

I don't draw and am not English, thus can't any of the originals. The plot though, that's mine.

This has been Grammarlied and Edited by **HP-DG-AP-PN-RG-NR**. He helped me finalize the first scene here, which again, was reaaaaaally hard. One paranoid, cynical wannabe game master on one side, a action-oriented, cynical, wary Harry on the other. Ugh. Anyway, here it is.

Chapter 11: Discussions, Impacts and Randomness

As he sipped his coffee, Ozpin pondered how to play this conversation. In the main, his goal was to make Harry admit that he was using magic and hopefully get him to explain where he had come by that magic. If there was a fifth Relic out there... well, it would not be the first time the Brother of Light had not told him everything, and of course there was the Brother of Darkness to consider.

But he did not want to alienate the young man or come off as too demanding. And it would not do to give away any of his own secrets until he knew Harry's and that the younger man could be trusted with them. *Needing to learn Harry's secrets without revealing any of my own makes for an interesting dichotomy, to be sure. This is going to be somewhat challenging, since I believe that Harry's opinion of me isn't the best, given some of his comments during Initiation and after. To say nothing of his parents' opinion of me.*

Ozpin allowed a small smile to appear on his face as Glynda walked in with Mr. Arc beside her, leaving him behind as she moved to stand by Ozpin's shoulder while the young man paused, waiting to be called forward. "Mr. Arc, welcome. I was hoping to get an impression from you about the recent events and Mountain Glenn while they are still fresh in your mind. This was the first time we had seen a Grimm assault on that scale during the Remembrance and the first time the freshmen class saw such. I find it fascinating to see how people react to that kind of thing, especially so soon in their careers."

"Considering we're not getting paid and have yet to finish school, I would object to the term career, Headmaster. But I take your point," Harry stated as he moved forward, gesturing with his hand towards one of the chairs in front of Ozpin's desk. When Ozpin nodded pleasantly, Harry settled in, thinking not about the question the headmaster had posed, but about Ozpin himself and his own impressions of the man.

In a way, the silver-haired man came off as the quintessential ivory tower intellectual, somewhat removed from the world. *I would very much prefer a headmaster who also teaches classes and could get involved with his students on a personal level.* But there was something

more to Ozpin, something more distant, more judgmental even than those buffoons who never raised their eyes from their books and felt that was the only proper way to learn things.

I can't forget the look in his eyes when he looked at Dove, Apacci and the rest. He wasn't really seeing them, or even Tia and the rest of her team. Just their potential as Hunters and Huntresses or the trouble they might cause other potential pieces. He wasn't seeing them as individuals. That is more than enough to make me wary of him.

Beyond that, there was something about the man, something that told Harry he was like Dumbledore in a way. He seemed... too poised? Too confident and independent and... strong? It was hard to put into words even in his own head, but it was there. As if he knew he was important for more than just his position, maybe? Regardless of the trouble Harry had putting words to the feeling, it was there and it put Harry on edge internally.

"True enough, but in a way, Mr. Arc, you become Huntsman as soon as you agree to put your lives on the line for your fellow men against the Grimm," Ozpin stated, taking a sip of coffee. "And my point still stands."

"I can see why you would want to gage how we've reacted to the battle in Mountain Glenn sir, but I would have chosen someone who wasn't already preparing an AAR for you." Ozpin smiled at that, and seeing he wasn't going to get an answer on that, Harry shrugged and instead asked, "Did you pick my name out of a hat, Professor, or was I specifically chosen for some reason? Because while you're right that was my first battle with Grimm on that scale, I didn't go into it entirely cold, so my opinion of the overall battle won't match most of the other freshmen."

"Hah. Well, I doubt that any of your fellow freshmen went into the battle entirely cold, but tell me what you mean when you say that, please?"

"I meant I have seen the same kind of desperate running battle through a built-up area before. Although, again, not to the scale of a city." When Ozpin cocked his head in question, Harry continued. "I don't know if it has become known to either of you, but I met my partner well before our Initiation. Pyrrha and I met for the first time nearly a year ago when we were in a town called Chian that was attacked by Grimm under the command of a young Nuckalevee."

Both Glynda and Ozpin raised their eyebrows in surprise at that. "I had heard that Ms. Nikos had been involved in that fight and had determined that it was indeed a young Nuckalevee given the lack of large numbers and the tactics the Grimm used. But this is the first time I have heard of anyone else being involved in leading the citizens of Chian in their heroic defense. How did that come to pass that you were able to avoid the reporters so well?" Ozpin allowed a faint smirk to appear on his face, trying to come off as more earthy and personable,

feeling that Harry was a little leery of him because of that lack. "Inquiring minds want to know and perhaps emulate your technique."

"Ehh, there's no great trick, there, Headmaster. More luck than anything else." Harry chuckled, leaning back in his chair a little and shaking his head. "My mother and my oldest sister, Violet, arrived before the reporters did just as Pyrrha and I finished off the Nuckalevee, but before the horde it had led had time to disperse. If not for their arrival, Pyrrha and I both might've died, along with who knows how many townsfolk. Yet they did, and I am very much not sorry at all that I avoided the reporters or the public attention."

Ozpin chuckled and continued this line of conversation, allowing himself to seem sidetracked. "Is that a personal preference or prior knowledge? I cannot imagine that Arturia has anything good to say about them."

"True," Harry laughed. "Although there is also a portion of personal preference there. I'm a very private individual in many ways, specifically the type of ways that make me have a violent reaction to anyone trying to push a microphone or a video recorder into my face."

"I would assume that most people would agree with you." Ozpin then shook his head, shifting the conversation back to his official reason for this conversation. *The poise of this youth. It is as if he feels right at home talking to me like this. There isn't an ounce of concern or automatic deference to authority, or concern about the same. Fascinating.* "Regardless of your prior experience, I wanted to talk to you as the freshmen team leader I've identified as the most natural tactician and strategist, not just to gain insight on how those who have not tasted such combat felt about it. So please give me your thoughts on that score."

Harry frowned, thinking it through yet still wondering where this was really leading. *If Ozpin just wanted his thoughts about Mountain Glenn, he could've waited for our After-Action Reports, like I mentioned a moment ago.* Team leader AARs covered a wide range of areas: how they felt about the overall fight, how their team did as a whole, things they knew they got wrong, did write, their opinion about the weapons used by their teams, suggestions for the future, and even critiquing the strategy of the overall battle if they were fighting with other Huntsman Teams. *Unless Ozpin is just asking about the emotional side, how we freshies are dealing with the overall impact of the battle? But why would he? That's been known for decades.*

It was a well-known fact that the more Grimm in an area, the more fear they caused. Not like Nuckalevee or other S-class evolved Grimm, but in terms of a less focused thing, a sense of fear that made defenders lose heart, even those with Aura, although Aura did defend against that feeling to a large degree. And, of course, beyond that was the emotional impact of so much combat, magnified in this case by the impact of Mountain Glenn as a whole. Fighting in

a city-wide mausoleum would make anyone depressed, even if their enemies didn't leave piles of bodies behind as would have been the case if they had fought human opponents. *Does he think I won't mention how my team and I dealt with that?*

Believing that was the case, Harry started from that impression, explaining how his team and those they were close with had pushed through the anguish and sadness they had begun to feel upon dropping into the city before the Grimm had started to push back into the city on the second day. The emotional control and mediation all of them had over the years had come in handy there as did the downtime at night. And cuddling, although he didn't mention that part, despite the fact his whole team partook of it, with Nora and Ren cuddling on their own and Pyrrha and Tia taking turns cuddling with Harry when the other was on watch.

"I don't think any of us were in danger of faltering due to the impact of the battle. The only ones I noticed who did were among other teams, but I can't tell you more than that. And I would be very reluctant to go into detail considering that impression is based off small, quick interactions rather than long term exposure," Harry concluded.

And again, this young man has so much poise and control, Ozpin mused. Normally, a student would be looking to get the eyes of the headmaster off himself and his own team nearly by any means necessary. This young man doesn't, simply stating facts and moving on. "And what about on a strategic level, Mr. Arc? As I said, you seem to be the best among the freshman in that area.

Shrugging, Harry went with the slight change of topic, explaining where he felt they had gone wrong on a strategic level and where his team and Company Black as a whole could've done a better job. The initial drop was gone over in detail, as that could have led to disaster against Grimm more organized or not broken up into various packs or flocks as the Grimm in Mountain Glenn had been. He also hammered on the need to have better communication from the start, as well as the ability to track one another's movements somehow. "And not with a scroll. To use a scroll, you need a hand free, and you need to hold it up to your face. Neither is a good idea. Some kind of helmet should be mandatory. I know that Atlas soldiers routinely use helmet-to-helmet communications. My own team and I have invested in earbuds with connected microphones. They proved their weight in gold, but should be mandatory."

"I will stop you there, Mr. Arc. Equipment and adding to what I have heard called rollout is a major aspect of your second year here, where we take what Professor Peach has told you about living in the wilderness and build on it, connecting it further into the laws and regulations classes, which end halfway through the second year," Ozpin said with a smile and a nod at Harry's perspicacity. "That then ties into the third-year tactics class, which for leaders is the most important class."

"I know about that class, I helped Arturia with her homework for it whenever she was home," Harry said, a smile on his face that was so tender and loving that Ozpin blinked at it, but he kept his brows from furrowing in surprise with ease. "Beyond that, more use of explosives and an updated map of the terrain would've been nice. Explosives to change the terrain, the map to know where you're doing it. We had to build up our map as we were there, and that wasn't the best way of doing it. More emphasis on ambushes, on creating dead zones too, and perhaps a class devoted entirely to building clearance and city fighting in general. That terrain was just nasty to fight in."

At that, Ozpin nodded, having been making a few notes as he listened. Those notes had more to do with how Harry was giving his suggestions than the points themselves, but he did make them. "I can add a semester I think to that specific need in senior year. Or perhaps an elective, or series of lectures."

Ozpin looked up from his notes, eagerness stirring in him as he inquired politely if Harry had anymore points. When Harry answered he hadn't any that would not show up in his AAR, once more broadly questioning why they were having this conversation, Ozpin moved with that confusion, debating between two ways to take this conversation.

"Well, that is interesting, and I think I look forward to reading your AAR more than I normally do, Mr. Arc. But there was indeed a few other reasons why I wanted to talk to you, and why I wanted your opinion on Mountain Glenn in particular." Ozpin reached out and tapped a small slim booklet that he had laid out on his desk. "You were in the lead when it came to changing the environment to give your team and indeed the whole force a better advantage, even more than Glynda. That is surprising, but what makes it even more so is how that came to be about. You filled in numerous large-scale tears and holes in the outer wall, used explosions, and other, energy-related attacks during the battle. All on a scale that is frankly impossible. Even with an Arc's deep aura pools, there is a limit to what you can do."

He held the book up so that Harry could read the title, which read simply as Aura Measurement and its Underlying Physics, while internally, Harry scowled, wondering where this was going.

"This is a scientific treatise on how Semblances work and the aura consumption scale, which has been in use since long before the Colors War." Ozpin went on calmly, taking a sip of coffee and setting the book down before saying, "Furthermore, Glynda and several others saw you using several interesting attacks, attacks that looked almost like you had taken some manner of energy and given it a specific task, or form. Now, none of that is so far beyond the pale as to be impossible. But to continually use such powers without becoming exhausted quickly? Unless, Mr. Arc, you have the equivalent of both of your parents and my own reserves

combined, there is no way this equation can explain away your powers. Would you care to comment on this?"

Ozpin took another sip from his coffee mug, looking at Harry, wondering what he would say, eager to take advantage of any response, but hoping the youth would unburden himself. *It would make things so much easier.*

For his part, Harry simply looked back, thinking quickly. *Is he fishing for information about my magic? Why? He knew about most of my abilities before this, so why does my ability to use my 'Semblance' so often matter? And why call me out about it like this, and not have Goodwitch simply put me through a wringer in our lessons?*

Deciding to not admit to anything just yet, Harry said simply, "Well, I am a bit of a misfit in many ways. I mean, I'm an Arc, but I have black hair and green eyes instead of blonde and blue. Yet I can wield Caliburn, and I'm an aura monster like the rest of my family. Why would my Semblance be any different?"

"True. And it is also true enough that people who step outside the norm frequently make for the best kind of hunters." Harry grinned at that, mock-preening for a moment, before asking how far outside of the norm Arturia stepped, causing Ozpin to chuckle even as he moved on quickly, making it seem as if his initial question about Harry's Semblance was simply for curiosities sake. "It is also a proven fact that no one but your family can wield that blade. I have to wonder about why that is, though."

Ozpin probably knew more about Caliburn than the Arcs did. That sword was an artifact from the First Age, the Age before known history. To anyone else but Salem and Ozpin, Remnant had always been like it was now. But before this Age, there had been another, when the two Brothers, the gods of light and dark, walked among men.

Caliburn had not been forged by either of the Brothers, not like the Four Relics he had guarded and kept from Salem for so many lifetimes. Yet, Caliburn **had** been crafted by those who had themselves been touched by the God of Light. *Forged for a purpose, forged for a specific set of hands. But while it is obvious it was made exclusively for the Arcs; its purpose is one I do not know. Even back then, the Arcs preferred to go their own way, joining neither Salem's mad assault on the Gods nor my own reconstruction efforts.*

Often, Caliburn has appeared in those who ended up becoming good leaders, but not always. Sometimes it has been used to war against fellow humans, sometimes simply against Grimm. I simply do not know what broad criteria it uses to choose its wielders. Yet that is but a minor mystery in comparison to the greater one that Harry represents. There is no chance that Caliburn is capable of imbuing Harry with magic.

To Harry, that was obviously a question, and he relaxed a bit as Ozpin had wanted as the conversation shifted from his Semblance. "I really don't know why the sword can't be wielded by anyone but an Arc. I've given it to Pyrrha, and she says that it's far too heavy for her to wield for more than a few strikes, and she's got the largest reserves of my friends, with Yang coming in a little below her. I think the blade is made out of some kind of metal that simply absorbs Aura passively to make it seem lighter, and only my family has ever had Aura reserves large enough to wield it successive generations. As to where it comes from, I've no idea. It's old, probably older than even my family. But frankly, it's simply a weapon with strange properties."

He shrugged, posing a question of his own, more to shift the conversation along than anything else, and still wondering where Ozpin wanted this discussion to go at all. "Do you know of many other relics like this, things kept by other families who have a tradition of producing Huntsmen? I confess I have wondered about that a time or two and how Caliburn was made to be so special in the first place."

To Harry's surprise, his questions got a reaction, although not from Ozpin. The headmaster was far too good a dissembler to allow himself to react to anything he didn't want to react to. Ozpin also had the added benefit of his large coffee mug covering the bottom half of his face. Glynda did not and wasn't anywhere near as experienced in keeping a poker face. Her eyes widened behind their glasses for just a second and her hand clenched at her side where she held her riding crop as normal.

Harry caught it and fought back a facial reaction of his own, frowning internally again. *What the heck? What just set her off? She looks torn between attacking me and wide-eyed staring. Something in my last sentence, my question. ...Relics? What about that word set her off?* That was the only thing he could think of. *A random word choice for things from the past. Why would that set her off?*

Now even warier of Harry than he had been before, Ozpin answered quickly, moving the conversation back to the younger man. "I'm afraid not. There are very few families as old as the Arcs who still produce Huntsmen after so long, for very obvious reasons. Yet shifting back to your Semblance, did you know before coming here that your Semblance was far more versatile than you stated when you arrived and spoke to us before Initiation? It is not just a matter of transfiguration or matter conjuration but energy **creation** and manipulation. That is a vastly different thing. And again, it seems to not have nearly as much of an impact on your Aura as previous scientific investigation would have us believe."

He is really interested in my magic. Why? And why isn't he coming out and just asking if he knows my 'Semblance' is unusual. He's fishing for something else, tied to my magic, but not just that either. I am starting to get more Dumbledore vibes here...

Harry answered as best he could without giving the game away. "I did have an idea, yes. I first used it in that battle that I spoke about, the one with Pyrrha in the town of Chian." That made Ozpin blink, but Harry went on. "It awoke in me almost as soon as I had my Aura unlocked, and I had to save Pyrrha from a Grimm attacking her from behind."

A slight exaggeration, but far better than outright stating he knew how to use his magic from the get-go due to this being his second life, Harry felt. "Arturia and my parents both helped me figure out some things, but we lacked the resources and training to figure out more on our own. Hence my asking for one-on-one lessons with Professor Goodwitch." *And I still get a kick out of her name sometimes.* "So, while I am afraid that I allowed my parents' opinion of you to cloud my judgment at first, I truly didn't know how to use my Semblance as well when I arrived as I do now."

"Listening to your parents is more often than not, a good idea. I have had reports about your training with Glynda, so I know that even holding back, you needed quite a bit of information and access to the resources we here at Beacon have to help you master it. As for the full scope of your **Semblance**," here Ozpin sipped at his coffee to give the term more impact, hoping Harry would bite, before setting the cup down gently. "Would you be willing to share more now?"

"Mmm... not really," Harry mused, scratching at his chin for a moment as if he was working out what he wanted to say as he went along. "You seem to have most of the information I've already learned myself about my Semblance." Harry let his eyes sharpen then, and he leaned forward a bit, going on the attack now, and also trying to shift the conversation away from himself.

"And frankly, while I no longer allow my parents' opinion of you to cloud my judgment, that doesn't mean that I haven't replaced that opinion with one of my own. I hardly know you, Professor, and I disagree with how this school is organized in several ways. Your attempt to push Tia into the leadership position, for example, or letting Professor Port teach at all. I have the utmost respect for him as a Hunter, but as a teacher, he leaves much to be desired. The same with Oobleck, who is opinionated and goes far too fast for many of us to get anything from his class, forcing us to take more time to do our own research to keep our grades up. And as for Initiation..."

"Yes, Mr. Arc, you made your opinion on our school's Initiation Ceremony plain at the time," Ozpin held up a hand, not on the backfoot so much as slightly annoyed at the failure of Harry to come clean and at being questioned in turn.

"I will admit to having made a mistake in Tia's case, yes. As for Port, while students have complained in the past about how tiring his classes can be, he still helps to produce excellent

Hunters from those who actually listen to his stories and get the meaning behind them rather than the bluster. And I think you are allowing your dislike of Oobleck's point of view to cloud your judgment there. Nor is it your place as a student to question such things. You are here to learn, Mr. Arc, and I did not wish to speak to you to hear your opinions about my school's educational standards or hiring policies."

"Well, there is only one more major question I have on that score, really, and it is in regard to Ruby. I understand why you think she had the training necessary to come here, but that is a far cry from being mentally and socially at a level where she fits in here." Harry chuckled, shaking said. "Not that I am arguing with your choice to make her a leader, though. She certainly has that kind of spark. But do you have any idea how much help Weiss, Blake and I have to offer to help her keep up in some of her classes? Math in particular..." Harry looked up at Glynda, then back at Ozpin. "I know Weiss allows Ruby to practically copy her work in math and science. That is doing all of us a disservice."

Ozpin could feel Glynda's glare now on the side of his head and winced internally, on the back foot for real now as that comment flipped Glynda's support against him for the moment. He hadn't known that, as, frankly, Ozpin didn't care about either course. Unlike history, which could be used to mold the minds and morals of prospective Huntsmen, those classes were only superficially useful to the Huntsmen themselves or Ozpin. "Mr. Arc, I am sure you are exaggerating."

"I am not!" Harry shook his head quickly. "Without Weiss in particular, Ruby would be failing those classes. As it is, she's getting Bs through mostly outright plagiarism. And that's only on the scholastic side of things. There have been numerous times since the start of school when only Yang or one of the others kept Ruby from being taken advantage of by other students in various ways. If you had wanted to reward Ruby for her part in fighting off Torchwick and felt she shouldn't stay another two years at Signal, then you could have had Ruby apprentice under a hunter somewhere near Vale. Get a year's worth of seasoning in social situations while keeping up her workload at Signal via remote classes before coming in as a freshman only a year behind rather than two."

Harry smirked. "Instead, according to my sister, all you did was give Ruby a plate of cookies and offer her a place here at Beacon as if it had as little weight as those cookies, all because she was able to fight well enough against Roman Torchwick and because you like her silver eyes."

He made that as droll as possible, both hinting at how it sounded and at the fact that he didn't believe how it sounded, causing Glynda to chuckle a little even as she kept glaring at the side of Ozpin's head, while Ozpin shook his head, hiding his lips as if he was trying to hide a

smile, while inwardly deciding he needed to change the topic somehow. He did not want someone as intelligent as Harry seemed to be and who had magic and perhaps access to something from the old world that could give him such, to know about the silver-eyed warriors.

“That does sound like a good idea in hindsight, Mr. Arc, but there was no Hunter in Vale at the time I would be willing to trust Ms. Rose to at the time beyond Ms. Goodwitch and my other professors. Whose workload certainly does not need any more piled on top. Thus, unless I wanted her to languish, to spend two years not growing as a Huntress, I had no choice.” He grimaced a bit, looking over his shoulder at Glynda. “I will... however, make more allowances than we already have on the scholastic side of things. Glynda, make a note to call in our science, language arts and math instructors. We will talk about ways to help Ms. Rose and her team. Perhaps ask Ms. Scarlatina to act as a tutor so her team can have more time off. I know she wants to become a teacher eventually.”

While that would probably help his young friend a lot, Harry still frowned internally. It really did feel like Ruby was important in some fashion to Ozpin. *FUCK. Why am I getting even more Dumbledore vibes than before? Am I dealing with silver eyes being some sign of prophecy-driven savior or something? UGH. And this man is obviously not going to tell me anything.* He kept that suspicion off his face for now, though.

Ozpin continued. “Very well, I can understand that you are also feeling out the limitations to your Semblance. I would, however, state that we are here to help young man, and more information would allow us to do so better.” Once more, Ozpin took a sip from his coffee mug, finding it only lukewarm now but unwilling to break his flow by going to get more. *Harry is not willing to trust me yet, but that can be built in time. He trusts Glynda, and I can lever that in the future.*

“And I think we have covered the battle in Mountain Glenn enough as well. But the last reason I wanted to talk to you about was actually in conjunction with the original reason for the creation of Mountain Glenn and some rumors reaching my ears about your hometown. I asked your father, and he was remarkably tightlipped about it. Arturia, too, doesn’t want to tell me anything about it, claiming she isn’t nearly as involved as you are, which begs the question of you, Mr. Arc, as to what Evig Låga is up to.”

That last was an outright lie. Arturia had not hinted at Harry being involved in what was going on at home at all. But given reports of the mining complex that had crossed Ozpin’s desk the night after the Remembrance began, it made sense for Harry to have been the one to raise the walls that had suddenly sprung up to defend the area around the Fire Dust veins.

“AH, so we are on to the raw curiosity portion of this conversation?” Harry quipped.

This made Ozpin chuckle once more, inwardly wondering about the poise of the young man again. *Here he sits as if he is used to being questioned by those in power. Why? How? Interacting with his parents and the Evig Council alone would not allow for this. Unless far more of what is going on in Evig Låga is at his provocation.*

In actuality, it wasn't just self-control that Ozpin was sensing. Instead, Harry was treating Ozpin as if they were equal. Something that only General Ironwood would ever normally do. The Vale council members acted as if Ozpin was but a high-ranking government official that answered to them, not realizing he was the one who more routinely pulled their strings via subtle back door suggestions or outright blackmail rather than vice versa. Ironwood knew Ozpin's true history, or as much of it as he'd shared with anyone in his Inner Circle, and James treated Ozpin like an equal because of that and because they were friends.

Harry simply felt they were equal. He was respectful, but that was all. There was no deference, no automatic respect for authority, age or anything else in him.

"Well, as you and probably many politicians and industrialists the world over, have begun to realize, Evig Låga is spreading out," Harry began, wondering if this had been the main reason why Ozpin wanted to talk to him. Their conversation had really rambled, and there were some **very** strange undertones that Harry couldn't figure out even if he could sense them. Why was Ozpin trying to hint at his Semblance being something? What kind of something? Why did Ozpin not react to the word relic, while Glynda did? And, above all, what was his interest in Harry and Ruby?

"We have a plan, a defensive plan, and we have resources we wish to gain access to. A refugee from Atlas settled into our town with a unique skill set. One that my family and I decided to try to use. Thanks to him, we were able to discover the vein of fire dust, and the rest is history."

"The rest is history..." Ozpin mused. "That covers a wide area, Mr. Arc. I will not try to second guess that decision made by yourself and your elders, but I have to ask, do you really think it is a good idea for you to spread out beyond the natural barriers as you are? I am not overly familiar with the terrain around there, but you could make some very bad parallels between what your hometown and Vale tried with Mountain Glenn. Such attempts to expand must be incredibly carefully thought out, and human defenses are no match for natural ones."

"On the contrary, I do not think that Mountain Glenn and what Evig Låga is doing is at all parallel," Harry shot back, not realizing he had made no effort to argue he hadn't been part of the decision to expand, which Ozpin noted. "First of all, Mountain Glenn assumed that they'd have access to an underground railroad for supplies without fully surveying the nature of the ground they were tunneling through, missing the hidden pockets of caves and their Grimm

inhabitants. When we first began the mines, we did thorough surveys and could not find any such caves that linked to the fire dust deposits. For another, the area between Evig Låga and the mines doesn't lend themselves to caves either."

Harry shrugged. "It's true we won't have much in the way of natural defenses, except for the nearby volcanoes and the ash that they habitually release into the upper atmosphere. But that alone cuts down sharply on the number of aerial Grimm that are comfortable with being in the area. Further, we don't rely on a constant stream of supplies, but rather supplies from over the air and stored supplies in case of emergencies."

Harry didn't realize how his eyes had lit up as he spoke. He was almost tempted to bring out a map of the towers and other defensive structures they were hoping to put into place in the near future prior to allowing more open colonization of the strip of land between his hometown and the mines, but he didn't.

The Headmaster however, did notice this. "I see. And you were part of raising those defenses, I take it?"

"I was," Harry admitted. "I raised the walls in a bare day, complete with the trenches outside. The internal defenses in the mine took me longer, but they are proof against any Grimm. Even a large s-class Grimm like Goliath won't be able to break those walls easily."

"Which again makes me wonder about your Semblance, Mr. Arc. It is very obviously beyond what any normal matter manipulation Semblance should be able to do," Ozpin mused. But Harry did not say anything, simply gazing back unperturbed by Ozpin's piercing gaze, even though he attempted his best to stare the younger man down. It didn't work, and Ozpin continued the present topic. "But those defenses, Mr. Arc, demand people to man them. Do they not?"

"It does. We are in the process of bringing in more colonists, and every adult between eighteen and fifty will need to agree to be part of a militia that will defend the new lands."

"I see..." Ozpin frowned in thought, hearing the confidence in Harry's voice. That was strange, as there was a reason why Atlas had decided to automate their defenses as much as possible. People without Aura simply could not be trusted to stand against Grimm. "Despite your enthusiasm, Mr. Arc, I still feel as if I should warn you and your extended family. Even if you set up your defenses perfectly, expanding like that into the Grimm lands is something that has only **very** rarely been done before successfully. It is an action that demands a response, and the Grimm do not hesitate to do so."

Harry pounced. The way Ozpin had spoken, the words he had used. Something about them and the way Ozpin always acted as if he knew more than he let on made Harry wonder if

perhaps Ozpin knew something more about the Grimm. Something that might be tied into the mission Death had reincarnated him in this world to deal with. “‘Demands a response’, Sir? That almost sounds as if you think the Grimm are not just mindless creatures who act on instinct.”

While that question rattled his mental cage a bit, Ozpin snorted, buying time to think about his real response to that by saying, “You and Ms. Nikos apparently fought a Nuckalevee. Tell me, exactly how mindless did the Grimm seem that day? Many such evolutions allow the Grimm to think in a far more problem-solving and aggressive manner than their fellows.”

“I disagree. Few Grimm have ever been shown to think **strategically**,” Harry emphasized. “Attacking Evig Låga or the mines would necessitate a strategic campaign. Multiple S-class Grimm working together, possibly. But that kind of thing has never been seen before, as far as I know. Even during the fall of Mountain Glenn there wasn’t any hint that multiple S class Grimm or working together to plan it out. So, unless you know different, professor, I think our defenses can stand against the Grimm.”

That response had given Ozpin enough time to think, to decide whether or not he should hint further at the existence of Salem. But he didn’t. Harry had dodged the question about his magic, let alone the hints Ozpin had allowed out to show he knew it wasn’t a Semblance. It was very clear that if Harry understood that his ‘Semblance’ was something unusual, he wasn’t willing to trust others with that secret. Therefore, Ozpin could not trust him in turn. *And I never really intended to share much information in the first place. Nothing he has said makes me question that decision. Indeed, his wariness of me makes me more unwilling to share.*

Ironically, both men were in somewhat of the same position. They both wanted to see if the other was trustworthy but weren’t willing to put themselves forward in order to see if that was the case. Harry was on guard throughout this entire conversation thanks to his past with Dumbledore and the politicians in his past life, and Ozpin had not given him nearly enough information to get Harry to open up in turn, not just because of the odd undercurrents during this conversation.

Professor Ozpin might be the head of Beacon Academy, but he had to earn Harry’s trust. Harry was not going to just give his trust to anyone because of the position he held, never again. Furthermore, as he had stated earlier, Harry did not agree with some of the things Ozpin had done, nor did he agree with Ozpin’s overall leadership style. It was too distant, too clinical, to say nothing about his concerns about Ruby.

On the other side, Ozpin was unwilling to open up to Harry, as Harry had attempted to get him to do. Ozpin had gone through several lifetimes, facing the reality of humanity being merely mortal and thus fallible, prone to weakness, distrust, treachery and everything else. This

was made worse by the most recent example of Raven Branwen and what had happened to Amber. He had gifted Raven and Qrow with some magic, the ability to transform themselves into ravens and crows.

And then, Raven, once she had been given the power of the Spring Maiden by the then dying maiden, the oldest member of Ozpin's circle. Raven had promptly turned around and betrayed Ozpin. She had returned to the Branwen Clan to use her now greatly enhanced abilities to lead them in banditry. Not to fight the Grimm, not even to just keep her powers secret, but to prey upon others. Even more recently, Amber's ambush had spoken of someone who knew about the Maidens and who somehow knew about their movements. Where that leak was, Ozpin had yet to discover, but regardless, Ozpin would not trust someone new so quickly.

"True enough, yet Grimm intelligence is not the only way the Grimm can be dangerous," Ozpin said aloud. "Simple numbers can eventually tell against even the strongest of defenses. And one aspect of the Grimm has been as certain as gravity. There are always more Grimm. **Always.** And there will never be enough hunters. There is no safety in simple strength, Mr. Arc, and a simple militia will not do."

"Who said it was a simple militia, professor?" Harry smirked grimly. "Everyone who lives within Evig Låga and beyond will have their Aura unlocked and will have weapons training. They won't form an army like Atlas has, but a civilian militia, which can be trained to hold defensive positions, will be enough to back up the real hunters and huntresses, freeing us to go on the attack more often, culling missions and so forth. With that, and with warning of any true incursions by such scouts, we will be able to defend ourselves from any Grimm assault."

"That is... I suppose that in Evig Låga the unlocking of Aura can be seen differently than in Vale or elsewhere. But that too can cause problems; there is a reason why the theory about Aura attracting Grimm even as it gives those who use it defense against them. The more people with Aura in an area, the more they will attract Grimm the instant one of those people feels fear. It will act like a dinner bell to an all-you-can-eat buffet."

"Let them come. The upshot of having Aura far outweighs the bad in the eyes of Evig Låga's council. That is the bedrock of our expansion efforts, and is going to go forward regardless of the societal constraints other city-states put on Aura awakening."

Harry leaned forward. "Professor, I will be plain. I find any conflict between humans, let alone the whole human-faunus nonsense, to be a waste of time. Chian wasn't the only small town that fell to the Grimm in the past year. Vacuo lost two of its plateau towns, and one of Vale's outer farming communities closed too, although there at least the people were evacuated. We, humanity, **cannot** afford to just keep on losing space. We need to expand, to

take back land, and maybe find out more of our enemy while doing it. Any social change, any new concept or idea that works towards that is good in our eyes.”

Ozpin stared at the young man, thinking, then slowly shook his head. “But in so doing, Mr. Arc, we may lose far more than we have to gain. Humanity as a whole cannot afford to lose such resources, lest we be in an even weaker position.”

“If you’re going for a tie, you lose the chance to win,” Harry retorted. “Taking council of your fears alone is not the way to win a war. And we are at war with the Grimm, professor, whatever bull crap people spout about this being a time of peace.”

“And do you think you can win against the Grimm, Mr. Arc?” As Glynda glared at Harry for his language, Ozpin sipped his coffee, shaking his head thrown by the sheer passion for this Harry was showing, but also pleased by it. *At least I can put my fear of his working with Salem to bed. But as to the rest?* “When they are but natural creations of the world around us? Nothing we do can change that fact.”

“If that were the fact, Grimm could pop up in cities and humanity would have already been wiped out. If they were simply part of the world, they would leave corpses!” Harry shook his head firmly. “No, professor. I can say that yes, there can be a victory against the Grimm. It only has to be found. Perhaps that is the biggest problem in the modern age. We have stopped looking for that solution. To me and the council of Evig Låga, it seems as if humanity has as a whole been trying to ignore the Grimm or too afraid to challenge them. Only by doing so can the world be changed for the better.”

“Be that as it may, Mr. Arc. There is a limit to what humanity can achieve. Mountain Glenn, Glea Partia, New Roma, Aztec, the names of attempted expansions go as far back as recorded history and perhaps far longer. Never have they succeeded. The Grimm cannot be beaten only endured.” Ozpin shook his head. “And any attempts to study Grimm, to figure out how they are created, have turned out even worse.”

This kind of thing, attempts to create new settlements, had been attempted dozens of times before. Sometimes, Ozpin helped. Back in the First Age and even a time or two in the Modern Age, after Remnant became what it is today, when the Brothers left humanity behind. He had stopped when he realized that his participation acted like a goad to Salem. But even without his direct aid, such expansions had only succeeded a few times, and even then, never for very long. If the Grimm’s natural aggression, numbers and local ‘leaders’ were not enough, then Salem herself would move against such. That was why Ozpin’s overall strategy had shifted to culling, containment and pushing humanity to look inward, to look for better ways to make themselves feel safe, to ignore the Grimm on a social level rather than confront them.

Now? Now, Ozpin knew that Salem would, sooner or later, move against Evig Låga if the local Grimm could not stop this expansion on their own. The loss of life would be horrible, and Ozpin could only start to prepare himself for those losses now if Harry and his family were set on this course. “However careful you are, regardless of local environmental issues stopping aerial-type Grimm from gathering in any number, the Grimm will come. They will attack and they will do so continuously.”

Ozpin locked onto Harry’s emerald ones as he went on, trying to convey one last time without stating it that he was speaking about Harry’s Semblance and the fact that it was not a Semblance at all. He hoped that in so hinting, Harry would at last admit to using magic in turn, and then Ozpin could give Harry that answer he so desperately wanted to find. But he didn’t, and Ozpin answered. “Whatever power you have access to, Mr. Arc, whatever plans you make, they will not be enough. At that time, I hope that you will remember there are always those who will stand against the Grimm, regardless of politics, and will reach out to me. Aid will always be given to those who come to Beacon in need of it.”

Harry internally flinched at how much that line reminded him of one of Dumbledore’s and wondered once more about what Ozpin thought he knew. *Still, I learned a lot of things here, hints more than anything, but that is enough to make some decisions going forward.* “And again, Sir, I have to wonder why you think that the Grimm will be able to respond in such a way. Such an organized, directed way. It is again almost as if you believe that they are intelligent enough to match humans, and I have to wonder why, if that is the case, this is the first I’ve heard of it? As it is, I think we have very different ideas of how to deal with the Grimm, and we should perhaps leave it at that.”

The two of them stared at one another, willing the other to give in, to give them **something**, anything to show they could be trusted. But Ozpin was unwilling to bend, believing himself to be in a better position of authority and knowledge than Harry. And Harry, with his past and his distaste for Dumbledore-like figures, was unwilling to do the same.

As their gazes remained locked, Ozpin had one final card to play. “You have very old eyes for such a young man, Mr. Arc. Has anyone ever told you that?”

“I’ve often been told that I have a very old soul,” Harry responded automatically, having indeed heard that line before a few times, before adding what he hoped was a zinger. “You also seem to have a obsession with eyes headmaster.”

That response twisted Ozpin’s so-called final card in his hand to the point where he nearly choked on his coffee but was barely able to hide it, simply grimacing as if he had realized his coffee was cold now while his mind raced with possibilities. *Have I been wrong this whole time? Harry didn’t find some artifact from the First Age that could give him magic, is this instead*

someone else who has a spirit reincarnation-type Semblance or magic? But then, why mention it like that? Could that be a dig at me? Does he know about my own?

It took Ozpin a second to push himself through that sudden bout of paranoia. No, there was no way that anyone outside of his Inner Circle would know about Ozpin's abilities. *This must be a coincidence... unless... no, the Arcs would never have anything to do with the Branwen Clan, let alone Raven, and he could not have gotten that information from Salem. If he had, why would he admit to knowing about it at all? But if Harry is indeed an old soul, where has he been all this time? What lives has he led? And why have I never even heard of someone similar before?*

Shaking those concerns off, Ozpin pulled his coffee mug away from his mouth, sitting it down with a light tap on his desk. "Well, from one old soul to another, I will give you a brief personal warning. Thoughts about the past can often lead us in wrong directions, such as how your parents' opinion of me has seemingly colored your own."

"Thinking about the past and building upon it can also give us strength, especially if shared with others you can trust," Harry retorted, his time with Dumbledore forcing out still more of a response. "Secrets kept from those who could use that information, Headmaster, only harm those who look to us for leadership."

Again, there was a brief moment of silence as the two men looked at one another. Both of them were wondering what the other was reading into their words while Ozpin scowled internally, wondering again what the story behind Harry was, feeling somewhat annoyed at how this conversation had played out nowhere near where he had hoped. It had been a very long time since someone had been unwilling to give Ozpin even a bit of what he wanted to know in conversations like this, and a part of him wondered if he was losing his touch.

On an intellectual level, Harry understood that he was projecting a bit onto Ozpin, and that was wrong. But coming clean to Ozpin, considering his concerns? Harry just couldn't argue against his reasoning not to do so. Instead, he simply smiled pleasantly and asked if they were done talking.

Ozpin nodded and stood up, gesturing Harry towards the door, asking him nonsensical questions about Mountain Glenn and the defenses he was talking about in the expanded territories for a few moments longer before bidding him farewell. When the doors shut behind the young man, he turned back to look at Glynda. "Well, if he has any contact with Salem, it is certainly unwitting. No agent of Salem's would be so willing to banter words, and his hatred for the Grimm is very real, if far too passionate. Passion like that clouds the judgment, and it seems to have infected all of Evig Låga if they are truly going forward with this mad plan of theirs. Mr.

Arc truly might not know that his Semblance is magic at all, or... or he is even more magical than I expected. It will be fascinating to see which it is."

"Perhaps. But I will say that young man probably saw more in you than you might expect," Glynda warned.

"It would not surprise me if that is the case, although hopefully, that will help Harry to warm up to us eventually. I need him to trust us enough to open up. He could do a lot of good in this world with the proper direction, and perhaps, with enough aid from other nations, this idea of expanding out from Evig Låga might even succeed."

Although it is doubtful considering Salem herself may get involved in directing the Grimm sooner rather than later. She is almost certainly aware of Harry's magic by this point, and will be wondering much the same questions as I am, Ozpin thought cynically. Not that his thinking cynically was anything new. Indeed, it was a rare thought in his head that wasn't tinged by some measure of cynicism.

Glynda frowned a little but agreed. The two men were in no way equal, after all. For all his power and skill, Harry was still young, and very naïve about the way the world as a whole worked, his naivety buoyed further by his parents apparently being blinded by their own hopes and perspectives. *Harry needs to understand that he needs our help, and in so doing, he really should be the one to open up first.* "Do you still want me to push him in our personal lessons, try to discern the limits of his magic? He may be more reluctant now to show more."

"Oh, of course. While I have no more doubts about Harry working for Salem, I still need to know as much as I can about his abilities, which will hopefully allow me to figure out how to direct his energies going forward. And possibly what kind of Relic he has had access to." *If my thoughts on his having a reincarnation Semblance of some kind are wrong, anyway.* "And yes, Glynda, I know he used that term. I believe that was simply a random word choice on his part. I can only hope that whatever it was, it could not give anyone else his abilities. And that eventually, Mr. Arc will realize that he needs us to truly direct his energies to where they might do some true, lasting good. If he does not, all we can do is prepare for the fallout, or try to use Salem's shift in attention in some fashion."

OOOOOOO

As Harry left the Clocktower thinking about the incredibly odd conversation he had just had and if he actually learned anything from it, Yang and Ruby were walking back to the dorm rooms, smiling happily and chattering about the conversation they'd had with her dad a moment ago. They had been going around the academy showing him their favorite spots via the scroll, more to kill time until this evening than anything else. The same was true for Tia, Mila,

Sung-sun, and the WB pair of RWBY, although they had stayed behind in the dorm room while the two sisters had gone walking.

The sisters' good mood evaporated when a shout of, "Well, maybe we were just tired of being pushed around!" reached them just as they entered the hallway leading to team Ruby's dorm room. The two of them looked at one another and raced forward, but halfway down the hall, Yang paused by a window, staring out as she watched her partner leap out from their dorm room's window to the ground below. "What the hell? Where is she going?"

Ruby paused to watch for a second, then the two sisters raced forward once more. Wrenching the door to their dorm room open, they piled in, only to see Weiss standing in the center of the room, her eyes wide in shock and her hand gripping a small vial of dust, one of many that she routinely kept in the dorm rooms to experiment with. With wide eyes, the white-haired girl turned to stare at them, pointing out the window. "Blake, Blake, she's a... a..."

"Faunus?" Yang supplied, crossing her arms and glaring down at the shorter girl as it was taking all of her self-control not to pound the heiress's face in. "Yeah, I know. I worked it out a few weeks back, and she and I talked about it last night. She was going to come clean this weekend to the rest of you, but I figured she had decided to push it back thanks to the arguments you two kept on having in town despite Harry trying to stop them."

"Wait, what?" Weiss seemed to rouse a bit at that, looking affronted. "What the, I knew something was going on, that, that cad!"

"Not important right now, Itty-Titty-Weissy!" Yang growled, using a nickname that she had used last when Weiss had frozen her hair during a fight. The name particularly angered Weiss, and it worked similarly now, breaking through still more of her shock. "What did you say to my partner to scare her off!?"

"Wait... you knew? Wait, no, that doesn't matter now!" Ruby got between the two of them, pushing Yang and Weiss away from one another. "What matters is that Blake ran away, and we need to get her back!"

"Why? Just let her run! She was part of the White Fang. Do you have any idea what that...that bunch of monsters have done to my family, to our people, our acquaintances, even some of my friends?" Weiss practically shrieked.

"No, but I know what Blake hasn't done," Yang shot back. "She hasn't killed you in your sleep."

Weiss and Ruby both recoiled from Yang at that, but Yang went on inexorably. "If she was some kind of secret agent for the White Fang, don't you think you would be a high-priority target? She's had hundreds, thousands of chances to attack you, Weiss. Even when you argued

about faunus rights, the numerous times you've done it..." Yang glared at Weiss, who had the grace to look a little abashed. "She didn't even raise a fist to hit you. What does that tell you?"

Clenching and unclenching her hands, Yang shook her head. "Should she have been upfront about her heritage? Maybe. But if she's running away from the White Fang, she might have more than one reason to hide that, couldn't she?"

"This is, this is, that is just supposition! For all we know, Blake could still be a member of the White Fang. She just, just wasn't assigned to kill me." Weiss knew that the last aspect of that sounded weak even as she spoke, but she barreled on regardless. "Why did she run?" she asked again, believing that a winning argument.

"Because she's scared!" Ruby shouted, interrupting the two of them. "That's what people do. If they're scared, they either flee or hide. Or attack and she wasn't about to do that. No, I'm with my sister on this. We need to find her."

For a moment, Ruby looked as if she was about to run off, but with her Semblance, Blake had too large of a head start now. At that point her scroll rang, and frowning, Ruby answered it, to find Sung-Sun's face appearing there. "Ruby, dear, is there a reason why Blake just absconded on one of the supply bullheads? As in, she used Gambol Shroud to cling to the top of it as it took off?"

Pouting angrily at missing the best way to keep Blake from leaving the academy's grounds, Ruby thought for a second, then let her face firm for a second and looked back down at her scroll. "Er, Sung-Sun, are you and the rest of your team busy with anything? Because I think we need some help."

OOOOOOO

Unaware of what was going on in the freshman dorm rooms, Harry headed back to team JNPR's townhome, looking forward to starting dinner and having time with his friends and girlfriends. *Not that we will be able to be open about that as long as the others are around, but still, it will just be nice to have all of them in one place for a bit, one place that isn't full of Grimm, anyway.*

But what mainly filled his head as he walked, was Harry's conversation with Ozpin. several fulminating moments, he decided that at the moment, he and Ozpin were on polar opposites when it came to both leadership and how to deal with the Grimm. *He seems to want to have me confess to something when it comes to my 'Semblance' but he refuses to share what he might think it is, just trying to force me to admit it and go from there. And what he said about our plans going forward? Wanting to point out that we are at risk without offering aid, or*

even knowledge unless we 'need' it? And where exactly would that help come from? He's a headmaster of a Huntsman academy, that's it.

Unless... unless he's part of the Vale Council? That, that makes more sense than I want to admit, frankly. Damn whoever felt that council should be unknown to the public! I am so glad none of the communities in Anima have ever gone that route. But even so, Ozpin's unwillingness to just outright offer aid, to mention it as he does, like we will eventually have to come crawling to him when we overreach, that smacks of manipulation so much it makes me want to punch something.

And that bit about the Grimm being natural? God, that smacks so much of defeatism it isn't even funny.

No, no. Ozpin and I are not going to be working together anytime soon. I tried to put my trust in the government and got burned. I put my trust in Dumbledore, only to realize later how stupid most of his plans were. No. I'm not doing that again. Not when I have so many more people relying on me now than ever before. Not when I have a family, I need to protect from both the Grimm and maybe other nations messing around with what we are doing, fearing what it can do to the status quo.

*And then there's how Ozpin clammed up about Ruby! Huh... actually, I might send a message back home about that, about silver eyes. I want to see if the archivist can find anything about that. If Ozpin's looking to use Ruby for some reason, then we are going to have **problems**.*

All in all, I think I might need to sit down with my team and discuss the future after this year, Harry decided. I don't think Beacon is going to be for me long term.

Entering the townhome, Harry found Ren already moving around some of the furniture. With so many teens coming in, they would need more space than just the table that had come with the townhome. "How did the meeting with the headmaster go?"

Smiling slightly at the worried undertone in the other man's words, Harry joined him, and the two of them easily began to take apart the sofa, shifting it to the side and bringing in some of the chairs from the cafeteria that they had borrowed for the night. "It was interesting. It was not informative, and only about a third of it was actually about scholastic activities. The rest of it was because he was curious. Curious about things going on back in Evig Låga and in me."

Ren's lips twitched into a faint frown at that, and then he shrugged his shoulders, not having enough information to make any conclusion on that score. Seeing that, Harry snorted. "Yes, that was pretty much my own reaction."

The two of them fell into companionable silence for a few moments as they finished shifting around the furniture and then moved into the kitchen, talking mostly about what to make. Ren had proven to be an excellent sous chef, which honestly made Harry chuckle occasionally when he thought about it. Out of three teams mostly composed of women, it was two out of the three men who could truly cook, with only Yang having any interest in that direction among the women.

As they were debating between fish or lamb, Ren paused, his face contorting as he turned towards the door, one eyebrow starting to twitch. Harry looked at him and then smirked a little. The two of them had bonded over the past few weeks, mostly over crazy girls (while not a single one of his 'sisters' was as crazy as Nora, he did have seven of them after all, if you didn't include Pyrrha,) movies, and other things of that nature since their trip down into Vale. By this point, Harry felt he could call Ren his best male friend. Not only in this world, because... well, that wasn't exactly a high bar to clear, as Harry didn't really have any other male friends, but also in his past life.

That meant that he could read the other young man pretty well, and his smirk widened as Ren abruptly left the kitchen, heading to where he had left his scroll on the small table underneath the TV. "I take it your Nora senses are tingling?"

"Very much so. That was a number ten. Nora has somehow gotten involved in something that, while not violent, might be troublesome in the ancient sense of the word. While that is one of the milder tingles, it is still worrisome considering how Nora can complicate matters."

"I would say something about it being ludicrous that you have actually been able to calculate what your senses are telling you that precisely, but then I remember, it's Nora."

Ren tried to raise Nora on his scroll, only to not get a response, but surprisingly, Harry's scroll went off. The two men looked at one another, and Harry pointed upwards, to which Ren shook his head but replied, "I believe Pyrrha went to the library."

The fight in Mountain Glenn had made Pyrrha realize something about her weapons load out, and she had been working on figuring out how she wanted to change things around at the back of her mind most of the day. Harry had offered to help before leaving to speak to Professor Ozpin, but Pyrrha had demurred, saying that she wanted to at least narrow her choices down to two or three before asking for anyone else's opinion.

"So, she could have been dragged into the same trouble Nora might be involved in. And Tia almost certainly has been, too. Drat." With a sigh, Harry picked up his scroll and was pleasantly surprised to see Tia's face there. "Tia, how are you doing?" Since Harry had left her barely an hour and a half ago to head towards his talk with Ozpin, that question might have

seemed a bit much, but Harry knew that, like himself, Tia had a large dollop of Arc luck when it came to finding trouble.

"Please postpone the feast. We're all going back into Vale, Harry," Tia said a faint scowl only just barely visible through her scarf. "Ruby asked for help."

"Could you unpack, please?" Harry said frowning and sitting down, gesturing Ren over so he could overhear.

Tia nodded as Ren's head appeared beside her brothers, then stated simply, "We saw Blake run away. Something happened with her team. Ruby came and asked us to help."

"Who is us in this case?" Harry said, raising a hand to his forehead, beginning to feel a small headache coming along. "And do you want Ren and I to join you?"

"I am afraid it is rather too late for that," Sung-Sun's voice said from the background. "We are already on a Bullhead heading into Vale after her."

Harry frowned, wondering how that worked. There was regular transport to and from Vale, but it ran on a schedule, one every two hours, forty-five minutes either way from six to one in the morning. "All right, I'll bite. How exactly did Blake get ahead of you if you all saw her running and Ruby was so quick to ask for your help to find her?"

There seemed to be a minor argument going on in the background, with Weiss set saying something about "just like a thief," and Yang barking back, sounding about three seconds away from activating her Semblance and rearranging the heiress's features.

Then Mila Rose's voice could be heard, apparently playing the peacemaker along with Nora. This made both men's eyes widen as they looked at one another in surprise. It said something that Nora, of all people, was trying to keep things from becoming violent.

Sung-Sun simply answered with aplomb, shaking her head slightly. "Ruby asked us for help after we saw Blake hitching a ride on the supply bullhead. We had to wait twenty-five somewhat uncomfortable minutes before the transport bullhead arrived. Hopefully, the trail won't be totally cold by the time we get there."

"Do you want us to join you?" Ren asked, repeating Harry's earlier question. "We'd be well behind you, but three more pairs of eyes might help."

"If you wish, but I do not believe that simply three more searchers would help overmuch without a place to start," Sung-Sun said with a shrug. "Frankly, I am this close to thinking that this is an internal team Ruby issue and turning Tia, Mila and myself around. The only reason I'm not is that Apacci has not returned to the Academy and is not answering his scroll, so this lets me both help our friends and look for our wayward teammate."

Harry thought about it for a moment, ignoring Ruby's whine in the background. Whatever Ruby thought, this did seem to be an internal team Ruby issue, specifically from what he was getting from this conversation and the noise in the background on the other side that this issue was between Blake and Weiss. It appeared as if his efforts earlier that day to keep the peace between them had come apart the moment the two of them were alone, and if he had to guess, Blake's secrets had both come out.

And I can't just step in and help to solve that issue, which I probably would try if I was the one to find Blake. No, this has to come from her and from her team. "I... I think I will leave that to you then. Could you put Ruby on, please?" Just because I'm not going to step in and try to help, doesn't mean I'm not going to give a little pep talk to someone who probably very much needs it right now. And maybe when she gets back, Ruby and I can sit down and talk about what she might have done beyond the fight with Torchwick to be let in two years early.

Tia smiled at him, pulling down her scar so she could see the small but very warm smile that crossed her face at his words as if she knew what he was going to do. Which she probably did. "Can we have the feast some other time?"

"Certainly. And I think that whoever finds Blake first gets to choose what the main dish is," Harry quipped back, winking at his sister.

"Well, there goes any idea of my pulling myself and Mila out of this little search," Sung-Sun said drolly, wagging her finger into the pickup of the scroll for a moment before handing the scroll down to Ruby. "You are a master manipulator, Hadrian Arc."

Just as Harry had feared, Ruby looked quite distraught when her face appeared in the pickup. Where normally the chibi reaper had an almost crazy level of energy, she seemed to be drooping in place now, her face showing Ruby's inner turmoil. "Hey, Harry. Don't suppose you have any advice to give me, one team leader to another?"

"I do. First, chin up," Harry said, smiling at the younger girl encouragingly. "Blake's running away, and whatever sparked it has nothing to do with you as a leader. If anything, keeping three girls with such disparate personalities as your sister, Weiss and Blake, pointing in the same general direction for so long without any blowups before this is a testament to your leadership skills. Never doubt that Ozpin, for all the mistakes he's made with my sister," *Or his real reasons for bringing you into Beacon*, "was right about that in your case."

Ruby smiled wanly. "It really doesn't feel like it right now from here. It feels like I should've seen this coming, you know?" Her eyes narrowed, and she looked to the side, probably to Sung-Sun, if the sleeve at the corner of the pickup in that direction was any indication. "Especially considering it was so obvious to some other people. Did you know?" She asked, looking back at Harry.

“That Blake was a cat girl? Yes,” Harry answered easily, seeing no reason to prevaricate or sugarcoat things. “But I picked it up because of her last name rather than anything she actually did.”

Ruby’s brows furrowed. “What is that supposed to mean?”

That response told Harry that not all of Blake’s secrets had come out. But he was still determined to keep those secrets for her. It wasn’t his place to tell her friends if Blake... well, in Harry’s opinion, hadn’t been brave enough to do it herself. *And here I thought that she was making a lot of progress, giving me her parent’s scroll number and coming clean to Yang. Apparently not enough.*

“That is Blake’s secret to share. But I will remind you that this is Beacon. I sincerely doubt that Ozpin or Professor Goodwitch would have allowed Blake to come to Beacon if they didn’t know all that they could about her background.”

Harry could just see the head of white hair over Ruby’s shoulder, Weiss apparently having moved forward into the pickup a little, before pausing at that, turning away now. “I think that so long as all four of you are able to sit down and talk things out, I think you’ll be able to smooth things over. Blake’s running away is a problem, and her keeping secrets is a problem, as is Weiss’s racism and jumping to conclusions.”

At those words, the white hair over Ruby’s shoulder twitched but said nothing, a good sign in Harry’s opinion. She was listening, at least. *Or maybe just doesn’t want to make a scene.* “But those are problems that you all can overcome as a team. And the fact that you are looking for her so hard, that I think is a step in the right direction.

Ruby smiled back, looking a little more cheerful and focused now, just as the door to the townhome opened and Pyrrha came in. *And now to play dirty.* “And if you do, Ruby, I will allow you to choose the desert for the feast. Whoever finds her first gets to choose the main meal, and if you are able to talk things out, you get to choose the desert.”

Ruby beamed back, straightening her shoulders and almost hopping in place, the video bouncing with her. “You will? Oh, heck yeah! Don’t worry, we’ll find Blake and work this out and...”

Tia took back the scroll at that point. She smiled into the pickup at Harry, and Harry smiled back, saying he would see her when she got back. She nodded and disconnected, leading Harry to explain things to Pyrrha.

“Wait, Blake is a faunus? And you both knew?” Pyrrha asked, staring between the two men first, she had frowned a bit at the fact that Blake had run off, a frown of consternation and annoyance crossing her features, before she schooled them back into her normal public smile,

which quickly turned into a real one when Harry kissed her on the top of the head, putting an arm around her shoulders as she lay her head on Harry's shoulder.

"Bows don't tend to twitch like that, especially when you're inside, away from the wind," Ren pointed out dryly.

Pyrrha winced, looking away. "Now I feel foolish."

"Don't take it personally, Pyrrha, Nora and her own teammates, bar Yang, didn't know either. In fact, I would wager only a few other faunus among our class knew. I'm just more observant than most. And Harry..."

"I'm a student of history, as I said earlier. Then I observed her and noticed the same bow twitching that Ren did," Harry chuckled.

At that point, Ren stood up and headed into the kitchen to put away most of the ingredients they had brought out.

"And you are positive that we should not get involved?" Pyrrha asked.

"I don't think that the three of us could add anything to the search. Well, I could if I was willing to, but this really does seem like an internal Team Ruby matter. Hopefully, they'll find her quickly, and Tia, Sung-Sun and Mila can return. Let the four girls handle it themselves. Outsiders shouldn't need to step in to keep the peace if Team Ruby wants to stay as an actual team."

Pyrrha nodded at that, humming in thought. "Poor Ruby. I imagine she's feeling very much stuck in the middle right now. And I can completely see this having just blindsided her utterly."

"I can, too. This is a social kind of thing, and Ruby just isn't mature enough to have any real idea about what to do in moments like this. But she's going to have to learn," Harry said before smirking a little. "Even if the big brother in me wants to step in and help. It's time for tough love rather than soft, I think."

Pyrrha giggled at that, then nodded, stood up, then leaned down quickly and very abruptly to give him a surprise kiss on the lips. But although she did surprise him, Harry certainly did not fail to respond. A second before she could pull back, his hands came up, gently holding the sides of her head as Pyrrha tried to pull away, holding her still and kissing her back until both of them needed to lean away for air.

"You don't get to kiss and run," Harry whispered as he released her, and Pyrrha giggled a bit while in the kitchen, Ren stoically continued to put away the food, pretending he hadn't heard the small romantic moment going on behind him. "Where are you off to?"

"I am going to head over to the blacksmiths," Pyrrha stated, referring to the series of foundries, machine shops, and, yes, traditional smithies that Beacon students had access to here in the Academy. Someone was always there, day or night, and Beacon had several weapons experts on hand to help students, if need be, although they wouldn't make any suggestions if the student didn't have some kind of plan to start with. That was why Mila and Ruby had become quite popular among many of the freshmen, whose personal weapons or styles needed an upgrade.

"I have got a few ideas I want to look at, and I want to see how viable they are. I tried to work it out with that 3D imaging program that they have us use, AutoceD, and all three seem to work, but..."

Harry nodded, and Ren came over, asking if he could go with her. He had some ideas of his own that he wanted to ask the experts, questions about mecha-shift weapons. "Lotus Flower needs a little extra something, I fear, as does my own... what is that term you used, Harry?"

"Battle kit, or battle rattle, although that isn't really applicable to you since you don't make any such noise," Harry supplied with a snort.

"That, yes. Ironically, I had hoped to ask Ruby or Milla about it during the feast, but I want to have something in hand come Monday to train with and I don't know how long this little drama is going to take to play out."

Harry waved them off, perfectly happy with his use of his magic, Caliburn, and his wrist rifle. He watched them go for a moment, then frowned, thinking, before pulling open his scroll again and checking time zones. Harry had a few things he wanted to do himself, especially trying to figure out what Ozpin was after with Ruby, but if the feast was no longer on, there was no point in waiting to follow up on the information that Blake had given him. In fact, the faster he could follow up on that, the better.

Settling back down onto the sofa, Harry pulled out the piece of paper that Blake had given him with her parent's scroll number and called it. It took an inordinate amount of time, but eventually, the call went through. A man appeared on the screen with the same black colored hair as his daughter, yellow eyes, and a firm, square-jawed, mature face, coupled with a beard that almost hid a mouth made to both smile and frown in equal measure.

The man looked back, frowning and opening his mouth before closing it. "Emerald eyes, right. You cannot imagine the grief my wife gave my daughter about that being the thing to look out for most in you. So, you're Harry Arc, the young man who somehow convinced my daughter to contact us."

"I don't think I had to convince her so much as point out that Blake's own circumstances had changed and that maybe, just maybe, that could be used as a bridge to repair your relationship," Harry demurred. "It is good to speak with you, Ghira. I presume you're Ghira Belladonna anyway. Blake didn't actually give me any descriptions of you, and for various reasons, an actual picture of you is very hard to come by."

The man smiled, a surprising amount of warmth in the expression. "You could say that is a legacy of the past. And whatever you say, I think we do have you to thank for making my daughter understand that she could reach out to us, young man. Neither my wife nor I had her scroll number after all, not since she wanted to stay with the... old gang even after it fell under new management."

Harry chuckled at the wordplay there, nodding his head in understanding. "Well, I am happy to hear that you and her are at least talking." *Hopefully, that means that she will also be willing to talk to her team.* "But I also hope she passed on why I wanted to talk to you."

"Blake told us about it, yes," a new, feminine voice said. The pickup pulled back a bit, allowing a second face to appear. And as it did, Harry had to hold back a whistle. *If this is what Blake is going to look like when she's older, maybe there is something about all those cat girl memes I saw so often back in Lighthouse.* For some reason, those have been the rage while he was there, and cat faunus in particular, seemed to... garner an extremely positive response from the male side of the human sphere.

Like Blake and her husband, Kali had black hair and yellow eyes, her cat ears noticeably larger than Blake's could possibly be if she could cover them with her little bow. She had shorter hair than Blake, and three gold piercings on her cat ears, which must have been very painful. Currently she wore something that looked vaguely Asian to Harry's mind, with black and white being the main colors, along with golden highlights. The only other color in her outfit was a purple armband that matched the shirt Ghira wore. Her face was also gorgeous. Even Harry, who had grown up in this life surrounded by attractive women and who was currently dating three beauties could say that.

Beyond her appearance, though, for some reason, Kali Belladonna gave Harry an impression of being somewhat like his own mother, the same kind of iron glove in a velvet gauntlet feeling. Despite the fact that, if her daughter's height was anything to go by, she was probably far more petite than Hazel.

"Yet just because you had ulterior motives to want to talk to us doesn't take away from the fact that you actually got our daughter to reach out to us in the first place. For that, we thank you. Very much."

Harry bowed his head in reply to that, saying nothing but avoiding looking at Kali's inquisitive, scheming gaze, instead concentrating on Ghira. Ghira nodded back, and he moved the conversation along quickly. "Blake told us something about you wanting colonists or settlers? She wasn't quite clear about the difference there." The man's narrowed dangerously. "That seems rather too good to be true, especially here on Menagerie with our problems."

For all the size of the island of Menagerie, which was quite large, larger than any of the small islands around the southern and northern ends of the Anima continent, there still wasn't a lot of arable land on it. Rather, the terrain was mountainous. This led to scant resources for the large faunus population. Predominantly faunus, anyway. There were humans there too, but not in any great numbers.

After the Faunus Revolution, a vast majority of the world's faunus population had transferred to their new land, only to discover that the councils of the world had pulled one final trick on them. The island didn't have any dust deposits whatsoever, although there were a lot of rivers that could be used to make hydroelectric stations and perhaps untapped heavy metals, but the faunus lacked the resources to exploit them. Concentrating on feeding and housing their population, the faunus had to mainly live off what the ocean could give them. They could do so, but nowhere near as comfortably as any of the other sovereign nations of Remnant. Even most of the smaller societies of Mistral had more food surplus than Menagerie.

"I assure you this is a real offer, nor would this be a sinecure. Any settler who comes into Evig Låga will need to carve out new homes for themselves, farms, businesses, what have you, in formerly Grimm lands and deal with all that entails. This means training in a militia and allowing your Aura to be unlocked, if at all possible," Harry warned, figuring to get the worst parts over with right off the bat.

That seemed to shock his listeners, and they looked at one another quickly, surprise and worry on their faces.

"Yes, I know that is unusual, but frankly, I find it ludicrous that even most policemen outside of Vacuo don't have their Aura unlocked. It has always seemed as if it should be a requirement. I know that there is a certain societal pushback against such an idea, but in Evig Låga, practically every family has someone who has been a Hunter or Huntress in the past, and the Arcs have always had Huntsman, going as far back as our history can tell us. While having a population with their Aura unlocked makes policing that population more difficult, the benefits far outweigh the downsides in our opinion."

"There is also the fact that having your Aura unlocked makes someone more visible to the Grimm," Kali retorted. "That has been a proven fact for centuries, just as much as its penchant for misuse and is a reason why even here on Menagerie, very few of our folk have

their Aura unlocked. To say nothing about the fact that occasionally, people's Auras simply can't be unlocked by any means known to those around them."

"We would not outright reject someone whose Aura cannot be unlocked, but it would make things far more dangerous for them. We are willing to somewhat bend on that score, but not when it comes to actually fighting," Harry stated fervently. "Everyone above seventeen has to pull their own weight. Further, we're not talking about building a city from the ground up. We're going to be lacking in factories and heavy industry for a while, bar mining anyway. But there is a river within the suggested settlement zone to use for waterpower, so eventually, we'll have other things. But can you honestly see any of the pampered inner-city folk of Vale or Atlas deciding to join us?"

"Which tells me you're probably going to look for settlers in Vacuo and the outer villages in Anima... possibly Mantle too, but that's doubtful," Holly mused. "Yet that isn't the biggest Juggernaut in the room. Between humans and faunus there'll always be one overriding question to consider. How would any faunus who takes up your offer of land and space be treated, Hadrian Arc?"

"And why exactly are we speaking to you rather than your parents or members of your Evig Låga's counsel instead?" Ghira added.

"You will eventually be speaking to them, but... I don't know how much you know about the taxation laws in Mistral or how it and the smaller villages and towns interact. Suffice it to say that if someone officially on the counsel for Evig Låga reached out to anyone and admitted to the fact that we are trying to grow beyond our borders and bring in more citizens, higher taxes and other laws would come into play quite quickly. In point of fact, I know my parents are hip-deep in that issue already thanks to Sunflash's miners."

Harry watched for but was not surprised that there was no flash of recognition at the name. That would've made his job easier, but it was perhaps a minor sign of racism (or just ignorance) to think that all faunus would know one another.

"As for being treated equally, you will be. You will be held to the same laws as everyone else and will have the same rights as everyone else. If a faunus can prove that he or she has faced discrimination, the offender will be held accountable and pay reparations. Evig Låga hasn't ever had issues with inbuilt racism. As I told your daughter, my own aunt was kicked out of Evig Låga due to her racism... and her overall attitude if I'm honest. We've had a small but extremely vocal faunus population since the Colors War. Sunflash, for all the fact that he would simply prefer to act as a mine supervisor, is also on the council, giving him real political influence."

"Give us this Sunflash's number. We'll want to talk to faunus on the ground," Ghira stated, jumping on that quickly.

"I can, but... don't expect to get much of an answer from the man," Harry replied, shrugging his shoulders. "He's not exactly talkative. And I'm not saying that as if I'm trying to imply that Sunflash isn't willing to talk to me personally or has problems with authority. I mean, he's just not very talkative. I've talked to several of his miners, and even with them, he communicates more in grunts, gestures and smacks upside the head than actual words unless they are working on something more serious."

For a moment, both faunus' eyes narrowed as if they were thinking that Harry was making fun of this other faunus, giving his words about racism not being a societal issue in his hometown the lie. But Harry blithely ignored that, continuing on, "I will give you his number though, as well as the scroll number for Rasputin Violette, the bat faunus who helped us find the Fire Dust deposits that began this scheme of ours. He's still the head of our survey teams, even though they've grown several times over. He is much more talkative, although his actual political position isn't nearly as powerful as Sunflash's."

That mollified both cat folk, and Ghira hummed thoughtfully. "Artisans, blacksmiths, farmers, masons, woodworkers, furniture makers... white-collar trades of all sorts. That's the sort of people you want, right?"

"Above and beyond all of that, though, they need to be people who are willing to be trained and to learn how to fight," Harry added bluntly. "Defenses against the Grimm are going to be based on the idea of using our manpower to best effect. And I am afraid to say singles or young couples without many dependents would probably be the best for now. Evig Låga itself is going to have trouble housing such for a bit until the push out into the corridor between it and the mines begins. And then, any kids running around would be a major security concern."

The talk continued for an hour or more after that point, as the pair began to ask more questions about the area in question and how exactly people were processed to become citizens of Evig Låga. The defenses Harry explained were strange but could probably work, although only because, as Harry had stated, the vast majority of the population would have their Aura unlocked and be able to fight back if Grimm incursions started.

Harry was also very blunt about the defenses around the mine and how they had already turned back a Grimm migration led by an S-class. Not the largest, but still far larger than a settlement of a similar size would've been able to see off without the defenses that Harry had helped raise.

In fact, those defenses sounded a great deal like what the faunus had been forced to rely on when they first came to Menagerie and began to spread out. Such defenses were still used in various areas around the island, while forty-man teams led by faunus with their Aura unlocked

went around to make certain that the Grimm population of the island wasn't rebuilding itself up to any dangerous level.

After a bit, discussion, both of the faunus had agreed to reach out to Rasputin and Sunflash, unwilling to take Harry's word entirely at face value but understanding that a new area to colonize would alleviate the population pressure on Menagerie. By a lot. Which in turn would have a cascading effect on the quality of life of the remaining citizens.

Even better, a lot of the skill sets that Evig Låga was looking for were things that the faunus population of Menagerie had in abundance. It wasn't even a single generation ago that Menagerie had first been so excessively colonized after all. So, it simply made sense in many ways.

For his part, the fact they weren't willing to commit to anything right away was fine with Harry. He would prefer them to be cautious rather than jump at the chance. Being so eager would probably mean that there was something else going on that he didn't know about that was pushing the idea from their end.

"The main sticking point will probably be the Aura issue. Humans and faunus alike, we don't like the idea of being so visible to the Grimm, and that stigma has been around for hundreds of years in nearly every society across the world. We won't have nearly as much trouble with the need to join a militia, but I think we can both agree that if the faunus already in your little nation back up your claims, we will help you advertise for colonists and even endorse any of our own folk moving to Evig Låga. We'll have to talk about resources and how exactly to get them there in the future, as well as payment for that endorsement," Ghira warned.

"That's fine. I'm only doing the sales pitch. Everything else is going to go through the Evig Låga council, so reaching out to Sunflash is a good idea, so long as you can actually get him to talk to you," Harry shrugged. "My sister Tia doesn't like to talk either due to a slight mental disorder, but reading her expressions and body language is a lot easier than reading his."

"We will manage," Ghira rolled his eyes, and after a few moments of small talk, the conversation ended on a positive note.

Harry leaned back in his sofa, deciding he had done enough talking for a bit and, seeing no one else around, decided to have some 'him' time, reaching for a game controller. *The ball is in their court now, I can only hope that they agree. We need more manpower, a lot more than we've got already. And the harder we push into the Grimm lands, the better.*

OOOOOOO

A few hours later, Kali left the Belladonna house, whistling cheerfully. She walked through the streets of the large town that was the capital of Menagerie, heading to the other side of the city. There, a large temple-like structure sat, the headquarters for the White Fang.

Kali was always amused when she saw it, wondering if the temple-like structure of the building had been deliberate on her husband's part when he built the thing or an accident. *What are we worshipping if that is the case? Freedom? The war against the oppressors? Or is there some other message he wanted to convey? Or was Ghira just drunk when he okayed the plans? Given I just told him I was pregnant, that is entirely possible.*

Kali fought back a giggle as she remembered how poleaxed Ghira had been for weeks after that announcement. But she kept the giggle inside easily, fearing that in many ways since her husband had stepped down from the leadership of the White Fang what was worshiped here was not so much freedom or the fight for freedom but simply the violence.

Outside, she passed a few guards, who frowned at the cat woman. More than one of them made to stop her, but their more senior members halted that, waving them back. That was something else she didn't like about the present White Fang. *Since when would faunus need to be so on guard against other faunus, and here in Menagerie of all places? Is that paranoia or guilt? Or simply arrogance and contempt for our citizens who don't want to take up the fight? Is it directed against me personally or the rest of the local population? I could almost hope it was contempt against just me. That would be less destructive in the long run.*

"Kali, darling," a feminine voice with a distinctive accent spoke as Kali entered the throne room. It could not be called anything else, although Kali reckoned that the individual who sat on that throne really wasn't all that comfortable there.

Sienna was a tiger faunus with amber eyes, a dark complexion and wild black hair in an asymmetrical bob. Her Faunus trait manifested as an extra pair of ears, and her body was adorned with numerous tattoos resembling tiger stripes. She wore four golden earrings on three of her ears, one on each Human ear and two on the left Faunus ear, as well as having a small jewel resembling a bindi on her forehead.

She was seen wearing a form-fitting dark gray sleeveless top with white trim; the top had a large diamond cutout exposing most of her back accompanied by a smaller diamond-shaped cutout just above her breasts. Over the top, she wore a low-hanging long red cape that was clasped by golden rings near the crest of her top's chest cutout, as well as a gray waist cincher with red trim and a gold-buckled belt over it, which fastened a gray pouch on her right hip. Below the waist she had a long gray open skirt with thick white trim revealing a pair of black shorts beneath, along with over-the-knee black stockings with golden trim. Aside from that, she wore a pair of light gray wedged sandals with red laces tied to her calves, as well as a

single black elbow-length fingerless glove on her right hand. She also wore a red rope with a golden bell on her left side wrapped around her waist with a matching rope wrapped around her right wrist.

“Sienna, it was good of you to agree to see me when I called,” Kali said, moving forward smoothly.

“Always.” Sienna Khan, leader of the White Fang, stated, hopping to her feet and moving towards the cat woman, smiling as they exchanged a fond hug before heading around the throne and into the back area beyond arm in arm. “I always enjoy talking to you. Did you at least leave Ghira some measure of dignity when you walked out the door, or did you leave him tied to your bed again?”

“I left Ghira with just as much dignity as he wanted to be left with,” Kali answered. The two women snickered, walking through the headquarters building arm in arm. It was no secret among those who knew Ghira that in the bedroom, it was Kali who called the shots, and ‘in the bedroom’ was a very, very loose term when she wanted it to be.

Although most wouldn’t have believed it, in fact, even most faunus would’ve found it highly unusual that the tough-as-nails leader of the White Fang was still so friendly with the former leaders, that was indeed the case. Ghira and Kali might’ve walked away from the White Fang, but they had both fought the good fight for far longer than most, and while they disagreed on the way the current White Fang was fighting that fight, neither woman had ever allowed that to get in the way of their friendship.

Moreover, Kali was one of the few people who knew how precarious Sienna’s position really was in the past few years. Extremism had crept into even Sienna’s more violent version of the White Fang, and it was only Sienna directing that need for bloodshed that had kept her in power in turn. Sienna had been the one to start advocating for more violence, but her violence had always been directed. Purposeful, surgical strikes, always with the goal of helping faunus, not punishing those humans or human institutions that took advantage of them.

But this gradually changed over time as more of the old guard among the White Fang left, either starting families of their own, losing their fire, or no longer agreeing with the methodology. And as crackdowns against the White Fang grew, so too did the radicalism within the group. This led to individuals like Adam Taurus taking greater positions of power within the White Fang rather than more strategically minded individuals like Sienna.

By this point, both women knew that Sienna was, well, riding a tiger, although neither woman would use that term aloud. Sienna dared not get off for fear of the tiger turning on her and mauling her in turn, nor could she give the reins of the tiger to anyone else, lest things become even worse.

The two of them made small talk until they were in Sienna's own living area within the White Fang headquarters, the door shutting close behind them. There, Sienna lounged onto a sofa, gesturing Kali to another one nearby. The two of them laid out. Cat people of all sorts preferred to lounge when they could. "So, what brings you to me today? Does it have anything to do with that wide smile you've been wearing for a few days now?"

"A bit, although only peripherally. My daughter actually reached out to us. You know she left the White Fang?"

"I know. Adam decided to execute all of the train personnel on a train he and Blake were supposed to simply infiltrate," Sienna scowled, shaking her head. "Bloodthirsty little basket case! I tried to demote him after that, but he's such a fucking hero to so many of the White Fang it didn't stick. Especially among our recruits, thanks to a few of his operations in Mantle and Vale. I'm happy for you, although I'm unhappy to have lost an agent so good as Blake. I should've kept her closer."

Kali smiled thinly at that before waving that off. "Well anyway, the reason she got in contact with us was a most perspicacious young man," Sienna set up abruptly, waggling her eyebrows at the other woman, who laughed and shook her head. Sienna sighed and leaned back once more before the conversation turned serious as Kali explained about Harry Arc and Evig Låga.

Sienna listened intently, understanding at least partially why Kali had brought this to her attention. "So, you want me to use White Fang resources to look into this place? See if it is all that this young man says it is? I don't have any agents there already. I know that much. White Fang penetration in Anima outside of Mistral itself isn't anything to write home about."

Unlike most of the villages and towns that called Mantle their home, the various smaller communities of Anima were very much distinct communities. Few among them wanted anything to do with anyone else they could get away with, and given the geography of the continent, most could look after their own devices, sharing hunters and resources as they liked and only paying taxes to Mistral, getting further Hunter and resource aid in return. There were a few where faunus made up the majority of the population, there were others where humans and faunus coexisted, and a few where faunus were not only unwelcome but outright not allowed to live. And the insular nature of the communities meant that even among those places where the faunus population was large, the White Fang had little influence.

"A little bit of that, although my husband and I have already decided that someone will be traveling to Evig Låga ourselves to meet in person with their counsel." Sienna looked at her quickly, and Kali understood. "One of us, not both. The other will stay here and hold the reins of

Menagerie. But I was wondering if you wanted to send along a representative? And... My husband and I were wondering if this is an opportunity.”

“An opportunity for more than just helping Menagerie?” Sienna asked shrewdly. “You and your husband of always been proponents of the idea of simply transplanting our folk rather than fighting for the land we were born in.”

“Exactly,” Kali answered placidly, not rising to the challenge in Sienna’s words. “If Atlas, Mantle or even Vale refuse to give us equal rights, why don’t we simply leave? Find a place that will, or, get behind this idea of carving out more territory in the Grimm lands.”

Sienna winced a little, shaking her head, and Kali understood. Harry had been very blasé about it, but there really was a **major** stigma against having your Aura unlocked that existed among the general population across all three continents. Fear of the Grimm was just that strong. Yet the upside was intriguing.

Shaking that thought off, Sienna thought for a bit. Then she nodded. “I will at least send in an advisor along with whichever of you goes. As for the rest, we’ll have to see.” Sienna personally wasn’t a proponent of that plan, but it did have some merit.

Kali smiled, knowing that was the best answer she could get from the cautious Sienna, and shifted the conversation back to her daughter, wanting to act the proud mother for a bit now that the business was out of the way. Speculation about Evig Låga, Menagerie, the future, and whether or not they should help one another could wait, at least for now.

OOOOOOO

With a sigh, Harry looked over at the time and sat down the controller to the game he’d been playing on the screen. First, he called Ren and Pyrrha, telling them that it looked as if the feast wasn’t going to happen at all tonight. Then, he asked for requests for food. It also looked like it would be only the three of them, and he agreed wholeheartedly with Ren’s fervent prayer to the gods above that Nora, in particular, wouldn’t cause any trouble.

OOOOOOO

As night fell, the search for the wayward Blake had not gone very well, in Tia’s opinion. First, she had indeed been long gone from the landing area in Vale by the time they got there. For another, no one seemed to have seen her in the surrounding area, not even to the point where they could tell where she had raced off to.

To Sung-Sun and Tia, that meant one thing: Blake had taken to the rooftops. As a cat faunus, she could probably easily move along areas where normal humans would have had a lot of trouble. After a brief discussion with the others, everyone decided to split up into teams. Milla joined Yang, heading downtown after Yang got her precious Bumblebee out of the storage area set aside for personal vehicles of students and Beacon professors alike.

Since there was no actual road between Vale and Beacon, personal vehicles like Yang's motorcycle were kept in a small, exceedingly secure area near the landing zone itself. Yang had to pay for it, but it was a small pittance in comparison to the price that it would've taken to actually transport the bike to Vale and back whenever she wanted to ride.

Yang had an idea where she could get some information on where Blake could've gone, and Mila "Is the only one among you all who looks like you would fit in as good as I can in that part of the city."

Weiss and Ruby, one very unenthusiastic and one very enthusiastic, decided to retrace their steps from earlier that day, heading down slowly to the shopping district, hoping to look at any of the bookstores nearby. Blake had gone to many of them in the past and could perhaps go there for help now.

Meanwhile, Sung-Sun, Nora and Tia would take to the rooftops, circling around the landing area in an ever-widening spiral. If Blake was just hiding out somewhere among the rooftops, they would hopefully be able to find her. Although to be fair, Sung-Sun felt that their chances of doing so were very low.

A bare hour into the search, she called a halt to that plan, instead shifting their rooftop survey deeper downtown into an area where more warehouses and abandoned buildings could be found. She didn't know how much money Blake had, but if she didn't have much, this area would be where she could go to find someplace to hole up for the night.

With night almost fully upon them, it was not Blake that they first spotted. Nora was skipping along behind Sung-Sun and Tia along one of the larger warehouse roofs, humming to herself and staring up over the edge before she paused and hissed, "Hey, look at this."

Tia and Sung-Sun had spread out to either side of the rooftop around her and had been doing the same thing to either side of Nora, but now came back towards her, looking over the edge down towards the street below. "What is it... Is that Apacci?" Sung-Sun muttered. "Good grief. I am half tempted to jump down there and smack those little antlers off his head for not responding when I called him earlier."

Nora had indeed seen their erstwhile teammate. He was standing, barely visible, in the small entryway to a warehouse that had been converted into a club or underground music venue of some kind, talking to someone else whose features were entirely hidden in the shadow cast by the entryway. Sung-Sun wasn't certain which, but considered either guess could be close to the truth, considering the music coming out of the building. Loud and annoying music to boot. How faunus preferred such a loud noise she had no idea, but they did.

Apacci wasn't in any kind of disguise or anything. But he hadn't been seen at all that day, and Sung-Sun, as team leader, was very annoyed by the fact that he hadn't contacted them or answered her call.

She was about to follow through with her threat when the silhouette across from him in the entryway suddenly became visible. It was a woman, a faunus of some kind. She was just as

short as Apacci was but very obviously a woman, given her hips and chest, and as Sung-Sun watched, she leaned into Apacci, whispering something before pulling him inside the building.

"Of course!" Sung-Sun groaned while Nora laughed cheerily, and Tia slowly shook her head. "Why am I not surprised that it was a girl. Well, I can only hope that he uses some kind of protection."

Again, Tia just shook her head and gestured that they should get moving.

Sung-Sun nodded, but in all honesty, she was close to giving up on this chore. This really wasn't their problem, and they'd already wasted a vast majority of the day on this search. "I vote we finish looking around in this district, then head into town to a few pawn or twenty-four-hour markets that are known to be owned by faunus. If we cannot discreetly find her there or at least leave a message with someone who can pass it on, then we call a halt to this and let Team Ruby solve their own issues."

"No." Tia stated simply as she moved off.

"You're outvoted!" Nora said cheerfully as she leaped from that roof to the next, landing lightly and racing on. "Finding our wayward kitten is a job for all of her friends!"

"But I'm getting tired!" Sung-Sun mock-whined, only not really meaning it to a certain degree. She didn't have nearly as much endurance as the other two, although she did have to admit to still being good to go when Tia made to kneel down in front of her, indicating without words that she could climb onto the broader shouldered woman's back.

The two of them set off after Nora, still on the lookout for Blake. This ended around twenty minutes later when Tia's scroll rang. Opening it, she saw Miltia's face, looking worried. The two of them had exchanged scroll numbers as both were interested in learning dance moves from one another, although Tia had been very pleased that Harry hadn't given his scroll number to Melanie when the white-themed twin had asked. Unlike Miltia, it was clear, even to Tia, that Melanie had ulterior motives when she asked.

"Um, Tia, right? Could we, could we ask you to stop in over at the club? We've got two Huntresses here, and we really can't afford to close the club again."

Tia blinked, then nodded and, after orienting herself, headed off in a different direction. The other two looked at one another, shrugged, and followed after. They weren't having much luck looking for Blake as it was.

OOOOOOO

Apacci tried hard not to stare at the Dog girl's rear end as she led him deeper into the building, through several locked doors and to a small office at the back, well away from the riotous rave going on out in the main area. There, a massive man waited for him, staring at Apacci thoughtfully.

Crossing his hands in front of his face, Chainsaw looked at the apparent Huntsman in training who wanted to join the White Fang. Of course, this sounded way too good to be true,

especially given the operation happening later that very night. "While we are always happy to welcome fighters with some experience, those who go to Beacon normally are blinded to the realities of the cause by Odd Oz and Goodbitch. I have to wonder if you're some kind of spy."

"You can search me for a wire if you want, but let's just say that Beacon isn't all it's cracked up to be. It's not deliberately anti-faunus, but neither do they go out of their way to defend us against those who are. And when it comes to a fight, they are more than willing to sacrifice our lives in favor of human lives," Apacci said before explaining the battle in Mountain Glenn, the Remembrance, from his position.

Or rather, colored by his thoughts. To Apacci, every time he had been assigned guard duty or on point as they moved through the city had been another example of humans, in this case, Sung-Sun and Tia, putting him and Mila in danger rather than shouldering it themselves. That, and the events in Forever Fall, a few racist students beyond Cardin, and worse, in his opinion, the fact that coming from a background with very little education, Apacci was forced to meet the educational standards of the school, all pointed to the fact that Beacon was subtly racist. To say nothing of Weiss Schnee being there.

"Are you looking to defect entirely? Leave Beacon, join our cause?" Bonesaw was skeptical. "You realize that even as a trained Huntsman, you will be kept at arm's length, correct? You won't be told anything of our operations; you'll have to be blindfolded for much of your time with us as we move from place to place, and everyone will look at you with suspicion for a time until you prove yourself in a real battle."

"I understand that, and if that's where you want me to be, that's fine. But I think, that is, I thought that would be what I wanted, but then I realized that maybe, just maybe, you guys might want someone on the inside at Beacon? Someone to keep tabs on the teachers and on the students. One student in particular," Apacci grinned evilly, pushing through his nervousness. "Or rather two. One target and one possible traitor to the cause."

"...You're not just talking about a faunus who hasn't joined the White Fang. You're talking about someone who was with us once and turned his or her back, aren't you? We've known the Schnee girl is there for a while. She will get hers eventually. But what are you talking about, a traitor?" Bonesaw asked slowly, his voice low and dangerous.

Hearing the locks to the door behind him shutting, Apacci gulped but went on gamely. These were his people, they weren't going to hurt him, and they would trust him the moment they learned his information. "Do you know the name Belladonna? Blake Belladonna, specifically? If she wasn't part of the White Fang, then she's at least a traitor to the faunus as a whole, being on a team with the Schnee."

Bonesaw's eyes widened, and his previous angry expression faded but then came back with a vengeance, although no longer directed at Apacci. "Tell me more..."

OOOOOOO

“... So, I was wondering if you would want me to just come over for the night, just the two of us?” Harry asked. “I can’t promise to cook anything, as late as it is, but we could watch a movie or just cuddle a bit.”

Smiling, Arturia leaned back in her chair by the window of her apartment, staring out over the city for a moment. “That sounds like an excellent idea, so long as cuddle is parlance for more amorous pursuits.” Her smile widened as Harry flushed just a bit but nodded in agreement. “Excellent. Should I meet you at the landing zone, or would you prefer to just make your way straight here on your own?”

“Well, considering you have a personal bullhead, we’d save a bit of time if you came to meet me,” Harry answered, wagging his eyebrows wildly.

“Mmm... there is my tactician of a brother. In that case, get ready, and remember to bring a change of clothing. I am not going to be letting you go back to Beacon tonight,” Arturia ordered.

“It will be another hour before the last bullhead into Vale arrives back here,” Harry warned. “I’ll call you when we’re circling into land.”

With a nod and a final exchange of I love yous, Arturia hung up the call and headed into her bedroom, where she opened her clothes closet. It would not do to wear the same underwear or dress she had done the first time they had gone on a date. *And if we aren’t going to go anywhere, well, perhaps I can be a little more daring. It is my bullhead, after all, and I am in no mood for simple movies. If I can get Harry into the proper mood before we return here, all the better.*

She held up two extremely daring dresses, outfits she would never wear in public, holding one in front of her and then the other. *Hmm...Black or purple?*

Before Arturia could get too deep into her choice of armor for the coming ‘battle’ a flash of movement to one side caught her attention. Turning in that direction, she stared out the window of her bedroom apartment out into the city beyond, blinking, then scowled angrily. “No. This is impossible. With everyone else searching after her, I am the one to spot the runaway cat?”

She was about to turn away, frankly more than willing to just ignore the sight of Blake running over a nearby rooftop, except, following behind Blake was someone else. Someone who Arturia had seen earlier that day apparently stowing away on a ship. *Worse, if my sense of direction is not fooling me, they are heading for the docks. Don’t tell me she’s just going to try to escape on an outgoing ship!*

That changed the equation for Arturia, and she looked back between the mirror and the dresses before sighing faintly. *Even if I got someone like Tia immediately via scroll, there is no way to know if they are in a position to do anything about it before Blake leaves port. I am not willing to just let her run without making certain that she at least has a chance to mend bridges with her team rather than compound a mistake into a horrible one.*

With a scowl, Arturia turned aside from her various choices for a night in with Harry and the experience of long practice, pulled on her Huntress outfit within seconds, followed by grabbing up her weapons. *If I have to subdue the pair of them by force, I am more than willing to do so.*

Within minutes she was out the door, racing over the rooftops words the distant docks.

OOOOOOO

“So, tell me again, what are we doing up here?”

“I am trying to scope out this area. You said that you thought there was a large shipment of dust coming in. If the White Fang are really behind it, they’ll go for that shipment. If so, I can get to the bottom of why they are stealing all this dust,” Blake growled out, not turning away from staring down into the port. “Why you are here, I don’t know.”

A loud chomping noise proved too hard to ignore, and Blake turned around, glaring up at the monkey faunus who had somehow broken out of jail and run into her as she had been running away from Beacon. “Yeah, that’s what I thought you said. But how exactly is that going to let you make good with your team?” Sun asked blithely, ignoring Blake’s glare.

“I would like the answer to that one, as well as why you are associating with this known criminal, Blake.”

The monkey man leaped straight up 12 feet, bringing out two tonfas that came together to form a staff as he did so. Blake rolled to one side, hissing like a cat until her face went even paler than normal as she saw who was standing on the rooftop behind them.

A thoroughly pissed-looking Arturia glared back at them both, idly smacking the hasty blow that Sun had launched in her direction away with the tip of her lance and then kicking his legs out from under him faster than he could counter right before he would have landed. He flipped away from her, but she made no effort to follow up, simply grounding the tip of Rhongomyniad into the roof, tapping one foot impatiently. “Well? I am waiting. Or should I just assume that you and this criminal are somehow planning to elope? I did not take you for someone who would leap into the bed of the first attractive man who came along that wasn’t already taken. I will admit his six-pack is nice, but the rest of the package doesn’t look all that pleasing, especially considering the downsides to running away as you have.”

“Hey now! It’s not as if you have seen the rest of the...” Sun began, only for Blake’s hiss of ‘shut up’ to interrupt him.

She stared mortified at Arturia, once more feeling the urge to run away but knowing that this time, there was no way she would be getting away clean. *She even knows about my Semblance!* “It isn’t like that at all! I, I...”

“Spit it out, girl! The longer you take to do so, the angrier I will become.” *I am missing precious dating moments here!*

One explanation later, Arturia was no happier with the events. She looked over at Sun, her eyes narrowing. "And you, how exactly did you come upon this knowledge of a shipment of dust coming in?"

"I stowed away on a cargo ship. Everyone was talking about it, some kind of huge first-time shipment into the city, a new source of fire dust they said. Way cheaper than the Schnee stuff, apparently."

At that, Arturia's eyes widened, then narrowed. She pulled out a scroll, quickly flipping through it, opening up an email from her father. *Well, now, isn't that interesting. If the White Fang does attack, I wonder how they learned of it. Learned of it in enough time to gather the troops necessary to take over the cargo anyway. That isn't the same thing at all as simply knowing of it in the first place.*

"... Very well. Seeing as I have a vested interest in that cargo through my family, I will agree to not knock the pair of you out and drag you back to Beacon. We are to watch and wait. If the White Fang does attack, you two will fall under my orders."

At that point, Sun sidled over to Blake. "You all right with that? I mean, together, maybe the two of us could beat her?"

"You don't even know who she is, do you?" Blake said, staring at Arturia, shaking her head wildly at Sun's idea. *I am not with Stupid!* "The two of us against the strongest active Huntress in the world? No, thank you."

Sun's eyes widened, and he turned back to stare at Arturia, who simply looked back at him, cocking an eyebrow. "Yes? Was there something?"

Sun shivered, turning away. "Fine, so I suppose we're stuck here on lookout, aren't we?"

Arturia growled a little, then moved to sit on Blake's other side, crossing her legs and assuming a meditation pose with her lance across her lap. "I suppose we are." With that, she pulled out her scroll and very reluctantly sent an apology to Harry. It looked as if they would have to postpone again. *Curse you, Belladonna. Some form of torture will be necessary to pay me back for this!*

With that onerous task done, she sent a few messages out to Tia and Ruby. Ruby had given Arturia her scroll number because Ruby had impressed Arturia with her instinctual grasp of tactics, and she was more than willing to talk with the younger girl about weapons that she had seen the world over. The others she wasn't nearly as close with, although of course, she also had Tia's number.

OOOOOOO

Ruby and Weiss stared down at the message on Ruby's phone, and eventually, Ruby looked over at her friend, cocking an eyebrow while Penny continued to read the message. The three of them had bumped into one another again as they had been searching for Blake, and figuring that another pair of eyes was always good (and that walking around with someone who didn't act as if she wanted to be anywhere else but there) was a nice idea, Ruby had convinced

Penny to stay with them. "Well, what do you think? I think we should go and help. If the White Fang really does attack, then more hands make less work, right?"

"While I do not believe that phrase is the best one to use in such context, friend Ruby, I do agree that having more Huntresses on hand to deal with any White Fang terrorists that might attempt to steal this shipment of Fire Dust is a good idea, even if Arturia the Dark Queen is on station. And as I already told you, I am combat-ready!" Penny said, saluting.

Ruby giggled at that and looked over at Weiss. "Well, Weiss, are you in?"

"... We will have to stop someplace out in the open, a park or rundown parking lot, to call for my weapon. Unlike you, Ruby, I don't go everywhere with Myrtenaster. But beyond that, I suppose... If, as Arturia says here, Blake is out to prove that faunus are innocent of this dust-stealing crime spree by finding out who is truly behind the dust thefts, then I suppose that is a step in the right direction. And even if she is wrong, I am more than willing to be proven wrong in turn about Blake while also being right about the White Fang in general," Weiss announced snippily.

But she was smiling a little, and Ruby decided that was the best she was going to get. Pulling out her scroll she called Tia and Yang. Weiss wasn't the only one who would need to call for their weapons after all, and they might as well coordinate.

OOOOOOO

Silence descended on the rooftop after Arturia had made her calls, the older girl sliding her scroll back into its holster on her belt and closing her eyes as she began to meditate. Or at least, that was what it looked like to most people. To Blake, who could hear her breath coming in and out, it felt as if Arturia was shutting out the rest of the world in an effort to control her anger. And since she had seen Arturia in action during the remembrance and knew her reputation, Blake decided to stay very, very quiet.

The cat faunus had forgotten her erstwhile companion. Feeling a little awkward and sensing some manner of tension coming from the Dark Queen, Sun did the most foolish thing anyone could. He tried to fill the silence with noise. "So... What's the Dark Queen doing in Vale? The last time I heard anything about what you were doing, you were over in Mantle. There were a lot of rumors in the rags, y'know, those papers that follow around Huntsmen like they're starlets? I've got a teammate who likes them. Anyway, they reported that Ironwood was trying to recruit you again, and this time you—"

"Shut up and do not talk to me," Arturia said coldly, twisting her head just enough to glare out of one eye at the monkey man. Next to her, Blake flinched but resolutely continued to stare out over the port. "Until it has been confirmed or disproved that the White Fang or whoever is behind the dust robberies is going to attack that shipment of Fire Dust, this remains simply a waste of my time, which could better have been used for more personal things."

At that, her voice lowered into a grumble, and Blake could sense that she wasn't supposed to hear this part, although both she and Sun did, thanks to faunus hearing being so good regardless of species. "Again! We were, I was interrupted again!"

Showing either his courage or foolishness, Sun began to speak again, intent on asking what she was talking about. Thankfully for his continued time on Remnant, Blake spotted movement down in the dockyard area. Two guards patrolling the area had just disappeared. She pointed in that direction, but the next moment, Sun pointed toward the docks around the ship they had previously identified as belonging to the transport company that Arturia knew Evig Låga was using to transport Fire Dust into Vale.

Within seconds, the area around the ship became a hive of activity. A few lights went on their beams centered on the side of the ship, and two cranes revved up, shifting over to start unloading. None of that was unusual, per se. Even this late at night, there were two other areas elsewhere in the docks, one near the place where the docks shifted over to private boats and the other at the far end where fragile luxury items were supposed to be offloaded.

Yet not only was this not on schedule, but if it was normal, there would have been no need for guards nearby to have been removed as Blake had seen a second ago. They hadn't even been anywhere nearby, just moving in that general direction.

And, unfortunately for Blake's worldview, even Arturia, with her merely human (if scary) eyes, could see that the individuals doing the unloading were not dressed as normal dockworkers. Instead, every one of them wore the black and white armor and the white half-masks of White Fang troopers on a mission.

As if they were a signal, within seconds of the lights coming on, more than a dozen bullheads could be seen in the sky, touching down in open areas throughout the wharf near the target ship. Small ones, those bullheads normally wouldn't be able to take on any kind of large cargo, but together, they could perhaps move a significant part of the Fire Dust that had come in on that shipment.

"Oh, great. Well, is that them?" Sun asked mostly rhetorically, crouching down next to Blake on her other side. He honestly didn't know what the White Fang wore while out on the job. While he went to school in Haven, he was originally from Vacuo, and life was so harsh in most places in that country that racism had never really been a thing there, even before the Colors War.

"Yes, that's the White Fang," Blake answered, shaking her head sadly. Then her eyes widened before narrowing as she spotted someone else among the regular White Fang troopers who most decidedly did not belong.

Down below, Roman Torchwick strolled out of one of the bullheads, his cane hanging off one forearm as he clapped his hands. "Come on, move it, move it! We are on a timetable. You dirty animals might not understand paperwork, but trust me, we do not want to be here longer than an hour or else our bullhead swarm's going to be spotted."

In the silence of the night, his words carried to the watchers, and Blake watched in horror as her former brothers and sisters-in-arms paused in their work to glare at the human, but instead of taking him to task or attacking, they simply turned aside, continuing to work.

“This is, this is all wrong! Why would the White Fang...” With that, she was up and leaping off the roof from where she had been lying in one smooth motion.

This meant she barely avoided Arturia’s grab at her shoulder, and the older Huntress hissed in irritation before reflexively grabbing Sun’s tail and holding him still with her other hand, ignoring his yelp of pain. “Foolish girl!” Scowling, Arturia turned to Sun, who froze like a deer in the headlights under her golden-eyed glare. “You, skirt around to the east of the activity down there. Shift from ship to ship until you can get onto the cargo vessel. Hit them from that angle. I will see to the safety of our wayward kitten.”

“You know a lot of faunus find that kind of joke offens- I’m going now!” Sun yelped, the yellow-eyed glare from Arturia more terrifying than any glare that Blake had given him all afternoon.

As the monkey man moved off, Arturia stood up, shaking her head as she reached down to Rhongomyniad and her shield, which she had laid out beside her. “Well, at least I am not missing a date tonight with Harry for no good reason any longer. I am still going to take out my pent-up **feelings** on these bastards, though.”

Near the cargo vessel, Roman lit up a cigar, placing it in his mouth and taking a drag, biting down on the end as he leaned forward lightly on Melodic Cudgel, staring around him, specifically at a few of the White Fang who were near the bullheads although he didn’t let his eyes linger. First, Emerald was over there, dressed up as a White Fang member, complete with fake fox ears of all things. She had wanted to be in on this mission, to see how Roman operated and then, like a good little girl, send that information back to Cinder.

That bothered Roman, but he had allowed it, as he had no other choice, so he hoped the little spy for Cinder was noting how ‘well’ the White Fang worked. *Honestly, what the hell was Cinder thinking making me work solely with the White Fang? Perry and his small cell are good. The rest? Useless for anything but spouting slogans and punching things, and even that not very well. At the rate they’re working, we’ll be here for hours, and that isn’t optimal. Still, there’s Bonesaw and that new recruit he insisted on bringing along tonight.*

That recruit intrigued Roman quite a bit. Oh, not his attitude. The youngster seemed a particularly stupid example of ‘I can’t be racist, I’m a faunus’ syndrome coupled with the worst kind of deluded self-interest. Something that Roman admittedly knew quite a bit about, yet in Apacci, it seemed to be at a self-destructive level. No, what interested him about Apacci Topaz was what the youth could represent.

The question was, would he just be useful for the White Fang, which wouldn’t be all that good for Roman or Neo, or could Roman make use of him in some fashion as well.

To one side, a carton of Fire Dust was dropped as two of the White Fang struggled with the handover into the bullhead, and Roman groaned. “Dammit, can’t you animals do anything right? We haven’t even loaded a single bullhead yet, and we’ve been here for ten minutes! We are on a tight schedule here, and I do not want us out in the open any longer than...

necessary..." His words slowed as movement behind him was followed instantly by the press of a sword to his jugular. "Or this happens."

Everyone stopped what they were doing to turn and stare, and Blake looked over Roman's shoulder at them all. "Don't move, Roman! Brothers and sisters of the White Fang, why are you listening to this human!? With a thief who belittles, sneers, and puts you down?! Where is your dignity as faunus?"

Several of the White Fang looked down, while the others just looked at her with hate in their eyes, and a low, rumbling voice caused Blake to shiver in shock and surprise even as Roman opened his mouth to say something. The thief paused as Bonesaw, the leader of the White Fang in Vale, stepped out from one of the other bullheads, growling angrily, hands clenching over his weapon.

"That's rich coming from you, Belladonna!" Bonesaw made Blake's last name sound like a curse, as it kind of was for those who followed Adam's ideas of faunus supremacy. "Lord Adam told us about how you left him behind on that train! You left him to die, Blake, and now you're going to pay for it!"

"Wait, what! No! We'd already secured the, there was no—GAH!" Stunned by the sight of someone she had actually worked with in the past, Blake accidentally loosened her grip on the back of Roman's head. And the man did have Aura.

So, he didn't hesitate to fire a grenade into the ground at their feet, launching both of them up into the air in different directions. The explosion caused him to fly forward but hurled Blake backward away from him, and after rolling, Roman hopped to his feet, showing the Huntsman training he had when he was younger, as he brought up Melodic Cudgel to point at her. "What are you lot waiting for? Get her!"

Whatever was going on with the cat girl and the White Fang, Roman could learn about it later. Right now, they had to shut her down before she could call for help.

"Get the traitor! We'll gift wrap her for Lord Adam!" Bonesaw shouted, only to flip backward hastily a second later as a lance slammed into the ground between Blake and the charging White Fang.

The impact alone caused the concrete to shiver and quake, tossing many of them onto their backs as Arturia landed next to Rhongomyniad, pulling it out and resting it lightly on her shoulder as she glared all around her.

"Oh boy... Of course," Roman whispered. "Of fucking course, the worst thing possible could happen tonight." *I am so glad that Neo's out there somewhere!*

Emerald had been watching everything from a line she had joined near the cargo ship, where they had opened one of the massive containers and had begun to unload the smaller cartons within. Although she had no interest in joining the charge towards the cat girl, this caused Emerald's eyes to widen and she started to shift over to where Roman was crouching.

Arturia was furious and not with the White Fang. She did not hate groups or individuals like that, although she was very interested in discovering how the White Fang had learned about the first shipment of Fire Dust from her hometown to Vale, as she had mentioned earlier that night. No, what was making her coldly furious right now was Blake's actions. Well, that and her earlier thoughts on how, once more, her time with Harry had been postponed. *Before it could even begin this time!*

But mainly, it was Blake rushing in as she did that made Arturia so angry.

"I thought you were a foolish girl before this, Blake. Now, I am wondering if you have some kind of strange martyr complex. If so, tell me now so I can kill you and save your team the trouble of dying alongside you," she said coldly, turning away from the White Fang as if they were of no importance, to glare at Blake.

In this, she was mainly correct, although there was a great deal of arrogance involved in that estimation. She judged very few had their Aura unlocked, something experienced Huntsmen could tell with some certainty. Bonesaw, a known terrorist she had read quite a bit about thanks to always being sent information packets on the White Fang along with other things from Atlas, might prove a hindrance, and Roman a semi-decent fight. But even combined, Arturia reckoned they were no threat to her.

She did not know about Emerald, however, or Apacci. Apacci was staying well away from the lights however, shifting back and away, then looking up towards the cargo ship as he heard grunts and groans from above. Hastily, he hopped up onto one of the cargo containers, then from there to another and finally onto the deck of the ship, finding a monkey faunus battling the White Fang there.

With a snarl, Apacci charged forward, shouting out "Traitor!" *Here's someone I can fight without being instantly recognized!*

Meanwhile below, as Arturia moved forwards towards the White Fang with Blake beside her now, having finished berating the girl for the moment and not being so foolish as to take too long to monologue mid-battle, Emerald used the confusion of Arturia's arrival to get close to Roman. Now, she was hiding beside him, using her Semblance, Hallucinations, to hide her presence from Arturia.

She could only use her Semblance on two people at a time for any length of time, and the more noises and other stimuli she had to imitate, the harder it was. With everything going on now, the dozens of fighters and everything, blocking all that out and replacing it with her own version would be incredibly hard on her, and Emerald figured she could probably only ensnare either Blake or Arturia, not both. The choice of targets was ridiculously easy in this case. "Maybe we can turn this to our advantage..."

"Not a bad idea, considering Neo is around here somewhere," Roman whispered back, taking the cigarette out of his mouth and tossing it to the side in preparation for the fight.

"Wait, what?" Emerald blinked.

“Always have a backup plan, my dear. Besides, why do you think we haven’t seen any security up to this point? I’m an excellent hacker, but there’s only so much I can do about that kind of thing,” Roman quipped. “Now, do your thing, but keep it subtle to start!”

Emerald would have retorted in some fashion, but before she could, bullets from Arturia’s shield-machine gun and Gambol Shroud came towards them. The next second, Roman charged forward, blocking a blow that would have skewered one of the White Fang with his cane. He was able to deflect the strike but barely, then had barely a breath to get his other arm up to block a kick from Arturia, who whirled around and lashed out faster than he had seen anyone move in years.

The blow took him in the forearm, and were it not for Aura, he probably would’ve had his forearm shattered. *FUCK she is strong!* As it was, Roman was flung through the air, slamming into one of the cargo containers off of the cargo ship with enough force to dent the metal.

“RAGGHH!!!” Bonesaw shouted as he closed with Blake, cutting off her barrage toward where Roman and a few other White Fang members were now huddling behind cover. Others had already begun to rush back to the bullheads, grabbing out weapons, and Bonesaw was grateful he had insisted they all bring some along despite Roman’s protests.

The large man slammed his chainsaw down into the ground, the chainsaw cutting into the concrete. The metal of the chainsaw had been specially treated to be far tougher than normal steel. He raised it again, moving into a series of cuts and slashes but he was too slow to fight Blake on an even footing alone, and Blake dodged through them, lashing out in turn with Gambol Shroud. Her own cuts didn’t do anything to Bonesaw, the man’s Aura protecting him, but each hit chipped away at it, whereas she dodged, used her Semblance, and flicked around this way and that, smashing out against other White Fang, who had charged forward, knocking them out, ducking under return shots as more and more of the White Fang got their weapons and began to fire towards the traitor and the Dark Queen.

Arturia was not so gentle, and the night was rent by a scream as one of the White Fang who didn’t have his Aura unlocked lost his leg to a strike from Rhongomyniad, as her shield blocked several bullets coming her way from others before she fired toward where a clump of them had begun to take cover, firing over a large crate. She hit an open Fire Dust carton, and the entire area exploded.

This explosion caught Emerald just as she had been about to use her Semblance, and she cursed as she found herself flung sideways. *Brother of Darkness, flipping hell! I can’t deal with explosions and all this chaos and use my Semblance at the same time.*

The next second her eyes widened as Arturia hurled her lance towards another group of White Fang. The lance slammed into the cargo container behind them and exploded on impact, Arturia having filled it with a tiny bit of her Aura. This time, though, Emerald had to hurl herself to her stomach to protect herself.

Another White Fang tried to jump on Arturia from behind, but Arturia casually reached out, grabbing the man by the throat, then slamming him headfirst down into the concrete,

where his neck snapped, causing the nearby Blake to wince. Arturia barely acknowledged the terrorist's death as she was forced to raise her head to avoid a blow for Melodic Cudgel. Astonishing the thief, she brought her shield back into a defensive position in time to block a kick from Roman, although the strike sent her skidding toward Bonesaw.

Bonesaw tried to take her down with a strike as well but found his chainsaw slamming into her shield as well as she raised her arm, and then knelt down quickly. Twirling around into a roundhouse kick, Arturia took his legs out from under him before she kicked off of the ground, flinging yourself through the air to land beside her weapon.

It was at that moment that Emerald used Hallucination for the first time. She had no time to construct a large-scale image to implant in Arturia's brain, and, like Roman knew that doing so would give the game away. Instead, she shifted Arturia's perception of the world just a bit.

For just a moment, Arturia's hands seemingly missed, and she frowned in confusion as it went through where her mind told her her weapon should've been. Then Sun hurled one of the White Fang members over the side of the ship. The screaming man slammed into Emerald, disrupting her coordination again. *Freaking damn it!*

Arturia was then able to see where the real weapon was, a bare few inches away from where her hand had passed through. Scowling, Arturia decided she had simply botched the landing a tiny bit. She grabbed it up just in time to meet a charge from Bonesaw.

Lance and chainsaw met as the two strained against one another for a bare millisecond before pushing off, neither being so foolish as to let their weapons lock for longer. Both went on to the attack again, only this time, Bonesaw was the one to be sent flying by a strike from the tip of Rhongomyniad hammering into his stomach, causing all air to leave his body for a second as he was hurled through the air.

Elsewhere, Apacci was finding himself hard-pressed by the monkey faunus, but his Aura, unlike most of the White Fang on the ship, was keeping him in the fight. Just as Emerald was using her Semblance, Apacci flipped away from his opponent, letting a few White Fang with guns hit him as he landed on the arm of one of the cranes that had been unloading cargo before the fight began.

His higher vantage point on the ship allowed him to see still more trouble coming. A streak of red was racing across the warehouse roofs, cargo containers and cranes elsewhere through the port, coming their way so fast that he could only track where it had been things to the rose petals left behind. Behind the streak, other huntresses were racing along the rooftops, spreading out as they came. "OH, FUCK ME!"

The youth grunted then as his inattention let a blow slam into his stomach, hurling him off his perch on the crane's arm. "No thanks, dude, I'm not into rear door action."

Apacci was still cursing as he slammed back down into the deck below.

Down on the wharf, Neo had joined the fight. As Roman had said, she had been nearby, ready to cover any hasty retreat with her illusions or to silence any witnesses. Indeed, she had done that several times to help the White Fang into the docks in the first place, capturing and gagging several security guards and again when a roaming pair had been making for the area where the White Fang had gathered.

She would normally have killed them, but Roman preferred to run a clean operation when he could. Murder was one thing, theft another, and in Romans's opinion, the two should be kept separate. Which was probably causing him just a bit of mental trauma right now, something that amused Neo.

An image of Roman shattered into glass as Arturia's lance slammed into him, followed by another image of one of the White Fang that Blake had been attacking similarly shattering. Floundering for a second, Blake felt something slam into her from behind, the strike sliding through, piercing her Aura in one strike. Blake's Aura, unlike Arturia's, did not lend itself to defense or strength but rather speed, although even then, no normal weapon should have been able to just break right through.

"GAHH!" Hastily, Blake activated her own Semblance, Shadow Copy, and shifted forward via a shadow clone, which took the hit for her just in time to save her from being crippled.

Eyes wide in near panic, Blake found herself facing a small girl, even smaller than Weiss or Ruby, although she had curves that put either to shame and multi-colored hair.

The ice cream-themed girl smiled up at her just before slamming the side of an umbrella into the side of Blake's face faster than she could dodge. She moved with it, her leg coming up into a kick, which was blocked, then her ankle grabbed by the hook at the end of the umbrella, and she found herself being tugged off-balance and into an elbow that took her in the midriff, causing air to whoosh out of her lungs as she gagged.

A knee to the head sent her reeling, but Neo was forced to flip away as several bullets rang through where she had been a moment before. More fire raced around the battlefield, interrupting Emerald's attempts to use Hallucinations as well and downing more of the White Fang who had managed to grab up weapons.

Emerald grunted as she rolled, bringing up her rifle, the weapon unfamiliar in her grip. She had argued long and hard with Roman about bringing along her own weapons, but in the end, she couldn't truly dispute the point that Thief's Respite was too recognizable to be seen with in public. If Emerald used them while out with the White Fang and was caught on camera – and there were cameras around even now – she might not be able to use them when they infiltrated Beacon. That might slow down the plan there, which Emerald knew Cinder would be furious about. *Damn glad I agreed with him now, though. Bastard always went on and on about contingencies, but I didn't think this operation could go this badly!*

Luckily, her aim with any weapon was still good, and she stitched up the side of Arturia as she fought Roman and Bonesaw, holding them both off. The bullets hammered into Arturia, but she ignored them and Emerald hissed, then began to try and use her Semblance on the

woman again. *Thank God Aura can't protect your mind against mental attacks! She didn't even notice the hits!*

A second later, Arturia missed a lunge towards Bonesaw, the tip of her lance passing by his side rather than slamming into him as he was open from a powerful riposte. This opened Arturia up in turn to a blow for Melodic Cudgel to her side, sending her staggering a little but doing no real damage. Arturia scowled, blocking another blow from Bonesaw with the shaft of her lance.

Bullets began to rain down from several different sides, and a glyph appeared between two cargo containers, shooting Mila forward like a battering ram, slamming into several of the White Fang nearby. This caused Bonesaw to pull back his next blow, which in turn let Arturia stab Rhongnomyiad into the ground at her feet. "Thousand Thorns!"

Bonesaw and Roman both leaped into the air hastily, with Roman being forced to block and being thrown back by one of the thorns as the energy made physical matter appeared all around Arturia. Bonesaw grunted in real pain as one of them caught him in the leg, nearly breaking his Aura and upending him to slam head first into the ground. He rolled away, then flipped himself backward, showing far more dexterity than a large man like Hidden normally would have, only to have his head nearly chopped off by Tiburon as Tia brought her weapon down towards him.

A hasty twitch away and Emerald catching Tia in her Hallucinations saved him, but looking all around, Emerald suddenly realized that more huntresses had arrived, a whole lot more. *Oh, Brothers damn it!!*

Bonesaw and Roman both realized the same thing, and with a whistle from Roman, he and Neo began backing away. Looking around quickly, Roman pointed Melodic Cudgel towards one of the smaller containers of Fire Dust that had already been unloaded from the larger cargo containers. "Make some noise!" He shouted.

Neo scowled, not armed with anything that actually had any range, and a part of her was annoyed that she hadn't even been able to finish off Blake, let alone close in with Arturia and try to take her out before the Huntresses arrived. *Funny, it is all Huntresses. Weird.*

Even before Neo or any of the White Fang could react to Roman's orders, explosions began to abound as Nora leaped up on top of one of the nearby cranes, shouting out, "Here's Nora!" Firing Magnihild from the hip, grenades plopped down across the battlefield, causing explosions everywhere.

Instantly, what had been a fight became a rout, as most of the White Fang without Aura laid down where they were or ran away screaming. Or simply died, as many of them did, to explosions, bullets or strikes from Tia and Mila, who were the first to close in with them, getting around their cover.

Those who did have Aura tried to close ranks, retreating once more towards the bullheads, only for Apacci to be hurled down into the ground in front of them. Still having his mask on and a bandanna over his horns, none of the Beacon students recognized him, but at

the moment, that hardly mattered to the groaning, moaning form of Apacci as he rolled to his feet and pushed himself to his knees.

"Freaking, bastard!" he glared up at Sun, who dropped down between the bullheads and the retreating White Fang. He was quickly joined by Ruby, who zoomed into place, dragging Yang behind her. She paused on a dime, hurling her sister forward into a few Aura-enhanced White Fang members in a move the pair had long since perfected.

Yang laughed, "Now, this is my kind of party!" Seconds later, shotgun blasts roared out, joining the cover being given them by Sung-Sun and Nora.

"Oh, heck yea!" Sun whooped, leaping down to join her. Between them, Sung-Sun and Mila clearing out two other areas where armed White Fang members had taken cover, the battle was now decidedly not going the way the terrorists would have wanted. Only how spread out they had been when the new wave of Huntresses arrived meant the fight hadn't already ended.

But two of the bullheads still had people on them. They rose up, bringing around guns to point at the group of huntresses.

They never got the chance. A green beam lashed out from one side, the originator hidden by the smoke, fire and the side of the warehouse from where Arturia and her immediate opponents were, although Ruby, who had been about to move in that direction, paused, staring. "Penny!"

"I told you, friend Ruby, I am combat-ready!" The diminutive, extremely eccentric but friendly girl said, as around her, floating daggers shifted, lashing out at two White Fang who tried to leap on her from one of the nearby cargo containers.

An explosion tore through where Emerald had been a moment ago, and any thought of using this turmoil to continue to use her Semblance on Arturia went out the window. Looking around, she saw Roman, or what she thought was Roman, still in the battle until his form shattered.

Wildly, she looked around and saw Roman disappear around one of the cranes. "Wait for me, you ass!"

Bonesaw also saw the two thieves getting away, but unlike Emerald, honestly didn't take it personally. Even with his blood up at the sight of the Schnee, he knew there was no way to win this fight or even retreat in good order. It was every man for himself, and he found that the last explosion from Nora had hurled him into the same killing ground that Sung-Sun, Yang, Ruby and Sun had created.

I have to get away, but I... Bonesaw saw Apacci lying out nearby, groaning as he tried to get to his feet again, and one other Aura-infused soldier. Well, at least I can salvage something! Grabbing them both, he rolled, hurling first one then the other off the wharf then heaved himself off the side of the wharf after them into the water below.

The cold water caused Apachi to flail around, but Bonesaw grabbed him again, growling out, "Hold your breath!" Gills opened up on his neck, and he began to tug the other two were long, swimming with just his feet, heading towards where he could see a tiny fishing boat just at the entrance into the port. Soon, they were practically invisible in the dark of night, the lights behind them having done a magnificent job of wrecking everyone's night vision.

Looking around desperately for her own method of escape, Emerald was surprised to see Roman duck back out of cover and shoot a grenade toward where Blake was about to attack Neo. His partner had been forced to flip away from a random grenade from Nora, putting her too close to Weiss, who had attempted to stab her. Neo dodged the strike but would not have been able to use her Semblance fast enough or dodge a blow Blake's attack.

A glyph appeared underneath Blake and Weiss alike, creating a wall of ice between them and the explosion, but the damage was done. Emerald raced after Neo and Roman, getting around the same crane they had and heading off through the warren of the industrial sector of the port.

Scowling angrily, Blake made to leap up over the wall of ice but found the back of her neck gripped, and then found herself being turned around to face the glaring face of Weiss while nearby, Milla smashed a White Fang member into the ground with a blow from her club, and then smacked another out of the air as he tried to leap on her back with a backhand that sent him flying. "Oh, you are not going anywhere, Blake! Not until we all have a little chat!"

"But they're getting—" Blake broke off as Arturia sped past her.

"Put the fires out, round up prisoners, and call it into the police. I will find Torchwick and his diminutive companions!"

Hearing that, Tia looked in that direction, then over at Sung-Sun. "Hmmm?"

The gesture accompanying that noise caused Sung-Sun to look in that direction. Seeing Arturia racing off, she glanced around, and, seeing that the battle here was winding down, the Vacuan native nodded, even as her eyes narrowed as she caught sight of Sun Wukong. "Go, Tia. We can handle things here."

Neo and Roman had slowed down to allow Emerald to catch up to them, something that surprised the girl and made her eyes narrow as she looked at them. "Well, this was a complete shit show! I don't know how many of the White Fang are going to get out of there after this, but..."

"We didn't bring all of them along, but the vast freaking majority. Perry and about six others are still back at the warehouse," Roman shrugged even as he continued to race along, putting more distance between them and the scene of the fight. "Perry's actually useful, unlike the rest of those animals. The White Fang's done in Vale after this. I trust that you understand how dangerous Arturia can be, right? That's why we slowed down. If she tries to catch up with us, we'll need you around to have any chance of even escaping, let alone beating the woman. If we can do that, maybe we can salvage something from this night."

Emerald grumbled a little, but his response mollified her initial rush of paranoia, and for several seconds, the group of them raced on silently. But Roman's own paranoia proved to be accurate a second later as a silhouette blocked out the bits of the moon above for a second. Roman saw this and was already rolling to one side as he shouted, "Huntress, above!"

Once more, Rhongnomyiad stabbed into the ground, flashing out Thousand Thorns in every direction, but Neo and Emerald were insanely quick and very well-trained for their age. Two glass replicas of the women shattered where thorns flashed through where Arturia had thought the two of them were, and Neo rolled between two others, landing lightly on her feet as Emerald did the same.

She had lost her initial rifle that had been part of her cover and hastily pulled out her twin gun-kusarigama, opening up on Arturia. The machine guns' small caliber bullets all struck Arturia's back and side, but the woman did nothing, simply ignoring it to concentrate on Neo, who had charged forward. *Bad move bitch! Start small again, then increase it as need be.*

With no larger fight to get in the way, Emerald reached out with her Semblance, and once more, Arturia found herself missing where she had thought Neo was. A slash to her forearm caused her to frown, as she had almost felt that through her Aura. An explosion rocked into her back, causing her to tumble a little, but Arturia rolled with it, her shield coming up automatically to block a follow-on blow from Neo, the butt of her lance thrusting out backward to catch me the real Neo while the first one disappeared.

"Some kind of mental Semblance? As well as illusions. Dangerous." Arturia gritted her teeth as a blow from an angle she hadn't expected one to come from caught her nearly at the junction between her neck and collarbone, but she rolled with it, the side of her shield going through the area where anyone who had attacked her from that angle had to be.

"Damn it," Emerald hissed. "We need to work better together! Your movements and attacks are coming in too quickly. I can't get the illusion in place fast enough to fool her!"

Neo grunted a bit as a blow landed but rolled with the blow through the air to land nearby, scowling. Roman closed in, another grenade from Melodic Cudgel fleshing out towards Arturia ahead of him.

Arturia's mind was now being faced with multiple disputing stimuli. Part of her mind knew she was just about to be attacked from the side and should turn in that direction. But her instincts and tactical sense knew that attacking from that way was impossible, as there was a wall within a yard of her. So instead, she kept moving, rolling forward, avoiding where the grenade had actually been, which slammed into the wall behind her.

It exploded, followed by a forklift that had been left outside for some reason that night. Small bits of shrapnel flew everywhere, but Arturia took the hits on her Aura as she opened up with her machine gun shield, firing in every direction.

Emerald was there a second later, a kick flashing in, her presence completely hidden by her Semblance. The kick did little to Arturia, but with her pain receptors also under Emerald's control for the moment – like touch that took a lot of power and concentration – Emerald lashed

out into Arturia's back and side with her kusarigama, but once more, Arturia's raw Aura shielded her, and the older girl had already raised her arms to protect her face.

Just as Emerald was thinking her way through a more elaborate illusion to convince Arturia to lower her guard, Arturia's shield hand flashed up to catch Emerald's weapon. Even as Arturia missed the sight of Roman closing the distance thanks to Emerald's Semblance, she lifted Emerald up and smashed her into the side of the wall, causing her to gag even as she kept up the hallucination filling Arturia's mind.

A blow cracked into the back of her head, sending her stumbling and causing her to release Emerald. A blow to her wrist threatened to dislodge her grip Rhongomyniad, but she still plunged it down into the ground, shouting out "Thousand Thorns!" pouring more of her Aura into it as she did. The field of thorns was far larger and appeared far faster, slamming all three of her attackers away, shattering several glass sculptures that Neo had attempted to use to redirect her targets, and ignoring all of the visual and sensory stimuli that she was getting.

"So, you can play with my mind," Arturia said, pulling her lance out from the ground and glaring around her, not locking her eyes on the images that Emerald was sending into her head but rather staring all around her. "Very well. I will fight with instinct alone and area-of-effect attacks. Let us see if any of you three can deal with that. You will pay for interrupting my date night for this foolishness!"

While Roman simply hopped to his feet, whirling Melodic Cudgel and moving in again, Neo and Emerald were not in a good way at the moment. Both of them had found themselves being hammered into other objects by the solid energy thorns that sprouted from the ground, and even through their Aura, that kind of double hit from both sides hurt as there was no way for Aura to fully dissipate the impact if it came from two entirely different directions.

Worse, while Neo still had a large amount of her Aura reserves, Emerald had been hit by several explosions earlier. And she had been using her Semblance for nearly twenty minutes now, with only a few breaks in between. Even when only used on a single target, her Semblance was Aura intensive, the more stimuli she needed to block out or change, the worse it became.

Arturia closed her eyes, trying to figure out if Emerald could also mess with her hearing, and after being attacked from the side and not hearing anyone close in, she realized that she could. Cursing, she opened her eyes again, whirling around in a wild circle, smacking into something solid twice, or perhaps not, then leaping up into the air and kicking out hard in the direction where she hadn't felt anything previously.

This worked. In an effort to work better with Roman and Neo, Emerald had attacked from an angle as far away from the trio of illusions she had cast into Arturia's mind. She now grunted in pain as a kick caught her in the face, shattering her White Fang mask and hurling her backward as her Aura broke.

This broke her Semblance for a second, and Neo hastily used her own to defend against a blow from Arturia that would've taken her in the chest, flipping herself backward and watching as the illusion she had created to look like her flipping sideways shattered in turn. This

left the illusion hiding Neo's actual position, and she watched as Arturia blocked the blow from Roman with her shield, then carried it to one side. The man moved forward into her range, ducking under a sweep from Rhongnomyiad but eating a knee to his chest, then a mule kick that sent him flying backward.

Rolling with it, Roman lashed out with Melodic Cudgel again, firing the last three of his grenades in quick succession, one at the feet of where Arturia stood and two into the side of the warehouse building. This sent exploding bits of metal and concrete everywhere, obscuring the battlefield for a second, which allowed Emerald to once more activate her Semblance.

"I've got her again!" Emerald hissed out, launching her scythes forward. Long, if tiny, chains trailed back to her pistols as the edges of the blades caught Arturia in the side.

Tia arrived on the scene at that point, scowling angrily as she saw her sister not respond to that attack. Or the next one that hit her in the back of the head. Instead, Arturia turned to engage something that wasn't there before lashing out with a kick that nearly did catch the woman attacking her from behind.

But Emerald had learned and now was to the side of where that strike flashed out. Another blow flashed into Arturia's side as Neo rammed Hush into Arturia's leg, trying to cut her major artery there but still not getting through her Aura, although the blow was strong enough to send Arturia to her knee.

Deciding she had seen enough, Tio held up Tiburon above her, sending a burst of Aura into the water dust crystal encased in the blade. A globe of water appeared at the tip of the blade, and she lashed it forward even as she leaped down, sending it down to slam into the shoulder and neck of the woman who'd been attacking Arturia from behind.

The pain of the blow and the impetus sent Emerald flying and once more broke Hallucinations at precisely the wrong time. Arturia whirled as the image of Roman she had been fighting disappeared, blocking a blow from Neo with her shield, pushing her girl up and into the air so that she crashed into the Emerald who had just appeared, her clothing and upper body soaked.

"NEO!" Roman shouted, flicking the head of his cudgel around. The top of his cane shot off as fast as a rocket towards Neo, much like the scythe blades of Thief's Respite.

Neo still had enough presence of mind to cover the sight of the chain and herself and Emerald as they both grabbed onto it. The two of them were winched back towards Roman along the ground just as Arturia shouted, "Shine, Excalibur!" and released a small burst of that style of attack.

Both women stared in horror at the damage that that single blast of ravaging energy had caused, carving a straight gouge through the port from where Arturia stood almost to the inner wall bisecting the port from the rest of the city. Even if they'd had full Aura, neither would have survived being struck by that.

Both remained quiet, letting Neo's illusions do their job as Roman pulled them away.

Tia landed next to her sister, staring around them, scowling angrily. "Did one of those three have some kind of mental Semblance? You were fighting nothing, Arturia."

"Not just one, but two. One apparently targets the other fighter directly, while the second one simply creates semisolid state illusions. They shatter into glass when you hit them. I think there is a limit to what the first can do, and her concentration is the biggest problem, but I was having a devil of a time with it." Arturia could sense that she was at around twenty percent of Aura at the moment.

Not deadly yet, but if the battle had continued, she had no idea which would've given out first: Emerald's ability to mess with her mind, or Arturia's Aura to the point where their strikes would have been doing real damage. She was just thankful that Emerald hadn't thought to use the terrain more to her advantage when she was creating illusions. Whenever Arturia had stepped on a piece of rubble or small bit of shrapnel Emerald had missed when creating her hallucination, that had helped push Arturia through the impact. "Thank you for your help, sister dear. Although it seems as if they have decided to escape."

Tia made an interrogative noise, gesturing to the still-glowing blast radius of Arturia's recent attack, but Arturia shook her head. "No, there is no human remains within that. Trust me, seared human or faunus leave a distinctive smell in the air, even if they are turned into so much ash on the wind as my attack could possibly have made her if she was that low on Aura."

"... I'm not going to ask how you know that," Tia stated, rolling her eyes. The two Arcs scanned the area, but as Arturia had predicted, with Neo now using her Semblance to simply cover their tracks entirely, there was no sign of them. There were just too many shadows, too many obstacles, and debris from the running battle.

"I suppose I could attempt some more area of effect attacks, fill the entire port with Thousand Thorns from here out to the inner wall. But I would be useless for anything else," Arturia murmured, considering where they were in relation to the inner wall for a moment and then shaking her head. "No, I think that we have done enough collateral damage for one evening. There's only so much we can cover with our capture of dozens of White Fang members, after all. Although I do hope that one of them is Bonesaw. That alone would make this night worth it to Vale's Council. Or indeed any of the councils."

"Mm. Sorry to hear about your date being ruined," Tia said, moving over to hug her sister from the side, smiling as Arturia returned the gesture, sliding her shield onto her back before wrapping that arm around Tia's waist. "You can take my night."

"A most generous offer that I will cheerfully partake of," Arturia said, suddenly far more cheerful, squeezing her a little more before directing their feet back to the initial battle zone. It looked as if the three most dangerous members of this little operation had gotten away, but they had quite a few other prisoners to question, and that would be enough for one night.

OOOOOOO

For a moment, as the two blonde women moved through the buildings and industrial equipment, the site of the fight between Arturia, Neo, Emerald and Roman was quiet. Then,

there was a light cracking noise as Neo's Semblance faded away, revealing the three of them standing on a portion of the warehouse that Arturia's attack had carved through, staring down at the mangled battlefield.

Emerald sat, shivering and shaking as her Aura reserves had failed her utterly near the end of that battle. Like Arturia had said, if that attack had landed, she would have been utterly vaporized.

Neo was in little better shape, although she was still standing, leaning on her parasol as Roman had a habit of doing with Melodic Cudgel, staring at the battlefield as well. Covering an area large enough to cover Roman's chain and their being pulled to safety with her Illusions had taken it out of her, and the battle before had already pushed her hard. She had even been forced to leave behind Hush's blade, leaving her with only the outer shell.

Roman was the only one looking at the mangled battlefield with anything approaching aplomb, although he had lost his bowler hat sometime during the battle, either back at the wharf or here when they tried to ambush Arturia and was also the only one visibly wounded, blood dripping from gash to one side he had gotten from a near miss. Yet even while his Aura was even lower than Neo's he still had it in him to appear poised. "Well, that was disastrous."

"Understatement of the flocking century, Roman!" Emerald practically screeched, keeping her voice low but still implying that she wanted to shout at the top of her lungs, hyperventilating, her eyes wide. Her training under Cinder had been incredibly harsh, and she had come close to death several times, but that was a far cry from seeing that last attack from Arturia coming her way, ravaging energy ready to simply blot her out of existence. "She was, she was actually moving the instant we were hitting her Aura. I've never seen that before; I had no idea how to block her being able to sense her own Aura. UGH. Even without that, I swear she was beginning to somehow push her way through it, somehow ignore the hallucinations I was trying to feed her."

"Exactly. It's not just Arturia's raw power that makes Arturia dangerous, it's her mind. We didn't see much of that on display here, although I would wager that she had something to do with the direction from which the other huntresses began to appear. And yes, she had undoubtedly figured out your Semblance by the end." Roman smiled blandly down at Emerald before looking back over the battlefield as he gently tapped two fingers against the top of Melodic Cudgel.

Emerald finally pushed herself to her feet, staring at the destruction wrought by the last attack, then out and down into the rest of the battlefield, shaking her head. "We, we're going to need to change our plans a **lot**. I might need to replace my weapons, I was a fool to use them at all, but I thought we really had a chance, and that other bitch arriving, I didn't see her until her attack hit me..."

"Oh yes, our plans are deftly going to need to change. And maybe, just maybe, we'll have to ask politely for a dating schedule if the Dark Queen gets this pissed off about her date nights being ruined," Roman said blithely, causing Emerald to turn away from the battlefield to stare at him incredulously.

Emerald never saw the shove coming. It caught her in the side and hurled her off the edge of the ruined building down into the jagged metal ruins of the warehouse below. Before she could do anything but open her mouth to scream, her body slammed down into several pointed, jagged bits of wreckage, several of them piercing her body, one of them a bar of tortured metal sticking straight up, its ends having been sheared off, leaving the point standing straight up. It cut into her side, nearly cutting Emerald in half, and she gagged, blood pouring from her mouth as she hung there, spasming, staring up at Roman and Neo in shocked betrayal.

Neo watched as Emerald's spasming subsided, her eyes rolling back in her head, her body going limp, stuck there like a fly on an overly large needle. Next to her, Roman smiled faintly, not in pleasure at the deed but at what it meant even as he kicked a stone from the roof down onto the body, watching as it bounced off, evincing no reaction. "Well, into every hell something good can come, I suppose. We won't even need to exaggerate too much to pin the blame for this on the dark queen. Not with the disaster this night has been."

Neo laughed, cuddling into his side, her face a little flushed, and Roman chuckled, knowing that murder always got her engine going a little. "Come on. We can stop someplace to steal some ice cream for you, while I work out a report to Cinder. We might be one step closer to freedom, my dear, but that report is going to have to be a very careful one."

End Chapter

WOOPS... so no more Emerald. I pondered everything, but after everything else, I felt that Emerald would be the sort to force Roman to bring her along to make certain everything he's doing is on the up and up in terms of following Cinder's orders. Similarly, Neo and Roman would be looking for a way to weaken Cinder's team. Take a chance to kill Arturia. Yes, if it works, good. If not, meh. Then, take a chance to kill Emerald while she's weakened. Either way, Roman and Neo come out ahead.

And they came very close to killing Arturia. If Emerald was better at using her Semblance in a larger-scale battle, if Tia hadn't decided to follow Arturia... well, her arrogance could have gotten the Dark Queen killed. I hope that comes across because Harry is going to take her to task on that in the next chapter.

But Neo and Roman have no real idea about Salem and the breadth of her backing. Worse for them going forward, regardless of anything else, Cinder's gonna suspect that this was Neo and Roman, and Salem already has Tyrian coming in to help Cinder. But the infiltration plan is going to have to change, if it goes forward at all, and Arturia has painted a very large target on her back... an even larger one that previously existed, anyway. Heh.

So, this chapter and a portion of the next one will slowly show a shift in the villains' plans, some discussions that desperately need to happen and the main plot, too. We will also have some more romance, and FINALLY, the conversation about Harry's past life with his girlfriends... if it really matters? I am debating that point internally. Anyway, a shorter chapter than usual, but I hope that you still enjoyed this.

In other news, FILFy still isn't back to me from it's editor, but I hope it will be soon. I am about halfway through GDWHOM, although it will be a much shorter chapter than the other works this month. As for the fourth story this month, the HP poll winner.... Well, we will see. I will close the poll when the Ranma fic is off to Hiryo.

And hey, the issue with that annoying popup on Patreon is gone! Woo!