

And here is the next Episode of S.O.H. I... I think I need to decide on these. While at the beginning they were fun, at this point I realize that the two and a half days I spend on these is valuable flex time. I will see what people say about the newest FILFy Teacher chapter before deciding.

And to repeat, Stallion of the Line is with **Tomon**. I am not going to post the chapter here or over on fanfic without his input and **Hiryo's**.

This has been seen by Hiryo. Hope you enjoy. Going to bed now.

Episode 4 Chapter 20, Part Two: All According to Plan...

Hours later, the teens and their teacher once more gathered in Nikos Metalworks. Ranma dragged a seemingly exhausted Jaune in, the blonde's new shield on his other arm, a cheerful whistle on his lips as he entered, only to stumble to a halt as he and Ranma stared. "Damn Pyr, that looks awesome!"

While Pyrrha's weapon was still days away from completion, the armor that Thetis had been working on had been finished that morning. While her greaves kept the same style and her color scheme remained the same, Pyrrha's earlier short skirt was gone, replaced by armored leggings under what looked like scale mail, which went up her body, covering her chest, shoulders and down to her gauntlets. These gauntlets were heavier built on the outside, with what looked like some kind of internal container within them.

Later, Pyrrha would show Ranma what these contained: hundreds of tiny needles in one, and metal files in the other. With her semblance, Pyrrha could use these as both offense and defense.

Her original red sash was the same, but underneath where it went around her waist Ranma could see a hidden belt, and he wondered what it held. Pyrrha's had also been given a helmet. Matching the rest of her look of being an upgraded Greek hoplite, this helmet obscured much of her face behind a heavy chin guard, and protected the rest of Pyrrha's head, although there was a wide slit at the back for her ponytail, which looped up and then fell down behind her.

"Hehe, Um, yes, apparently Aunt Thetis had been preparing this for me for a while. She calls it a 'adult, realistic take on armor'," Pyrrha replied, pulling her helmet off.

"Your original armor was only marginally designed to actually protect you Pyrrha, it was mainly designed for its sex appeal," Thetis stated bluntly, causing Pyrrha to blush. "You might have been known as the virginal, Invincible Girl but that only made your sensuality stronger."

"Er, setting that aside, can you move in that thing silently?" Ranma questioned.

"MM." Pyrrha hummed, hopping up and down then moving into a series of fake cuts and parries. "Quite well actually. I'd want to remove the padding in my gauntlets and pouches so I can get at the iron filings and extra Dust within before a fight, but even that isn't really an issue."

“Excellent!” Ranma moved over, putting an arm around her waist, noting with a mental pout that doing so while she was in this new armor wasn’t nearly as snugly as it had been in her previous outfit. *Still, she’s better protected, I can deal with that lack for such an important upshot.* “What about the rest of our supplies, did they arrive?”

Ren nodded from nearby and Pyrrha moved upstairs to take off her armor. Meanwhile, as Jaune recovered, the others went through their equipment, both Dust, bullet rounds, and their assembled camping equipment. However, by this point the morning had gone, and soon after lunch all of their scrolls began to beep incessantly, warning them they were coming up on the time the Council and Pyrrha’s father had scheduled for their interviews.

Growling to himself, Ranma pulled his scroll out, looking at it. He read the message there and sighed. “We have about forty minutes before we have these interviews that they’re so hung over. I suggest, we preempt them.”

“I second this notion,” Jaune held up his hand from the ground as if he was in school, one head cocked to one side as he looked at Ranma, pushing some of his hair out of his eyes. “How?”

“The Coliseum where you made your fame, that’s near here is, isn’t it?”

Pyrrha nodded, then her eyes almost literally began to glow as she realized what Ranma was suggesting. “Are you perhaps thinking of having an exhibition match instead of a series of interviews? My manager certainly would jump all over that, as would the Mistral Council considering what they want us here to be a part of.”

“Heh, something like that,” Ranma answered, smirking slightly. “So, let’s get going.”

Soon enough, they arrived at the Coliseum, where passersby saw them. Pyrrha’s crimson hair instantly drew attention, despite the fact that she was dressed in sweatpants and a sweatshirt at the moment.

Whispering soon followed them into the Coliseum. This was a building on the highest level of the city which was set up almost exactly like a roman coliseum cut in half, the other half leading into several different types of training grounds, each surrounded by short fences. the coliseum itself overlooked a large, sandy area, its tiled sides able to seat several thousand at once.

“Do you want me to show you around?” Pyrrha asked quizzically.

Ranma looked at her, his lips quirked. “Do you want to? And think about it before you answer Pyrrha.”

With the others all murmuring agreement to that, Pyrrha’s automatic, polite response to being asked to do anything died still born, and so she followed Ranma’s quest, thinking, then slowly shook her head. “No, not really. I’m perfectly happy with an exhibition match I suppose. But this place, it represents... well, my being placed on a pedestal, my being special...”

“Your being controlled? Not in charge of your own fate?” Ranma asked.

Pyrrrha blushed at how blunt her boyfriend could be but nodded at his words regardless. "That too."

Ranma nodded back, and said simply "In that case, why don't we all just find the lockers and we will meet out on the sands."

As Pyrrha led Nora off, Jaune looked at Ranma thoughtfully, then punched him in the arm. "You're planning something."

Ranma shrugged. I don't what you're talking about. My scrolls certainly hasn't gotten several dozen messages from Achilles demanding a fight with me this morning. And I would certainly never use that to my advantage to get us out of playing glad hands for the politicians."

"Glad hands?" Ren asked with some amusement.

"I think he means yes men," Jaune mused a smirk on his face. "And of course it doesn't have anything to do with that, that would take a Machiavellian frame of mind."

Smirking slightly, Ranma nodded beatifically. "Which obviously I don't have. I don't even know that is."

When they came out of the changing area and onto the sands of the training grounds, Jaune and Ren both paused, staring around them. There were literally hundreds, perhaps over a thousand people already gathered around the training zone, jabbering and talking excitedly. If the training zone hadn't been protected by a low wall and a force of police, who had extended to guard the entrance to the changing areas, they would probably already be swamped. And Ren and Jaune could both hear the staccato clacking of scrolls taking pictures already.

For his part, Ranma ignored the crowd, waving his hand at them, then barking to Jaune and Ren, "What are you waiting for, get your warmups started!"

"Doesn't this all make you a little nervous?" Ren asked, frowning and fighting the desire to use his Semblance to control his emotions.

"Nope," Ranma shrugged, speaking freely since the noise of the crowd covered them so well. "It wouldn't be the first time I've had an exhibition match and that's what this is going to turn out to be one way or another."

"And it doesn't impact your plan?"

"Nope," Ranma repeated. "They're here to see a show. The type of show doesn't matter, Pyrrha training with us or me versus Achilles. And what better show could there be than a semi-popular ass like Achilles getting humiliated? If anything, all of these people make the plan even easier."

"You make it sound so simple but disappearing like that really isn't," Jaune complained.

"OH, but it really is. Watch and learn, my young apprentice," Ranma rejoined.

“Oy, since when was I your apprentice,” Jaune grumbled while Ren chuckled quietly.

Soon enough, the girls came out of the changing room and predictably, the attention of the crowd instantly turned in the direction. Pyrrha wore much the same exercise outfit that she had when Ranma had played tag with her in the park back in Vale: short track shorts showing off legs that went on forever and an amazing rear coupled with a brown T-shirt which had a sports bra under it.

On the other hand, for those people who noticed such things, and Ranma was certain there were a few in the crowd, they might have noticed that she looked even leaner than normal. Her abs were more defined now, her thighs a little more toned, her arms just a bit stronger looking. *She’s really showing some good progress over the past few months since we met.*

Like Ranma, Pyrrha ignored the crowd as best she could, putting on her face smile and waving once at them before moving over and starting a few exercises. Nora though hammed it up, flinging her arms up in the air, making kissing motions towards the crowd, shouting out, “Thank you my adoring fans, it’s lovely to see you! Don’t worry, the vile bagel lover will get his today!”

Ranma laughed, although he could see that a lot of people were now taking pictures of her. after all, like Ranma had said, most of the crowd was there for a show, and Nora was new. Not only that, but Nora was also slightly more powerfully built than Pyrrha, and had just as generous a chest, which was enfolded in a hello Kitty training bra, complete with somewhat boyish pants. In short, she looked darn good, and watching her move gave Ranma a certain thrill.

Ranma let them all stretch out for a bit, doing some himself, although it had been years since he needed it, then moved into the center of the training salle nodding at JNPR. “Hand-to-hand first, then you’ll go get your weapons. Those of you who have weapons at this point anyway, sorry Pyr.”

That caused some murmuring among the crowd. Many concentrated on the bit about Pyrrha. “Wait, the Invincible girl lost her weapons? Bu, but that’ can’t be! Milo is part of her, intrinsic to her style!”

Others though seemed to care more about the nickname Ranma had made for Pyrrha. “Wh, what the hell! Just because you’re the Azure Warden don’t think you’re on the level where you can address our goddess so familiarly!?”

“Do you think that means that rumor that they’re dating is accurate!? Say it isn’t so, our goddess!”

“Die, you bastard, just die!” With that, several large banners appeared from within the crowd like it had back at the port, with much the same messages. Although they had been joined by, ‘Go Die Warden,’ which Ranma thought was just rude.

However, the majority of the crowd wasn’t so fanatical, and many of them began to murmur as they saw that Ranma was going to face the entire team rather than just one at a time. He then took it a step further and began to work with them in various forms. To the crowd’s disgruntlement, no sparring seemed to be on the menu but Ranma knew it was coming. Or rather, Achilles was coming. *Come on Distraction, I know you can’t stay away...*

His smug thoughts on that score were interrupted by Jaune. "You do know that if Achilles doesn't show up, this is going to backfire badly?"

"Oh, ye of little faith," Ranma chuckled. "I told you I know his type. He couldn't avoid coming here after hearing the Pyrrha was here. He wants an audience for what he sees as his inevitable destined victory."

"How do you know?" Pyrrha asked. She and Nora had heard from Ren what Ranma was planning. Neither were happy about it, and Pyrrha had been pouting for several minutes by this point but had decided to set her annoyance to one side in the name of getting out of the city without needing to spend any more time in front of the cameras than she had to. On the other hand, Ren had to promise Nora to feed her enough pancakes to make her explode the next time he could get to a kitchen.

Ranma shook his head, moving over to Pyrrha and then grabbing her outstretched foot as she lashed out in a kick that was part of a kata she had been working through.

"Your raising the ball of your foot trying to add more power to the kick. You don't want force, you want speed."

Ranma let her drop, and then lashed out from a standing start, his foot stopping a breath away from her face, the wind of it causing her hair to ruffle. There were some shouts of shock from the crowd, but Pyrrha ignored them, staring past Ranma. "Plant your foot, keep it planted throughout the kick. You're too used to then twirling around and making one of your grandiose moves or having your weapons to compensate for your weight. That's the kind of mistake that sometimes trickles in when you are trained exclusively with weapons first."

She nodded, remembering one of Ranma's most overused mantras when they were training together alone. *A state of affairs that usually ended up with them making out*, she thought, with a faint frown on her face that the crowd took to be one of concentration, but truly came from the thought: *why the fudge is my life so public?!*

Despite her currently annoyed mindset, Pyrrha moved away, and began another series of kicks, reflecting on Ranma's mantra. "In a real fight, don't do any kind of move that isn't a hundred percent purposeful. In a spar or a show-fight you can be acrobatic or whatever you want, but in a fight against Grimm, being seen doesn't matter. Fight Grimm like a freaking miser, economical movements, quick, quick, quick! Speed matters way more than power, endurance way more than speed. Don't tire yourself out with big grandiose movements."

It'd highlighted a difference in Ranma's fighting style that Pyrrha hadn't actually been aware of. In every fight she'd seen him in, it looked as if Ranma was well extremely mobile, shifting from one place to another to another in a fight, always moving. But, when he closed with the Grimm and had to dodge their attacks, he used the barest minimum of movements. And when he attacked, or made a faint, he did those moves to perfection, again with no wasted movement at all. It was a dangerous kind of style, but if it worked then you could fight for hours without tiring yourself out prematurely.

For Pyrrha, who was used to having to basically draw out fights, to make them more interesting for the crowd, that had come as a severe revelation, one that she wasn't certain the others understood.

Perhaps Ren does, but he always fights like that anyway. Jaune would see the point if it was explained to him, and Nora, Nora probably wouldn't care. She thought to herself, her frown turning into a grin, as she finished that kata, and moved into the next one. She paused as Ranma moved up behind her, grinning and smacking her lightly in the back of the head with a flick of his finger.

"Good. Now I've got another one I want to show you."

This one was taken from Wing Chun, the Chinese Martial Art. And if someone ever asked him if he had to pick a single style that Anything Goes had taken from over the years to continue with, it would be Wing Chun. It was elegant, deceptive, and above all it was fast and based more about agility than anything else.

Pyrrrha watched avidly as Ranma moved through the kata first, then took up the stance that he had begun with, her eyes shining with eagerness. It truly was fantastic watching someone who was at the top of their game work through a kata like that, especially when that man doing so was her boyfriend, IE, someone she felt free to ogle as his body moved like a well-oiled machine.

A pure feminine thrill went through Pyrrha at that thought and as Ranma finished, she looked over the crowd idly. There were several girls now staring at Ranma. They came from all ages, from younger than Pyrrha up to mid-thirties. It was a thoughtful look on some, while others were simply blushing hotly. Others were now looking at her with open jealousy. *That's right, eat your heart out girls, this man is all mine.*

Pyrrrha was almost tempted to ask Ranma to help her through some of the kata's moves to drive that point home, and to make certain that her fans among the crowd understood where things between her and Ranma stood. *I wonder if that will 'tarnish' my Invincible Girl image enough that they will f... **fudging** stop obsessing over me! Drat it, I still can't curse even in my own head?!*

With that minor, if entirely internal defeat, Pyrrha decided to not go that route just yet. So she simply did what she always did: work through the kata, corrected the mistakes that she felt she had made, and continued to try and perfect her form.

However, before she got the kata down, Pyrrha's efforts were interrupted by a shout of, "I see that the rumors were true! Tell me Pyrrha Nikos, my destined one, are you planning a return to the sacred arena! If so, the gods themselves will surely scream in delight. And I, Achilles, will cheerfully prove myself worthy of your affections upon the blessed sands!"

With a faint groan of annoyance, Pyrrha turned her attention to the side, watching as a lain opened up in the crowd, allowing Achilles through it. When he reached the guards, they too moved aside, letting him hop up and over the intervening wall. Once on the other side, Achilles beamed, throwing his arms wide as he shouted again. "Delightful, to see that even though you have sullied the name of a gladiator with that of a Huntress, you are still perfecting your craft. Although I fail to see that such as this so-called Warden could teach a true Gladiator anything."

"I rather don't think that my becoming a huntress demeans my being a gladiator. Rather, first being a gladiator demeaned being a huntress," Pyrrha retorted.

But she had said it too softly, under her breath. *This means Ranma's plan is going to work!* Indeed, she could see her manager in the crowd, having started to move through it with several newscasters following with their professional video cameras.

Ranma also noticed that, and straightened up, cracking his neck and shoulders then gesturing the other man to stand across from him, his most insouciant smirk on his face. "If you think I don't have anything to teach you, or Pyrrha, why don't you come in here and prove it."

"Bah, unlike you seem to enjoy, I am not so base as to simply fight with my hands, if you would see my true skill, you would allow me the honor of wielding my blade against yours," Achilles scoffed.

"That sounded dirty, and I didn't like it at all!" Ranma barked back, shuddering. "Never say that to me again. But yes, you can go get your little sword."

Achilles reared back, affronted. "I am insulted beyond words! My sword is not little!"

"The hell, he couldn't be playing into Ranma's hands more if he was trying?" Jaune murmured from next to Pyrrha.

"I know, isn't it grand?" she murmured back.

After a bit more back and forth, Achilles left to get his combat gear, returning with the spatha-like sword and tower shield that let him look like a Roman legionnaire while the others moved to the side of the salle, letting the two combatants have the center of it. He frowned though, seeing Ranma still unarmed. "Bah, you have not gotten your own gear? Or have you yet to replace it after your battles with the weak Grimm which my destined one slew on your ship?"

Snorting at the number of backhanded insults which had been in that one sentence, Ranma shook his head. "Nope. I just don't think you're worth my getting them out."

His eyes narrowed, Achilles moved forward, his shield up between them, his sword held back to strike. "In that case, let us begin."

Ranma nodded, then darted forward, his fist crashing into the man's shield with enough force to cause him to stumble back, but then Achilles was stabbing forward. His sword though went low as Ranma leaped upwards, landing on the man's shield, before his foot flashed down, slamming into Achille's wrist with deadening force. Achilles dropped his shield, then stabbed upwards at Ranma, but Ranma dodged, still riding the man's dropped shield into the ground, where he flipped it up into his hand, used it to block another slash, then tossed the shield out of the salle to land between two of the police keeping the crowd back.

He then dodged around Achilles, snorting in humor even as the man roared and began to use both hands on his sword, moving faster and stronger. "Right then, let's see what you can do without your shield, you turtle."

"Tu, turtle!?" Achilles roared, charging forward. "I will show you turtle!"

OOOOOOO

Nearby all these events were being watched by a certain trio. One of whom had fought, to a certain degree, Ranma before, and thus had an opinion of what he was seeing. "The Azure Warden is playing him," Mercury stated bluntly, staring down from the rooftop that he, Emerald and Cinder had taken over.

"What do you mean?" Emerald asked frowning a little.

"He's not moving nearly as fast against this Achilles guy as he was doing against me when the two of us had our little run-in in Eastport," the former assassin turned secret agent said. "For another, he is dragging it out now. 'I've seen at least four openings that the Azure Warden should've been take advantage of."

"He's right," Cinder mused. "And he's not using any of his strange Semblance either." Cinder pulled her attention away from the twosome in the training, her eyes moving around everywhere, narrowing. "Where did the invincible girl go?"

The other two also started, then looked around, and then, Emerald chuckled. "Damn, a feint! Look, Nikos, Nora and that slowpoke Arc, they're all away. The only ones left are Nora's boytoy and Ranma."

Nora not being there was something of a blessing in Cinder's opinion. That girl was batshit crazy. Lie Ren also concerned her a bit, although not what Emerald had passed on and they had seen in official reports on the battle of Semaphore. No, in her opinion no one could be that tall with someone like Nora around without some serious medication, and if you removed the medication what would happen afterward? Crazy people were far too unpredictable. *Much like Ranma is, something to remember*, Cinder repeated to herself.

"Yes," Cinder mused, "but to what end? I refuse to think that this will have been solely to get Nikos out from the stare of the..." she fell silent as she saw Tyrian Callows in the crowd, completely focused on the fight and she smiled. *Clever, Ranma. You not only doing this for one reason, are you?*

Mercury saw him too, hissing. Of her three companions, Mercury had the most knowledge of Tyrian, having trained against him a time or two. He knew precisely how deadly and sadistic the bastard was. "Well, I'll be. How much ya want to bet the Warden's got a way of getting out of here sight unseen?"

"No bet." Cinder chuckled. "I wonder where Hazel is?"

At that moment, in fact, Hazel was meeting with Lil' Miss Malachite, trying to demand her gang go back to work for them. And getting nowhere. When her estranged daughters warned her about how

dangerous Ranma could be if pushed, and that he was a friend of Neo (or, as she was called in Mistral, the Ice Cream Murder-Moe), Lil' Miss Malachite believed them.

"Whatever this is, it isn't planned from above. Or if it was, it's something that her manager or father or whatever their relationship is doesn't like," Emerald pointed.

The older male redhead had apparently realized that his daughter had disappeared and had begun to look around. Through her telescope Cinder could see the older man's thunderous expression. "Yes, I believe you are right. This was a 'two birds with one stone' operation and that bird is not happy to be so plucked."

A sudden thought occurred to her, and she stood up, gesturing to Emerald and Mercury to join her. "Come on. I think, at this point we need to forget the Azure Warden." Both her companions looked like they had questions, and for once, Cinder gave them the answer. "I told Salem everything we knew last night, but I think that on the whole, spending further thought on him will not be a good use of our time."

Salem is still too damn intent on him, too angry about his ability to survive, a male using the powers of a Maiden, and that one Grimm now refusing her orders with seeming impunity. Let her continue to obsess, I will continue to serve for now as best I may. But if there is a chance, I will take it. "I think we need to start networking with the others teams. When we take Spartoi I wish to be in charge of the operation. Completely. Whatever Ranma is up to, that aspect of this operation will not change, and thus, we can take advantage of it."

OOOOOOO

Ranma, who was actually doing this for only one reason, looked away from Achilles as Ren sneezed, scowling and looking around. "Don't tell me you're getting some kind of allergy?" Ranma quipped, then ducked a blow from Achilles's sword, before flipping up and over a kick, thrusting his hand down on the side of the blade that came pushing back through where he had been a moment ago. *It's about time to end this*, Ranma figured.

With that he dodged another few blows, before letting his normal rage-inducing smirk shift into a full-blown sneer at Achilles. "So, this is what I can expect from a so-called champion arena? I am not impressed..."

There were a lot of rumbles of anger and shouts of rage at that from the crowd. And Achilles, turned red in the face, a color which deepened quickly to near crimson as Ranma went on. "No wonder Pyrrha had to leave Mistral to find any challenge worthy of her."

Hearing the special weight Ranma had put on the word 'challenge,' Achilles bellowed in inarticulate rage, and began to attack even more ferociously, but Ranma was done playing. He remained

in the air now, using his opponent's momentum to stay there, smirking as he always did when using the aerial style of Anything Goes and making gravity his bitch.

A kick lashed out, crashing into Achilles' head, causing him to stumble back. The aura sensor to one side, which had previously been showing Ranma's wonky up-and-down aura, and a hundred percent for the tournament fighter, showed the damage. A hundred crashed down to eighty.

He then landed and hammered a palm up into the swiftly descending blade. *Say what you will about this guy, his reaction time's decent enough.* But the suddenly reversed swing left Achilles wide open for palm strike from Ranma's other hand. Another twenty percent gone.

A low-kick upended Achilles, causing him to crash ass first onto the training ground. To the shock of everyone watching the kick to the leg cause Achilles to lose another twenty percent of his aura. Achilles was undaunted though and his sword lashed out from the ground slicing out at ankle height.

Ranma hopped over it and away, shaking his head theatrically even as a foot connected with the other man's face, dropping him by precisely thirty percent. "Damn. And this guy is supposed to be one of your best turn of the fighters? These tournament fights are supposed to be your national pastime? That's pathetic. Practically every Hunter I've ever met could fight better than this."

The Tournaments of Mistral were the modern-day equivalent of the bread and circuses in Ranma's old world that the leaders of Rome used to distract the public of that city from their poverty. It had done that job so well that few in the main valleys, Mistral and Athenia, understood precisely how dangerous the Grimm threat was, hidden beyond the walls of their valleys, the massive anti-air guns the only sign for those who wished to look of the danger beyond. The majority of Mistral in the main valleys took great pride in their coliseum, looking down their noses at 'mere' Hunters, particularly those who hadn't come from Mistral.

The crowd roared, surging against the guards, shouting imprecations at Ranma, shouting at Achilles for how badly he was losing. But most of all, angry that someone so close to their Invincible Girl seemed to denigrate their national pastime. the noise rose to a crescendo, and several people even began to start throwing things at the two fighters. The police line faded and people moved through them over the intervening wall.

Only a few dozen throughout that crowd thought to look around to see how Pyrrha was taking that. And those dozen or so, quickly began to realize that she was nowhere around. This included her father, who seemed to get as red in the face as his hair for a moment, turning this way and that before trying to shout into his scroll.

Meanwhile, Ren had faded away, shifting into the shadow of the coliseum to one side as if about to enter the changing room.

And Achilles surged to his feet, his sword mecha-shifting to reveal a large-barreled handgun. "You will not demean the sacred tournament, Hunter, not whilst I draw breath!"

The audience recoiled, but Ranma crouched and slammed a finger into the ground. "Bakusai Tenketsu!" The ground exploded upwards, enveloping the rounds from the handgun and causing them

to explode on contact. Surrounded by the smoke from these explosions, Ranma dropped a few smoke bombs of his own, adding to the effect. Then he was leaping up and out, high over the heads of the crowd, touching down lightly here and there before landing next to Ren. "Time we left?"

"Time we left," Ren quickly pointed through the crowd to one bullhead nearby. "That one."

Ranma nodded, grabbed the younger man around the waist, and leaped into the air, covering the distance between where he had been and the bullhead in question. As Ren started up, hotwiring it in a very professional man manner Ranma noticed and then promptly forgot, Jaune, who had been waiting for them in the back, was already pulling out his scroll, talking into it to both Nora and Pyrrha. "We're clear, no pursuit so far but we should be getting on."

"We're already aboard the river trip both heading out," Pyrrha reported, then teased, "You were awfully slow."

The ship in question looked more or less like a paddlewheel river barge something that you could've plunked down in the Wild West timeline, and it would have made perfect sense. It was small, fast, but didn't have much space, Ranma could tell that just by looking.

And by the time the boys arrived the ship was already pulling away from the dock. That didn't matter much to the Hunters, although Jaune had a moment of dismay as he stared at the ship. "My stomach medicine! I haven't taken it yet!"

"Don't worry, Jaune," Ren replied placatingly. "I packed it away in my things, which should already be on the ship with Ms. Thetis."

At that point, they reached the pier, and Ranma paused, watching as Ren and Jaune hopped up onto the ship. Ren made it easily, rolling on the deck of the ship between two of the sailors, then springing to his feet next to Nora, who smiled and moved him on the nose. Jaune, barely made it, and it was only the quick thinking of Pyrrha that saved him, grabbing his shirt with the end of a one of the poles the rivermen were using to poll the ship away from the wharf, pulling him the intervening distance and two rivermen quickly grabbed at him, pulling him down to the deck and ribbing the youngster good-naturedly.

Once the two of them were out of the way, Ranma followed, landing lightly on his feet despite the fact ship had made at least three yards away from the wharf and up the river in that time. "Well," he said brightly. "That was fun. And has everyone remembered to turn off their scrolls? After all, we are going to need to conserve power while aboard ship."

Pyrrha laughed, giving Ranma a quick hug, and then moving forward, wanting to show them all their rooms. The Hunters and those traveling with them had been given three cabins. One was for the married couple, one was for the girls, which included one of the two apprentices that Thetis and her husband had brought along. That meant that Ranma Ren Jaune and the other apprentice. "Er, it isn't much, but..."

Waving that off, Ranma stated, "I'll sleep outside unless it's actively raining." He then grinned and Jaune gulped. "Now, about your training..."

OOOOOOO

Blake didn't know what she was feeling right now. Shock, horror, regret? Sadness? All of that was in there now, merged into a muddle where no one emotion could come out on top as she stared at the headmaster. "I'm sorry what? Could you please repeat that Headmaster?" she asked me, but it was an extremely fragile politeness, her cat ears flickering this way and that, as she clenched her hands at her side.

The headmaster stared back at her sadly, shaking his head. "I realize this is a shock to you, Ms. Belladonna. It was always my plan to have Adam pay for his crimes against Remnant, but yes, Adam Taurus died during questioning. Before you ask, no, Ironwood was not using torture simply dressed up as interrogation. Such would be foolish and stupid. It never gives you any information and is as scarring on the soul of the person doing that, as it is the victim's body. Instead, it was a, a stupid accident that occurred as he tried to escape."

Blake stared at him, and Ozpin sighed, turning the computer screen on his desk toward her. Blake leaned forward as a video, obviously taken from a security camera began to play. The video, Ozpin reflected, was an excellent forgery. *Ironwood's computer and video specialists are to be commended. Even knowing it is entirely fake I can't see any hint of that.*

It showed Adam pushing himself up rapidly, grabbing at something on a tray of medical equipment just as someone on the other side of him was preparing a syringe of some kind. Although the man was sent backwards, the needle stabbed into his arm. Adam kept on moving, tossing the tray at one of the nurses and using the thing he'd grabbed up, a tiny knife, tossing it at the other man, catching him low in the chest. However, as he lunged up off the bed, he found himself falling sideways, still too wounded to move quickly. On the ground, he convulsed a few times and went still.

"Adam's attack meant that the entire amount of the drug entered his system at once. The Aura suppression medicine is supposed to be given to the individual over ten minutes, not all at once. He had a fatal heart attack before anyone could attempt to save him," Ozpin explained gravely.

Blake shivered, one hand rising to face rubbing at her eyes as she stared at the image. "Oh Adam, why?! You never could learn to stop fighting, could you? It never occurred to you just to get along, just to, to lull them into a false sense of security until you were healed!"

"I'll pretend I didn't hear that," the headmaster drawled, understanding she was coming from, but knowing Ironwood would not have taken that line very well, despite the whole thing being fake.

"And you, you didn't get anything out of him?" Blake asked hesitantly. "I, I don't know how much what I know would be of help, and I'm..."

"We were able to answer several questions Ms. Belladonna, but I was never interested in the White Fang alone, and we had barely begun to answer any questions on the individuals he was working with."

"You mean the people that Ranma says are working with the Grimm?" Yang asked bluntly from beside her partner. The blonde girl had been watching the headmaster with narrowed eyes throughout this meeting, but only spoke up now concentrating more on giving Blake support via a hand clasping one of Blake's.

The headmaster paused, looking at them carefully. "That sounds like a wildly inaccurate and obviously impossible lie to throw at the feet of the White Fang. If you are for trying to prove something like that on mere hearsay then..."

"Ranma told us about his own theory on that," Ruby piped up despite Weiss doing her best to glare her into silence. "But it's true right? I mean it would explain a lot and he had me shoot a Grimm that was just watching my train. It was acting weird and then there's the fact that the Grimm didn't bother to attack everyone really, just Ranma, and then we learned about the Grimm attacking their ship out of nowhere and that's just weeirrd!" she exclaimed, waving her hands wildly and trying hard not to look at the video which had just restarted.

"I see," turning his computer back to him, he turned it off, looking at the group, his eyes narrowed slightly behind his glasses. "We will talk about this more in the future, but I'm afraid that I am constrained by a promise I made to your parents not to share anything with you until you are both a certain age. And I do not wish to put Ms. Xiao Long in the position of keeping secrets from you Ms. Rose."

Both Ruby and Yang scoffed at that, and Yang's glared was all the harder, and she muttered under her breath, "Right, another freaking secret!"

"Nor," the headmaster went on smoothly, "is this the moment to talk about things. For now, I will confirm that yes, I do know that there is a, an over-Grimm that is at times active. Any information beyond that is for another time, when we are not already discussing a serious, if peripherally related issue. Ms. Belladonna, I am sorry about this. I realize you were close to Adam at one point, and I wish that I had been able to keep my promise to you to let you speak to him. Alas, life and the actions of other people sometimes conspire against us."

"You could have let me talk to him before questioning him!" Blake said, now pushing through her shock with anger. "Perhaps if I had, I could have softened him up enough for Adam to help with your question, rather than leave Adam convinced the only thing could do was escape no matter the cost!"

"Perhaps and that was a mistake on my part. One of many that I will regret. But I urge you to move past this moment," Ozpin answered.

"That's very fucking easy for you to say sir!" Blake shot back hotly. "You didn't just lose a, a friend! Even if I hated some of the things he did, and left the path he was intent on, I still cared for him."

Ozpin shook his head. "But Adam Taurus chose that path willingly, Ms. Belladonna. You must know given what he has done in the past, there would've been no redeeming Adam."

"I would have at least liked to try Sir," Blake before standing up, dashing away her tears. "If that is all?"

"It is for now. I'm hearing rumbles from Mistral, and my old friend Lionheart recently reached out to me requesting that we send a few of our student teams over to be a large-scale culling and a few secondary missions, which would be acceptable for a freshman team such as yourself. But I am not going to agree to any such thing until I am told more about the actions in question. I already have sent JNPR there against my better judgment and Ranma there, that is more than enough."

Although, sending Ranma was a calculated risk, a Knight let wild out in the field to attract the attention of the enemy. While Salem is so busy trying to deal with him, she is opening up several other areas, not least of which is that I am not as concerned about running into her influence in culling actions.

Indeed, at that moment every Hunter team in Vale and most of the Senior class, both B and A type teams, were moving into areas where before, they would have been unable to make any headway thanks to Salem being aware of any such assault and thus, able to direct the Grimm in defending themselves. With Salem's mind fully devoted to Ranma and the events happening in Mistral, the headmaster felt they had a chance to wipe a few of these areas out, decreasing the local forces of Grimm, and adding to the protection of Vale and its smaller protected towns.

"We'll sign up for any such mission sir, we're ready for this!" Ruby insisted enthusiastically.

"I would not say that you are ready for the field Ms. Rose, but you at least proved yourself to not to be a liability there," Glynda interjected, speaking up from one side. Like Yang, she had been mostly silent up to this point, but now spoke up on this matter. "You are the best team remaining among the freshman class, but I believe that your recent bout with team CFVY should've taught you some humility. If not, we can schedule another such bout?"

She let the statements trail off into a question and Ruby pouted shrinking deeper into her hood while Yang simply smirked, cracking her knuckles. She'd had a great fistfight with Fox during the match earlier that day and had decided to hunt him down for some sparring later. She Blake and Ruby had done okay against the sophomores, but Weiss had been next to useless, thanks to Coco destroying every glyph she could with Gatling fire before they could form and putting out Weiss out of the competition within a few minutes of battle being joined.

The heiress was still quite stopy about that, grumbling about, "Overpowered females and their need to overcompensate for a lack of personality through guns and fashion."

Coming out of her sadness for a moment, Blake smirked at the Atlas native. "What would you do if she actually heard you say something like that?"

Weiss growled, but subsided, and the four of them nodded their heads to the headmaster and quickly left his office.

Behind them, Glynda moved over to look at the headmaster, one eyebrow rising. "You could've been more sympathetic. Blake's anger at you is hardly unusual, after all."

"Perhaps," Ozpin sighed. "But Blake is an unusual case. She is extremely idealistic, but just as extremely set into a very black-and-white type of mindset. She sees things through that lens of right and wrong, black and white and doesn't realize that they are in fact shades of gray. Nor does she seem to understand that her own actions, and that of the White Fang in general, are not one and the same. She should not feel guilty about them nor defensive about what Adam or the White Fang has done. I am hoping that with Adam dead, she can make any a clean break from that."

"More importantly..." he paused, typing into his scroll, as Benzaiten entered his office carrying a pot of tea, and sitting next to her professor, smiling at the woman as she poured the two of them cups of tea.

The headmaster stared at the tray, a barely perceptible sneer on his face as he looked at their tea. "And where is my coffee?"

"Your coffee mug is being cleaned," Benzaiten said tersely. "The reason why, I finally realized why you were always sipping at that darn thing, is because half of its interior dimensions was taken up by a kind of thick, black tar-like substance from all the coffee you've had in there. It's in the washer now in the teacher's lounge. You'll get it back soon, and besides, it's not as if you need coffee every hour of every day after all."

The headmaster stared at Ranma's sister in appalled silence. "You are cleaning out the mug," he said, his tone like lead. "That... some of that sludge I've known for years, decades even! It was a finely distilled, well-crafted solution to give my coffee an extra piquancy and punch!"

"It was disgusting, vile and halved the amount of actual coffee you put in your mug," Benzaiten shot back.

Ozpin's hand gripped his cane and violence crackled for a moment in his eyes, but then the scroll set onto his desk connected to the office's communications equipment, and he calmed down, clicking a button. Instantly a nearby holographic projector activated, and Ironwood appeared there. "General, how goes it on your end?"

James scowled a bit, but he still looked somewhat smug. "You tell me. Adam has been answering questions relatively well when they don't involve the White Fang. He's given every indication of hating them 'just as much as I hate all humans'" James quoted. "But he doesn't know anything about the woman who he met with other than she seemed to have black hair and a heat-based Semblance strong enough to make him unwilling to fight her, along with two followers. Everything beyond that seems to have been covered by some kind of sense-based Semblance, which obscured their features when they talked to him, or perhaps erased them from his mind once they were not in his presence."

"Hmmm, fascinating, but annoying. Yet you look a little smug for someone who has run into such an issue," Ozpin answered mildly, yet inside he felt a bit of frustration. *There goes my hope this one break in the intelligence war would let me find all of Salem's pawns.*

"We've gotten a few answers out of him on what they were paying with, including information on specific shipments. With that information, we've been able to identify members of the smuggling ring here in Atlas. We haven't identified its head yet however, and that worries me. Someone very bright and very well hidden is behind this, hiding within Atlas somewhere."

The fact that James was taking that as a personal affront was obvious.

"Good," the headmaster began nodding his head. "Very good."

"Indeed, although I would think that shutting down the distribution network outside Atlas would be just as important, since it is that aspect which makes the White Fang, or any other groups, more dangerous than they would otherwise be if stuck in Atlas alone," Benzaiten mused. "Especially considering my own work in reaching out to the less violent members of the White Fang."

Glynda and the headmaster had read her into the secret about Salem and the headmaster's 'Immortality Semblance,' and she had since come up with a few ideas of how to take advantage of the White Fang. Showing Adam had worked with humans might be counter-productive to peace between the White Fang and the humanity, but it would certainly destroy Adam's position as a semi-cult leader within its ranks. She had also reached out to the White Fang's leader, Sienna Khan, personally, and the two women had started to open up formal communications between the White Fang and the Hunter community.

"True, but we already rolled up its tentacles here in Vale, and Ghira Belladonna did the same thing in Menagerie. Vacuo is going to handle it in their own way, and as far as we are aware, there was no connection in Mistral. Beyond that, I don't like the fact that Adam had no idea how they were controlling or communicating with the Grimm, nor do I like the fact that whatever this is, was so compartmentalized. But now that we know there's a leak, we're following it."

"Might I ask how? After all, knowing when a weapon is supposed to be delivered is a far cry from knowing who made them and how they were kept off the books of whatever factory did so."

"We're not trailing the weapons to the factories at all. None of the weapons had any identification on them, not even the Atlesian paladin," grumbled, thumping one hand down hard on the chair he was sitting in. "Just like the two that were destroyed by team RWBY." Ironwood seemed to brighten up for a moment. "Speaking of which, you should accelerate their training program. They acted at least as well as most of my academies graduating class could."

"I rather think that says much about the quality of graduate you were graduating than how good team RWBY is," Glynda answered tartly, causing Benzaiten to snicker.

"Let us not take such admittedly amusing shots at one another," Ozpin chuckled, shaking said. "How then are you following up on the creation side of those weapons, James?"

"Material and money. With the remnants of three enemy vessels in our custody, we've been able to track quite a bit of their production. Even if someone is putting them together in some clandestine factory, the various metals and other bits have to come from somewhere else, and a few of the parts are difficult enough there's only a few places they could have been built. I've had Penny and

her partner Ciel looking into that aspect. When it comes to numbers crunching, they are the best I have."

"But that brings up another issue that is somewhat bothering me," Ironwood went on after taking a moment to gather his thoughts. "There were some changes to the paladin, changes in the identify friend or foe program specifically that should've been impossible. Whoever is behind this is almost as intelligent as Dr. Pinocchio."

"And that is saying something," the headmaster muttered, frowning. "I trust you are guarding him and making certain that anyone he associated with before is being checked out?"

"I am. But that is running into another issue. I think, I think we might have a fake death on our hands," Ironwood growled. "I've set winter on it, along with a crack team of my command of my best hunters, the Aces. But I think that Arthur Watts faked his death. Why he could be working with Salem I have no idea, but he's the only scientist I know who could singlehandedly build paladins and reprogram their IFF."

Glynda frowned thoughtfully, and with none of her new usual rancor at James. Say what you would about the man, he was methodical, serious, and doggedly determined. "...I think ego could play a part there. Wasn't he passed over or set aside on the paladin project itself, or something similar? I regret I can't quite remember."

"He was, and he also... well that's just say that he makes Winter's father seem relatively benign in terms of how he feels about Faunus and leave it at that. Using the White Fang to further his own ends would seem a delicious irony," Ironwood answered.

"Most Atlas people have ideas about Faunus that make me uncomfortable," Glynda murmured into her tea, before sipping it appreciably. "But tell us honestly, general. Do you think you'll be able to find him?"

Ironwood shook his head. "I don't think so. I imagine that by this point whoever is on the other hand, has pulled in up their stakes and left. We might be able to find their warehouses, their metallurgy factories and so forth, and I know Penny and Ciel will be able to freeze any money they have, but the people? Like cockroaches they'll have scurried away from our searching light."

"An excellent analogy," the headmaster chuckled. "And speaking of people moving, have you gotten any information about what the Mistral Council is doing? I'm not asking because I think they're involved in all this, but the exhibition mission that JNPR was requested for seems to have evolved into far more. And Lionheart isn't giving me any information, as if he's been told to keep it secret."

"Hmmm, Mistral isn't talking to Atlas about whatever it is," Ironwood mused. "In fact, this is the first time I've heard of it. Sorry. I don't think I'll even look into it to be blunt, if there's even a chance that I can find Arthur Watts, or whoever was able to read re-program the Identify Friend Foe feature, I'm going to follow it up with everything I have."

"That brings up a point," Benzaiten said, interjecting her tone quickly, setting aside her tea. Most of the time in these meetings she had been a silent observer, but now she wanted to speak up.

"This Watts fellow. I understand he was something of a genius? But in war, communication is vastly important, not only being able to communicate, but keeping it from your enemies. And all communication in the world runs through the same system, the CCTV towers. Is there any way someone could mess with that programming in some way and listen in on conversations like the one we're currently having?"

"...That's a horrifying thought, but one that I can certainly follow up on," Ironwood agreed with a shiver. "Regardless, we need to be aware of the electronic side of operational security from now on."

"Further," Glynda interjected, "we can meet with the Vale Council. The tower here in Vale should be defended much like the one in Atlas. And doing so will give any Hunter team that is recuperating from actions in the field something to do. Even Mistral and Vacuo can do that."

The headmaster nodded at this, thoughtfully hiding a grin behind his hand for a moment, lamenting his missing coffee mug. *Alas, poor sludge, I knew you well.* Yet that thought was not uppermost in his mind, rather he was smiling quite happily at how much Salem was seemingly concentrating on Ranma, the rogue Knight on their chess board.

However, Salem had come up with the idea of using humans as well as Grimm, and however she had done it, a series of unfortunate events mostly surrounding Ranma, had helped bring it to light and now they were blunting the damage those human agents could do.

I doubt will be able to find all of her pawns, but we'll be able to destroy their schemes and much of their resources. And I rather doubt that even once she realizes we're on to her, that Salem will be able to do anything about it. For all her ability in controlling Grimm, she's never been able to ride the chaos of war as well as she thinks. A fault I share, Ozpin admitted to himself. However, I wonder how long we will be able to ride her interest in young Ranma? And what she has planned for him in Mistral?

OOOOOOO

As they left the headmaster's clocktower, the RWY of team RWBY all looked at Blake in some concern. Her now silent anger was worrisome, as well as the grief they could see in her eyes, the tears, which had stopped falling but still glistened there.

While Weiss and Ruby didn't really have enough information or any equal kind of loss to compare it too, Yang had more understanding thanks to their talks on this score. Adam had been something of a cross between boyfriend, role model, and idol for a long while to Blake. While she might have realized how far he had fallen, there was still an emotional connection there.

As they passed the path that would take them to the cafeteria, Yang put her arm around her partner, pulling her into a hug which, not coincidentally pressing Blake's head into her chest. "We're here for you, Blake."

This instantly got Blake's back up. She disliked admitting to need help, whatever she was facing, and she struggled to free herself from the pillowy confines enclosing the back of her head. "I don't need..."

"Yes, you do," Yang interrupted, shaking her head. "No one should be alone at this point. Besides, there seems to be a bit of stuff in your head that doesn't have anything to do with grieving for Adam." Blake opened her mouth to protest, but Yang went on quickly. "Repeat after me Blake. You are not responsible for the actions of others. You are not responsible for Adam. You are not responsible for the White Fang."

"But I am! If I had been able to talk to him, maybe even if I had snuck in to do it, Adam would..." Blake began, only to be interrupted.

"Oh that is ridiculous!" Weiss walked up to Blake, smacking her on the forehead with two fingers like she was a dog, something that caused Blake's eyes to narrow. She opened her mouth to say that that had been racist but once more, the other young woman spoke up first.

"You are not infallible Blake Belladonna, nor are you that eloquent a speaker. This presupposes that you would even be able to get in to see him sneaking around. I will not deny the possibility but would place it at that you're talking to them could have perhaps called this Adam fellow down before. Oh, he tried to free himself so drastically without Aura. But that is it. A slim chance. It was the headmaster's call, and that is more than enough for me."

Blake growled, but couldn't get away from Yang, and she knew that even if she did, Ruby was poised nearby, actually crouching down, as if she wanted to pounce. Clearly, she wasn't going to get away from her team anytime soon. *And really, while I don't agree on all their points, Yang's right. As, as much honest grief as I'm feeling, I am just as guilt-ridden and angry at the fact I couldn't do anything about it.*

"I think a late night of romantic action comedies, food, and some crying on your shoulder will do me," Blake said sighing, leaning back into her partner. Instantly, Yang's tight grip around her she changed, becoming far more like a hug, rather than her simply grabbing her. This caused Blake to blush a little, realizing that her head was still sort of entrenched in Yang's chest. "You can get off me now, you know."

"I don't think so. Unless of course you want me to hand you over to Sun? Are you an abs girl or a breast girl?" Yang teased. Sun had been handed over to his School's representative, and his team were stuck helping Port with some kind of project involving lots of time out in the woods. that hadn't stopped him from seeking out Blake anytime he could. Although thankfully for Yang, Blake didn't seem very open to his advances.

"What kind of question is that?!" Weiss shouted, all three of Yang's listeners now blushing slightly.

But Blake shot back, her free hand smacking Yang on the thigh. "That should be a question I should be asking you, considering how often you've been flirting with me and before me with Ranma."

"I swing both ways," Yang answered honestly even as she released Blake, watching as Blake's eyes widened. Then Yang winked at her and moved around her to her now-frozen sister. Now come on you three, we've got a soppy recovery party to plan."

Behind her, Blake stared after the Blonde Bomber, then her eyes shifted down to Yang's rear before chuckling. *Well, if she's serious about batting for both teams, I might just have to see what it's like to have a 'Hanging time'...and I cannot believe I thought that, ugh.*

End Episode 4

I'm thinking of one more noncombat episode, then three combat episodes, then a wrap up episode. At that point, this story will be done. It won't be a huge fix 'em fic, but I think the ending will be satisfying regardless.