I...I don't like that, nor the hint about him keeping information back," Tristan admitted. "Maybe he really was waiting for James Ironwood to arrive and use Atlas troops? Vale doesn't have a real standing army after all."

"Maybe, maybe not. The reason we don't, though, is that Vale's Huntsmen are supposed to step in as such. And none of them are around lately," Martina pointed out. "

"That conversation isn't the first I've had with Ozpin. I won't go into details, but there are far more reasons why I'm distrustful of Ozpin beyond his apparently leading Blake to continue her one-woman crusade against the White Fang." Harry snorted then, shaking his head. *She reminds me so much of myself it's a little scary, and a lot disturbing. Only I think I had better motivations for thinking it was all down to me, up to and including a prophecy stating it as fact.*

"Were you serious about deciding to leave at the end of the semester?" Sung-Sun questioned. "And would you be willing to tell us what was discussed in those conversations?"

"Yes," Harry stated, shrugging his shoulders. "Although not often, and only once, please. Going over it several times would be annoying."

The other leaders all laughed at that, and then Harry went on more seriously. "I was also serious. Like I said, I have no idea about Ozpin's motivations, why he's so reluctant to act, or so secretive. But regardless, I can't trust him any longer, and I refuse to remain in his power here in Beacon for any longer than I have to. Besides," Harry suddenly grinned boyishly, the serious of the moment dissipating as he did. "There's so much going on back in Evig Låga, it isn't like I'll be pressed for things to do."

The others all chuckled at that, but Tristan scratched his chin. He was one of the few freshmen who was already showing signs of needing to start shaving regularly, and both Sung-Sun and Martina chuckled at the *skritch skritch* noise. "I can't say that I went into that conversation with Ozpin suspicious of his motives, but I certainly came out of it as such. I am going to do some research on our Headmaster before asking for more of your explanation, but... I don't suppose your hometown would be interested in a few more Huntsman-in-training?"

“So long as you can make yourself useful around the place, I don’t see why not,” Harry snorted, nodding his head. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I want to check in with my team and then head back down into Vale. Hopefully, whatever he thought about that confrontation will not have made General Ironwood rescind his offer of a bullhead to take me back. I’d hate to have to steal one of the schools, particularly since I don’t have a pilot’s license.”

The others laughed at that, but Sung-Sun simply rolled her eyes, knowing full well that Harry was not, in fact, making a joke. To check on his poisoned sister, Harry would most definitely pour gasoline on the already burning bridges between him and Beacon.

And where does that leave me, Mila and Adam, I wonder? Tristan might have said it half-jokingly, but I am actually thinking seriously about following Harry and his team. If Harry thinks that Ren and Nora won’t follow him when they leave, he’s an idiot. And I’m wondering if Martina is on board with that idea too... Sung-Sun mused.

OOOOOOO

Unaware of the fact that Beacon might be losing a little over a third of the freshman class at the end of the semester, Ozpin laid Pyrrha’s scroll on his desk, staring down at it, his face openly showing his triumph in a way that normally he would never allow. “So, we now know the final two members of the group that attacked Amber. We even know some of their powers. Fire, control of heat, and the ability to use such to manipulate her weapon and clothing. This other one, he also looks like he could be related to the assassin and mercenary you mentioned, James, although he’s too young to be Marcus Black himself. A son, perhaps?”

“That is my thinking, although I would never have expected someone like Black to have sired a son, let alone trained him in his own style,” James agreed. “I’ve ordered Ciel to bring in several forensic personnel from the police force to go over the battle against the White Fang, too, and I’ve already offered to help keep the rhino faunus imprisoned as he should be. We’ve even got an ID on him. Lorgar Yellowsky is part of Adam Taurus’s... well, I would call it a special operations unit within the White Fang. Which probably means Taurus is around here somewhere still and could perhaps be the go-between between this woman and the rest of the White Fang.”

“Put this woman’s image and that of Black out there,” Ozpin ordered. “I want neither of them to be able to hide among the populace any longer, regardless of where they try it. With that, and with Tyrian Callows being dead, we will have successfully defanged Salem’s plots for quite some time, I think. She may have succeeded in removing one of the four Maidens from the board, but I think this brings us even again, and protects Beacon itself from further infiltration.”

We have also discovered that Harry is certainly not on Salem's side. Not if his sister, who he is very clearly close with, that is not something he could fake to me, was targeted by one of Salem's human tools, Ozpin reflected.

Glynda, on the other hand, had her mind on something far closer to home in her opinion. "Harry was correct, however, in that everything that has happened tonight was because he and his friends reacted the way they did. I understand you set them all in motion, Professor, but they don't, and they feel, rightly I think, that they've been used. If we don't make any overtures towards Harry and his sister, then the two of them, Pyrrha, and perhaps the rest of Harry's team will certainly leave." She frowned then, shaking her head and pointing at Ozpin. "I am also telling you now that I am not going to be the one to tell Tai about his daughter's severe injuries."

Ozpin winced at that, looking at her plaintively for a second, but seeing the stone-cold expression on Glynda's face, he sighed. "I will do so before turning in for the night. It is quite late already, but better I wake him up and tell him than he find out in the morning."

"And what about making overtures towards Harry?"

"I do not believe that any would be accepted." *Save perhaps for sharing information, and that I will not do. Not even the secret of the Maidens, not until he comes clean as to the origin of his magic.* "Perhaps if he is allowed to calm down a bit, as I mentioned, he will be more thoughtful about things. But as he said, Mr. Arc no longer trusts me. Nor do I trust his perspicacity or actions. No, Harry will leave," Ozpin said, shrugging philosophically before smiling slightly. "But a knight, no matter how odd he moves, can still be of use."

Glynda scowled angrily at that, opening her mouth to remind Ozpin that it wouldn't just be Harry and Tia, but Pyrrha, and almost undoubtedly Ren and Nora. Perhaps more, considering how many other teams Harry had roped into the night's activities. They might be seeing a mass exodus, and worse, she did not like how Ozpin sometimes fell into the habit of seeing people as tools, as pieces in his conflict against Salem.

But before she could speak, James spoke up, shaking his head. "**Very** odd moves. Not just young Harry, but the rest of Evig Låga. I don't know if you know this, but they've not only reached out to the Vacuan criminal syndicates to provide them guns. They've also reached out to Menagerie, and specifically the White Fang. I'd expect that they might be opening trade talks with Menagerie, but working with the White Fang **directly**? That is causing a lot of ruffled feathers back in Atlas, especially considering that I have received reports of recruitment aimed at SDC miners. There is a reason, above and beyond the sudden competition in the Dust market, why Jacque has been yammering in my ear about 'those blasted up-jumped land barons'."

“That is all down to Harry’s family. I will not say that he didn’t have a part in that, I’m not foolish, but back on point,” Glynda said, waving James off. “You don’t see how much respect he’s earned among the rest of the freshman, and I do not think you, Professor, are taking it seriously how badly everything could have gone without Harry and his company being involved from their perspective. If you thought for a moment that there was trouble brewing, we should have had troops stationed in Vale, true Huntsman, not Ironwood’s tin soldiers.”

“Now hold on! Why am I and my army being attacked now?” James asked, stiffening and looking at Glynda with annoyance rather than the softer feelings he normally felt towards her.

“Maybe because your troops and you are about as subtle as a hammer coming down on an egg! If not for them, we might well have had that woman who stole Amber’s power in custody, to make no mention of Neo and Roman.” Glynda retorted tartly.

“Ironically,” Ozpin said, raising his voice slightly to override the coming argument. “Arturia is actually the one I would have put in charge of such a backup. It would’ve been much easier if she had agreed to work with me, but she would still have taken a job to simply remain in Vale and be on the lookout for any unusually violent activities.”

“Hah! Trust me, Arturia isn’t very amenable to job offers,” James said dryly.

“And regardless, everything did work out somewhat well in the end. Beacon will foot the bill for Yang’s medical operations, and I’m certain that we can find someone with a healing Semblance to bring in.” Such Semblances were quite rare, but there were a few Huntsmen out there who specialized in healing wounds. “Right now, I feel as if our time is better suited going forward rather than going over Mr. Arc’s ill-aimed recriminations at me.”

Glynda ground her teeth a little, realizing that Ozpin either didn’t see the real issue here with Harry and his little group, or didn’t care that other teams might well follow suit and leave Beacon. The prestige of the Academy would take a major hit if they did, but again, such thinking was not something that Ozpin, seeing what he thought of as a true victory over Salem, was in any mood to consider. She would need to bring it up in a few days, when he wasn’t so focused.

For now, she nodded and turned towards the door. “In that case, it’s late, and I would like to get some sleep tonight before dealing with all the paperwork that this night’s events will have caused me as deputy headmistress. However, you, Ozpin, still have some work to do tonight. We don’t want him hearing about how Yang was injured while a student here from Ruby or someone like Lisa Lavender first. Do we?”

The groan from her boss was music to Glynda’s ears as she entered the elevator, with James hurrying to join her.

OOOOOOO

After checking in with Pyrrha and borrowing Ren's scroll for the rest of the day, Harry headed back to the landing area, where he found that James, to his relief, had indeed ordered one of his bullheads to wait for Harry. Less than an hour later, he landed at the hospital, where he found Tia waiting for him.

Tia lunged for Harry the moment he stepped into the corridor leading out into the bullhead, barely letting him drop the large pack he had brought along before she was clinging to him, pressing her face into his, her entire body quivering. *FUCK!!* Harry thought, putting his arms around her, soothingly patting her back. "It, it was bad, wasn't it?" he said, his heart hammering in his chest. *Arturia!*

"Mmm." Tia nodded into his collarbone, not saying anything for a moment. When she did, the words bubbled out of her in a torrent, faster and more profiligately than she would ever normally speak. "She's out of danger now. They practically had to use the hospital's entire reserve of scorpion antivenom and a lot of other types of antivenom. Whatever the assassin was using wasn't just scorpion-related for some reason."

Harry gulped at that. "A, and any long-term damage?"

Tia whimpered a bit more before answering. "Maybe. Due to the side effects of that antivenom, Arturia will need to be put on a purgative for a while, and they will need to examine her daily for long-term physical damage to her body. Luckily, she still had Aura, which apparently kept some of what the doctor terms 'secondary damage' to a minimum. But she's going to be healing from this for months unless someone with a healing Semblance is brought in."

The poison that Arturia had been injected with twice was, at base, scorpion venom, only there had been far more in a single sting from Tyrian than would've been found in a whole slew of scorpions, and it had been made even more virulent in some fashion, taking on aspects of other venomous creatures like snakes. If not for Fen's Stasis Semblance, she would have died long before the doctors could have gotten enough antivenom into her to deal with the poison, something that Tia pointed out now.

"Well, safe to say if Fen ever wants anything short of murder done, we'll be footing the bill. And if it's murder, I might have to think twice about it," Harry quipped, trying to lighten the mood. It didn't work, but at least Tia's tremors, the full body tremor of a woman who had issues showing emotions on her face normally and was currently gripped with terrible grief, began to fade.

Harry simply held her for a while, letting Tia get it out, cursing Ozpin in his head for forcing him to stay rather than go with Tia to check on Arturia. How long they stood there, he didn't care, but eventually Tia started to pull back. As she did, Harry hefted the large bag he'd

brought along. "I brought a few extra blankets, some changes of clothing and toiletries. We're going to be sleeping here until she's at least got her eyes open."

Tia nodded at that, and Harry went on. "What about Team Ruby?"

Turning, Tia took the bag in one hand and then tugged Harry along with the other, still talking more than she normally would, but given the severity of the topic, she was willing to push through her normal issues with communication. "Ruby broke her wrist and didn't even realize it, she was so high on adrenaline. Weiss is uninjured."

She looked at Harry, who shrugged. "Blake's still at Beacon, I don't know if she even knows that her team was in combat, as she was carried off before the other bullhead arrived behind us. I hope we can trust Ozpin to inform her when she wakes up, but given her injuries, she's going to be staying in the nurse's office anyway. Now, what about Yang?"

A moment later, Harry grimaced at the litany of injuries that Yang had taken: broken ribs, a perforated lung, along with a significant chunk of her stomach and side simply gone. If not for her Semblance being a type that let her body absorb damage and turn it into strength, she, like Arturia, would have been dead before Weiss could put her body into cryogenic freeze. As it was, it would take a lot of surgeries or a Huntsman with a healing Semblance to put her back on her feet.

Those rare Huntsmen were rarely found within city-state hospitals. Instead, most of them plied their trade in the smaller cities or communities. It would take time for one of them to be called in, but Harry was certain that Ozpin was already doing so and said so aloud. As much as Harry no longer trusted him, he would certainly not allow a student to remain hospitalized if he didn't.

The two of them walked through the hospital for a bit until they reached the area where Yang and Arturia had been given a simple single room to themselves. As they went, they passed a few nurses and doctors still on duty this late, but all of them gave Tia a wide berth. Harry wondered why, but decided that his sister had probably intimidated them at one point or another and set that aside.

Entering the room where they would find Arturia, Harry looked around. The room was designed to hold six beds with three to a side, each with separating curtains. In the nearest bed to the door, Weiss and Ruby lay cuddled, with Ruby clinging to the older, shorter girl like a limpet, her eyes puffy, but closed, her face, tear-stained but slack in sleep.

Weiss was none of those things, and she glared at Harry, who nodded her way, before looking at the other two occupied beds. Two of the other beds had been removed, allowing for the room needed for a few machines. Most of those machines were hooked up to Yang, and

Harry didn't recognize any of them bar an IV drip, which he supposed wasn't actually a machine.

However, two of them were also hooked up to Arturia. Moving down, Harry stood by the bed, reaching forward to gently take his lover's hand, a muscle in his jaw twitching as he looked down at Arturia. *She's so pale!* Arturia was always pale, but this was far worse. Previously porcelain skin had turned pasty and ghostly pale. Her chest moving was the only thing showing that Arturia was in fact alive rather than a poisoned corpse, and Harry's heart nearly broke seeing his powerful, strong, lively and loving Arturia like this.

"Hey, Arturia. We, you gotta stop getting hurt like this," Harry whispered, kneeling by the bed, pressing her hand against his forehead as Tia came over, hugging him from behind. Weiss looked away, somewhat embarrassed (and jealous) of the closeness the Arcs showed so casually. Despite this, Harry kept his voice so low that even Tia could barely hear him, not wanting to hint at his and Arturia's relationship like this. "W, we're going to be here when you wake up. Whenever that is. You're way more important than anything else here in Beacon. Just... recover from this, okay? I don't want to live in a world without my Dark Queen."

Tia wasn't one for words even now. She simply reached forward, joining her hand with Harry's where they held Arturia's, squeezing all three. They stayed there for a time before Harry made to stand up, and Tia backed off. Turning toward Weiss, he moved towards her, first thanking her for letting them have that moment, then motioning to the bag. "I had Sung-Sun and Professor Goodwitch go into your dorm and grab you some stuff, along with extra blankets. No pillows, though if Ruby wants to, I can have Pyrrha drop some off tomorrow."

Weiss thanked him quietly, looking down at Ruby with a confused, but warm expression on her face before slowly slipping out of bed and moving to stand by the bag. Moments later, she retreated from the room to go change, while Harry and Tia, moving as quietly as they could so as not to wake the still-sleeping Ruby, prepared one of the other beds. Soon they snuggled in there, watching their sister. That raised Weiss's eyebrows, but looking at Tia pulling Harry into a tight hug, she shrugged.

There they remained for a time before Harry started to curse. Tia pulled back a little to look down at him, and Harry sighed. "Who's going to tell Mom and Dad about Arturia's injuries?"

"Not it," Tia stated firmly, before Harry could open his mouth again.

He cursed, tried to give her the puppy dog eyes, only for it to fail. After a second, he sighed, and with all the air of a martyr going to his doom, slid out of the bed, leaving Tia behind as he exited the room.

Outside, he opened the scroll that he had borrowed from Ren. Moments later, his mother's face appeared, looking confused before smiling as she saw who was calling the Arc plantation from an unknown number. That smile disappeared, draining away as she saw Harry's expression. "Mom, I, I've got some bad news. Not the worst kind of news, but..."

OOOOOOO

Cinder paused for a moment, leaning against the wheel of her purloined car, breathing a sigh of relief. As battered and exhausted as she was from the battle with Hadrian Arc, his sister and the Invincible Girl, even a few beat cops would have been enough to capture or kill her if they had noticed the blood in her hair or the fact that her clothing didn't fit right and stopped her. *Fuck me, but I even passed several police cars racing toward the scene of the fight, and another pulled up next to me at a red light. I'm so very happy to see how horribly complacent the police here in Vale are. Damn, but the man on the passenger's side actually winked at me!*

An impromptu giggle almost escaped Cinder for a moment before a flash of fury banished any thought of humor. So violent was her rage that she could feel her mistress's gift moving where it clamped down onto her spine just where her neck met her shoulders. "Fuck you, Arc! I wish I had never heard of your bedamned family! The sooner my mistress turns her attention fully to Evig Låga and wipes it out, the better!"

Feeling her Semblance sluggishly start to react to her subconscious will, Cinder fought her anger back under control with an effort of will, removing her hands from the wheel and slowly looking around the private parking lot of the small apartment complex, this particular bolt hole had connected to it. *As always, I'm quite glad that little virus Watts created is so effective at peeling off cash for the rest of us from the SDC Tower's comms. And that my scroll survived this fight, unlike so much of my clothing.*

A bitter smirk flashed across her face as Cinder recalled that she had at least destroyed Harry Arc's scroll in one of their exchanges. *That's something at least. But what a cluster fuck this night has been.*

Pulling out her scroll, Cinder sent a signal to a program that she had uploaded into the complex's internal systems. Another tool made by Watts it turned off the security cameras around Cinder for a moment, letting her exit the car after making certain no one else was around. It would also allow her to erase the last ten minutes of footage. This late at night, that had been almost a given, considering this bolt hole was on the opposite side of the city from the battle Cinder had fled from.

It's also one that Roman and Neo shouldn't know about. I wouldn't put it past them to try and attack me in my weakened state. I know Roman's Aura cycling is better than most, so he might have recovered by this point, and I've no idea about Neo's.

Grimacing, Cinder took a moment to look over the car. There wasn't anything on the exterior of the car that showed any kind of violence, thankfully. Nor any blood from when she had snapped the idiotic man's neck. *Good. Remove the license plate and replace it with another, just in case. Nothing can be allowed to lead anyone back to me.*

That took going back and forth from the apartment to grab one of the fake license plates that were part of the large bailout kit she had put together just in case before coming here to Vale. She did, however, stop to take a shower and change her clothes. Nothing as fancy as she preferred, but it would do for now. *Better to be anonymous anyway, she mused. I will need to be very careful from now on. It's certain that Arc and Nikos at least saw my face well enough to give a description.*

Cinder was on her way back from replacing the license plate when she saw Mercury arriving, his scroll in hand as he probably used the same program she was using to mask her movements through the complex. She gestured for Mercury to join her, noting the mercenary's battered state with a grimace, but saying nothing until they were in the apartment. "Mercury, please fucking tell me that something this night went our way!"

"Ouch, and here I was gonna ask you what happened to you, boss lady," Mercury grumbled. Cinder didn't stop him as he moved over to the apartment's sofa, dropping into it with a groan. "We were winning. The Dark Queen wasn't alone, like your sources told us, but we had time to set up an even larger ambush than initially planned since she and two members of that White Fang traitor's team were coming back the way they had gone..."

From there Mercury described the fight, ending with, "I saw Tyrian go down, and decided to get the fuck out of there. I'm good, but even if they were just freshman, I couldn't face eight would-be Huntsmen. I know Tyrian stuck the Dark Queen at least twice, so she's probably dead, but I couldn't stay to make certain."

"Understandable. I'd have liked to know rather than guess at that, but getting away was more important," Cinder replied, shaking her head as she slumped into a lazy chair, leaning back in its soft confines with all the automatic delight of a woman who had not known such luxury often in her life. "Your night went better than mine. Oh... you should know. We're done working with Neo and Roman. They decided to take the opportunity to... tender their resignations. We won't be able to find them. Taurus might have the power to bring them to heel, but I don't have the connections here in Vale to search for them."

Vale was about as large as what science fiction novels on Earth would call a 'megapolis' in terms of total area, though it lacked the population density and huge, interconnected building complexes that such a place had in most stories. Finding Roman and bringing him and his deadly companion to heel for the first time in that mass had been difficult, but doable with

enough cash and computer skills, coupled with the fact that he had thought working with Cinder was just another job. Now that he and Neo knew about Cinder? No chance. "Oh, and Roman admitted he killed Emerald. If that matters."

"It does, but I know we're not in a position to take him out," Mercury grumbled. That had been almost a certainty for a while, after all. And while Mercury had been trying to get into Emerald's pants since the moment they met, they hadn't actually been together or anything. "What now?"

"Now... you go get some rest. Then, in the morning, you'll use some of that coloring shampoo we've got and go out and get a few things for me so I can change my face too. I... we'll need to see where we go from here. Without Neo, any hope of infiltrating Beacon is probably gone. But we will see," Cinder decided.

Mercury didn't need to be told twice, and after heading into the kitchen to grab a drink that'd help him sleep, he headed for his room quickly.

Cinder turned off the lights and headed to her own bedroom, but made no move to go to sleep. Instead, she opened her Scroll and, after running several programs, found herself connected to the greater SDC network via the underlying programming structure rather than the normal channels. A few seconds later, Salem's face appeared.

"Cinder. Judging by your face and the lateness in Vale, you have not called me to inform me of progress, have you?"

Feeling the little Grimm embedded in her spine twitching at the voice of their mistress, Cinder nodded and began. She first spoke of Mercury's night, to which Salem listened intently, interrupting only twice. **"A girl with silver eyes, you say?"**

There was an amused and somewhat dark interest in her voice, but she did not elaborate, simply staring off to one side. **"I wonder... That would be delicious irony. But that one was not the injured one of the two?"**

"Ruby Rose? No, not by Mercury's report," Cinder replied. "Mercury might have killed the other one, her half-sister, going by the reports from Roman. But like with the Dark Queen, he could not verify."

"The Arcs are ridiculously hard to kill. I have seen a few of that family over the centuries. As for Xiao-Long... well, that would be amusing, and a blow to Ozpin, at least." Salem's eyes narrowed. **"And where were you while this attack went on? It seems to me that your participation would have allowed you to make a clean sweep."**

Cinder gulped, sudden apprehension filling her. “W, when that operation was being planned, we did not have any idea that the Dark Queen—”

“I am the Dark Queen, Cinder, your Queen. Do not use that appellation again,” Salem growled. **“So, you were overconfident and did not want to involve yourself, wishing to keep your abilities secret. Do not lie to me.”**

“I had thought to keep an eye on Torchwick and the White Fang’s operations,” Cinder said with as much dignity as she could, shivering. “And it was good I did...” she gulped again. “Or, or was at first, as I kept Torchwick and Neopolitan from being captured.”

Salem’s eyes were still narrowed as she looked through the scroll at Cinder, a look that made Cinder feel weak, vulnerable, things that she had no wish to ever be again. Cinder tried not to bow her head in complete submission even as the Grimm set into her spine began to twitch and flex, sending waves of pain through her.

Eventually, Salem nodded. **“Explain.”**

The questions came fast and furious once Cinder turned to her own night’s work and the battle against Hadrian Arc. At first, Salem seemed happy with all the knowledge of Harry Arc’s magic Cinder could pass on, almost absentmindedly admitting it was indeed magic rather than a Semblance, which only served to add to Cinder’s deeply buried fury at the world.

How dare some male have access to magic, when I had to steal back what should have been mine! Cinder thought, indignation and anger allowing her to push through her worry about how Salem would react to everything else.

The questions shifted away from Arc and his magic, going back over the battle, pulling out details of the other Huntsmen with Harry, then the ones who had interrupted the ambush against the Dark Queen. Finally, Salem leaned back, a look in her face that Cinder didn’t quite know how to interpret. Interest? Amusement, frustration? It was very odd, especially since Salem had never been very emotive at any point since she had taken Cinder in.

Eventually, Salem’s face returned to its normal semi-haughty mask, and she slowly shook her head, as if Cinder was a child who should really have known better. It made Cinder feel small again, and fearful too.

“You assumed too much, Cinder. You assumed that Tyrian and Mercury would be enough to deal with Arturia Arc, not assuming that wild factors could come into play. You assumed again that you could continue to control Roman and Neo on your own. Both assumptions made an ass out of you, my dear. If you had nothing to share in terms of Arc’s magical abilities, I would be looking to punish you to the point you would be screaming for hours. I might have gone so far as to discard you entirely.”

Fear ratcheting even higher, Cinder bowed her head, feeling the Grimm embedded in her shifting again. “M, Mistress, I apologize, I, I know I have failed you, but I was trying to do the best I could with what information I had. I erred, but my errors were made from aggression and a desire to set my plans to rights again. I, I will take whatever punishment you wish, but please, please do not discard me!”

As much as Cinder worshipped Salem almost as much as the now-deceased Tyrian had, Cinder also feared Salem, feared the idea of being discarded, of being set aside. *Without Salem, what am I? I would become weak again!*

“That is your saving grace, Cinder. You are correct that most of your mistakes, bar the one to not join the attack on the older Arc, were made without enough information. I will... allow this. But never fail me again, Cinder Fall. You are important to my plans for the Maidens, but that does not make you irreplaceable.”

Even as she thanked her mistress profusely for another chance to serve her, Cinder wondered why Salem had mentioned that she was important just for her plans for the Maidens. *What about the plans to defeat Ozpin and find the relic hidden under Beacon, and the plans to install Watt’s virus into the SDC Network?*

Salem seemed aware of Cinder’s thoughts as she went on, that same look of interest mixing with annoyance on her face.

“No Roman, no Neo, and of course no Emerald, and your face at least will be known now. Yes, there is very little luck in getting Watts’ latest programs into the SDC Tower, let alone anything else.” But then Salem smiled, her annoyance fading away with the ease of someone who had been alive for a very, very long time and dealt with a lot of setbacks. **“But information is power all its own. And your actions were well thought out for what you knew at the time. Arc is not a tool of Ozpin as you might have thought. He is a new player.”**

Cinder frowned, trying to work that out. “This, you think that he wasn’t acting on Ozpin’s orders tonight?”

“Exactly. Oz has gotten stuck in a rut since before the Colors War. He always plays his cards close, especially since Raven Branwen’s betrayal. He doesn’t like to take action on his own, to set in motion his Inner Circle, not even Qrow. He always thinks in terms of conservation of secrets, as well as almost entirely in terms of defense, as Oz knows of the hordes I can bring to bear. This makes him easy to predict, and it was also easy for us, or, rather, you, to retain momentum, the ability to act as he only reacts.”

Nodding slowly, Cinder admitted that it was so. Never once, not in the past decade, had Ozpin taken an offensive action designed to impact Salem. He had wiped out Grimm nests,

certainly, but that was a drop in the bucket. He had also worked hard to create alliances between the city-states, but such things were rarely worth more than the paper they were printed on.

“This young Arc is different. He is acting, or better said, reacting proactively, while Ozpin would not.” Salem smirked very, very slightly, a dark expression flashing through her eyes. **“Ozpin would deny it, but he would have willingly sent that young faunus girl to her death if it meant you revealed yourself without him needing to put his Inner Circle into danger, blaming Belladonna’s own actions for her demise. He was always good at moralizing.”**

“Arc not only put himself in a position to go to Belladonna’s aid, but to smash the White Fang instantly. Ozpin wouldn’t have. He would be interested in gaining information,” Cinder mused. “He would want to know about me so he could move against us directly, as he doesn’t care about the White Fang.”

“Exactly. This Arc is far more active. Further, his family is the power pushing for Evig Låga to expand as it has, and to defend its citizens in such a unique manner. It has been several hundred years since the last time a community thought to awaken the souls of so many of their fellows.” Salem shook her head. **“I had thought Arc was just an interest before this. But the breadth of his magic and abilities... yes, he is a new player, one I must learn more about. Thankfully, I already have Hazel working on that.”**

“Moving forward, Watts’ ‘greatest creation’ will need to be uploaded into the SDC comms network from somewhere else, and the destruction of Vale will need to be postponed. I don’t like that, but when we move against one of the other city-states, I can send an army against Vale well enough.”

Salem’s words indicated more than just Cinder’s plan was being left by the wayside, and Cinder could not keep her surprise from showing.

“Hahaha!” Salem actually chuckled, the noise both throaty and vile, causing Cinder to hold back a shudder. **“My dear, as much as you wanted the powers you were destined to have returned to you, Amber is but part of the piece, you know this. Killing Oz is just a part of the journey, not the destination. I wanted what is hidden under Beacon more than I wanted him dead, now that his spirit is so weak. There are other Relics. And without a subtle way into Beacon, I am not going to waste further resources there. Not when there is a new player in the game.”**

Cinder nodded, and Salem continued. **“Make your way to Mistral. By the time you arrive, I will have sent as many Seers as I can in order to discover more about Evig Låga. The task to further infiltrate Beacon will need to be given to Watts now. Or perhaps... perhaps I**

will work directly with Adam, if I can. I have begun to build up Seers in the lands beyond Vale's mountains, and they can be used to keep him in line."

"But, Mistress, what about Arc and Ozpin? They are both here. Unless... you think an attack on his hometown will bring Arc to defend it, and we can deal with them separately?" Salem asked.

"That is the long-term plan, yes. But you forget, I know Ozpin. And I do not think that Arc will be there for very long. His energy and willingness to take risks will clash with Ozpin's more thoughtful nature," Salem answered. **"Ozpin will assume I will fall back into the shadows, now that you are known to him. The overproud fool will not be able to think that my priorities have changed. Flexibility of thought is something he has also begun to lose over the lifetimes he and I have been locked in our endless conflict."**

"But what about the Maiden?" Cinder asked, fighting and nearly succeeding in hiding her anger at not being able to reclaim the other half of the Maiden's powers.

"There are other Maidens, my dear. And my little tool won't just work on one of them," Salem answered. **"If we are going to go to Mistral anyway, then perhaps it is time to use one enemy to weaken another, or search for the Spring Maiden."** She mused for a moment, then smirked. **"All that dust you had Roman and the White Fang steal. Retrieve half of it. We will have need of it in the future."**

Cinder didn't know what Salem was hinting at, but Salem ignored her confusion. **"The Summer Maiden's powers can be taken and added to the magic within you, and she, like the Spring Maiden, is in Anima somewhere. I cannot localize it further than that, but I know that for a fact. As for you, how that magic impacts the world is different, but not the source of it. You will have new and interesting powers. But I will have Arc's magic first. With that, Ozpin's skills and Inner Circle will avail him nothing. And then I will have what I have long desired."**

"As you command, my lady," Cinder answered instantly.

With that, Salem cut the connection, and Cinder was left stewing. She hated the idea of leaving her plans here in Vale after so much prep work, but that was a secondary concern. No, the primary reason she was furious was because this, beyond a shadow of a doubt, meant that her plans to recover the rest of the Fall Maiden's powers were dead and buried. And that Cinder herself would no longer be the lynchpin for Salem's plans going forward. That would shift to Watts, with his technical know-how. And right now, she didn't know what was worse: the feeling that she was no longer special, no longer important to her Mistress's plan, or that she would need to wait longer and for luck to go her way in order to find and drain one of the other Maidens.

Groaning, Cinder decided to think of all this later. Right now, she needed some sleep. She set the scroll down and leaned back, before she could turn off the light, it began to buzz at her with an incoming message. Wondering if perhaps her mistress had decided she had forgotten to ask something, an incredibly far-fetched idea, admittedly, but which could be possible, Cinder reached for it, only to glare into the face of the equally furious-looking Adam Taurus. "You! You were involved tonight with what went down at the rally, weren't you!?"

"If by that you mean I attempted to aid the White Fang and Roman and his little creature when they were faced with several Huntsmen teams at once, then yes. I was there. We did our best, but they were prepared. I wasn't on the scene at the start, and by the time I was, most of your troops were already down. I attempted to lead some of their Huntsmen away, but Roman turned on us," Cinder said, mixing truth with lie easily.

Given his nature, she doubted that Roman would be working with the White Fang or even contacting them without her around to force them to work together, which meant that throwing Roman under the bus with Adam was a perfectly acceptable idea. *Even if my mistress eventually reaches out to him personally.*

Adam growled at that but eventually nodded. "I can see that, I suppose. He hasn't been answering my calls for a damn explanation. But we lost two paladins, and a significant chunk of the weapons cache I brought in to boot."

"I know. I was there after all. But the only person I saw still fighting effectively was Lorgar. I will get with what few remaining contacts I have that don't work through Roman to see if he was captured or killed. If he was captured, I might be willing to help you free him, but right now, I need some sleep."

"We already know Lorgar was captured. It's been on the news, damn humans have been flashing his face up on the news every twenty minutes as if he were some prize! Parading him around..." Adam's voice devolved into a wordless snarl for a moment, but he pulled back, shaking his head. "He's being held in Vale for now, but with the Atlas military here, we don't know how long that will be. Do you think you'll be in a position to help us break him out Wednesday?"

"Wednesday? Why specifically Wednesday?"

"You don't need to know that. Are you going to be in a position to do so?" Adam growled. He seemed to be aware of the fact that Cinder was badly battered, and also that she could now be beaten. Plus, without Tyrian around, it was just her and Mercury. They weren't strong enough on their own to enforce any kind of compliance on Adam, given how Adam had brought along his special action group to Vale.

The sooner my mistress can show him the true balance of power, the better. I wonder how long it will take a seer to arrive here and find him? Despite that, Cinder's mind was working, and she began to smile a little. She didn't mean for me to take all of the dust we've gathered, and I doubt Adam would allow me to do so willingly. Not given how enthusiastic he was for that part of the operation here in Vale. Although why my mistress doesn't want to go through with that aspect at the very least, I don't know. She must have plans for that dust in some fashion. "I think I will, yes. And frankly, it will feel great to get some of my own back on some unsuspecting troopers."

Adam actually allowed himself to smile at that, too, nodding his head in agreement. "Get a plan to me by Tuesday, and I might even have some of my own troops be able to help you break Lorgar out. Until then."

OOOOOOO

Adam cut the connection, looking around at his fellow faunus. "Apacci's certain of his information? And the boys over at Diamondo's Bullhead Supplies will be able to get us what we need in time? With what happened last night and the heat that's going to come down in Vale on all faunus, let alone anything smacking of the White Fang, we need to strike quickly before the Vale police start actually acting competent, or worse yet, reach out to Ironwood in a more official capacity."

Trifa grimaced. "Diamondo's certain, and Apacci's info checks out. But boss, I don't like how we haven't heard from Torchwick. If he turns on us, he knows way too much about our activities."

"Yes, Torchwick's probably gone with the wind now. I'm guessing that whore might've forced him to use some of his contacts a bit too openly," Adam grunted. "But he won't move against us quickly. We have a few days to act and then retreat from Vale. And I mean everything we've got here. Whatever that bitch is up to, I want Bonesaw to get that Dust away from Mountain Glen. But we won't be sending him any help; he'll need to prep it for transportation with the troops on hand there."

His team all nodded firmly at that, and Adam grinned savagely. "Good. As for the rest of us, we have a traitor to capture, and a Schnee to kill."

End Chapter