

King of Champions 16 version 1

I don't own RWBY since I'm not a team nor Harry Potter, as I am not a woman nor British.

This has been edited through the use of Grammarly and HP-DG-AP-PN-RG-NR.

Chapter 16: Betrayals, Dirty Dealings and Ominous Events

To say that Harry and Tia did not have an easy time falling asleep was a gross understatement. Arturia was not only Harry's lover, but Tia's sister, the sister that she had always been closest to, a role model that both of them looked up to almost as much as their parents. Seeing her brought low like this from something so vile as venom was horrific. Combined with Harry's anger at what else he and his team had run into the night before, along with his confrontation with Ozpin, and the fact that even this attack might well have been from the same group, well, his dreams were quite disjointed, to say the least.

So when they were woken up by Ruby shouting, "T, Tia!? What the heck?! Did you sneak a **boy** in here?! Where did you even come from! Where did he come from!?" neither of them was in a very coherent frame of mind.

Harry instantly rolled off of Tia, whose chest he had apparently been using as a pillow, coming out from under the covers and falling to the ground of the hospital room as he launched a spell designed to act almost like a glue gun at the source of the shout. It was a remarkably useful little spell that the Weasley twins had come up with in his last life, which he'd used when he didn't desire to go for more lethal options right off the bat. As muddled as his thoughts were, Harry's subconscious mind knew he was still in a hospital and splash damage was a thing. Thus, he didn't for that option now. It was also a spell that, like the rose he had once presented to Professor Goodwitch, was well within his capabilities, even if the glue wouldn't last very long in this world.

"GAH, what the Harry?!!" Ruby found herself flung backwards, the glue-like substance slamming into her face, chest and arms and pinning her to both the bed and the wall behind the bed that she and Weiss had been sharing the night before.

Weiss had also woken up at Ruby's shout and had rolled off the bed similarly to Harry, which had saved her from Harry's instant reaction. However, it also brought her face-to-face with Harry. Or rather, Harry's boxer-clad crotch at present.

Harry had changed into his regular sleeping outfit of simple boxers the night before. Similarly to Tia, who was naked bar a pair of loose boy shorts, he had decided some skinship was just what the doctor ordered after everything that had happened. Of course, neither had

been in the mood for sexy times or anything like that, not with Arturia and even Yang resting in a coma nearby, hooked up to several machines keeping them alive. But there was something to be said for the simple warmth of skin-to-skin contact.

At the time, Weiss hadn't noticed, as he and Tia had already been in bed by the time she returned from changing into the bedclothes that Harry and Tia had brought for her. Similarly, Ruby hadn't realized that the black hair sticking out from under the covers in between Tia's breasts was Harry, as that had been all she had seen before leaping to conclusions.

At present, the how didn't really matter to the sheltered heiress. All that did was that she was face to face with a boy's crotch, who was only wearing a pair of underwear, and despite the shock of Ruby's shout waking him, Harry was still a young man. With a young man's normal reaction upon waking.

"EEE, EEEKKKK!!" Weiss shrieked, bringing both hands up to her eyes, tightly closing them, even as she tried to peer between a few of her fingers. *Gah, bi, big, or, or is it? I've never, I wonder if Neptune would have, no, stop it!* "What in the world are you doing, Arc!?" she yelled aloud, "D, dressing like that, and showing a pure maiden like me s, something like this! How dare you!"

"Calm down, princess, it's not like I tried to flash you on purpose. Blame your teammate for all of this," Harry grumbled, pushing himself to his feet, and thinking for a second to offer a hand to Weiss before deciding it might not help matters. Instead, he moved back, shifting around the bed he and his tanned lover had shared the night before.

Tia had grabbed up a small bedstand from beside the bed, hoisting it over her head in preparation to throw. Now, she slowly lowered it, but remained in bed, even pulling up the blanket to just below her nose. A part of her knew that letting the fun-sized duo know Harry had not been the only one to take off his clothing the night before was a bad idea. Another part just wanted to cover her mouth in front of the pair.

"Th, that doesn't matter! Whatever, t, this is a hospital, you, you shouldn't be going around in your boxers of all things, and you shouldn't be showing it to someone like me or Ruby," Weiss grumbled. "Ugh, and why in the world are you dressed like that anyway?"

Tia blinked at that, then asked, "Things like that happen when you're living with a boy. How would you have reacted if you were placed on a team with one?"

"Bribed the team next to us to give us a portion of their room, brought in a construction crew to expand our own, and isolated him in his own little corner," Weiss said seriously, showing that she had actually thought of that.

At that, Harry snorted, while Ruby, despite still being stuck to the wall and bed, began to giggle a little. Then her eyes fell on Yang, and her giggles died in their throat, as she stared, a little whimper escaping her instead. "Oh. And, and here I was hoping all of that was just a bad dream..." she mumbled, her voice trailing off.

"I know the feeling," Harry murmured, his own good humor vanishing as he took in Arturia's pale form across the way. Tia also nodded, both of their eyes glued to Arturia's face. It was still pasty and pale even for Arturia, but thankfully, it seemed to have lost most of its clammy look overnight. That probably meant that the antivenom treatment had finished its job, but how long it would be until the antivenom itself was completely out of her system and the damage done to her body healed was up to how long it took to get someone with a healing Semblance here.

Still, she was in a much better way than Yang. Even after several surgeries, she was basically being kept alive at this point by dozens of different instruments, all of them thrumming and beeping in unison around her bed. The blonde bomber had taken one hell of a beating after her Aura had been overcome, losing chunks of flesh, and having her ribs broken, along with perforating her stomach and lungs. Yang was only still alive thanks to a number of surgeries she'd been put through while still under Fen's Stasis Semblance and now the machines the younger woman was hooked up to, the number of which eclipsed the three IVs and one monitoring machine that surrounded Arturia's bed.

Frankly, it's just luck that she lived at all. If I had broken up the teams another way, if Martina and Weiss's group weren't able to arrive in time, she would've been dead before they could get there. All in all, I think everyone got immensely lucky last night that no one outright died. It could've gone so, so much worse. And it would have, if not for the fact that my friends and I were in town and worried about trouble in the first place. If it were up to Ozpin, there would be at least four dead students today.

Harry didn't realize that he had said that last sentence aloud in his anger until Weiss and Ruby both twisted to look at him, their eyes wide in shock. "What the hell/heck? What do you mean by that, Arc?/What does Professor Ozpin have to do with what happened last night?" They both shouted in a jumble, one shouting over the other.

The pair paused, staring at one another, then Ruby craned her neck, the only part she could currently move, to stare at Harry. "Wait, what else did happen last night? And where's Blake? I'd have thought she'd be here by now."

Ruby hadn't been awake when Tia and Harry had arrived the night before, having cried herself to sleep against Weiss's shoulder. She had thus missed Harry and Tia's arrival, let alone his explanation. Now she was staring at Harry earnestly, worried about their missing team

member. It took a moment for what she was seeing to register to the pint-sized reaper, but then Ruby began to blush, as did Weiss, who had pulled her hands away from her eyes to stare at Harry all the harder. "And get dressed for goodness' sake!"

Seeing that, Harry shook his head, then ducked back down behind the bed Tia still lay in to grab his clothing, which he had pushed under the bed the night before. "Why don't we **all** get dressed, and Weiss and I can go out and grab us some food. Real food, not hospital fare. Then we can talk."

"Er, does that mean you can, er, get rid of this gunk you hit me with? Only I'm getting kind of uncomfortable now. This stuff... it feels like glue, right? It's hardened so quick, and not only do I now need to scratch, but this is kind of a painful position to be in," Ruby said sheepishly.

Having pulled on a pair of pants, Harry wound his way around the beds again, while Tia idly noted that Weiss wasn't looking away from Harry any longer, instead, looking at his upper body with interest. Harry didn't notice, instead moving over to Ruby, where he began to wet down the glue in segments, slowly freeing Ruby.

"By the way, do you know if Ozpin or Goodwitch has already contacted your father about what happened to Yang? Or did you call him already before you passed out?"

At Ruby's growing look of alarm and horror, Harry sighed. "I had to call my parents last night about Arturia. I didn't want it to come from Ozpin or anyone else. Even if he's already heard the news, hearing from you would make your dad feel better. Maybe you should give the man a call before we sit down and talk, yeah?"

He turned to look over at Weiss, only now noticing how she was looking at him so appraisingly. He coughed delicately, and the white-haired girl flushed and looked away. "Why don't you get changed too, Weiss? Unless you want me to pay for all our meals?" he teased gently. Weiss had always been very certain to pay her fair share when it came to shared meals between the teams and anything else.

It was only now that Weiss realized she, too, had changed into her nightwear. Admittedly, her flannel nightshirt and shorts were not erotic or anything like that, but they were form-fitting, and given how flustered she was already, Weiss eeped and raced for the bathroom, only remembering she needed clothing to change into a moment later, calling out sheepishly, "Um, could someone pass me my clothing, please? And um, thank you for the clothing again, Tia."

"MMM," Tia announced in reply before turning her head to stare over at Arturia again. She was still doing so when Harry and Weiss left.

The two of them were silent as they moved through the hallway, into the elevator. Despite the months spent with their teams being so close to one another, Harry and Weiss hadn't ever really gotten close for various reasons. The few times they had talked, some bad blood between their families or the Arcs and the high society of Mantle in general had come up, resulting in a few arguments, but beyond that, they just didn't have much in common beyond their teams.

Eventually, though, as the elevator began to move, Harry assayed, "Erm, I am sorry about the whole boxer thing. It's just that's how I sleep most of the time, and Tia—"

"Tia barely seems to care about the difference between men and women. I understand. I even know it was really Ruby's fault, Arc, and I would rather not talk about it, thank you," Weiss interrupted him quickly. "Just... for now, tell me if Blake was hurt last night, please."

"She was hurt, but nowhere near as badly as Yang or Arturia. She was brought to Beacon with the rest of us after everything that happened," Harry answered easily. "She's going to be looked after by the school nurse there."

"I see. And... what you said earlier, if not for you..." Weiss trailed off, glancing over at Harry.

He sighed. "That's something I don't want to go over more than once. For now, what do you and Ruby want to eat? I've a hankering for bacon, sausage and hashbrowns myself."

Frowning a bit, Weiss decided to let that go for now. *I would rather have some food in me before we have any serious talks anyway.* "Bacon is, while decidedly not good for you, bacon so obviously is good, but as for the rest, perhaps some smoothies? Something healthy to set against the bacon."

"Gotcha." The two of them reached the entrance of the hospital, where they paused to look around for a moment. "No guards?"

"There were a few Atlesian guards on the floor Yang and Arturia's room is on stationed, weren't there. I suppose having such guards visible would be troublesome for the public also using the hospital?" Weiss murmured.

Shrugging, Harry pointed across the parking lot to a café that shared it with the hospital. "Bah, more tin soldiers. More importantly, both Tia and I would love to deal with anyone trying to finish off our sister or Yang. For now, let's get some food."

In reality, if Weiss hadn't wanted to come with him, Harry might have gone further afield, wanting to take care of an errand in the city as soon as he could. But for now, he could put it off.

The pair entered the café and, finding no line, ordered their food quickly. When it came to be Weiss's turn to pay for her and Ruby's food, however, a problem cropped up when the card reader let out a loud error tone as Weiss tapped her card against it.

Frowning, Weiss did so again, but after a second, the same noise came through. The young man at the cash register frowned a bit. "Um, miss, it says card declined, not read error."

"I know that, but there can't be a problem with my card! It's a gold standard Atlesian Bank card," Weiss hissed, trying one more time before looking at the card. "I suppose it might have gotten damaged at some point?" Scowling, she fished out another card, this time a credit card from Proctor and Proctor, one of the oldest credit card companies in the world, also based out of Atlas. "Whatever. I will send for a new debit card. This should..."

Weiss's face first went red in anger, then even whiter than normal in embarrassment as that card also caused an error note. "What in the world..." *That card is connected to my personal account, not one my father or the Schnee Dust Company can touch! I know he cut me off from the family account, but he couldn't have touched this one... could he?* Scowling, she pulled out her final card, another bank card to a bank here in Vale, which she had opened up barely a few weeks after arriving in Beacon. "This one must..."

That one did go in, and she breathed a sigh of relief. "Honestly!"

Harry watched this and shook his head. "You know I could have paid for the food. It's not nearly enough to bother me."

"I know that, but I refuse to be in anyone's debt for food, of all silly things. I..." Weiss frowned, scowling. *I will need to get to the bottom of this.... Oh fuck me with a totem pole!* In her mind, Weiss often allowed herself to use some of the more esoteric curses she had heard from other people over the years. *I promised my father that I would talk with him this morning. It would be just like that man to put pressure on Atlesian Bank and any other institutions he knows I have accounts with to make certain I call him. FUCK.*

Just as she was about to ask Harry to excuse her for a moment, Weiss's scroll went off, and she stared at where it sat on her belt in consternation. *Or he could put a marker on my accounts and call me when he learns I've tried to use them.* "Harry, would you mind carrying all the food? I have to take this call. And... please stay out of the pickup range."

Seconds later, Jacque Shnee's voice appeared as Weiss opened her scroll, his face appearing a moment later. The Schnee patriarch was a past-middle-aged man, fair-skinned, with white, slicked-back hair. He had a large, thick mustache and light blue eyes, which he wore a shirt of similar color to. "Ah, there you are, daughter mine. I had been told you wished to talk with me at this time, so I thought to remind you."

“Remind me of how you always seek to control me, you mean,” Weiss retorted, while Harry reflected that the voice coming from her scroll was giving him even more Malfoy vibes than he’d had upon first meeting Weiss, where they had both made poor first impressions on one another. “I would have been calling you regardless, but this overblown response from you is all too predictable and puts me in a rather bad mood.”

“Your mood does not interest me anymore now as your thoughts of independence of independence ever have,” Jacque retorted, and Harry winced. He was tempted to speak up, but remembered Weiss’s injunction on staying out of the pickup. “I also know about the data you convinced that young woman to let you see. Was there some point to it?”

“Honestly? Other than letting us realize precisely how much of an ungodly sum of Dust Roman Torchwick and the White Fang have stolen, not so much. I would have thought, though, that you would be interested in hunting down the White Fang responsible for taking one of our transport ships and the Dust aboard,” Weiss retorted.

“I would, if I didn’t already have a team of our special investigators hunting the captain of that ship down. It was an inside job in many ways, and you well know my opinion of such people, on many levels,” Jacque snorted at his own witticism, which caused Weiss to simply stare at her scroll blankly.

That caused the man to scowl, and Harry realized he was one of those people who didn’t have any sense of humor but hated it when others didn’t go along with the lie that he did. “At any rate, hope you have something more interesting to report than Vale’s local problem with the animals.”

Ah, there’s why I was getting Draco vibes from him, he’s an old-fashioned racist fuck, Harry thought, a scowl on his face, before a thought occurred to him and he set the food down on the walkway. Pulling out his scroll, he began to type into it.

Weiss caught this, but said nothing. “I will have more to report on the White Fang by the end of the day, but—”

“I said I don’t care about that. What about my demand that you look into the Arcs and the two of them you’re currently sharing classes with?” Jacque cut her off coldly. “I told you, the Norssken is cutting into our monopoly on Dust, and I will not allow that. Is there some kind of blackmail we can use, some scandal? The whole furor about Harry Arc possibly not being an Arc died out quickly, and there isn’t much else we can use right now. If I cannot target their company as I hope, then somehow targeting their children is acceptable.”

“And would bring you in direct conflict with Headmaster Ozpin,” Weiss warned, while Harry’s eyebrows rose into his hairline, although he kept typing. “As for that, I can tell you a lot

of their abilities and detail their personality, but as for threats, secrets or scandals, there are none. Unless you try to attack Harry's relationship with Pyrrha Nikos, the Invincible Girl, which I would not recommend."

"HMMPH. If I didn't know that you know what would happen if you lie to me, I'd think you were doing so now," Jacque grumbled. "And I am not so foolish as to tie up resources on a losing proposition. I will need to find other ways to stymie Norssken's growth, I suppose. It was a long shot, I'll admit, but I had hoped to get some actual good use out of you being at that school and this whole nonsense about becoming a Huntress."

Weiss was about to lose her temper when Harry held up his scroll, a word processor open with words written there in large font. Weiss read it quickly and blinked, then said, "Well then, I suppose that you wouldn't be interested in how someone in the White Fang was using Atlesian Paladins? And Atlas Military equipment?"

The younger Schnee watched as her father's face closed down even more than normal. No one else would have noticed, but she did, and Weiss's mind jumped to a strange conclusion. *He's not startled by the information; he's startled I found out about it. Is Father trying to play both sides!? Keeping the White Fang dangerous and prevalent to somehow explain away our crackdown on our faunus employees, the miners and the rest? I know him well enough to know he'll have covered his bases, and a look like that certainly isn't admissible, but I wouldn't put it past him to do just that.*

"T, that's interesting," Jacque coughed a bit. "I, do you have any evidence of that?"

"I will by the end of the day, and General Ironwood has some of that same information, up to and including the totaled remains of the two paladins to try and backtrace," Weiss said, reading the next line as fast as Harry wrote it. "Wouldn't that be horrible, Father? To find that someone among your friends and acquaintances in the rich and mighty have been in cahoots with the White Fang all along?" Weiss added those lines of her own accord, and then continued, a wild surmise going through her. "Indeed, who knows how long this unholy union has been going on? Could the White Fang have used Atlesian military equipment to kill members of our own board of trustees?"

"I, that is certainly interesting," Jacque muttered. "I, I will reach out to General Ironwood and offer my expertise and even some of our own investigators. You have, have done well to pass that information on. I still expect you to send me anything you learn about Norssken from the Arc children, and to let me know if anything useful comes up. I also expect to continue to hear only good things about you in terms of grades and your own public comportment, but for now, I will let you go."

With that, he hung up, and Weiss breathed a sigh of relief, stowing her scroll away even as she turned to look at Harry. "So, that story about your night is getting more interesting. Atlesian paladins?"

"And a heavy autocannon," Harry agreed.

"You're, you're not going to question me about my father wanting me to spy on you?" Weiss asked warily.

"You didn't tell him anything useful, and you don't know anything about Norssken that would be other than the fact I've been acting as our local factor," Harry shrugged. "I figured that anything else is coming from him rather than by choice. And might I say, your father sounds like a right cockbite, someone who's overcompensating for his lack in the man bits department by acting as if he's got something large up his rear."

Weiss stumbled a bit at that, and for a moment, Harry thought that his language, if not his opinion, had offended her. Instead, Weiss began to laugh, shaking her head. "HAHAHAHAH, y, yes, he is indeed. And you don't even know what he's like at home. That would take him from *ahem* cockbite level to 'lord unholy cunt' level, trust me."

In another life, airing out even her own thoughts about her father would have been something that would not have occurred to Weiss. This one, though, with more friends and a far more hectic time at Beacon, she had left even more of her training, or rather indoctrination, as a Schnee behind. Added to this, hearing someone just outright insult her father's general character like that without any fear of repercussions was like a breath of fresh air.

Chuckling a bit, Harry picked up the food again. "Well then, milady, shall we get back to the others? And if you don't mind, I have other names you can use for his Royal Stick-up-his Ass."

Still giggling, Weiss took some of the food from Harry, using her other hand to link arms with him. "My, I would be delighted to hear them, good sir. In fact, if you could rate some of my own, that would be even more delightful."

Laughing, the pair went back to the hospital, exchanging odd curse words and taunts they'd heard that could be applied to Jacques, the hatchet between them thoroughly buried.

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At the same time that Weiss and Harry were grabbing breakfast for the quartet in the hospital and Weiss was facing an attack from 'Mr. Mustachioed Asshole' Apacci had returned to Beacon on the first bullhead out that morning from Vale. When he walked into the dorm room his team shared, Mila stared, then began a very slow clap, as Apacci looked as if he had had a

lot of fun the night before. He walked with a noticeable limp, his hair and clothing were askew, and the grin on his face was so wide it looked almost as if someone had enlarged his face to fit it. All in all, he was very much acting like someone who had gotten lucky and good last night, which, to Mila, who was going through a dry spell at the moment since she and Apacci were no longer hooking up, was something that she needed to acknowledge.

In actuality, Apacci had gotten lucky. The reasoning wasn't anything romantic or anything else, but he'd still had a lot of fun with a young cow faunus who would otherwise have been **way** out of his league. Thus, his acting right now was far less of a lie than it might otherwise have been.

Unlike Mila, Sung-Sun had no desire to praise Apacci when she looked up from where she was busily doing up her blouse. Instead, she scowled, resisting the urge to stab him with an ornate letter opener nearby, a keepsake from home. *It's a family heirloom, and it wouldn't do to get... oh, who am I kidding, I wouldn't be the first to use that to stab someone.* Putting that thought on hold, Sung-Sun finished getting changed into her uniform, then pointed a long finger towards the deer faunus. "What have I told you about keeping your scroll on?"

Apacci blinked, then pulled out his scroll, staring at it, before shrugging. "Shoot. I forgot to charge it. Why, what did I miss this time?"

"A lot," Mila said, her clapping pausing for a moment, her face becoming serious. "In fact, you missed a great deal."

The girls filled Apacci in on what it happened last night, while Apacci changed from his everyday wear into the school uniform. He didn't have time to take a shower before their first class, so he still looked a little unkempt and disorderly, but there was nothing to help with that. "Wow. That's a lot to take in."

And it was. While Apacci knew everything that was going on with the White Fang from the White Fang's perspective last night, he hadn't heard anything about this other battle that had been going on, and to hear that the Dark Queen had been nearly killed by someone with a Semblance that let them bypass a person's aura, well, that was the stuff of nightmares.

It made Apacci realize that whoever the White Fang had allied with was way more dangerous than Adam or anyone else he'd yet met with had let on. After a moment, he decided that was fine with him. Compartmentalization was a thing, and he wasn't going to do anything with these weird humans anyway. *I'm fighting for the cause, for our people.*

As he thought that, a bubble of anticipation wound up within him, even as he glanced sideways at Mila. He wondered what she would do when the time came. If she would have been

so willing to protect Weiss instead of Blake in a battle like she had the night before. Blake was a race traitor, but she was still a fellow faunus, one that Mila was friendly with.

But Weiss? She was a Schnee, and that made her far, far worse than merely being human would have. Of all the Atlesian nobles who still, to this day, abused their faunus workers, the Schnee were the worst. Apacci had heard about how Bonesaw had suffered at their hands, along with several others, and anything he could do to a Schnee, he would. Mila was a faunus, too, and Apacci wondered if she would be willing to at least look the other way when they came for Weiss.

Still, he knew deep down that Mila would probably stay the course as a Huntress rather than turn to the White Fang as she should. She hadn't dealt with any of the personal tragedies and racism that he had after all, and seemed perfectly happy to be held to the double standards that Beacon, supposedly a school where faunus were welcomed, seemed to hold for them.

It never occurred to Apacci that it wasn't a double standard. Beacon's professors were simply holding all students to the same high standard, regardless of anything else. If Ruby, who had been jumped ahead in two grades, could stay afloat, if barely, in all of her classes, then surely someone like Apacci, who at least had somewhat more advanced education, could do the same. That was all there was to it.

Well, that and Apacci's own victim complex. Throughout his life, he had always seen everything through the lens of someone who expected to be taken advantage of, someone who looked at every little problem in their life as if that was the cause. While that had certainly happened occasionally, most of his life's issues came from Apacci's own attitude and his general laziness, nothing more. He certainly had not suffered like Bonesaw, Adam or others who had dealt with genuine racism had.

"I see that your mastery of the obvious has evolved along with your ability to keep a girl happy," Sung-Sun said tartly. "Which brings the conversation back to you. And the fact that you were not there last night to help the rest of your team as you should have. You were even in Vale, for crying out loud, and we couldn't get in touch with you!"

Realizing that he probably couldn't get away with the whole 'I was with my girlfriend' thing here, Apacci shrugged, trying to look apologetic. "I did mention I didn't charge my scroll, and besides, I probably wouldn't have been with you all in any event. I'd have insisted on going with the others to the tower along with Martina's makeshift group in case trouble sprang on Ruby and Yang instead." He shook his head firmly. "I might no longer sympathize with the White Fang and their violent tendencies, but that's a far cry from fighting other faunus myself."

Sung-Sun scowled a little at that, but as Mila nodded in understanding, she agreed. “I can understand that, I suppose. But this had better be the last time you’re out of contact, Apacci, or else I’ll demand the school intervene, alright?”

Apacci winced and argued back. Despite knowing that he might not be at this damned school for long, that sounded both humiliating and would be something he would reject regardless.

The argument took them through the halls and to the first class of the day, where the rest of the freshman class was already. There, Sung-Sun exchanged nods with Martina, Tristain and a few of their teammates, keeping one eye on Apacci as he forged through the crowd. He was nodding to a few of the other students, exchanging quips or smirking slightly at the slow claps a few of the male students were giving him, showing they could tell what he had been up to last night and approved.

Sung-Sun watched him go, her eyes narrowing for a moment. There was something... false about Apacci. Some instinct nurtured by her life with her family, as the youngest daughter of a Don, told her Apacci had more going on than was visible. What it was, she couldn’t tell. But it was there, and those same instincts were telling Sung-Sun it had been there for a while; she was simply becoming aware of it now. *Come to think of it, when was the last time he and Tia stayed near one another for any length of time? Or him with our little group of friends?*

She remained watching Apacci until the professor came in and class began. At that point, she shook off her worries. *Stop that, Sung-Sun. We’re making progress as a team, and that’s all you can ask for right now. We just need to keep hammering teamwork and our changing combat styles. Which means I need to ask Ruby for some advice, and get the team over to the blacksmith’s. After... well, once Ruby is able to concentrate on anything but her sister being in the hospital, anyway.*

As that thought occurred to her, the professor began class. He didn’t take the roll call, and Sung-Sun wasn’t the only one to notice this. At that point, a few of the other freshmen who hadn’t been involved in events the night before began to look around. One of them passed Pyrrha a note, which Sung-Sun caught. The redhead glanced around, catching Sung-Sun’s eyes, and the Vacuan native sighed. *Damn. Looks like the rumor mill’s already begun to churn. This isn’t going to be fun.*

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As the four of them sat on the beds and began to eat the food that she and Harry had brought in, Weiss and Ruby listened to Harry explain about the battle against the White Fang and their mysterious backers. As much as Harry had hinted at, the reality was even worse for

Weiss. She scowled throughout most of the tale, asking dozens of questions about the Paladins and the weapons the White Fang had been using.

Brothers damn it all, Father, what are you thinking!? I know that look from earlier. It might not be enough to convince anyone, but I know you knew about something like this if you aren't directly involved. But how? I can guess on the why, but how?

Ruby was more concerned about Blake's injuries, but Ruby's attempts to blow up the cat-girl's phone ended quickly after Blake responded. Her typing was noticeably impacted by the amount of painkillers Blake was on, but Ruby was still able to understand that she was fine and would be allowed to leave the nurse's station tomorrow to help watch over Yang.

As the story finished, Weiss felt her eyes narrowing further as she stared at Harry thoughtfully. She wasn't the only one who noticed something, and when Harry went on to describe his talk with Blake on the bullhead back to Beacon and then his confrontation with Ozpin, Ruby shook her head, interrupting soon after his first attack on the headmaster. "Oh, come on! I'll admit that maybe the whole thing about the tracker was weird, and I'll ask Blake about it, but how do you know that it wasn't one of the White Fang who turned it off? Did you ask Blake? Maybe they had to hand over their scrolls and have them scanned or something that shut off any apps on them. I've seen those kinds of things in movies, so they've gotta be real, right?"

Tia giggled a little at that, while Harry rolled his eyes, taking the words more seriously even as he sighed internally. This wasn't going to go over well. "That's possible. But even so, even having it get turned off, should've warned Ozpin that something was going on. Admittedly, by that point they wouldn't have been able to arrive in time to do much, but they would've arrived sooner than Ironwood's tinpot soldiers did."

"What do you have against Ironwood and the soldiers of my country?" Weiss growled, more to say something than because she was really interested in the answer. Really, she was more interested in learning more about what was behind Harry's apparent distrust of the Headmaster. *There is something more going on here than he has said thus far, but even so, if Ozpin reacted as Harry has said, then...*

"Beyond the fact that their arrival gave Roman, Neo and that other woman a chance to escape? Nothing at all. I think James Ironwood is a little too high and mighty and far too quick to reach for a hammer to solve any problem, but beyond last night, I haven't had any dealings with Ironwood and don't know much about him. Well, except for the fact that he's always looking to recruit my sister."

Harry looked over at Arturia, his face closing down for a moment. That made Ruby nod, and Weiss to shake her head, knowing she would be feeling much the same if it were Winter lying there.

“Still, I think you are wrong to take Ozpin to task like that about so many things,” Ruby said after a moment, shaking her head. “He’s for sure the greatest Huntsman alive, but that doesn’t mean he can be in two places at once or cross vast distances quickly. Well, I don’t think so, I don’t actually know what his Semblance is, but I doubt it’s that or else he wouldn’t need to worry about paperwork, right?”

“Hah! Well, while I can’t comment on his Semblance, it’s become clear to me over my interactions with the man, that Ozpin is playing his own game in some fashion. And you’re forgetting what I mentioned about the search engine on Blake’s scroll having been messed with, as well as the tracker. There’s also the fact that the bullhead operators should’ve been told Blake was under probation, but they didn’t report her leaving Beacon either.”

“While I believe that you are indeed taking this a little too far, Harry, that stuff about the search engine and the tracker does seem a little suspicious to me,” Weiss murmured, to which Ruby looked at her in betrayal. The very idea that her mentor could have aimed Blake in the direction he wanted her to go for some ulterior motive was disturbing to her.

“I am not saying that I agree with all of Harry’s points,” Weiss went on hastily. “He seems to be thinking that Ozpin is somehow omnipotent, that he could know that something was going to go wrong, but I would say that Ozpin didn’t do as good a job at defending his lack of action against the White Fang as I would have thought, nor how there wasn’t at least one professor in Vale somewhere just in case of further trouble, considering past events.”

“Correction: I am thinking that he knew that Blake was going to go in search of trouble, not that he understood the amount of trouble she could run into. I am saying that he set Blake in motion like that and then did not have someone or something in place to back her up if things went wrong.”

Weiss conceded the point, but Ruby did not. “But he did, you guys! If he knew we were in Vale, maybe the headmaster knew that you and Tristan and Martina and the rest were going to be in Vale. Maybe he thought about moving someone, then spotted Tia and Pyrrha bringing together the team that you all lead,” she said earnestly. “With all the firepower already in place, maybe he just trusted you all to get the job done.”

“If so, why did he not bring that up in the argument with me?” Harry responded tartly. “Instead, he got all defensive and refused to say that he was behind Blake’s actions.”

“That is perhaps damning when it comes to the tracker being turned off and everything else, but equally, perhaps his hands were tied, Harry. Perhaps he could not move any of the Huntsman into Vale without their presence being known, as Professor Goodwitch, I believe, pointed out,” Weiss argued. “That makes more sense to me.”

“Fine. Let’s assume that Glynda and Ozpin were telling the truth about that point. I have no information to say it’s wrong. But even then, if he was willing to use us, as Ruby said, Ozpin could still have reached out to Tristan, Martina, and me at some point to share any information he had about what we might be running into. He didn’t. No, he had no idea that Tristan and Martina’s teams had joined up with me and mine. And consider. Without us, how would tonight have gone for all of Team Ruby? For my sister?”

Again, he looked over to his sister, then Yang, falling silent. At that sight, Harry’s ire calmed, and he shook his head. “I... I apologize, Ruby. I know that Ozpin’s your role model because he allowed you to skip grades to enter Beacon, and you grew up listening to stories about him. But I would urge you to talk to Blake and Yang when she’s healed up. Get their impression of what I’ve said. I’m not trying to just color your impression of Ozpin for my own reasons or anything like that. I won’t go into all our interactions since the year began, but this is honestly my feelings about the man.”

Ruby nodded, still looking a little disconsolate, appalled at the very idea that one of her heroes could have feet of clay. Weiss was merely looking thoughtful, tapping her fingers against her forearm for a moment. Then she, too, looked at Yang, and the faraway, thoughtful expression faded into one of simple worry. “I’m going to go talk to the doctors. I would also like an ETA for when the person with the healing Semblance will arrive. And I want to make certain that Yang’s ongoing care is being taken care of.”

“Ozpin and Beacon are taking care of the bill there,” Harry informed her. “As for the Huntsman with the healing Semblance, your guess is as good as mine on that one.”

“I, I need to go take a shower. I stink.” Ruby said, sniffing at her armpit for a moment, causing Weiss to groan and smack her upside the head, commenting about how unladylike it was. “Hey! I didn’t wake up last night when these two arrived to change like you did. I slept in the same clothing I fought in, and I’m feeling dirty. What do you want from me?”

“Yes, but there are other ways to check on your smell than that, Ruby,” Weiss growled, before her expression softened. “Honestly, what am I ever going to do with you?”

“Cuddle me?” Ruby asked seriously. “I might’ve fallen asleep after crying too much, but cuddling with you through the night was really nice.”

Tia and Harry exchanged amused glances as Weiss's face turned far redder than either of them had ever seen it go before, before she trooped out of the room, waving her hands and muttering about her partner was so embarrassing. Ruby followed after, grabbing up the bag Harry had brought along last night for her and Weiss, which Nora had made up for them.

"And don't think for a moment that I have forgotten you have a tutoring session with Velvet tonight, Ruby," Weiss threatened. "There's nothing we can do but wait here for Yang, and that doesn't need two of us."

"UGH!" Ruby groaned. "Seriously!?"

"Don't be like that, Ruby. Your education is important," Harry chimed in. "We can head back together, how's that sound?"

"UGH," Ruby grunted again, heading into the bathroom with Weiss still walking beside her.

As the fun-sized pair left, Harry's loaned scroll rang. Opening it, he smiled as he saw Pyrrha's face. She looked a little subdued, but began smiling as she saw him. "Hey, you. Having fun in class? How's it going?"

"Well, you were right in that the professors wouldn't cut as much slack. Ren and I are doing our best to take notes, but it's not exactly the same without you or Tia here. To say nothing of Yang's impact on the rest of the freshmen. News has got around, although hopefully, one of the professors at least will step up and address things at some point."

"Bet on Glynda doing it," Harry said, with Tia nodding in agreement. None of the other professors had as much gravitas as the combat instructor, and it would make more sense for her to do it than any of the others. "How are Tristan and the rest doing?"

"If I had to describe the mood of everyone involved in last night's activities, the word reflective would be the best choice, I think," Pyrrha answered. "I think everyone will feel a lot better when you and Yang are both back here."

"Don't worry. Tia and I will start splitting time here tonight, and I will be heading back to Beacon tonight with Ruby. Until then, hold down the fort for us, would you? And... we're all back together tonight, the team will need to have a serious discussion about the future."

"Of course, although I don't think it needs to be said, but where you go, I go, my Rigas," Pyrrha said, winking at the end and trying and frankly failing to give the term a teasing lilt like Yang would've been able to. It didn't come across quite as well, but still had Harry smirking just a bit as she hung up, needing to go to her next class.

As that call ended, Harry shook his head. "Ruby and Weiss have the right idea. Go and shower, Tia. I'll watch Arturia and Yang. Then, when you three get back, I'll take a shower and head out and buy myself a new scroll. I can't keep using Ren's forever."

Tia was somewhat reluctant, but eventually got up out of bed, flashing Harry very purposefully as she did so. She smiled at him, watching his eyes dilate for a moment, taking her form in, before quickly dressing and then leaning in for a kiss. Now wasn't the time for more, but still, it was nice to know that Harry always found her attractive.

Harry quickly sent a text to his parents' phones, getting a reply that the two would be in Vale by Thursday at the earliest. International flights weren't exactly easy to get onto so quickly, even for retired Huntsmen.

Still, besides a shout from Ruby of, "Oh my God, they're even larger than Yang's!" coming from the bathroom, his time passed uneventfully until the trio returned, whereupon he headed out.

As he left the hospital, Harry frowned suddenly, feeling eyes on him. It wasn't something he could put into words, but during his time hunting Death Eaters and everyone else associated with Riddle, he had come to know when someone was looking at him with fell intent. He was feeling that now, but he wasn't certain from where. Looking around, he couldn't spot anyone looking in his direction, and as he paused there in the door to the hospital, the feeling faded after a few seconds.

Still, that was enough for him to call Tia and make certain that she was on guard. After all, whoever had targeted their sister might come back, even with their identities known.

She responded that both Ruby and Weiss still retained their weapons, as did Tia, and Harry smiled grimly. If anyone was going to fight Tia inside a building, well, they had the one-sided slaughter she would deliver coming to them. Right now, Harry had a mission, and it had nothing to do with getting a new scroll, although he did stop in and buy one at a scroll store before moving on. No, that wasn't his objective for the day. That had to do with a certain underworld leader.

A taxi allowed him to cross the city quite quickly, although they had to go well out of their way to avoid the area where Arturia, Ruby and Yang had been ambushed the night before. The whole place was crawling with police, insurance inspectors and so forth, although Harry idly wondered what the hell the police could learn. *I really doubt the one survivor of that attack is dumb enough to have left behind fingerprints. And I know Martina, Weiss, and the rest weren't exactly taking prisoners.*

Despite that, about twenty minutes after he had left the hospital, Harry stepped out of the taxi, amused to see how quickly it raced away. There were four guards outside the club, but Harry couldn't care less. Four or forty, if Harry wanted to talk to Junior, mooks like this wouldn't stop him. "My name's Harry Arc. I'm here to talk to Junior. He can talk to me, or I can talk to him after leveling this building down to the bedrock," He said coldly.

"Boss don't like to be threatened," One of the mooks began before finding himself encased in asphalt from the waist down. His fellows twitched, but dozens of fists rose out of the ground as Harry sent his magic down into the ground via his foot. *I'm really getting better at these kinds of barely formed earth element-type attacks.* "I wasn't asking. I was telling. Two choices. Call him, and let Junior be the one to decide which."

Gulping, the most senior guard pulled out a walkie-talkie and spoke into it. After exchanging words with whoever was on the other end of the call, he was given permission, and he pushed the door to the club open. "The boss says he'll speak to you."

Harry waved a hand while pulling his magic back out of the earth, and the fists disappeared along with the vise that had captured the first speaker. He then strode into the club, his eyes taking a moment to adjust.

Sitting at the bar and leaning back against it, Junior sat with the twins on either side of him. Both of them looked at Harry askance, not having thought he would be the kind to use the strong-arm approach after his date here with Tia, but Harry was in no mood to play nice. "I don't take kindly to my place of business or myself being threatened, Arc."

"And I don't like being given the run around by a supposed crime boss and information broker, who clearly can't control jack and shit in his own city, or weren't you aware that my sister and our friends were attacked barely a few blocks from here last night? By gangs that certainly weren't answering to you when they did so. Unless, of course, you're going to tell me they were. In which case, I really will bury you in your own club."

Junior winced at that, and Harry went on, pulling out a stool and pushing it away from the bar so he could sit on it and stare at all three gangsters. "In fact, that ambush was so bad, that both my sister and my friend Yang are in the hospital right now."

"We didn't have anything to do with that," Miltia insisted, shaking her head quickly.

"Maybe you didn't, but isn't that damning in and of itself? What use are you as a gangster if you didn't know that someone had gathered so many local gang-bangers to launch that kind of attack? Not to mention how powerful the White Fang were before my friends and I, hopefully, shattered their strength here in Vale last night? What use is your information if all you can do is... what, exactly? Or maybe you're lying, and have been working with the people

arming the White Fang and inciting violence against faunus alike. Maybe it's your distribution system that brought in their weapons."

"...You're saying I'm under suspicion of what? Aiding and abetting terrorists?" Junior scoffed. "If I were, I'd be talking to someone official, like that scary Goodwitch, or Ironwood, since he's in the city today. What do you want, Arc?"

"Ah, but there's the rub. Even Ironwood would need some justifiable cause to come after you. I don't." Harry held Junior's eyes, letting more of his old war veteran look into his eyes than he normally ever did. "In fact, I just need an opportunity."

Junior scowled, but looked away eventually. The truth was, there were a lot of questions going on among his people, because all of them had indeed been blindsided by the attack on Arturia Arc and the younger girls. That just wasn't supposed to happen. Faunus stuff, the White Fang and their street-level gangs were one thing. But so many gangs that did indeed have connections to his gang going rogue? That was entirely another.

And Junior had no idea that the bitch behind Roman's recent activities had been behind that. While he had been able to trace the weapons, how the woman had influenced them and how that influence had been hidden by him still eluded him.

That didn't look good for Junior, and frankly, he didn't need more trouble right now. And this kid, who had first given him a rather warm impression, was now scaring Junior something fierce. "Fine. What do you want?"

Harry wordlessly held up his scroll, to which he had downloaded some of the images that the Atlas soldiers had taken when they interrupted the fight between Harry and his group and Roman, Neo and Mysterious Woman X. Weiss and Ruby had also given him a verbal description of the only attacker to get away from that battle. He sent over both, along with a description of the scorpion faunus. "I want everything you can give me about these three. Everything. Not just here, but reach out to other criminal groups. I don't care how much it costs. I want to know about them. I especially want to know about the woman. Understood?"

Scowling, Junior stared down at the image of the woman who had so terrified Roman that he had agreed to work with her. "Damn it. You're forcing me to choose sides here, kid. Whatever this woman was up to, it was huge, and she's got a lot of resources and pull."

"I am, but she doesn't have many minions left beyond the White Fang, though. So maybe Mysterious Woman X isn't as powerful as she once was."

"... I can tell you one thing for free. They, this woman, and the other guy, they aren't from Vale. And Roman and Neo have split from them. They left me a message to that effect, but where they went, I don't know."

“Get me in touch with them, and you can forget telling me anything about the woman yourself,” Harry replied instantly. “Firsthand information is always better than anything else.”

“Fine. Deal. I’ve already got some of my agents working on things for your sister. Reaching out to other mafiosos will be expensive, but I can do it. I won’t charge you for getting in touch with Roman, if I can, but reaching out to other mafiosos, that’ll be immensely expensive, and be on a case-by-case basis, since... well, if this woman’s had dealings with them too, they’ll know how dangerous she is, or might be under her thumb themselves.”

“Understood.” Harry smiled thinly. “I’m actually sorry to threaten you like this, Junior, but I need to know where you stand. And frankly... I’m getting the impression this woman’s plans were very large indeed.”

Junior grunted at that, and after a moment, Harry stood and made his way out of the club, heading back to the hospital.

OOOOOOO

As Harry walked away from the hospital, Cinder glowered at him from behind a pair of fake sunglasses she wore underneath a fake wig. Beyond that, she was wearing, in Cinder’s opinion, a dress so frumpy that it looked like it should be on some sixty-plus-year-old housewife with no sense of fashion.

The entire ensemble made her look about as non-threatening as she could, but thankfully was just as easy to take off as it was to put on, and was built to blend in, make Cinder look like the kind of woman who people, if they saw her at all, would only remember her as laughingly frumpy. The exact opposite of Cinder’s normal appearance, in other words.

It wasn’t a permanent disguise. For the next few days, Cinder and Mercury would only go out and about in various quick disguises, things that made certain neither could be recognized, but which could be changed easily, and even then, rarely. The pair of them had only two sets each of emergency ID cards, and one would be used to get them out of Vale. A plan that had been in place long since, but even that had been subject to some change, given Salem’s recent orders to Cinder.

Safe behind her current disguise, Cinder examined the front of the hospital and its environs. She didn’t see any news reporters or visible protection and deduced that Ironwood had probably clamped down hard on the events of the night before. Although Ozpin is certainly the sort to add some hidden security, trick anyone attempting to finish off Arturia Arc and then take them out in close combat. *I suppose if killing off that bitch was important enough; I might even try it if I were at hundred percent myself.*

While Cinder could possibly fight, her Aura reserves were definitely not up to the task of fighting someone in close combat anytime soon, and her body was still feeling badly battered after the fight last night. Still, she had come here hoping to learn that at least Arturia Arc or the Xiao Long girl had died. *However, I doubt it now. Harry and that Schnee girl's face looked extremely worried, not broken or grieving. Now, if I could find out what room they were in, and it was an exterior room, I might be tempted to see if something could be done. But as it is... No, this whole Vale endeavor has been a loss on every level, all but gaining information on Harry Arc, one of the two chief architects of this disaster, and his... his **magic**...*

For just a moment, just a brief instant, the idea of ambushing Harry came to her mind as that knowledge went through Cinder's mind again: that Harry Arc had magic, something that should rightfully be hers. But Cinder suppressed it viciously. There would be nothing to gain by going down that road again. The young man would almost undoubtedly be on guard, as she had just seen, and he was an Arc. That meant that he had probably already recovered from the drain on his Aura reserves from the night before, unlike Cinder.

"Besides, I've got other things to do today. Coming here was just a personal thing. Still, Harry Arc, know that you have made an enemy in me," Cinder hiss aloud, with only the interior of the car she had stolen the night before bearing witness to her silent vow. "And I will collect my pound of flesh for how much you have disturbed my plans! Either from you or your loved ones, I'm not picky. But I will have my vengeance for this!"

Shaking her head, Cinder finally put her coffee mug down, ostensibly the reason why she had been sitting in a car for several minutes in the parking lot that the hospital shared with a few nearby stores and businesses. Cinder got out, headed over to a trash can and put it back in, then returned to the stolen car, the same one from the man she had murdered the night before, its license plate having been changed that night. Opening her scroll and dialing Mercury's current number, she began without preamble. "Martin, is our client's portfolio ready to be displayed?"

"Yes, ma'am, I just checked out the gallery, everything is good to go. You can bring it by anytime you want," Mercury answered, both of them speaking in code just in case. It was very, very doubtful that the scrolls she and Mercury were using could have been intercepted, but when the enemy controlled the only cell phone towers around and knew you were in the area, it paid to be careful.

Cinder thought her last minion's voice actually sounded somewhat upbeat despite the battering he had taken the day before, and the battering to Cinder's overall plans. Cinder herself knew it would be a very long time before she recovered from that for certain. Even more than Emerald's death, the final nail in the coffin of her plans angered her no end. *But I am a*

past master at controlling my fury, oh yes. “Excellent. I’ll pick you up at that little café you like, get some cinnamon buns on me, would you?”

Not twenty minutes later, Cinder pulled up outside Snowbucks, a ubiquitous, if expensive, coffee store that could be found in every major city and most minor ones, too. There, Mercury, his hair hidden under a wide hat and wearing a somewhat oversized suit to hide his physique, walked towards her, hopping into the passenger side, and holding out a bag. “It’s all there, boss.”

Cinder nodded, reaching in, only to pull back an actual cinnamon bun, which caused her to look at her companion, one eyebrow rising. “What? I was hungry. I figured it would only be right to get you something too.”

Shrugging her shoulders at that, Cinder bit into the confectionery, finishing it off quickly and wiping her fingers on a napkin before reaching back into the bag, pulling out what they would need that evening. A pair of blank white masks, two balaclavas and several other little items.

Cinder’s plan to get Lorgar out of jail was exceptionally simple, if relying on careful preparation, inside information and violence. That morning, she had used a few backdoor programs to search the city for information on him, then the police at the prison complex where Lorgar was being kept. Anything else didn’t matter, as she wasn’t interested in actually attacking the prison complex or doing much herself to break Lorgar out. No, he would do that himself. *Getting away will be something else altogether.*

Still, even that was easy to take care of, and Mercury did so while Cinder continued to scope the area around the prison.

It would have surprised many that Lorgar was not being kept by the Atlas military. But he had been found and detained by Huntsman, associated with Beacon, Vale’s Academy, and in Vale to boot. There was no way the police were going to hand him over to a foreign power, regardless of what kind of pressure Ironwood or even Ozpin could put on them, and they would have the Vale Council’s backing in that decision.

There was just no way that kind of thing would look good in the public eye. Not when what little coverage everything that had happened last night was pointing out that it was local Huntsmen who had been fighting the White Fang terrorists and ‘the serious crime problem Vale has been plagued with for months’ with barely a word for how the Atlas military had helped. Well, except for cleaning up after the fact.

Admittedly, once the furor died down, Lorgar would probably be handed over to Ironwood’s cronies on the sly. Atlas had generations of keeping faunus in their place to fall back

on when it came to getting information out of them, and as long as Ironwood shared that information, that was enough.

That was why striking now was a good idea, although any kind of direct assault was right out the window. Just because the local powers didn't want to hand the man over didn't mean that the Vale police had lost their senses and turned away any help guarding this specific prisoner. No, to get Lorgar out, subtlety would be needed.

Timos Grau was a mild-mannered introvert with few friends but a conscientious work ethic as a prison guard. He had few friends, none of them among his peers at the prison complex, and was happy for it, keeping his work and private lives separate.

That night, Monday night, Timos walked into his house, which he shared with his wife and ten year old daughter, and had barely a moment to close the door to his garage behind him and register that there didn't seem to be any noise from within the house before a gun pressed into the side of his head, and a female voice whispered, "Good evening, Mr. Grau. You have access to a certain facility that interests me. I believe it is in your family's best interest that you and I talk about that."

Grau's eyes widened, and he tried to look to the side, only to find a hand grabbing his neck, turning him to look the other way. This let him look into the kitchen, where his wife and daughter were sitting.

Not willingly. They were tied to chairs by zip ties and had gags in their mouths. Another man was standing nearby, holding two butcher knives. Both of them looked unhurt, but frightened, and the woman behind him squeezed his neck briefly.

The man held up the butcher knives, gently tickling both of their throats, causing them to squeal into their gags. "Today is not going to be a good day for you," he drawled.

Timos gulped. "M, Marcus Black? But you... Y, you haven't been seen..."

"Rumors of my retirement have been greatly exaggerated," Mercury sneered. "And you're talking too much for a man whose family's lives depend on your cooperation."

Mercury had made himself up to look like his old man, who apparently had a reputation. Up to and including killing kids if they got in his way, apparently. That was why the pair of them would be making it seem as if this operation was under his command.

Cinder personally would not kill the child. Nor would she even torture her. Cinder would, and could, allow a child to be hurt, or many children, like in the Grimm attack on Vale that had been part of her original plans. Doing it herself was another matter entirely. The

mother, on the other hand, Cinder could easily kill and torture a little bit if need be, and with a jerk of her head towards the woman, Mercury raised that dagger again to her throat.

"It does not matter to you who we are, Mr. Grau. Only know that we will go through with our threats to your family if you do not work with us or attempt to warn anyone about what we are speaking of. I sincerely hope you have enough brains to understand that any attempt to free your family from our hands will result in them dying as well," Cinder said, in her best Atlesian accent. Since it was her original accent, it came easily. "Do we have an understanding?"

"What, what do you need me to do?" The policeman, no more than a normal security guard at a special prison for those with Aura, asked what little courage he had, fleeing him at the sight of his family being threatened.

Behind her mask, Cinder smiled. *It looks as if I am getting quite good at improvisation*, she thought, before explaining precisely what she wanted Mr. Grau to do.

OOOOOOO

For her part, Pyrrha was somewhat subdued that morning. Arturia being in the hospital and Harry not being there had put a pall on her morning. Despite the fact that Pyrrha and Arturia were not lovers in any way, even the loose way she and Tia had begun to experiment with, she admired, respected and even liked Arturia as a close friend. To know her former rival had been brought low by an assassin's blade was horrific to the gynaíka Spartiátissa. To have her Rigas not be there beside her was also annoying.

Similarly, Ren and Nora were somewhat disconsolate. While the pair weren't quite as close to Arturia as Pyrrha or Harry were, they still viewed her as a friend and role model, and to hear how badly injured she was, not to mention Yang, who was a much closer friend, well, that put even Nora off her stride.

Perhaps that was why, when one of her classmates asked what was wrong, Pyrrha wrote out a bit too many details. Which only served to heighten the rustle of rumors around the room. This was heightened a moment later when Martina and Beth were asked similarly about the missing team RWBY. Although thankfully for Pyrrha's own general feelings, checking in with Harry during lunch helped a bit, as did knowing that he and Ruby would be returning to Beacon.

Regardless, knowledge of what happened Sunday night spread like wildfire. By the end of that first class, the entire freshman class had learned of what had occurred, and everyone began to worry about Yang.

While the Dark Queen was a distant figure, a role model that many of them looked up to in awe and adoration, Yang was one of their grade's social butterflies. She had numerous acquaintances, friends and people she was just friendly with. As such, her absence was felt

keenly, made worse by the fact that Blake was also stuck in the hospital wing that day and that Weiss and Ruby were missing.

Isolated as she was, Blake had woken up that morning and been told about events with Ruby and Yang. To say she had not taken it well was an understatement. Only the fact that it looked like the attack was meant for Arturia, kept her from falling into a spiral of self-recrimination. Despite that, she had wanted to rush off to the hospital, but the gash in her side and the bruised ribs she'd taken in her fight with Cinder, Neo and Roman in the Paladin had been so bad, she was bedridden for the day at the very least.

Learning from the nurse that Ozpin had already called in a Hunter with a healing semblance for Yang and Arturia calmed Blake down somewhat. Similarly, when it was shared with the freshmen, they all breathed sighs of relief. Yet the knowledge that the ebullient, laughing life-of-the-party Yang was being barely kept alive by the hospital even after the various surgeries the doctors had done on her put a pall on their day.

The professors attempted to just ignore everything that it happened last night, if they were even aware of it, beyond not taking roll call, and thus drawing more attention to the fact that team RWBY wasn't there. Yet this really didn't work so well. Those in the know were already too gloomy about things, and those not in the know became so once they heard about Yang. Really, the best idea would've been to sit the entire grade down and explain everything, but that didn't happen. Not until combat class, anyway.

The blonde professor took one look around and instantly understood that everyone there knew about Yang and Blake's injury, and at least a portion of the events of last night. Glynda wasn't happy about it, but she faced it easily. *And I have to admit, I'm far better at this kind of thing than someone like Port or Oobleck.*

"Ladies and gentlemen. I can see from your faces that none of you is actually happy to be here in class today." *Even more so than usual for some of you.* "I understand the concern you have towards your fellow freshmen, Ms. Belladonna and Ms. Xiao Long. While Ms. Xiao Long is being kept on life support right now, rest assured that Professor Ozpin has already located and begun the process of transporting a hunter with a healing Semblance to Vale to help her. Once that occurs, she will be back with us here quickly. Similarly, Ms. Belladonna is expected to make a full recovery even faster and is currently in the medical wing if you wish to stop in and speak to her."

Most of the freshmen perked up noticeably at the fact that there would be a person with a healing Semblance coming in for Yang, but the only ones who perked up about Blake were a few students on the bookish side of things, and, confusing the watching Pyrrha, one young woman who she had never known Blake to even communicate with. It seemed to

surprise her neighbors as well, and she whispered that she and Blake had some of the same tastes in books, something Pyrrha barely caught.

Oh, another smut lover. Never mind then. While at one point I might have been intrigued by such, the real thing is far, far better than reading about it, Pyrrha thought, with some smug complacency, even as the thought made her miss her Rigas's presence next to her even more.

"I will not go into detail about the combat and fighting that occurred. I will only say that myself and the rest of our professors are saddened that it had to occur in the first place," Glynda continued. She glanced at Tristan and Martina, then at their teams, and finally at the trio of team ANVL members who were present. "We would all be happier if we could move more openly, without causing suspicion or concern among normal people, enough so that our presence is well known before we can do anything. Sometimes, we are constrained by the fact that we, as huntsmen and huntresses, are almost unilaterally well-known across the globe, and also must deal with the general distrust of those with Aura also causes issues, even for accredited huntsmen."

"For instance, I myself have to sneak into Vale if I don't want to be suddenly given an 'escort'," Glynda finished, distastefully holding up two fingers on either side of her head as if quoting that word. "But it is simply something we must deal with in order to do our jobs."

She waited for that to sink in before her face closed down, and her riding crop came down on the podium in front of her loudly enough to cause many of the freshmen to jump. "Similarly, we must all be aware that, as much as we might not like the idea, Huntsman will at times need to deal with the loss of friends, the loss of teammates. That is a horror that I hope none of you will ever **have** to deal with, but it is also one that you **must** be prepared to face. The life of a huntsman or huntress is one of hardship, loss, and even death. Even self-sacrifice, if the mission is important enough. You need to understand that now, if you don't already."

Again, Glynda paused, her gaze sweeping across the auditorium. Tristan and Martina looked thoughtful, although what they were thinking about, Glynda wasn't quite sure. She was... Deeply concerned about the power block that Harry and Pyrrha had somehow put together among their fellow freshman. She wasn't blind to the fact that his team had been able to pull together a full company for Harry, and that he had, despite splitting them up, done so in such a manner as to emphasize their differing abilities.

Glynda obviously hadn't seen the full After-Action Reports yet, but judging from the meeting they'd had after the impromptu company returned, the kind of fight they'd been forced to deal with would've challenged any fully trained team of Huntsmen, and they'd gotten through it without any losses among the company. *Although I doubt that Harry sees it that way, given what happened to his sister and his words to the headmaster.*

Looking back on it now, those were not the words of a prideful young man. No, those were the words of someone who was at the end of their rope. Glynda was certain that Harry and his team would be leaving Beacon at the end of the semester, as he had threatened they would. She also didn't think there was anything she or anyone else could say that would convince them otherwise.

Ozpin seemed ambivalent about that, and that morning, it seemed as if he felt that they had come away ahead after the carnage last night. But again, Glynda wasn't so sure... specifically because of the company that Harry had led into battle. *I wonder how many other teams will follow ANVL if they and Tia leave, as I am certain they will.*

Right now, though, Glynda couldn't do anything about that, although she would try to speak to Tristan and Martina, try to assuage any concerns they might have after Harry's... intemperate remarks and biased opinion about the headmaster. Convincing them that his words were to be taken with a large grain of salt might be possible. But right now, she needed to get all of the freshmen through this, their second brush with mortality since arriving at Beacon. *And this time they weren't able to justify it away by how it was Cardin and his team's own fault that he was nearly killed. That, and Yang is not a bully like they were.*

Seeing that her words were being absorbed well enough, Glynda spoke up again, a tap from her riding crop on the podium once more causing the group to jump, something Glynda very carefully did not smile sadistically at. "Now, today, we will be starting group-based combat. We will do so inside the normal arena here, but from now on, we will be meeting in one of the larger training areas so that you will all have more room to maneuver."

A lot of the teens suddenly sat up abruptly, and the team leaders quickly began to talk to their teams, their attention now fully focused on the class. Glynda noted this and was pleased. "I will expect everyone who is not fighting to be taking notes, pros and cons. List them on opposite sides of your notebooks, and at the end of the class, we will share them on the screen, addressing each team in the same order that I have called on them."

For a moment, those words didn't register, then they did, and Glynda smirked. "And yes, ladies and gentlemen, that means that you will indeed be spending far more time here than normally today. In fact, I will call the cafeteria to have them send us food in a few hours. Do not expect to leave this auditorium without being exhausted in both mind and body."

That earned her some groans, and Glynda's smirk threatened to widen just a little before the first two teams faced off against one another.

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That smile was in stark abeyance not forty minutes after the last of her students left that night, for Glynda found herself waiting at the bullhead landing zone, watching as Harry Arc and Ruby Rose exited the transport. Seeing the sad expression on Ruby's face took precedent over the cold one on Harry's, though, and she took a step forward.

"Ms. Rose, Mr. Arc. I have some good news to impart to you. Professor Ozpin has succeeded in finding a hunter with a Targeted Regeneration Semblance. Unfortunately, it will take a good week to get him here. We will be paying for an express transport from Vacuo, but he is deep in the desert there, dealing with the aftermath of an earthquake. Still, once he arrives, both Ms. Xiao Long and Arturia will be as right as it is possible to become," she said.

"OOOOH, thank you, Professor Goodwitch," Ruby exclaimed, looking like she was about to collapse from relief. "We were talking about that and um, protection at the hospital just in case. Are you, um, is it okay for one of my team members to be there at the hospital? I know Harry and Tia are planning to switch off, and um, I know that it isn't like she's aware of us or anything but..."

Glynda fought back a twitch at the news that Tia and Harry had already made a decision like that without asking, but nodded, pasting a smile on her face for Ruby. "That is acceptable, Ms. Rose, so long as at least one of you is able to be in class from tomorrow on."

Ruby nodded, and Glynda turned to Harry. "And I suppose, Mr. Arc, your and your sister's grades are good enough that so long as you have someone taking notes, you will be allowed to miss class as well. I well understand the pain of loss or near loss, and I will not stop you from spending time beside Arturia."

Breathing in deeply, Harry nodded. "I, thank you, Professor. I also apologize for some of my intemperate remarks last night, and I will continue to address you and all the other professors respectfully as long as my sister and I are here. I will not take my words to the headmaster back, however, nor my warning that we will be leaving at the end of the semester." He then smiled a bit. "However, I will still expect you to stop in later this week when I get a chance to cook for my team."

That was the agreement they had reached months back for letting Team ANVL move into a townhome, and Harry had kept to it since. Now, Glynda smiled a little at that, thawing more than a bit. "Thank you, Mr. Arc. Your cooking is always enjoyable, and I am happy to hear you bear me no ill will, although I still say it is a mistake for you to leave Beacon."

Harry just nodded at that, biting back a few words that were more for Ozpin than Glynda. "Loyalty like yours is an amazing thing, Professor. I hope Ozpin tells you that every day."

“He certainly does, mostly when I deal with his paperwork,” Glynda replied dryly, causing both her listeners to laugh, and if Ruby laughed with relief, Glynda wasn’t about to comment. “Now, if you will excuse me.”

Harry watched Glynda go for a moment before shaking his head with a sigh. *Loyalty needs to be a two-way street, though. And I wonder how loyal Ozpin is to anyone he cannot move like so many puppets?*

Looking to the side, Harry saw that Ruby still looked a little disconsolate despite the good news that Glynda had given them. With a sigh, he decided to put off heading back to see his team and turned to continue walking beside Ruby in the opposite direction towards the freshman dormitory. Hearing his footsteps, Ruby looked around, blinking. “Harry?”

Harry shrugged, resting a hand on her hair and ruffling it gently. “You looked as if you needed some company, Little Red. I’m not going to ask if you’re all right or anything, but I’m gonna remind you again that nothing that happened last night is your fault.”

Other than going along with splitting your team, but I gather that was more because you understood why, and thought Neptune and Sun would be backup enough if Weiss and Blake ran into trouble, Harry reflected. Talking to Ruby about the discussion on that point, he and Tia had heard in the bullhead had been interesting. *Well, that and assuming the White Fang are idiots, but if I were going to blame anyone for that mistake, it’d be Blake.*

Ruby tried to huff but didn’t bother pushing his hand away for a few moments, letting him rest it there, taking comfort from the gesture as she seemed to think for a few moments. “I, I don’t know. I’m still... I still don’t want to believe a lot of what you said, even the parts Weiss agreed with. I’m not going to say anything more about that. I do want to speak to Professor Ozpin about it, but only after Yang’s been healed up. Other than that...”

She fell silent for a few moments, absently batting Harry’s hand away from her hair and turning to resume their walk. Harry continued to walk with her, sensing Ruby still had more she needed to say. He remained silent until she spoke up again, the silence working to draw Ruby out of her thoughts. “Hey, Harry, why did you want to be a Huntsman?”

At that, Harry blinked. “We’ve never talked about that?” When Ruby shook her head, he shrugged. “I know I’ve talked about that with my team, I just thought you and the rest of your team were there at the time. Well, I suppose it isn’t a big secret or anything. I wanted to change the world.”

It was Ruby’s turn to blink, and she did so, turning to stare up at him, their walk pausing again near the entrance to the freshmen dorm building. “What the heck? What do you mean

by that? The way you say it, it's a lot bigger than just making the world a better place or helping people."

"It is. To me, far too many people throughout the world are willing to bury their heads in the sand and forget that the Grimm even exist or simply treat them like they are some kind of natural disaster that needs to be endured, turned aside or better avoided rather than fought." Harry shook his head, scowling. "But even with the best Huntsmen can do, the fact of the matter is that humanity is losing this war."

Ruby started at that. "Wait, what? And, and war? The Grimm aren't..."

"They aren't an intelligent enemy," *At least, not most of them.* "But they are certainly at war with us. A genocidal war," Harry stated firmly. "Every generation, there's less land and more Grimm territory. Every few years an attack occurs, hitting a small settlement away from the four major powers. If it's not a desert community disappearing in Vacuo or a town or village somewhere else in Solitas, it's one of the independent villages scattered around Anima or Sanus, with the Atlas military arriving too late to do anything about the latter, and too few Huntsmen to really protect all the former."

"I, I know that, but I didn't... that is, that can't be right, it can't happen that often, can it?" Ruby nearly demanded, her face slack with confusion.

"It does. It's just not talked about. Why would it? The more people that worry about that, the more fear of the Grimm there is, the more likely that fear is to draw them in," Harry explained gently.

Yang had at one point mentioned how Ruby's mother, Summer, had died defending a smaller settlement, so he knew this was a touchy subject. She'd succeeded but died doing it.

"Ever since I realized that, I knew that humanity simply can't let that trend continue. I knew that society itself needed to change, and that was something my parents and the other elders in Evig Låga had also come to realize. The change in society, I mean. That's why we started to scout the area beyond our control, why we set up the Breitenfeld mine, and everything else. Humanity needs to go on the offensive, needs to take back lands from the Grimm, needs to stop thinking that they can't be stopped, you know what I mean?"

Through all this, Ruby had stared at Harry, her eyes going wider and wider, and when he finished, she simply nodded, still processing everything he'd said on top of all the other shocks to our system recently. There was a lot to take in there, and Ruby consciously decided to set aside the basic reasoning of what Harry had said to concentrate on everything else.

"That, that sounds amazing. I just wanted to help people, to make the world a better place. Now, hearing your reasoning, and having heard a lot of other people's, I, I'm wondering if

my reasoning is, is wrong. Or..." Ruby's hands began to make grabby motions, as if she was physically trying to grab the words she wanted out of the ether and failing miserably. "Or not wrong, so much like it's too small or something."

"No." Harry shook his head quickly, the firmness in his single word drawing Ruby out of her confused thoughts. "In the end, that's what I'm trying to do too, even if my specific dream might seem a lot larger. Yours, simply wanting to help people, it's similar, but far purer, and perhaps far more powerful for all that. I will never say that wanting to help people isn't a proper motivator to become a huntress, Ruby."

After all, while I'm more than willing to be somewhat of a hypocrite when it comes to Blake's actions and how much they remind me of my past life, I'm not willing to condemn Ruby's motivations. Wanting to help people and to protect them was just as much a part of my motivation in fighting the Death Eaters and Riddle as protecting myself was.

Shaking those memories away, Harry again rested a hand on Ruby's head, staring at her seriously, giving her some advice that he wished someone else had given him in that first life of his. "Just don't let your own goodness blind you that there are others whose own priorities and desires are far more muddled. Some you can take at face value, some not so much."

"I feel like you're trying to warn me about Professor Ozpin again, so I'm going to shove that into the 'don't think about it' box in my brain right now. I've got too much already I am being forced to think about when all I want to do is curl up in a bed next to Yang, eat cookies and wait for her to get better," Ruby stated bluntly, causing Harry to laugh ruefully, and agree that the idea of doing so while waiting for Arturia to recover sounded like a good idea to him.

The two were silent as they entered the freshmen dorm, finding no one around at this time of day. It was only when they reached the floor where Team RWBY's dorm room was that Ruby spoke up again. "Yang's injuries, even Arturia's. I, I've never seen anything like that before. Never thought it could happen. Not to my sister, she's too strong, too angry to be taken down so easy. Now she is, and it... It hurts."

She looked over at Harry, pausing again, not reaching to open the door to their dorm room just yet. "A part of me knows you are right when you said it wasn't entirely our fault. We couldn't have seen the ambush coming any faster; we couldn't have known that the enemy, particularly so many gang members, would ambush us like that. But the leader in me thinks I should have done better... and that it should be me lying in that bed."

Harry nodded seriously, and he reached out, gently pulling Ruby into a hug, as he had done countless times for his younger siblings. Odd to think of the rest as siblings and Arturia and Tia as something else, but there you are. "As a leader, you always think you need to do better. You will always assume there was something you could have done to help your team,

whatever you're facing. That's good. It shows you care." He then shook his head. "But don't let that guilt trip you, or make you second-guess your decisions, Little Red."

He smirked then. "On top of that, I think I speak for Yang when I say that she would be far happier injured than having you be the one in that hospital bed. The reason we older siblings come first is to protect those who follow, after all."

"Or lead us into situations where we need to be defended," Ruby mock-grumbled, although she looked far happier now, hearing Harry saying that her guilt was simply a natural part of being a leader and the hug. How much of that was his words or the hug, Harry didn't know, but it seemed to have helped regardless. "Thanks for that, Harry."

"Anytime, Little Red."

Ruby shook her head exasperatedly as her scroll beeped in her pocket, showing that she had set it up so that the door would open automatically when she was nearby. Harry didn't care so much about that until the door swung open, and suddenly, his face was full of dog.

Ruby gasped as Harry stumbled, nearly pulling her sideways, as something small but heavy hit his face, clinging there as he felt something licking his hair, face, and ears. "Zwei!!!" Ruby shouted, ecstatic as she released Harry from their hug, allowing Harry to stumble sideways into the far wall as his hands reached up to grab at her family's pet dog, a small corgi. "What are you doing here?!"

Before Harry could pull the dog off of his face or Ruby look around, someone else was there, grabbing Ruby into a hug far tighter than the one Harry had been giving her. "Ruby!"

"Gah! Dad!?"

Ruby had barely a second to look up before her father's eyes latched onto Harry as he finally pulled Zwei away from his face. "And who are you? I saw that hug earlier, are you, don't tell me my little girl has a boyfriend?!"

"No!" Ruby shouted, fear suddenly coursing through her, overriding her happiness and shock at seeing her father. "I, it's nothing like that! Harry is just a fellow team leader, and he's already got a girlfriend!"

Oh, Brothers, please don't let Pyrrha hear anyone calling me his girlfriend, please! While Pyrrha was a remarkably gentle and kindhearted person for someone who had achieved such martial accomplishments, the older redhead was also demonstrably possessive of her relationship with Harry. Thus, Ruby had no desire whatsoever to see what she would do if anyone tried to come onto Harry. *Ugh, I still have nightmares about the beatdown she gave that one second year who tried to flirt with him. Arms are not supposed to bend that way!*

Harry also blinked, holding the dog up in one hand, staring at the man. "Yeah, Sir, I don't see Ruby in that way. If anything, I see her as more of a little sister figure. Although that's probably because of how many such sisters I already have. When you already have three younger sisters, everyone shorter than you sort of starts to look sister-shaped."

As Ruby nodded rapidly in agreement, ignoring the fact that she would normally be very annoyed by that coming from any of her friends, let alone one of the Arc siblings, the man's grip tightened around her, and his face softened a little as he looked down at her. "Well, that's good then. I'd have been horrified if that was why you weren't here when Qrow and I arrived. He's over talking to Ozpin at the moment, and let me say that both of us were not exactly happy to hear what happened to Yang and you."

Ruby emitted a noise that actually caused the furry ball of fluff in Harry's hand to twitch, whining and trying to reach up to his ear with his little paws, failing at present, given how Harry was holding him. Harry could sympathize, though, as that had been remarkably painful. "Drunkle Crow is here? I haven't seen him in nearly half a year now!"

"Ha, as if either one of us would not try to get here the moment we heard that Yang was so badly injured. And not in a class, mind you, but getting involved in an assassination assault on a Huntress like the Dark Queen," Tai-Yang said with a scoff. "Both of us know that Huntsmen and Huntresses get hurt all the time, Ruby, and we're willing to let you and Yang live your own lives. But that doesn't mean that we like hearing how you got involved in some kind of investigation against the White Fang."

"Hah, good to know that I'm not the only one at the moment who's angry with that old bastard. As for where Ruby was and where her other two teammates currently are, they're down in Vale hospital protecting Yang. Now, if you're confronting the arse in the ivory tower--" Harry began, before Ruby kicked him in the shins. It didn't hurt, obviously, but it did at least interrupt him.

"Harry, enough! Seriously, with how much cursing you've done lately, you'd fill up our team's cursed jar and then some!" She muttered.

"You still have that?" Tai-Yang asked with a laugh.

"Of course! Cursing is really just a bad habit to fall into, and anyway, Yang and Blake can barely go a week without putting some money in it. Which gives me enough money for cookies every week," Ruby said, smirking diabolically.

Shaking his head, Tai-Yang looked over at Harry, his mind shifting gears. "Ozpin called and told us that the Dark Queen and Belladonna were hurt, and something about her attackers." In fact, Ozpin had been very forthcoming to both Tai and Qrow on that score, thanks

to the fact they were members of his hidden circle. That didn't mean he had been entirely forthcoming with them though about how badly it could have gone without someone else's intervention, though. "Although I don't know who you are or your involvement Mr..."

"Harry Arc," Harry said simply. "I found out Team Ruby and hangers-on were going looking for trouble, and put together a company of our friends to be close by just in case."

"Arc? You don't look anything like the Arcs I've seen," Tai-Yang interjected, his eyes narrowing.

"I get that a lot, but both my parents and the sword Caliburn say I am one, so the rest of the world can lump it as far as I'm concerned," Harry shrugged his shoulders. Seeing the glare that Ruby was giving him, Harry realized that she didn't want him to spout what she thought of as his theories about Ozpin's lack of action, and decided to set it aside for a second. "Now, could one of you take this little fluffy arse shaker?"

"Hey! No weird nicknames for Zwei! He's awesome! He can even help us hunt down Grimm occasionally," Ruby said, pulling Zwei out of Harry's grip into a hug, which was enthusiastically returned in the form of licks and nuzzles.

"You're not the one he just tried to lick to death," Harry taunted, shaking his head. "Anyway, I'll leave you here with your dad, Ruby. I'm sure you two have a lot to talk about."

"I would say so, young lady, considering Ozpin said that all of you had rushed out to danger," Tai-Yang said, crossing his arms and staring hard at Ruby, jerking a head into her dorm room. "And don't think for a minute you're getting out of this without explaining everything."

Ruby whined, suddenly wishing that Harry had gone on to explain his own theory on who had been responsible for events last night, but Harry quickly backed away, waving his hands at both of them, bidding Ruby farewell and good luck in one move. This family meeting had been kind of amusing to witness, unlike the family drama with Weiss and her father, but Harry still had his own team he wanted to see.

Tai waited until the door closed behind them and Ruby was sitting down on her bunkbed, which, honestly, looked like it was constantly threatening to fall apart to him, before speaking up. "Well, tell me everything that happened, Ruby. I'm not talking about just Yang's injury, either. I've already gotten the report from the hospital about that. I want to know what the blue blazes you all were thinking, splitting your party like that!"

"W, wait, that's it?" Ruby twitched. "You're not angry about us going looking for trouble?"

“Daughter mine, you’re looking to become Huntresses. Looking for trouble is often in our job description. I’d rather you’d wait until your training was done, but I know that Ms. Belladonna was the driving force behind that,” Tai waved a hand airily. “No, I want to know whose bright freaking idea it was to split up a group of freshman Huntresses who haven’t even had a full year of training at Beacon yet!”

Gulping, Ruby realized that maybe getting out of explaining why they had gone looking for trouble wasn’t going to get her out of trouble.

She was right. Unlike Harry, who had been willing to basically put down the whole splitting up the gang thing to peer pressure, her father broke it down in an almost contemptuous manner, tearing into each group and pointing out their weaknesses, the mistakes they had made (even Wiess and Neptune’s, who didn’t run into trouble) and more. This took so long that Ruby was surprised when her scroll went off. “OH! Um, look Dad, I, er, I was going to head over to see my teammate Blake, and then, um, I’ve got tutoring...”

“I’ll tutor you tonight, apologize and cancel on whoever was going to do that. If whoever it is still wants to be reimbursed for their time, I’ll pay for it” Tai said firmly. “I still want to talk to you and this Blake girl.”

“ERK.” Hangdog at her attempt to avoid further lecturing having been cut off, Ruby groaned, but nodded. “Fine, but let’s go see Blake first, okay?”

Thankfully, Ruby met someone else on the way to the medical wing that cheered her up a lot. Coming haphazardly down the lit path in their direction was a gray and black clad figure Ruby knew very well. “Drunkle Qrow!” she shouted, racing towards him with her Semblance.

Qrow smirked as he caught the girl, twirling around in place with her for a moment. “How’s it going, kiddo? You keeping your spirits up? Heard tell you and your team are getting into even more trouble than Team Strike.”

“Eh, more like a different kind of trouble. You two apparently always got in trouble with girls and breaking the rules on campus, we um, we find trouble elsewhere,” Ruby said sobering as she spoke, her face falling.

“None of that, Ruby. It wasn’t your fault. It was those buffoons who attacked you, okay?” *And whoever the mystery brunette is. Tyrian Callows... we should’ve known he was working with Salem. But now he’s dead too. So is the green-haired girl, and we know what the brunette looks like. The cost might’ve been heavy, but Ozzy’s right. We came out ahead last night, despite how close it came to being a disaster.* “Now come on, you were off to talk to your teammate in the medical wing, right?”

Blake looked up at the sound of the door to her room opening, breathing in a sigh of relief as Ruby poked her head in. She had heard about the injuries to the rest of her team in a separate ambush, and while they had exchanged dozens of messages earlier that day, seeing Ruby alive and well was nice. "Ruby, thank goodness. They won't let me out of bed until tomorrow, can you believe that? Is... is there any news on Ya..." Seeing what Ruby was carrying, Blake's voice trailed off.

"Professor Ozpin's already called in a few favors to get a Huntsman here with some kind of regeneration or healing Semblance. It'll take a week, because he was way the heck out there, apparently. Don't worry about that. The hospital's keeping her alive and in one piece for now, that's all they need to do, apparently," Ruby said, entering the room and giving Blake a brief one-armed hug, during which Blake twitched, the little dog in Ruby's other arm trying hard to sniff and lick her..

"Th, that's good, Ruby, but what's that?" she nearly hissed, her catlike ears flat to her skull and her tail twitching enough to be visible under the covers.

"This is Zwei," Ruby said, nuzzling her cheek against the top of the dog's head. "And he's awesome! Don't worry, he's housetrained really, really well. He won't get into your stuff or anything like that."

Blake wasn't certain she believed that, nor was she certain she wanted to be around a dog at all. While dog and cat faunus could get along well enough, cats and dogs often reacted poorly to their counterparts. It was why most faunus didn't keep pets, and Blake had already had several instances of dogs reacting poorly, or, really, a little too friendly towards her in the past. "Just, just keep him away from me for a bit, okay? I'm not exactly up for any kind of roughhousing," she pointed out, hoping that would be enough.

Ruby pouted but agreed with that, just as the door opened again, and an older man came in, his looks causing Blake to blush. *Good God! It's like an aged-up, gender-changed Yang with a tan. How the hell is that pushing all of my buttons? That is so very wrong! Oh crap, is that...* On the heels of her hormonally induced thoughts, Blake realized who this guy must be. "Would you, er, that is are you Ruby and Yang's father? I, I'm really sorry..."

"You weren't there when Yang and Ruby were attacked. I can blame all of you for the fact that you weren't acting as a team should, **staying together**, but I can't blame you for them being in the area when Arturia Arc was attacked. As for chasing the White Fang, yeah, that was stupid, especially after what happened last time, apparently." The older man looked down at Ruby, who flinched under that gaze. "I'm not going to hold it against you, though, so long as you start fucking learning from your mistakes. Understood?"

Both Blake and Ruby nodded even as Ruby mimed putting a lien to one side, and the older man moved into the room, followed by yet another man, who didn't look altogether like Yang or Ruby. But the way Ruby smiled at the man made his identity easy to guess. "So, you'd be Blake then? So, what can you tell us about the White Fang..." That worthy began, frowning at her.

"Qrow..." Tai growled.

"Tai, come on," Qrow snorted. "Ozzy's already movin' heaven and earth to help our little girl, and you know Yang wouldn't want us beating her team up over everything. Best to move on, and besides, the more we get from these two, the less they'll have to give to the authorities, right?"

Tai couldn't really argue with that and sighed, pulling up a chair. "Fine, so long as we start from the beginning when she and this Wukong kid found the rally, I can put off remonstrating with her about looking for trouble on her own for some other time."

With Ruby putting her hands together in a sorry gesture to one side, Blake sighed, but nodded. "I, yes, sir. Umm...well, to start with, I suppose you need to know that White Fang have a way to leave markers for other faunus that only faunus can really understand. It's a cultural thing, but you can eventually..."

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Harry breathed in deeply, smiling happily at all of his team as Pyrrha nuzzled into his neck, his arm going around her, a hand resting on her thigh tenderly. "Thank you. I, I didn't want to assume, I needed to lay everything out, to, to let the pair of you make your own decisions. Hell, I didn't even want to assume with Pyrrha, but—"

"I have made it clear several times, Harry Arc, that you are both my man and my Rigas. I would follow you for either reason, let alone the fact I agree with you on this," Pyrrha said, a thrill shooting through her at the thought of what the future might become.

"And you were a silly willy for thinking we'd ever wanna stay here when you left, Fearless Leader. You're ours, and we're not letting you go!" Nora exclaimed, looking like the only reason she wasn't launching herself over the table to tackle Harry in a hug was the fact that she was still eating the pancakes Harry and Ren had made for her.

"Your thoughts are logical and sound, and I... we made a promise you and I. Heading back to Anima early just makes it so that we are closer to fulfilling that promise," Ren said more seriously, before smiling. "Beyond that, you have proven time and again to be a man worth following. Ozpin has the reputation. You have the reality in my eyes. I will follow you."

Harry smiled, then shook his head. "In that case, let me call home and start getting things organized. No time like the present, after all."

Ren nodded. "We can also canvas the rest of the freshman class. After all, when you're carving out a new city-state out of the Grimm lands, the more the merrier, right? And I would wager at least those who fought with us last night will follow my thoughts on that score."

"Keep it on the down low for now. But... if you think Martina, Sung-Sun, Tristan and their teams would be willing to join us, then... yes," Harry said slowly, before his face firmed. "But wait until Arturia's back on her feet. I don't want anyone to make this choice in the heat of the moment or without thinking it through. For you two, it might seem easy. For others, not so much."

At that, the others all nodded, but Ren and Nora's expressions didn't change. When it came to it, Team Anvil would be leaving Beacon together, and they might not be alone in doing so.

OOOOOOO

Later the same night that Harry's team was contemplating what could be called a revolt, Ozpin was still at work, contacting people around the globe, hoping to find more information now on Salem's 'queen' now that they had a face to go with a description. However, that work was interrupted when Tai blasted the elevator door off with a thunderous punch, and Qrow leapt over him, both men charging towards Ozpin. "Ozzy, what the fuck have you been up to!?"

Ozpin sighed and stood up, shaking his head. "I have been doing what I have needed to. I take it you would like me to be omniscient too, Qrow?"

That made Qrow pause, his scythe falling to the side, but he was still glaring at his old professor. "You didn't have anyone to back them up. That's a fact, Ozpin."

"I thought it was just my daughters and their team getting in over their heads. What the fuck is up with you using Belladonna like that? That's way beyond Yang and the rest rushing off on their own! My daughter's on death's door because you used them and didn't back them up!" Tai roared, moving to slam a fist down onto Ozpin's desk, only for Ozpin to block the blow with his staff.

"I would rather not need to get a new desk, Tai. That desk is older than you are. As for your allegation, I see that Mr. Arc was free with his opinions," Ozpin shook his head.

Tai roared, but a swift blow to the knee broke his attempt to throw a punch at Ozpin, and the next thing he knew, he was pinned under Ozpin's cane, the tip of it pressing him into the ground of Ozpin's office face-first. However, Ozpin was faced with Qrow's scythe, Harbinger,

having shifted into its claymore form, pressing into the back of his neck. With Ozpin's Aura, that was a scant threat, but the implication was there, and he turned to glance over his shoulder at Qrow. "Am I wrong?"

"Actually, he passed it on to Ruby. She told us about them," Qrow growled. "We talked to her, and she doesn't believe her friend's accusations any longer, but she'll still want to talk to you when Yang's up and about again. Now, I don't believe most of what she passed on, but that whole thing about turning off the tracker's too much for me to ignore," Qrow growled.

"Even if, because of that, we now know what Salem's Queen looks like? Even if those allegations are coming from a young man who has magic?" Ozpin asked with a sigh, lifting his cane off of Tai's neck. Leaning on it once more, Ozpin ignored the sword at his neck, moving over to a sitting area that had been put in place when James had arrived, gesturing his two friends into the chairs across from him.

Tai growled and pushed to his feet, his eyes still red and angry, but Ozpin continued to speak softly. "The attack on Arturia Arc is something we can lay at our mysterious woman's feet, at Salem's, but it is one I did not see coming. I had no idea that the serial killer Tyrian Callows was in the city, nor that he would target Arturia, or had sworn himself to Salem's service. That entire assault blindsided me, as well as Yang, Ruby and Arturia herself."

His gaze hardened as both men hesitated to follow him, scowling at the headmaster instead. "That is an entirely different issue than my, yes, using Blake to discover the doings of the White Fang. I will admit that, and even looking aside as Wukong, Vasillias and Team Ruby as they left Beacon. However, I had no idea that the White Fang would be able to plan for Blake's attempts to find them, or would have access to such weaponry."

"Seems to me that you've been taken by surprise a lot lately," Qrow grumbled, folding Harbinger back into its carry-on form. He grabbed Tai's shoulder, but Tai was already calming down, his Semblance, Burn, which he shared with his oldest daughter, guttering out. "What's Jamey boy say about that?"

"He is quietly furious. You know James. When he has a scent of some kind of corruption or target, he is as determined as a dog with a single bone," Ozpin snorted, grateful that any threat of outright confrontation was gone. Admittedly, he was lying about some things, but neither Qrow nor Tai were already inclined to not trust him as Harry was.

"Don't change the subject," Tai stated even as he thumped down into one of the chairs. "James is competent, if nothing else, and that aspect will get handled. I'm more wondering why the fuck you didn't have any backup nearby. Using Blake for her insider knowledge, okay. But no backup? Even if Ruby and the rest had stayed together, they would have faced one hell of a fight, and Arturia would have been killed for certain."

“What makes you think that Harry Arc moved entirely on his own?” Ozpin asked, outright lying for the first time that night. “That young man with his magic has been of interest to me since he first came to my school, to say nothing of what is going on with Evig Låga.”

“Magic? Wait, you mentioned that before,” Tai paused, scowling, before his eyes widened. “You mean that? He has magic, it isn’t a Semblance? How? You wouldn’t have—”

“Of course not. I lack the power at this point, and will for at least four or five generations,” Ozpin waved, not mentioning how Qrow had stiffened at his words, or the glare he sent the window, remembering half of why that was the case. The half that had not turned out to be a good investment.

Tai looked in Qrow’s direction, then frowned a bit. “Speaking of, has there been any sight of —”

“Raven is so good at hiding her presence and traveling unseen that even if I were able to blanket the whole city with cameras and Atlesian soldiers, she would almost undoubtedly still be able to slip past,” Ozpin snorted. “I don’t know if she knows about Yang’s injury, nor do I care to speculate about another thing I have no control over.”

“Like Arc’s magic?” Tai guessed. “You tried to find out about it, he pushed back, and you decided to instead guide him from a distance instead of directly, am I right? Just like you decided to first with me and Strike until we’d matured enough to understand Salem and everything else.”

“Indeed,” Ozpin smiled briefly before shaking his head with a sigh. “I am no closer now to knowing how Harry Arc received his magic than when I first became aware of it. He was suspicious of me from the get-go, for reasons I am still pondering.”

“But that doesn’t mean he can’t be useful.” Tai grinned suddenly, now fully accepting the conclusion that Ozpin had wanted both men to reach.

“Mr. Arc thinks himself unable to be manipulated. But he can, just like Blake, be directed,” Ozpin said, lying once more, but he felt it was necessary. “Does that satisfy the two of you?”

“No, but then again, I don’t use the word satisfy except for very specific things I go to women for,” Qrow snorted, taking a drag from his flask.

The room fell silent for a moment, broken by Tai. “And we have your word you knew nothing about the attack on Arturia before it was launched?”

“I did not. Nor did anyone in the government know how far corruption had spread in the Vale police force. That is actually what James’ Penny is up to right now, along with many of

the best men he brought with him. We... I have indeed become complacent," Ozpin admitted. "Even after Raven's... withdrawal from the circle, I had not considered how badly Salem's having human supporters who were not blunt objects could be. That is something we will all need to take into account in the future... even if I suspect that her immediate goals will change."

Both men looked at him, confused, but Ozpin said nothing. When it came down to it, using Harry Arc as a stalking horse, ironically, as he had hinted he had already done, was simply too good an idea to not go ahead with. *He and Evig Låga alike will act like honey to a bear. And while they do, and James roots out whoever is supplying weapons to Salem's forces, I can strengthen Vale and the other city-states, and bring more resources under my control to guard against further betrayals. And, of course, do what we can to transfer Autumn's Maiden powers to someone else. With Ms. Nikos no longer viable... well, we will see. Best not to even think such thoughts in front of these two right now.*

Seeing that his two interlocutors were satisfied, Ozpin decided to end things here. "Now, since you two have barged in, I believe I will use that as an excuse to quit work for the night. I will allow you to use the school bullhead to head into Vale to see Yang, Tai. I know that Qrow can make his own way there." That elicited a wry laugh from both men, and Ozpin shooed the younger men towards the elevator, happy he had diffused the situation. "For now, this old wizard needs some sleep."

Mollified if not truly satisfied, Tai and Yang left then, as Ozpin headed for his quarters, set below his office. They glanced at one another, still questioning what had gone on here, but after a series of facial gestures and twitches, both of them decided to keep trusting Ozpin. He hadn't led them wrong before, after all, except when it came to Raven, and well, both of them had made their own mistakes there. *But you're on thin ice, you old coot. Try to drag our girls into Inner Circle business, and I'm going to introduce you to the tip of my scythe.*

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The first thing that came to Arturia's senses as consciousness returned was a sound of beeping close by. The next thing that she felt was a surge of weakness and a weariness the likes of which Arturia had never felt before. Weakness was not something that Arturia had ever had to deal with often. Even before her Aura unlocked, her training began young and built on muscles and endurance shaped by the need to help around the plantation.

Now? Arturia felt as if she were a week-old kitten, unable to lift even a hand, let alone anything else. Even opening her eyes was a chore, and once Arturia pushed through enough to do so, she was forced to close them again, as the lights of what she quickly recognized as a hospital room stabbed down into them. "Ughhh..."

“Arturia!” Even through her muddled thoughts and exhaustion, that voice was Harry’s, and Arturia tried to open her eyes, to turn toward him. Her neck refused to move, but she was able to open her eyes again, and a second later, the annoying lights stabbing into her eyes were eclipsed by Harry’s head, looking down at her with worry and concern.

That worry drove the last of the haziness from Arturia’s mind, and her eyes widened slightly as memories of the ambush flooded into her. *Oh, I was poisoned, wasn’t I? Scorpion, or scorpion faunus, venom. That assassin, his Semblance, it allowed him to get through my Aura. Worrisome. I hope he died. Dealing with such a one again would not be pleasant.*

“Don’t try to move, sis,” Harry said, leaning his forehead down into Arturia’s, breaking into her still somewhat disjointed thought process. His emerald eyes locked onto her own golden ones. “That venom did a lot of damage to your body, and worse, the antivenom also had some bad side effects due to the amount they had to use with you. Normally, you’d be laid up for months getting over it, and then more time getting your muscle mass back, but Ozpin’s already got in contact with a Huntsman with a healing Semblance.”

As Harry said that, a conflicted look passed across his face, both annoyed by something and happy about the news, something Arturia noticed. “Unfortunately, getting him here is going to take at least a week. The man in question was deep into Vacuo’s desert. We’re actually lucky he was even able to contact the man via the CCT for Yang and you. You’re actually not as bad off as your fellow blonde is right now.”

Arturia allowed her lips to twitch a little at that, the closest approximation she could make to a smile. *I am platinum blonde, thank you very much. Not for me is that more common term. Yang might have the curves, but I have the sophistication.*

She tried to speak, but could barely keep her eyes open, let alone open her mouth to do so. Instead, Arturia blinked slowly once, then again towards Harry, and he smiled back, knowing Arturia well enough to know what she wanted to ask. “Ruby is fine. Weiss and the rest of the group that you met at the tower arrived in time to save the three of you, although you’d all done a bang-up job of chewing up your attackers on your own. They finished wiping out your attacker, except for one of them who fought like a kickboxer and got away, including that guy with the anti-Aura Semblance. We won’t have to deal with him again... Well, unless someone’s somehow developed cloning or something.”

Arturia’s lips tried to twitch into a smile, but again, ‘trying’ was about all she could do. Harry seemed to sense this and pulled back, talking quietly to someone for a second before he was back in her line of sight, resting a hand on her cheek tenderly. His thumb traced her lips, and a part of Arturia realized that whoever he had been speaking to earlier when he called Arturia his sister had probably left the room. “I understand, sister. Don’t try to force yourself to

stay awake or anything. Me or Tia will be here when you wake up again, regardless. We won't let you be alone here in the hospital if we can help it."

He smirked then, pulling his thumb back as Arturia heard a sound of a door opening and closing, and several doctors moved in, pushing Harry away to examine her. "I even took the liberty of calling our parents. They might even beat the Huntsman with the healing Semblance here."

Arturia fell asleep before she could properly think about that, not even bothered by the probing and prodding going on all around her.

Staring down at his sister, Harry scowled, hating seeing her like this. Still, there was little he could do about it right now. He waited there, his hands clenching as he watched the doctors work. Eventually, one of them turned around and, almost like they had just remembered Harry was there, started, then hastily began to explain. "Um, the, the damage done to her heart and bloodstream from the venom has been dealt with by the antivenom, but as we were worried about, the antivenom itself badly hurt her intestines and stomach. She will gradually regain some strength, but without a Healing Semblance, it is doubtful Ms. Arc would ever regain her full athleticism."

"But with access to one, she should be able to recover fully?" Harry practically demanded.

The man flinched a little, while more than one of the doctors backed away, heading out the door quickly. "Ye, yes," he stammered, making Harry blink, wondering how he had come across as scary there for a second. "I imagine Ms. Arc will be able to make a full recovery if, as my more experienced colleagues have told me, a Healing Semblance can act like regeneration. N, now if you will excuse me."

With that, the chief doctor in charge of Arturia hurried off, and Harry blinked, looking over at Ruby and Weiss. They had both decided to spend an hour here and then eat in Vale before Weiss headed back to Beacon. "Was it something I said?"

"You can come off as rather intimidating, Harry," Weiss snorted.

"Especially when you do that flashy-eye thing," Ruby added.

"Flashy-eye thing? What flashy-eye thing?" Harry was still confused and became more so as the two shorter girls laughed but didn't explain. Rolling his eyes, let that go with a chuckle, breathing a sigh of relief. Now that Arturia had woken up, even for a moment, it felt like everything would be right with the world once more.

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The next time Arturia woke up, it was Tia alone who greeted her, leaning in and giving her a brief hug. "You worried us, Arturia. Don't do that again."

That was about as effusive as Tia could ever get verbally, but the look in her eyes and the gentleness of that hug told Arturia far, **far** more. Tia was one of the most physically powerful people that Arturia had ever met, right up there with her father and a few other experienced Huntsmen. To feel the amount of restraint Tia was using, the gentleness of that hug, it told Arturia all she needed to know about exactly how fragile her body was at the moment.

This time, though, she at least felt up to speaking a little. "How long have I been out this time?" She asked, before blinking in grimacing a little. "And I desperately need some mouthwash."

Tia obliged by grabbing a cup of water and holding it up to Arturia's lips, her eyes smiling at Arturia as she said, "Say ahh..." reminding Arturia of the time when Tia and Harry had both gotten sick, and the older siblings had worked to take care of them on a rotation.

Still, despite her growing embarrassment, Arturia eagerly sipped at the water, then drank a small cup of mouthwash, before spitting it back out. Well, dribbling it really, a fact that mortified Arturia, but Tia didn't really react to it beyond dabbing at her chin and neck to get rid of the drizzle.

"You were out of it for most of a day. You woke up Tuesday afternoon, before, it's very early Wednesday morning now," Tia said succinctly, before sitting down and taking Arturia's hand in hers. "Don't let this happen again," she added, the gentleness of the squeeze she gave Arturia's hand adding to the concern and worry that Arturia was able to see in her face, even if Tia's tone remained its normal bland one.

"I will try not to, darling," Arturia replied, before blinking as Ruby's face appeared above her, followed by Blake's. The Belladonna girl held back a little, not looking at Arturia, but rather down at the ground guiltily. While the three awake members of Team RWBY had been able to talk and help Blake get over her guilt about what had happened, Blake was still of the opinion that the attack on Arturia had something to do with how they were looking into the White Fang despite everyone's best efforts to make her think otherwise. As Harry had remarked upon, Blake was far too quick to take responsibility for things well beyond her control.

"Arturia! You're awake! Oh, that's so awesome! I didn't think you'd wake up again so soon, er Sorry, Harry's not here, but he and Weiss aren't due in for another hour or so. They'll be replacing the three of us at that point, although Blake could volunteer to stay here if she still didn't have to check in with the nurse every five hours and--" Ruby practically babbled, giddy to see the woman whom she had fought alongside and still felt guilty about failing, waking up

again. She hadn't been able to talk to her before, but was definitely trying to make up for it now.

"I am an Arc, dear," Arturia said, smirking just a little bit. She had enough energy now for moving her facial muscles at least, but still couldn't do more than squeeze Tia's hand back, let alone move her arm. "If we're not killed outright, we tend to recover quickly. Although I understand that I will still be abed for quite some time."

"Until the man with the healing Semblance arrives," Tia said, before deciding she'd been speaking enough, and going back to just gently squeezing Arturia's hand, her head leaning sideways to rest on the bed close enough that Arturia could feel her hair brushing against Arturia's smock-clad shoulder.

"I, I have to apologize, I'm really sorry that being around me and Yang when we were investigating the White Fang caused you to be attacked like that, we, that is I..." Ruby stammered, looking down at her feet guiltily.

"Stop that!" Arturia ordered, trying to inject some harshness into her tone, and considering how sore her mouth and throat were, doing a bang-up job of it in her opinion. So much so that Ruby not only looked up at her startled but flinched slightly. *Good.* "I should be apologizing to you two. Helping you was my job, and the reason I was there in the first place. I am deeply sorry that Yang was injured under my watch, although I know her well enough to believe that she will probably get through this."

Even if it is likely her stomach and chest will scar something fierce Arturia reflected, going back over the memories of the fight. The last few memories of it were hazy, but she remembered Yang going down with a lot of blood erupting from her side and stomach. And seeing how Yang was in a bed across from her looking like death warmed over, it seemed as if that memory was all too accurate.

"She's right, Ruby, it's not your fault, it's mine," Blake said, scowling. "I should never have agreed to let you all help me look into the White Fang. I—"

"Tia, could you flick her in the ear for me?" Arturia interjected, staring at the girl as sternly as she possibly could at the moment. With all the equipment hooked up to her, and the fact that Arturia was wearing medical garb and was currently in a hospital bed with the covers pulled up to her neck, that wasn't much.

Yet that didn't matter as Blake gaped at her and failed to move quickly enough before Tia, who hopped to her feet, took two steps forward and flicked her ear, one of the pair she hid under her bow normally, with a finger.

“OUCH!” The cat faunus hissed, stumbling sideways, a hand going up to where her ear was now quite aching a bit as Tia hadn’t held back much with that finger flick. “What—”

“Was I vague, girls? While I did not enjoy hearing that you had once more decided to take matters into your own hands, Blake, I did not have a problem with you bringing your team into things. Indeed, given your unique insight into the White Fang, I cannot even fault you for wanting to do more than you saw the Powers-That-Be doing. You were doing what you felt you had to, and at times, that is all that can be asked of a huntsman or huntress. Further, you had no idea about this other group that was out there, and how they might target me.”

“Harry thinks they’re the same group,” Tia interjected, followed quickly by Ruby saying that Professor Ozpin believed much the same thing, her face looking conflicted even as she said it.

“In that case, whatever else occurred, your outing this connection between the White Fang and this other group is a good thing. While I will still maintain that your searching for trouble was a bad decision on your part, it was not that mistake that led to me, Ruby and Yang being attacked,” Arturia emphasized. “That was a bad decision made on equally bad Intel and arrogance. The only true mistake you four made after deciding to act on your own was separating and forgetting your enemy had working brains.”

The caustic tone in Arturia’s voice made it clear what she thought about that, and both girls flinched, with Ruby doing so even harder than Blake. The others had decided to split the team up, but she hadn’t argued, as none of them had really thought that they could be running into anything they couldn’t handle even separated. Looking back, that, even more than anything that happened once something had gone badly wrong, was really stupid of them.

“Never forget, girls, that even Grimm can at times show remarkable instinct and an ability to think ahead. You cannot go into any operation, be it against Grimm or in an investigation against your fellow humans, assuming that your enemy is stupid. This time, the worst didn’t occur. Next time, you might not be so lucky. Do not make the same mistakes again, and you will not need to feel guilty about your sister and teammate’s well-being again,” Arturia went on, staring hard at Ruby. “Understood?”

Tia smirked, raising her head to look at Arturia. “Pot calling kettle. You’re both black.”

“Ouch, but recall, dear sister, that I have a wider skill-set than these four, and I can choose what missions I take. I would no sooner take an investigative mission alone than I would take an S-class Grimm hunt without backup,” Arturia replied. *I will admit that I might have been buying into my own hype too much prior to that battle by the docks, but running into not one but two criminals with mental-assault type Semblances certainly healed me of that notion. And if it didn’t, this last disaster would have.*

Right now, though, that little speech had drained Arturia, and she could already feel her body falling back asleep. She closed her eyes, squeezing Tia's hand gently, murmuring, "The first thing that I am going to demand when I can eat solid foods is that Harry cook for us. If you could make a list of some of my favorite dishes and pick out a few you also enjoy, I would appreciate it, dear sister."

Tia hummed in agreement, and once more Arturia fell asleep, unaware that elsewhere, things were about to start moving again.

OOOOOOO

Following Cinder's instructions to the letter, Timothy Gray smuggled two items into the prison Tuesday and Wednesday morning when he reported for his shift at the prison complex. These were parts of an explosive compound, which, if they had already been mixed together, would've been detected by the prison complex's scanners or the dogs that patrolled the open area around the prison entrance. Separately, however, they could be smuggled in to Lorgar, who would then mix the material together. With these two compounds came two notes that told him what day and time to break out and which car to look for.

During those two days, Cinder and Mercury guarded his family, living in the house with them, with at least one of them always watching both mother and daughter. No scrolls, no calls. The mother had called in the daughter sick from school, and the husband had done the same for the wife, with guns pressed to the sides of their heads.

The wife had been no trouble throughout all three days. She was a middle-aged civilian whose idea of excitement was watching a comedy-action movie with her husband. Thus, she began cowed, compliant, submissive. Everything that Cinder hated.

The daughter, on the other hand? She had tried several times to escape. Every night, she had attempted to untie herself or cut the zip ties her wrists were bound with. On a bathroom break, she had tried to jump for the window, despite Cinder being right there, presumably thinking she could break through the glass. She had even tried to lash out and kick or knee Cinder and Mercury both occasionally, only for the effort to hurt her more than them because of their Aura.

Now, as Wednesday afternoon rolled in, Cinder glanced at her watch, nodding. "It's time."

"Finally!" Mercury grumbled, smirking just a little bit as he came in with the daughter hogtied under one arm, wiggling and grappling and growling. "This little brat tried to escape again, despite her wrists bleeding a good bit by this point. What are they teaching kids these days?"

Biting back a snort at that, Cinder was torn between amusement at her fierceness and dismay at her lack of self-preservation instincts as Mercury continued. "What are we going to do with these two?"

"Tie the wife up in one of those kitchen chairs, and we'll leave this one as she is," Cinder said, staring down at the daughter. "Out on the sofa after removing the zip ties around her wrists. It shouldn't take her more than an hour to get out of the rest of that rope."

The wife shivered and quailed as Cinder moved towards her, but Cinder said nothing as she efficiently tied the woman to her place in the kitchen, then followed Mercury out into the living room. That would lead to a backyard they would use to get up into a tree line between two properties. The trees let them head towards where they would find the pickup truck Mercury had rented out for the getaway.

As Cinder pulled back from reaching under the rope Mercury had rather comically wound around the youngster's body, she noticed the girl glaring at her and smiled thinly behind her mask before leaning in again, her voice a whisper in the girl's ear. "You hate it, don't you? Being weak. You hate us for showing how weak you are, how pathetic your father is, how spineless your mother can be."

The girl continued to glare for a few seconds, then, almost against her will, nodded, a move she changed into a headbutt that caught Cinder in the center of her mask. Cinder simply chuckled, her Aura and the mask protecting her easily. "Good. Use it, child. Use that hatred and fury, your new knowledge of how the world works. That only power, the willingness to use violence, and the control to direct your anger matter in the end."

And, while Mercury watched in some confusion, she pulled her mask off to allow the girl to see her face. "Remember those lessons and strive to never be weak again."

The girl's eyes widened at the sight of Cinder's face and for a second, she stared before trying again to escape her bonds. She wouldn't, though. Mercury had not taken nearly as much amusement in the girl's antics as Cinder had, and his hogtying of the girl after her latest attempt had been most thorough.

Within twenty minutes, Cinder and Mercury had ditched the clothing they had been using for the past few days, which, in Cinder's opinion, was highly necessary, and got new clothing, wigs, and sunglasses. With that done, the pair got into the pickup truck they would use for the next part of their operation. Soon, they were within a block of the prison complex, where they began making frequent small stops at various shops, always keeping one eye on the sky, where several Atlas drones whirled, watching everything.

Ten minutes after the time that the message that morning to Lorgar had told him to set off the explosive concoction, the explosion finally went off in the distance, and Cinder raced back into the car, along with Mercury.

By the time they got to the prison complex, Lorgar had charged over the remnant of the outer wall of his former cell, looking a little worse for wear. They had apparently been feeding him Aura suppressants, which meant the backblast had seared him in more than a few places, but he was a rhino faunus and charged ahead regardless of his burn wounds or the shots from the guards on the watch towers around the complex.

The car screeched to a halt outside the prison, and Cinder leaned out her window, her hand flaring with gold and red fire as she launched a stream of fire at the outer chain-link fence, melting segments of it into slag. The next moment, she had to duck back into the truck as several bullets spanged into it, one of them nearly clipping her face.

Seeing the lance of flame, Lorgar's eyes widened in confusion, but he was already charging in their direction, and a moment later, he was up in the back of the pickup truck, and Mercury was driving them away even as dozens of guards continued to fire at them from all over, including from two of the guard towers. Lorgar grunted as a few of those bullets hit home, but ignored them, his rhino-like durability well up to the task of ignoring small arms and even normal police rifles.

Opening the small window between the back of the pickup truck and the front, he stared inside. "You two, but, what the hell! Where's Adam, you fuckers?!"

"Not anywhere near here if he has any sense. He asked us to free you as a favor, and it was so simple I deigned to agree to it" Cinder said, smiling thinly at a plan well executed. "Now sit tight, Mercury is going to need to floor it for a little bit."

With that, they raced away from the prison, knowing that the police would be in hot pursuit any second. They were, and in the distance, sirens began to ring out. Yet the truism about rental cars being the fastest remained true, as Mercury gunned the pickup truck's engine well beyond what was good for it. The truck raced along the road and through several lights, ignoring both red lights and right of way several times as he worked on putting distance between them and the complex.

Even as Mercury worked the truck, silence reigned as Lorgar kept a suspicious eye on the two humans, even as his hands began to pluck bits of bullet out of his side. That was fine by Cinder, as was the fact that Mercury remained silent, concentrating on his driving, a manic grin on his face. She would rather remember that young girl's eyes than listen to either of these two chatter, remember the hatred there, the snarl on her gagged face. *It is always nice to see another young girl learn the power of anger and hate*, she reflected.

Driving into the back of an auto parts store, the trio ditched the car there, then raced across into an alleyway. “Well, what are you waiting for?” Cinder demanded, pointing at a manhole. “The hard part’s done, we get to endure the stinky part of this plan now.”

Grunting more in disdain at her words than effort, Lorgar lifted up the sewer mantle, letting all three of them down into the sewer. Less than a minute later, police cars were all around the truck, with police officers and Atlesian soldiers fanning out in every direction. But by that point, the trio was long gone.

They surfaced again about an hour later, coming out into a narrow alleyway set between a few warehouses, most of which were still being used despite the lateness of the day. Inside one of those warehouses, which ostensibly was being used by a company specializing in heavy farming equipment, Adam sat along with the rest of his special action group and surprisingly few members of the White Fang besides that central core.

Cinder pulled off her mask, which had done sterling work filtering the smell of the sewers, tossing it aside as she looked around. “Hmm... there don’t look to be very many of you left, Adam. Has the desire to fight the good fight gone out of the faunus of Vale?”

“After this past weekend, few of our brethren here in Vale have the stomach for the fight any longer,” Adam surprisingly admitted, before his expression hardened. “Although don’t mistake me. We still have troops, most of whom have their Aura unlocked by this point. They’re just all out at Mountain Glenn at the moment, training.”

Cinder filed that away as Lorgar stepped forward and was brought into what Cinder had heard described as a manly hug by Adam. After a few seconds, she concluded there were still far too few of the local White Fang members here, given the previous number of trained members that had been in the city. One name sprang to her mind, and she slowly smiled. “Perry, that was his name, wasn’t it? A local logistics expert, the one who worked so well with Roman. He and his team aren’t here, are they?”

Turning away from his follower, Adam snarled, but held up a hand when Trifa made to attack Cinder, staring from Cinder to Mercury, noting how both of them were still looking a little battered from this weekend. It wasn’t obvious unless you were looking for it, but Cinder was favoring her right side, and Mercury was limping. “I wouldn’t throw stones right now, woman. After all, it was you who demanded the White Fang work with Roman and that little bitch, Neopolitan. And it was on your watch that they betrayed us all and got away clean. Even after today’s operation, I’m still wondering if you’re worth keeping around, given how little power you and your little boytoy there bring to the table.”

The look he sent all around made it clear that he knew that the power structure between them still remains soundly on his side of the ledger, and his next words showed that

line of thought clearly, even as Cinder growled angrily at the insinuation in his description of Mercury. “Remember you’re the junior partner in this alliance now, not us.”

Letting her Semblance cause the air around her to shimmer like the air over a volcano, Cinder stalked forward a few steps. “Would you like to test that theory?”

In actuality, Cinder wasn’t certain that she could kill all of these faunus, not without Emerald or Neo around to mess with their brains. In a straight-up fight, she would take any two or even three of them, possibly even four, but Adam’s entire action group plus a handful of typical grunts? Even with Mercury helping, that was a losing proposition. Still, if she had to fight, she would. What Cinder was really doing now was simply acting out the part, knowing that Adam would expect it of her.

“If not for the weapons and material you can still supply us with, I would. But speaking of those supplies, when can we expect another shipment? Not those overdone Paladins,” Adam waved a hand airily. “I know it will be a while before we can get our hands on one of those again, and frankly, I’m not sure that they’re worth it. But I want explosives, guns, scanning equipment, body armor and so forth. Things that will keep me able to fight the good fight on my own without needing to reach out to White Fang resources.”

“You mean that your superiors realized you were running your own private war and cut you off, and now you need me to further supply that war?” Cinder sneered.

“Perhaps. I will labor under official disapproval for a bit, but eventually Seinna Khan will see reason and welcome us back. Only after we’ve turned Roman’s little crime spree into a bloodbath for the humans, though.” Adam smiled thinly, and his coterie of followers all grinned evilly. “And doesn’t it work into your plans that way better? An ongoing campaign of violence and terror to cause ever-growing fear? That is what you wanted, right?”

“True, and I can get those for you. It will take a few days, though. I could’ve wished you had told me this this past weekend, then I could’ve been working on it while also going forward with my plan to spring Lorgar,” Cinder said, letting her eyes flash a little at the second taunt at her expense. “If you want those shipments to come in small and over time, I can get that arranged by the end of the week, and you’ll see the first shipment arriving next Monday. But if you want them in larger lump sums, that’s going to take some time.”

Actually, with Roman having fled, Cinder didn’t have a local distribution network to lean on to get contraband into Vale regardless of the size of the shipment. If she had planned to stay in Vale and the Atlas military wasn’t here with their facial recognition software, Cinder could have rectified that in a few days, but she had no intention of doing so. Adam didn’t need to know that, though, and whatever else he was, he wasn’t a mind reader. None of his folks were able to read Cinder’s body language enough to tell fact from fiction.

“Small and untraceable, I’ll tell you where with that burner scroll that you gave me,” Adam said with a smirk. “For now, lay low, and keep recovering. Me and mine have a little job to do tonight, but we don’t need you with us for this one.”

Knowing she’d just been dismissed, Cinder made a point of grinding her teeth together visibly before turning and stalking towards the door, with Mercury following. The two of them remained silent, shifting away from that warehouse and into ones where there was a lot of actual work going on, up into an office, where they ditched the disguises they were still wearing, and then headed up onto the rooftop, where they made their way out of Vale’s current storage district and into the city beyond.

Keeping to the shadows in alleys and away from any police activity, of which there was a lot of at the moment, thanks to the earlier breakout, was difficult, but eventually, they arrived at the last safehouse Cinder had prepared that Roman had no knowledge of. There, Cinder quickly took a shower, followed by Mercury, who came back out of his room a second later holding a pair of ID cards and scrolls. “So, you think Taurus suspects anything?”

“No. For all Adam’s apparent charisma and ability to gather others of like mind to him, the bull man is a blunt instrument. Taurus doesn’t think in the long term, and he has very little ability to see through lies, especially when he is already locked on a target,” Cinder smirked just a little as she took one of the scrolls and the ID. “But we are still on the clock, Mercury. We have two hours to prep to match these IDs. Get a move on.”

“And then what? I mean, I understand we’re leaving Vale, but what happens then?”

“We are indeed leaving, for a given value. By that, I mean that I wish to gain as much value as possible from our leaving,” Cinder said, smirking just a little before her expression turned chill. “After the debacle, our operation in Vale has turned into I will take what I can get.”

Two hours prep time and all the knowledge that Cinder had learned over the years about changing her appearance was enough to completely change both her own and that of Mercury. Mercury’s hair had been turned entirely black and then slicked back, with a pair of fake contacts changing his eye color to a normal dark brown. With a ring on his finger and a pilot’s outfit of jeans and a bomber jacket, along with forty-five minutes of practicing to smile instead of smirk in front of the mirror, Mercury almost looked like a family man.

As for Cinder, her normally pale skin had been given some color, the hardest part of the entire operation. Cinder’s lustrous black hair had also been dyed vibrant blue to match her fake contacts. In contrast to this was the businesswoman’s outfit she wore, which was far and away from anything Cinder would normally wear. On her, it still looked sexy, but very demonstrably was not intended to.

Soon, the pair were off, getting into a car that she had rented that day under her new disguise's identity, heading to the bull port. There, after waving their IDs and an appointment number, they were led into the runway, where a giant bullhead almost as large as one of the Atlesian warships waited for them. Two people came out of the ship; both dressed in attire similar to Cinder's.

Businessmen, they shook hands with Cinder without any hesitation. "We were incredibly pleased to learn about your mission's upgrade, Miss Chase," one of them said, smiling and waving his hand towards the ship. "And even more pleased when you were able to pay the increased down payment necessary so promptly."

Cinder smiled back, having shifted into the guise that she was currently wearing. Anastasia Chase was a roaming factor for an international food bank, whose goal was to arrange the transport of food to needy communities. This was a cover that Cinder had set up well in advance of arriving in Vale, and indeed was one that she had used several times over the years in various places. It was never connected to any of her other activities and was simply a means of getting from one point to another. "And I thank you for letting us change our contract at such a late date. We had no idea when I was first contracted to buy one of your bullheads that Savitar had taken in refugees from several other smaller communities, which had been flooded out during a recent quake. The food crisis there is extreme, but thankfully, a few surviving communities nearby will be able to provide food so long as we can handle the necessary shipping quickly. And with Vacuo being how it is..."

"Hah, yes, well, this bad boy will certainly see you through. I'm simply sorry that your stay here in Vale was so abrupt. Trust me when I say that violence like what has been on the news isn't really what our city is famous for," the second businessman stated, shaking his head.

"Have no fear. I love my time in Vale normally and have never had an issue with your company before," Cinder said, before introducing Mercury as her pilot, the man nodding and grinning at the pair.

Another man came out of the bullhead at that point. Paperwork was passed back and forth, and Cinder and Mercury took possession of the bullhead, heading up into it without any further delay. Within ten minutes, they were in the air and leaving Vale airspace, with none of the Atlas ships or the Vale air control officials making trouble. Rather, they both called, and, after Mercury shared their clearance, gave the bullhead their best wishes as it went on its way, heading, apparently, into central Sanus.

"Well, that worked," Mercury smirked. "Now, where to?"

"Mountain Glenn. We have an investment to recoup," Cinder said darkly. "When you get close to the ruins, tell me, and I'll point you where to land outside the outer wall."

Several hours after leaving the Vale defense grid behind and turning towards Vale's failed expansion project, Cinder ordered Mercury to land the large bullhead out in the forest. They'd move it into the ruins soon, but there were a few... That had to be dealt with first.

Stepping out of the bullhead, Mercury looked all around him, shaking his head as Grimm began to come out of the forest and the two humans. Before they could attack, Cinder held up a hand, on which she was now openly wearing the wasp-like Grimm that Salem had given her to drain away Autumn's power, all the Grimm they are backed away, snarling and growling. They wouldn't obey her, not unless they came from the pools that Salem was directly connected to, but neither would they attack Salem or anyone carrying one of her Grimm.

With that proven, Cinder gestured for Mercury to follow her, and he joined her. However, when he did, there was movement within the foliage above that caused Cinder to twist around. From out of the foliage above, a Grimm dropped, its appearance grotesque even by Grimm standards.

It had wide wings that were currently folded flat against its gorilla-like back, small back legs from which a single talon arced down, while its hands looked almost human, but bigger, with multiple joints and claws and needles showing both outside and in its grip. Its Grimm mask was marked by a large jaw, filled with pointed, eel-like teeth. Grimm armor covered it like body armor everywhere but its joints and wings, the armor marked liberally by red veins, showing its age. Looking into its gaze was enough to make the bowels quail of all but the hardest Huntsmen.

"Gargoyle..." Mercury whispered in shock and fear. Evolved from the Ravager, a bat-like Grimm. The Gargoyle was a rare type, an S-class Grimm that could not only fly, but do so quickly and which rarely had a set range. That made it a real horror, as it could suddenly turn up, lead an assault on a human settlement, then leave even as a response moved in. They were one of several true boogymen among the Grimm, known for both leading other Grimm like that and killing Huntsmen with ease.

Cinder didn't care so much about the S-class Grimm that had suddenly shown up. Rather, she cared about the Seer that floated away from the Gargoyle's outstretched arm. "Mistress," she intoned, kneeling quickly on the loam of the forest.

"Cinder, excellent. You are on time, as I hoped you would be," Salem intoned, her voice coming from the jellyfish like Grimm as it floated down to nearly eye level with the pair of humans. If that is, Mercury hadn't quickly followed Cinder's example and knelt.

His breathing was erratic as the mercenary and assassin stared at the strange Grimm, then at the Gargoyle, his body beginning to tremble under the sheer pressure of that voice, even through its strange medium. *Fuck me! I knew that Cinder had something to do with the*

Grimm, but this is, that is waaaay more than I expected! I thought she'd discovered a way to control them in small amounts but, but whose voice is that?! That Grimm's got no mouth, and the Gargoyle, it brought it here to let whoever is on the other end to speak to us. That, that voice....

"I told you I might have use for Adam and perhaps a few of his other fighters. My Gargoyle is here to make certain they are taken. He will help you order my Masks to remove themselves. After that, it will be up to you to make certain the bull cannot be aware of his fate. After that, my Gargoyle will come back here with Adam and whoever else survives."

There was a certain kind of twisted affection or pride in Salem's voice as she spoke of the Gargoyle, which reacted to her voice by leaning towards the Seer, like a dog waiting for its master's orders. **"You will meet him again later. This Gargoyle will serve as my general against Evig Låga. But only after Arturia and Hazel soften the new power rising there through their own machinations. I mean to also gather Harry Arc to me, while making an example of the rest of his hometown."**

"Of course, Mistress," Cinder responded promptly, bowing her head, her anger and fury at the reminder that Harry Arc had magic going through her again.

"Do not fret, my dear. You will have a chance to become the Maiden you were destined to be. It will come in time. For now, retrieve the Dust your former associates have accumulated, and then head on to Mistral. We will talk further when you arrive there. Just because our work in creating your background with the Cowardly Lion has been upended does not mean he is without his uses, after all," Salem answered, before the Seer abruptly fell silent, floating away, its queen having said all she wanted to say.

Cinder quickly stood up, staring at the Gargoyle, nodding. "Come then. You can gather other Grimm, but they'll need to stay to the outskirts of the ruins until we remove the Masks and I go in and remove what I need to so the target can't get a warning out."

Mercury wasn't certain which was worse: the sight of Cinder, who was still a fucking HOT woman, speaking so calmly to a Grimm as if it were a person, or the sight of the Gargoyle, nodding, showing that the ancient Grimm was able to follow human speech. It then opened its mouth and Mercury easily decided that the thing's scream was far worse than anything else he'd been subjected to so far. **"KEEEEEAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!!!!"**

The shriek reached deep into Mercury's soul and hammered the button marked 'primal terror,' causing him to nearly fall back to his knees. Only a hasty grab at a tree limb kept him upright as the sound reverberated through the woods. All around them, the Grimm responded, shifting forward, howling, shouting, Nevermore flying up into the sky, cawing.

The Grimm had answered their general's call.

Cinder ignored the scream even as Mercury had to fight hard to not try and run away, knowing that if he did, Cinder's protection would be left behind, and the Grimm would tear him apart. Luckily, Cinder let him get control of himself before moving away towards the city. The Gargoyle followed, leaping up into the trees and moving almost as quickly as a monkey through the foliage.

Behind them, the Grimm followed, keeping a distance as more and more of them came in from all over the forest at the call of the Gargoyle.

In the city, there weren't as many Grimm around. After the battle against the students from Beacon during the Remembrance, most of the Grimm had returned to their own territories rather than take over from the Grimm who had been wiped out in Mountain Glenn. A few hundred Nevermore winged through the sky above, and many of them looked down at the two humans moving through the territory, but they didn't attack, nor did the roaming packs of Beowolves.

Here, the Gargoyle left them. Mercury stared after it, and Cinder smirked. "It knows what to do. The Masks will know that the Gargoyle comes from their mistress."

"Er... right," Mercury said, his normal insouciance trying, and failing to come back to him.

Pushing ever further into the city, the two humans soon found an entryway down into the subway. The majority of such had been barricaded, allowing Roman and the White Fang to create their secret base. Such work would not have been possible if not for a few 'tokens' that Cinder had given them, essentially warding markers for the Grimm to stay away.

These were insect-like Grimm. They were about the size of a human head that moved like spiders, but their backs were formed to look like the Grimm masks of something larger, almost as if they were simply the heads of a more massive Grimm that had simply decided one day to start acting on their own.

Mercury had seen them before, and before today, would have said they were the creepiest Grimm he'd ever seen. After the last hour, they barely registered, as, with a wave of Cinder's wasp-clad hand, one of those masks shifted, twitching and spasming, sending dirt and grime off its body. Its real head appeared out of its front like a turtle's out of its shell, looking at her with far more intelligence than such a creature should ever be able to have, and Cinder gestured it away through the city.

A moment later, the Mask began to move away, accelerating quickly.

"We will need to sneak in and take out the communication booster," Cinder said idly. "After that, the Grimm will do the rest."

"And here I was thinking we'd go in, all guns blazing. With most of Adam's chief enforcers with him in Vale, surely the only group here..." Mercury began, but Cinder cut him off.

"Bonesaw is dangerous on his own, not to me, admittedly, but you heard Taurus. The majority of his people who have their Aura unlocked are out here. I'd rather not get bogged down in a fight that we don't need to. Not after the disaster this past weekend. And my mistress has made certain we won't need to."

Mercury couldn't argue with that, no matter how much some normal violence would make him feel better right now. He nodded, and the pair of them shifted deeper into the subway network.

The White Fang had spread out across several subway stations, all interconnected by tunnels, with living quarters, Dust storage, and everything else distributed evenly. The communications booster was kept near one of the working trains that had at one point been the centerpiece of Cinder's plans for the invasion of Vale.

The White Fang at this base had seemingly grown complacent despite all Bonesaw could do. Sneaking through the first station they came to and out into the tracks leading to the next one was child's play. Getting from there to the train where the communication booster had been set up was only a tiny bit harder, but their luck changed when they reached the station where that train was currently sitting.

There, the White Fang were hard at work, transferring boxes of Dust vials not into the train, but out of it. Cinder idly wondered what orders Adam had given on that score, but it didn't matter at this point. Whatever those orders were, the communications booster was still visible on top of the train. *Too far away for me to hit with a fireball before the alarm goes up. Now, where is Bonesaw...*

Moments later, Cinder saw him, coming down from another tunnel leading into this one. He hopped onto the platform, leading several other White Fang members who followed him. All of them were sweating, pale and carrying weapons, and Cinder supposed they had just been training or something. This was proven a second later as Bonesaw's voice reached her, remonstrating loudly with a few of the other White Fang members, pointing to the group he had arrived with.

Cinder ignored whatever he was saying, examining the layout of the area quickly, while Mercury watched her back. This proved necessary a second later as he hissed, "Some of them are coming up behind us. They haven't spotted us yet, but..."

In the middle of the tunnel, there were very few places to hide, but thankfully, the tunnels between the various stations hadn't been rigged with lighting. After all, the White Fang were all faunus, and a trait that all faunus shared was that they could see better in the dark than humans. However, their eyes took time to adjust from light to dark, allowing Cinder and Mercury to slip into a small service room set into the side of the tunnel unseen. There they crouched, watching as the group of White Fang members passed them by.

Soon, that group was up on the platform along with the others, and the way to the side of the train was clear.

Cinder darted out of their hiding place with Mercury close behind, her hand raised. A small, highly condensed stream of fire raced from her hand, hitting the side of the communication booster and burning through it, destroying its internal systems. Then she was racing down the tunnel, as Bonesaw and several of the other White Fang members twisted around at the sound of the flame.

Bonesaw saw her, shouting, "Huntsman! Get after them!" He hadn't ever seen Cinder in action, only heard about it, and the appearance of the two people who had just attacked them didn't look anything like Cinder had.

He led the charge, grabbing up his chainsaw from where it had been leaning against the station side of the train, jumping down into the tunnel and hurling himself after the pair. Behind him, several other White Fang members followed, grabbing guns as they went. They began to shoot over Bonesaw's head while the revving of his chainsaw filled the tunnel.

Ahead of them, alerted by the shout, several White Fang on guard at the entrance near an open area the White Fang had been using as a training area turned. They hesitated for a few seconds, then, as two unknown shapes resolved themselves out of the gloom of the tunnel began to fire, doing so far more accurately into the dark tunnel than humans would've been able to.

Cinder and Mercury began to dodge, making certain that any bullets that found them hit their upper bodies rather than their legs, allowing them to keep going. The impacts still hurt, as both of them were still sore from this past weekend, but they kept going. As she did, Cinder raised the hand on which she had the wasp-like Grimm attached.

Behind the quartet of guards, two Masks began to shift and stir, then leapt down. They landed on one of the shooters, who began to scream and shout, twisting away and trying to bring up his gun. The others turned and fired, killing both of the Grimm, and not hurting their fellow thanks to his Aura.

But that allowed Mercury to reach them. He slammed into one of them with a flying kick, taking him in the chest and sending both men to the ground, where Mercury flipped around and launched a kick into another man, shattering his Aura as he hadn't the first. The bright tinkle of that sound was soon joined by a scream of agony as Cinder paused, shifting her weapon into its bow form and fired, a glass arrow taking that man in his side, stabbing deep before shattering.

A second later, Cinder twisted around, dodging more fire from behind, and launched another Dust-infused glass arrow towards Bonesaw, which cracked into his forehead. The attack did nothing but stagger him slightly, but that was enough to stop his first attack.

Then she was rolling, dodging more incoming fire, lashing with a kick at Bonesaw as he closed the distance, moving the large chainsaw faster than she thought he would have been able to. He couldn't dodge her kick, thought as she hit the man's knee, taking his leg went out from under him. Aura protected the limb from any damage, but couldn't stop the knee from failing for a second.

Then, Cinder was kicking up into the air and a second later off the side of his head, hurling herself out of the tunnel entrance after Mercury. Hitting the ground outside, she rolled sideways, avoiding still more fire, and then Mercury threw down a gas bomb. A mixture of smoke and an odor bomb, it caused Bonesaw and the other faunus to squeal and pull back as the smell hit their enhanced noses.

The two of them raced on, into one of the nearby buildings out of sight and then up into the upper workings. There, a group of Nevermore turned to stare at them, but Cinder simply held up her hand again, marching between the Grimm to stare down at the opening below. The Nevermore, woken up by the noises below, shifted and stirred, then, as the smoke from the gas began to fade, dove towards the terrorists below.

As they hit and the White Fang defended themselves, more Grimm came into view below, followed by still more. Beowolves loped over the ground with Creepers. Other monkey-like or spider-like Grimm crawled along the sides of buildings, leaping from one to the next, heading towards the entryway in sight.

Bonesaw saw them coming and shouted orders, pulling his people back, but even as the Nevermore pulled back, unwilling to enter the tunnel on the ground, the other Grimm came on. And elsewhere throughout the city, Cinder knew, more Grimm were coming. With the Masks removed and the sudden noise of the defense to draw them in, the Grimm knew that humans were here, and now, with the Gargoyle having already prepped and put them in place, they did what Grimm did best.

Mercury stared down at the mass of black and white charging into the tunnel, the fear he'd felt earlier when faced with the Gargoyle coming back to him. "There are so many of them all of a sudden. We, we didn't see nearly this many as we came in," he nearly babbled.

"That is because you were not looking once we reached the city. A city like this has thousands, millions of places to hide, and after the battle against the Beacon students during the Remembrance, the Grimm will have found all of them. The White Fang and the base were protected. Now they are not. Now they face the reality of the world naked and without any recourse to retreat nor aid. Just like the original inhabitants of Mountain Glenn," Cinder said, a smile curling her lips that had Mercury almost backing away from her.

That feeling increased when she turned to look at him, then gestured out into the city, as more Grimm began to appear in the distance, and screams began to be heard from below, made hollow from distance and happening underground as they were, Cinder's face a mask of delight and amusement. "Remember this, Mercury Black. Remember the power of my mistress, of whom we both serve. Never forget that no matter what little victories people like Harry Arc, Ozpin and others might achieve, there is no strength that humanity can gather that cannot be overcome by the true power in this world."

Mercury stared back at her, gulped, then nodded, and even smirked a bit as some of his normal attitude returned to him. He always knew that being on the winning side was the better idea, and well, in the end, the Grimm always won. "So what now?"

"Now we wait. It won't take the Grimm very long. And then afterwards, the Gargoyle will command any that can to help load our Bullhead. Then we are leaving," Cinder said simply, as the screams down below grew ever louder, along with the sound of gunfire and the growling of the Grimm.

OOOOOOO

When classes ended for the day, Tia headed to the Bullhead along with Ruby. The two of them would switch with Blake and Harry, who had spent most of the day at the hospital after Tia and Ruby had returned that morning. Pyrrha walked with them, asking Ruby about the project that Sung-Sun had asked her input on. That kept Ruby happy and chattering, which was something all of the teens had taken time to help with over the past few days while they waited for the healing Semblance user to arrive to help Yang. While Arturia was slowly becoming more energetic with every day, Yang was still unconscious, and despite several surgeries, had yet to even move, let alone anything else. To say that Ruby was not dealing with this well was an understatement.

Tai-Yang was still around the place, but he spent most of his time at the hospital with his daughter, so during school hours, the others had taken it upon themselves to keep her spirits

up, and in this, Sung-Sun's request for help in redesigning the weapons of her team had been most fortuitous.

When the Bullhead landed, Ruby was surprised to see not only Harry and Blake exiting, but Qrow. "Druncle Qrow? What are you doing back? I thought you'd be staying at the hospital with Dad and me tonight." The young girl leveled weapons-grade puppy-dog eyes at Qrow. "You know we need a threesome for cards."

"Heh, sorry, kiddo, but I've got business with Ironwood and Ozpin," Qrow said with a faint scowl, looking away from those pleading eyes before he gave in, examining Harry closely for a moment. *So, this is the youngster Ozpin says has magic, huh?* "Did you all hear the news?"

"What news?" Ruby asked.

"One of the prisoners we took from the White Fang rally broke out of prison this afternoon, barely a few hours ago, in fact. Qrow and I were watching the car chase on our scrolls on the way here." Harry said, holding up his scroll before ruffling Ruby's hair. "Don't suppose you're bringing along Crescent Rose, are you? Just in case."

"Who do you think I am? I always have Crescent Rose with me," Ruby snickered, batting Harry's hand away from her head. "Heh, with me and Tia there, anyone trying to finish my sister or yours off is going to be in a bad way, even before my Dad gets involved."

"Good girl," Harry smiled, winking, causing Ruby to beam at him. If anything beyond working on Team Garnet's weapons was bound to make Ruby happy these days, it was the idea of slicing or shooting something or someone that deserved it.

"You know, this is the first time I've seen the two of you together," Qrow said, smirking just a little, keeping an eye on Harry for a moment to see his reaction. "I think Harry's the only boy that you've ever allowed to ruffle your hair like that without introducing his innards to the tip of your scythe. Is there somethin' going on here that your father and I should know about?"

"No! For the **second time**, no!" Ruby shouted, waving her hands in every direction. "Brothers, why are parents so embarrassing!? And why are you two so blind? You really think I'd get with someone who is always treating me like I'm his little sister?"

"I do have a lot of experience with those," Harry mused in a low voice, looking over to Tia, whose deep blue eyes gleamed with good humor for the moment before he turned to Pyrrha. "That's going to be interesting; when I take you home to meet the family."

"I think that sounds grand," Pyrrha whispered back, before shifting her attention to Ruby, her smile still in place, but somehow... changing so that Harry shivered.

Meanwhile, Qrow had continued his teasing. He hadn't been in any mood for it when he'd first arrived, and seeing Harry not reacting, he'd decided to get under his little Rose's skin a bit. "I don't know, I know a lot of girls your age seem ta like that idea, judging from some of the conversations I've overheard over the years anyway. Y'know, having a big brother around to protect them, or take care of them at least like a stay-at-home waifu," Qrow teased.

"Well, not this girl! And, um, while he's er, probably material for that kind of thing, that's not my type!" Ruby barked back, trying desperately not to stare over to where Pyrrha was smiling. Only it really didn't seem to be a nice smile when Pyrrha looked her way. It was like death warmed over, and there seemed to be this kind of dark aura around her now. "Nope, nope nope!" Ruby exclaimed, waving her hands frantically. "I've no interest in Harry, never did! I was introduced to him as Tia's brother, and then he became Pyrrha's prospective boyfriend before we even met in person. There's no crush here, no interest, no nothing."

Pyrrha lost the aura of death surrounding her and reached forward, patting Ruby gently on the shoulder, her smile now far more genuine, even if her jade eyes still looked a little too sharp. "Calm down, Ruby. I think it's a parental prerogative to tease their children, and I imagine the same is true for uncles. Especially one you've gone so far to emulate. No one's accusing you of anything."

She shifted her gaze towards Qrow, and her earlier smile, which Qrow mentally likened to a slasher smile, came back for a second, causing him to take a step back, almost as if Pyrrha had suddenly become even more terrifying than Glynda at her worst. "And I would ask you to not include my boyfriend in your teasing of young Ruby, sir."

The possessive tone she gave the word boyfriend made Tia smile inside her scarf, while Harry simply walked over and put an arm around Pyrrha's waist. The slasher smile disappeared, and suddenly she became all bashful and blushing, causing Ruby to shake her head mentally and feel tired all of a sudden. "Pyrrha's right, Ruby, no one's accusing you. Now come on, you and Tia need to head to the hospital, and me and Pyrrha need to get back to Ren and Nora."

He glanced over at Blake, who nodded at him, exchanging a smile and high five with Ruby before heading off in the direction of the infirmary. The two of them hadn't spoken much since the first trip back to Beacon after the battle with the White Fang and their human backers, but they had exchanged a few words, at least. They hadn't quite fully buried the hatchet, as Harry still felt Blake had gone about things stupidly and led her friends into danger, but understood her desire to do what she could, too. He still had mixed views on her decision-making, but had stopped pushing her on it for now.

"Right!" Ruby said, darting ahead of him into the Bullhead. "See ya, Druncle Qrow!"

Qrow snorted, looking over at Harry speculatively. "So, you're Harry Arc, huh? The one who helped keep the curious kitten alive, along with my two nieces?"

"More the curious cat than Yang or Ruby, really. We're still not certain if the two of them or my sister was the target of that attack, and my friends were the ones who recruited Martina and the rest of them to work with Weiss and Neptune," Harry demurred, even as his eyes locked onto Qrow. "And you're Ruby's trainer from when she was young, and a former member of team Strike?"

"That I was. And you also fought with the burning bitch, right, the black-haired babe with the fire powers?"

"I did. Nearly caught her, and would've if not for Ironwood's tin soldiers getting in the way."

"Yeah, heard that too, plan to give him a lot of grief about it when I get him in person," Qrow snickered. "Still, it's impressive you were able to fight someone so deadly. And your Semblance, I've heard a lot about it."

Ah, so that's where this is going, I had wondered, Harry thought. "I'm sure you have if you're a friend of Ozpin."

"Which you ain't," Qrow stated, while Pyrrha and Tia moved to flank Harry. "I ain't exactly happy with him at the moment either. Still, Ozpin isn't omniscient, kiddo. Give him a chance, will ya? You two could do a lot of good together."

"I'd rather do good on my own terms, thanks, and not under someone whose goals and leadership style I can't trust," Harry said firmly.

The two men stared at one another, then Qrow nodded, shrugging his shoulders. "Fair enough." *That doesn't mean I won't follow you when you leave Beacon, though. Unless someone else comes up. Ozpin's right, you don't just suddenly have magic, and we need to know where he got it from, before Salem finds it. We're already down three damn Maidens we can't afford to let Salem have access to more magic on top of however many fucking bastards she's somehow convinced to work with her.*

That thought hurt, though, as the fact that he failed to get to Autumn in time to help her joined old regrets about his sister's actions after gaining the Maiden powers, and he pushed it to the side as he moved forward, heading toward the Clocktower. He wanted to know what Ironwood and Ozpin were doing about the breakout. "Well, whatever. You do you, I suppose. You won't be the first or the last to want to give the finger to authority."

“Depends on the authority figure,” Harry snorted, watching him go for a moment before turning to his girlfriends, the official one and one of his two secret ones, winking at Tia as she moved closer, pulling Harry into a sideways hug. “That was kind of sexy, you getting all possessive.”

“Yes, well, I didn’t like his insinuation,” Pyrrha grumbled, staring after Qrow as he made his way deeper into the Academy grounds.

Pyrrha was well aware that she really had no right to be so possessive of Harry. It wasn’t like she had him all to herself. But she had been willing to share with Tia and Arturia because they had prior claims, and attempting to try and keep them out of Harry’s life would’ve just resulted in all of them being miserable. Something she had no desire to be or be a part of. Yet Pyrrha was very, very certain that none of them would be willing to share Harry with another woman, no matter who it might be.

“I know we haven’t had much time lately, not even for training, let alone anything else,” Harry said, pulling Pyrrha into another hug, kissing her lightly on the forehead, knowing she wouldn’t be comfortable with anything more. “And we won’t have us time today, either.”

Even at night, Harry hadn’t been in the mood for more than cuddling, not that Pyrrha had ever pushed for more. “But I promise that the moment Arturia’s out of the hospital and Yang’s been healed, we’ll make time. Okay?” he looked over at Tia, including her in that statement, only turning back to Pyrrha when she nodded. “Wasn’t there that kooky anime movie you wanted to go and see?”

“The one that you took one glance at and said that the author wasn’t certain he was going for slapstick comedy or over the top, boob-related fan service and then decided to make an unholy mash up of both?” Pyrrha replied, snickering. “Really?”

“If you want to go see it, I’m fine with that. I can even deal with seeing so many fake anime boobs,” Harry snickered, before letting his eyes glance downwards just a second. “Even if I think there’s no comparison to the real thing.”

Biting her lip to keep from giggling at how much that mirrored her thoughts on Blake’s smut on Monday, Pyrrha nodded, trying hard not to thrust out her chest just a little bit, enjoying both the look and the promise of more to come. “That sounds grand. Both the movie and what our date can turn into afterward,” she said instead. She then looked apologetically over to Tia. “I’m sorry, Tia, I know that you also wanted to watch something on TV, I think?”

That was about as close as any of them would get to hinting at the real relationship between the quartet (currently minus one), but Tia got it easily enough. “There are three nights every weekend,” she said simply. “Besides, I’ve been spending more time with Arturia anyway.

She remained conscious for several hours last night. Questioning her about some of the missions she's been on has been fun."

Tia's lips curved into a smile underneath her scarf, her eyes following suit in a way that always took Harry's breath away. "Try it. And don't just ask about her tactics or anything similar. Ask about more fun stuff."

"Yes, Captain, I will, Captain," Harry said, as if Tia had given him an order, which she simply nodded to. She then tugged at his arm, where he had let his arms fall from around Pyrrha, and Harry obligingly pulled her into a hug too, although refraining from kissing her even on the forehead. Tia hummed happily, then, with a sigh, head up onto the bullhead.

Harry watched her go for a moment, then turned, linking an arm with Pyrrha. "So, let's get class-related stuff out of the way with a trip to the library. I predict Ren'll be there sitting on Nora. After that, we'll get to training, and then tonight... well, we might not have time or energy enough for anything major, but some more cuddle time is always nice."

"Most definitely," Pyrrha agreed, and the pair moved towards Beacon. As they did, Harry noticed another bullhead arriving nearby, landing not at the normal landing area but deeper in, near the cafeteria. *Oh, the monthly supply truck. Yeah, I suppose it's that time of the month, isn't it?* That sight, though, made Harry realize he hadn't had time to cook anything over the past three days, and he turned to Pyrrha, asking, "What would you like to eat tonight, by the way. Considering how you and Ren have probably had to deal with pancakes or cafeteria food, I figure you're due a home-cooked meal. And maybe we can convince Professor Goodwitch to join us, finish ironing things out there."

Pyrrha's face lit up, and she hugged Harry's arm to her even tighter, grinning as she began to list off the ingredients they had on hand, hoping to spark Harry's culinary imagination.

Little did either of them know that there was something special about this supply truck...

OOOOOOO

Diamondo's Bullhead Supplies was a small company that did brisk business in redoing the interior of bullheads and so forth on the down low for smugglers and legitimate businesses alike. Businesses that didn't care about the owners being faunus, anyway. When approached by Adam's representative, they had agreed to modify a supply bullhead that was the exact match to the one Beacon used, except, of course, the normal one didn't have secret partitions and hiding places.

Achieving the switch without the two Beacon-employed pilots noticing took a bit. Several young faunus ladies had to sacrifice a bit of their pride by putting on a show in a nearby window while the switch was made. Once that was done, the food was brought aboard the new

bullhead without either man noticing. Similarly, the food was taken off the bullhead outside the cafeteria with no one the wiser. After all, who would break into a Huntsman academy?

As school property, once everything was offloaded, the supply bullhead was moved to its regular hangar bay, where it would stay that night.

Soon after the lights of the hangar bay went off, a small hidden alcove in the bottom of the bullhead opened, and Adam stepped out, followed by Greta. The tall bull faunus moved to the side of the bullhead, then reached up to the top, knocking on a segment of plating there. Two more hidden alcoves opened a second later on either side of where he knocked, out of which came Trifa and Dietrich, rolling out of the hiding place and nearly collapsing onto their faces before catching themselves. A second later, Lorgar came up from underneath the pilot and copilot seat at the front of the bullhead, looking almost haunted.

Nor was he the only one. "Diamondo never told us how uncomfortable that would be, dammit!" Trifa muttered, a fierce blush suffusing the normally dead, cold features of the spider Grimm. She was normally not interested in sex or anything of that nature. The Cause was all that mattered to her. But being pressed into Deitrich's chest for hours on end, their legs constantly shifting and moving against one another, had not been exactly pleasant. "And if you speak of this to anyone, I kill you, Toothy!"

"We didn't ask them to make it pleasant for us; we asked Diamondo and the other compatriots to make certain that we couldn't be found," Adam interjected before Deitrich could retort in that ever-annoying voice of his. "Shut up. We're here, and judging from Apacci's last report, both Blake and the Schnee girl are on campus tonight."

All of them pulled their hoods closer, replacing their Grimm-like masks with black ones, the better to blend into the night. "You know your assignments. Greta, Deitrich, you remain here, guard the bullhead and make certain it's ready to go while monitoring the campus... Apacci was able to upload that spyware, right?"

Deitrich quickly pulled out a scroll, while Greta reached into the hidden alcove she had shared with Adam. Unlike Trifa, she was somewhat more upbeat. She wasn't so huge that she had been feeling cramped and contained like Lorgar, and Adam was far better company in an enclosed space than Deitrich. *If only he weren't hung up on a certain traitorous catgirl... and knew more than to just plunge away at a girl*, she reflected ruefully. *A woman likes to be wooed and worshipped, you know.* "He told us he did in that last report, but I wouldn't trust them to last long. Honestly speaking, I'd say we've got an hour at best before Beacon's cybersecurity figures out what's going on. We'll need to be gone by then."

Greta was the best thinker among Adam's team, minus the often-absent Bonesaw, anyway. She'd been the one to find a group that could make the cyber warfare-like worms that

would let the team spoof and even use Beacon's security cameras for a bit. But given how advanced those systems were and how often their security was updated, it was doubtful anything the freedom fighters came up with could last long.

The others all nodded, taking their weapons. Many of them were specialized, like Adam's Wilt and Blush, although the oddest of the bunch was perhaps Trifa's gun gauntlets, which the unimaginative girl (she was the youngest of them) simply called Spitter. They were made to work with her spinnerets, adding momentum and range to her genetic ability to shoot out spider webs in a way that none of the others, who weren't blacksmiths or gun makers, understood. Beyond that, the gun gauntlets had tractable daggers that popped out of the back of the gauntlet.

As the others tooled up, Deitrich nodded. "Apacci says the program's ready to go. We just need to send an activate signal to 'Professor Lightfoot' when we're ready to go." Continuing to read the email Apacci had sent to his 'girlfriend' was annoying, but after another minute, he said, "The traitor and the Schnee girl are indeed here. They're currently finishing up training with Apacci's team and should be tired and sore when they head to bed. He recommends waiting till around two in the morning and says to... look for the red scarf out of the window for our way into the dorm building."

"Good. Everyone, get some rest, stretch out and prepare. When we move, Lorgar, you and Trifa are with me." Normally, Lorgar wouldn't be taken on what would be a quick smash and grab, but with so many possible combatants nearby, Adam wanted someone around who specialized in stuffing up in a hallway and taking damage. This mission was going to be chancy, at best, and they really had no backup here. It was an all-or-nothing gamble, but Adam felt it was worth the risk.

Greta was the only one of the team who wasn't so certain about that. The others were completely devoted to Adam and believed his words were gospel when it came to The Cause. Greta, on the other hand, would much rather have started to fight a guerrilla action against the local cops and humans, hitting them wherever they could without taking this big a risk. But when it came to Blake Belladonna and the Schnee, Adam's ability to think logically went out the door. *And he's my commander. There's nothing I can do about it right now. We've also planned this out as much as possible. I just hope that we can get out of here.*

At two in the morning, the signal was sent, and the campus cameras were spoofed for a time. With Greta and Deitrich guarding the bullhead and prepping some surprises in case things went pear-shaped, Adam led Trifa and Lorgar across the campus following a public map they'd downloaded. They had to dodge a few security guards, both Beacon's and a few Atlas soldiers,

and maintenance workers still out and about, but at this time of night, those were few and far between. The trio made their way to the freshman dorm room safely.

There, Trifa swiftly spotted the red scarf outside a window, and, after throwing a small rock up into the window, Apacci's head appeared. He dropped a thick hawser down, and Trifa and Adam scaled up the two stories quickly, although Lorgar had some issues given his sheer size. Still, between them, Adam, Trifa, with her Trifa webs, and Apacci were able to help the big man hold himself up over the windowsill and into the spare room that had once been assigned to Team ANVL before they moved into their townhome.

"Okay," Apacci whispered, jerking his head towards the door. "The spoof program that I was told to input into the beacon system won't last for very long, but it should have covered you all getting here. How are we getting out, though?"

"The same way we came in," Adam muttered, rolling his eyes. "Now be quiet. Blake's hearing is phenomenal, and we don't want to mess this up."

Apacci nodded, then reported something that Adam was very happy to hear, keeping his voice low as he did. "Ironwood and most of his troops have shifted down into Vale to help the manhunt going on for whoever it was that broke Lorgar out this morning. The only troops around are a group of twenty, and while they might be patrolling, they aren't really a threat. None of them have their Aura unlocked; they're just regular weak humans."

Smirking, Adam looked over at his team, who nodded back. "We'll wait another ten minutes, make certain no one saw us getting up here. Then we move." With the amount of grunting and time it took to get Lorgar up the rope, that was a concern.

Ten minutes passed, then Apacci led the way out the door, standing guard further down the hall as Trifa shifted over to the door leading into team Ruby's room. It was scroll-locked, obviously, and Apacci certainly had no access to it. Indeed, the only person not on Team RWBY who did was Nora of all people. And as scatterbrained as Nora sometimes acted, she never left her scroll anywhere where anyone else could get it.

While Adam was marveling at the fact that there were no security cameras in the hallway, Trifa went to work on the lock with a program on her scroll designed to crack similar locks. Within moments, the dull read of the lock signal shifted to green, and Adam quickly pushed his way in, with Trifa following and Lorgar moving after.

Blake woke up the Instant the door started to open. She was a cat faunus, and as Adam had warned, her hearing was exceptional. So was her reaction time. Before Adam was through the door, Blake had rolled out of bed, landing facing the door, Gambol Shroud coming up in its

gun-form. But she had her finger off the trigger and the safety on just in case Ruby had decided to return rather than spend the night at the hospital for some reason.

However, that moment of hesitation, which lasted another brief heartbeat at the sight of her former lover, cost Blake. "A, Adam..."

Even as she stammered and flipped the safety off of Gambol Shroud, Adam leaped across the intervening distance. Before Blake could fire or use her Semblance, Adam's hand clamped down around her as his other hand grabbed her by the throat. At the same time, Trifa fired, her near-silent web-gun firing, slamming into Gambol Shroud. The mass of webbing at near point-blank range hit with enough impetus to tear the mecha-shift katana-gun sword out of Blake's grip, pinning it to the outer wall of the dorm room.

"Oh, no, Blake," Adam hissed, just as Weiss, a heavy sleeper, began to rouse herself. Adam didn't notice, glaring with a bottomless well of anger at the girl who had torn out his heart and stamped on it. "It's time for you to pay the piper, you and your Schnee friend, you turncoat bitch!"

Blake lashed out with a few kicks even as Adam lifted her further into the air, pressing her into the outer wall of the dorm room with both hands, one around her mouth, the other around Blake's throat. His hands weren't big enough for him to both grab her throat and mouth, and Blake's Aura would be able to protect her enough from being strangled.

Then Weiss finally shifted, and, thanks to the layout of the room, was actually able to do something. Unlike Blake, though, she didn't sleep with her weapon nearby. Hence why Adam suddenly found his eyesight obscured by a flung mattress, and a decidedly petite foot slamming into his balls. At the same time, Weiss found her face covered by spider web, her shriek muffled by Trifa's weapon.

Adam grunted at that hit, as that kind of blow did input some damage despite Aura, the blow loosening his grip just a tiny bit around Blake's throat. That was enough for her to use her Semblance, Shadow. The solid-state clone made of shadow took Blake's place in his grip, and she was pushed to the side before Adam could start wailing on her. A foot came around to slam into the side of his face as her mouth opened, and another Shadow clone launched her towards the door, before her eyes widened. "LO--!"

She could only get out a strangled cry before Lorgar's meaty hand closed onto her face, silencing her shout for help. The rhino's grip was so strong that Blake's Aura barely protected her neck from being badly bruised. Before she could try to loosen his grip like Adam's had, a blow to her side came, hammering into the same area where she was still healing from the battle against Cinder. Her aura held, but then two more punches came, followed by a third from Lorgar.

Barely able to see through the webbing covering her face, Weiss tried to create a glyph under one of her feet. This was one of the many things that she had been working on since coming to Beacon: silent casting her glyphs without the use of Myrtenaster. Without dust to empower some of the techniques, her offensive glyphs were limited, but the sight of one of them launching towards her caused Trifa, who had been moving to secure her, assuming that Weiss was out of it, to dodge to the side into the bathroom.

That was enough for Weiss to see, reach down and grab up a pen and hurl herself towards Adam, using the pen like a makeshift weapon. She was aiming for his eye, as his head was halfway turned away from her, but thanks to the webbing still blocking most of her vision, Weiss's accuracy left much to be desired. The pen skittered away from his mask, doing nothing, and Adam twisted around, grabbing her in a bear hug for a second before switching to a choke hold. Holding Weiss in one hand, he held Weiss out toward Trifa, who quickly wrapped her up in further webbing from the feet up.

"NGWEGGSS!!" Blake tried to shriek around Lorgar's hand, kicking out, before a bolt of webbing hit her legs, tying them together. Despite that, she still brought her feet up to try a mule kick on Lorgar.

This didn't do much, only causing him to take a step back, while still retaining his hold over Blake's head. He replied with another blow to her chest, which shattered Blake's Aura.

At the same time, his step back had pushed him towards the RW side of the room and into their bunkbed. The bunkbed that Weiss and Ruby shared, which had been called by all of their friends bar Nora as the most categorically haphazard, unsteady-looking thing anyone had ever seen.

It'd been able to deal with the weight of a petite-sized girl like Ruby using the topmost bunk, but Lorgar's weight hitting one of the corners had the rope that held up that side of the bunk snapping, and the books piled there as a makeshift leg collapsed. This sent the rest of it crashing down in a loud cacophony.

"What the fuck! Who put that thing together?" Lorgar mumbled, staring at it.

"Who fucking cares!" Trifa growled, finishing the job of wrapping up the Schnee girl in her webbing. Adam promptly began to hit her head and chest enough to overwhelm her Aura, while Trifa turned to do the same to Blake. A blow from Lorgar crashed in, and Blake found herself slumping into unconsciousness, while putting down Weiss took a few more hits as Apacci hissed from the hallway, cracking the door open. "Fucking hell, you morons! That roused the whole floor!"

Even as Apacci stared down the hall in horror, doors were opening throughout. He ducked into the RWBY's dorm room, but not fast enough. "A guy just went into team Ruby's door!"

"What the heck's going on?"

"Wasn't that Apacci? No way would Weiss or Blake let him in there..."

Like Blake, Sung-Sun was generally speaking a light sleeper, unlike Tia, who took a bit to rouse, and Mila, who was similarly slow to welcome being woken up. Even waking her up at a normal time was occasionally a trial. But not Sung-Sun Greenscale, who had been woken up several times while a young child when enemy families attacked her own family's mansion.

Pushing herself out of bed, Sung-Sun ignored that she was dressed in her sleepwear, which looked like a negligee except it was made of a soft, fuzzy fabric rather than a silky smooth one, as she leaped toward their door, wrenching it open. She looked in the direction the noise had come from, and seeing nothing but a lot of other freshmen already reacting, she turned in the opposite direction, moving to the window.

There, she was in time to hear a crash and then see a large body hit the ground below. Sung-Sun might not have fought the man, but she recognized him from Mila's description of the bruiser. The next man out was also easily recognizable to anyone who had studied White Fang. With that, Sung-Sun barely needed to see two lumps being hurled down toward waiting hands to realize what was going on. "Sound the alarm! Kidnappers! White Fang!" she shouted, pushing open her door as Tia woke up at her shout.

How the hell did they get on campus?! Every public bullhead landed in the same place, out in the open where anyone could see it, and the school's own bullheads were inspected every time they were used and locked down for the night. The school itself was on a high cliff face, which even Grimm wouldn't be able to scale easily. Certainly not without tripping the various sensors and so forth that line the cliff face.

At the moment, that didn't really matter. What mattered was that none of Sung-Sun's team kept their weapons in their dorm rooms. Nor did any of the other teams, except maybe Ruby, who was in Vale, and Blake, who was currently being abducted. "Everyone, call for your guns and get into your gear if you can! Someone call the professors and tell them what's going on, if they don't already know."

Several other freshmen peered into their room, and Sung-Sun looked at them seriously. "We need to get organized, figure out where they're going and get ahead of them, and rescue Weiss and Blake. Let's show those terrorists that they can't just waltz into Beacon!"

That earned Sung-Sun a cheer, while Tia leaped out the window. She ignored the fact that she was wearing a muscle-t and small boy pants, or that she was weaponless, as she flicked on her scroll. "Harry. White Fang infiltrators are trying to kidnap Blake and Weiss."

With that, she tossed her scroll into the grass along the path and reached inward for Harribel. She continued racing on as Grimm-like bone armor began to grow out of her skin, covering her lower face, chest and then more.

Behind them, Sung-Sun turned to look at the bed where Apacci should have been sleeping. "Where's Apacci?"

"I saw Topaz entering Team Ruby's dorm," one of the other freshmen said, shaking his head. He was an otter faunus, one of the more playful yet least motivated among the students, yet right now, his face was grim as he shook his head. "I think..."

"FUCK," Mila groaned. "What do ya wanna bet that Apacci's girlfriend was White Fang?"

"That, or he sought them out himself," Sung-Sun growled. "Damn it! Well, there's nothing we can do about that now. Come on, let's get after them. No way can Tia handle Adam Taurus and whoever else he's brought in on her own!"

Well ahead of where dozens of Beacon lockers were slamming down all around the freshman dorm, Adam raced through the night, cursing as ahead of him several Atlas troopers were already turning in their direction. "Fuck, Lorgar, switch out, take them out."

Lorgar tossed Blake and Weiss's cocooned forms to Adam and Apacci. Having heard his name being shouted,

The shorter pair caught the two prisoners as Lorgar pulled his massive Gatling gun off his back. It wasn't a mecha-shift weapon. Few White Fang members could afford or were important enough for those. But it could lay down an insane level of lead at a moment's notice, and this Lorgar did now. Four of the Atlas soldiers fell, and the fifth ducked to the side, only to lose his head a moment later as Apacci shot him with his Thunder Hoofs, the same mecha-shift dagger/dual pistol weapon he had used since arriving at Beacon.

It was somewhat ironic that they were not his current weapons. Ruby and a few of the blacksmiths had begun to work on new weapons for Apacci, Mila, and several other freshmen. At the moment, none were complete, but he had taken to leaving the prototypes in his locker and keeping Thunder Hoofs on him.

Now Apacci was regretting that, as the prototype pistols had heavier rounds, even if they weren't mecha-shift yet. "That damn bed! That damn bed has ruined everything! Who even

puts up a bunkbed like that?! I'm no carpenter, but even I could see that that thing was an accident waiting to happen," he babbled as they raced on. "Fuck me, fuck me, fuck—"

"If you want to survive to be pegged again less panicking, more running," Trifa sneered as she raced ahead of the others.

Behind them, dozens of freshmen boiled out of the building, some even hopping out over the windows, grabbing at guns. Looking back, one blonde in particular as she seemed to be mostly dressed in some kind of Grimm armor. *That's one of the fighters Lorgar told us about from the fight at the rally. Damn.*

"Deitrich, Greta," Adam growled into his scroll, breaking coms discipline, but at this point, it didn't matter. "We have the packages, but we are coming in hot, repeat, coming in hot. You'd best be ready."

Ahead of them, the door to the bunker opened, and the bullhead that they had arrived in rolled out, its engines on standby. Deitrich and Greta hopped out then, as Greta began to fire around the area with a large mortar gun. It was so large that only she and Lorgar could have used it, and now it fired incendiary or explosive rounds everywhere.

Not at the freshmen running after them. By this point, the fleeing White Fang specialists had put several buildings between them and the freshman dorm room, and right now, the only one in sight was the Grimm-armored one. No, Greta fired randomly, causing destruction and fires everywhere her rounds landed.

This diverted Professor Port, Peach, and a few others as they turned aside to put out fires. But Ozpin, who had yet to leave his clocktower, paused, and, seeing this through the security cameras, diverted the students from the other classes to help fight the fires or search the wreckage of a few buildings that had been hit, including the house of one of the non-Huntsman teachers.

Next to him, Qrow opened a window, eager to race out, but Ozpin stopped him, a hand on the shoulder. "NO!"

"Wh, what the fuck!? Ozpin, they're attacking your damned academy!" Qrow protested angrily.

"And they will pay for it. But think. I have others here, myself and Glynda chiefly, who can deal with these White Fang cretins. But we won't learn anymore from them unless they break under questioning, and you know how hard that is. Only you can get into a position to follow them if, say, one of them escapes on this bullhead they seem to have used to invade my academy," Ozpin said calmly.

Qrow scowled, but after a second, he transformed into a crow. Qrow was one of two people whom Ozpin had invested generations of built-up, husbanded magic in more than two decades ago. This allowed Qrow to transform into a, well, a crow, just like his sister, the other person, could turn into a raven. To say that side of things had not worked out was an understatement, but Qrow, at least, was loyal.

By the time Qrow was flying over the center of the turmoil below, he saw that Ozpin was right, as Glynda had arrived on the scene.

Lashing out with her telekinesis, she stopped Greta's next mortar rounds in place, hurling them up and away towards the edge of the cliff face, bar one, which she turned around, launching it down towards where she could see Adam Taurus leading a group of White Fang towards their fellows. *Is that Apacci Topaz!? What in the world, he, he's joined them? No wonder they were able to plan out this attack!*

Ironically, this was indeed very true. It was what Cinder's overall infiltration plan had been based on: that Ozpin trusted more to his ability to discern a person's character than in technological defenses or computer-based security. To him, the sheer number of sensors and video cameras meant that he could stay on top of things in Beacon. But if a student turned on the school, that same student could bypass a great deal of the school's cybernetic defenses. They couldn't reach anything truly important, but the White Fang infiltrators didn't need to.

The mortar round smashed into the ground in front of Trifa and Adam, causing an explosion of fire and force, sending Adam stumbling, while Trifa, caught between steps, was bowled over, sent sideways off the path into the grass nearby. Further back, Lorgar kept on going, with Apacci using the rhino faunus as a shield against the explosion, firing towards Glynda.

This was a mistake, as Glynda waved her riding crop, grabbing his bullets out of the air and twisting them around, sending them not towards Apacci, but Lorgar. She couldn't tell what he was carrying in the darkness lit only by the fires and the scattered light fixtures, but one of the things he was carrying seemed to be wiggling, so it didn't take any great leap to understand what could be going on.

Roaring as the bullets smacked into him, Lorgar pulled to a stop, tossing his two prisoners to the ground near Trifa. With his arms free, he brought around his gatling gun again, firing towards where Glynda was charging towards them.

Once more, Glynda just waved her riding crop in the air, and all of the bullets paused, then flipped, coming back towards Lorgar, who grunted as they hit. But he was able to ignore the pinpricks thanks to his Aura, which he'd had time to rebuild throughout the day and his Rhino-like skin.

“Don’t try to fight that bitch directly, Lorgar. Greta, keep laying down distractions, Lorgar, Dietrich, aim for the students,” Adam ordered as he grabbed up Blake, and Trifa grabbed the Schnee girl. “Force Goodwitch to make a choice to defend or attack. “Apacci, slow down that one blonde girl!”

While Tia was nearly on them, the first of the freshmen able to race after her had just come around the side of a currently burning building. Several teams had split off to help fight the fires made by Greta’s incendiaries, and now Lorgar and the shark faunus’ fire caused many to stop, drop and roll into cover. Dietrich’s gun, a sniper rifle, let him hit several of the students, hitting them with special Lightning Dust-infused bullets, causing more damage than a normal sniper round would have.

Tia, however, couldn’t be stopped by Apacci’s guns, even though he was using Dust-infused bullets as well. She barreled through his fire, her Grimm-like mouth opening to release a bellow like a lioness. “RAAAAAAAAHh!!!!”

Many of the freshmen quailed at that sound, and even Apacci and Trifa cringed, but Trifa still tried to fire at Tia, gumming up her legs with her spider webs.

For a time, the open nature of most of Beacon’s grounds worked in the White Fang operatives’ favor, allowing them to pin down most of the freshmen still coming after them, as well as keep several of the higher-grade students who had been about to come out of their own dormitory building from getting into the open where they could grab their weapons. Several of those weapons caches exploded under their fire, and more than one shout of dismay was heard, possibly indicating that the weapons within had been ruined as Greta continued to lay down as much firepower as she could. Without better lighting and proximity, there was only so much that Glynda could do to stop this.

Instead of fighting the White Fang directly, she gathered as many of the incendiaries the tiger faunus was firing as she could midair. Crushing them, she created an energy wave that she directed downward. This wave caught most of the bullets heading towards the freshmen for a few seconds, grinding them into powder, and then sent that powder back in a wave of unrelenting fury towards Trifa and Adam. The pair carrying the prisoners was still racing towards the bullhead, bypassing Lorgar and Apacci.

That wave broke over Trifa, but she had already shifted away. Tossing the Schnee girl to the ground, she raised her gauntlet guns toward the incoming wave of metal filings and bits of Dust, creating a thick wall of webbing right in front of her. The thick, heavy, web-like substance acted almost like a canvas, catching the rainfall and keeping the fire and dust away from her.

Grabbing up the Schnee girl, Adam tossed her after Blake towards where Greta stood. “Dietrich, grab a dagger, you know what to do.”

He then turned, Blush, his rifle-sword sheath, coming up and firing. He then quickly pulled Wilt, his chokuto, out of Blush, slicing it sideways through a wall of energy directed at him from Ozpin, who had also just arrived on the scene. In his other hand, Blush shifted, some components moving around to let it act more like a proper rifle, complete with

“Adam Taurus. This was bold of you. Bold and foolish,” Ozpin said, smirking just a little bit as he gently knelt down and set his coffee mug on the ground before rising to his full height, his staff no longer being leaned on, but held like a sword. “You didn’t think you would actually get away with this, did you?”

“You humans, always so certain, always so high and mighty! So above it all up here on your cliff face, Ozpin? I **am** getting away with it! That is, unless you want my companion over there to slit the throats of those two young women. We’ve already overcome their Aura, so don’t expect it to help them,” Adam warned, glancing all around them.

Even as Deitrich raised his dagger to the Schnee girl’s throat, more and more students were arriving, even with Greta’s work at sowing chaos, and Adam knew they were already badly outnumbered. *I might be willing to fight even a full class of would-be Huntsmen, but not bits of three and their professors.*

Most of the senior class wasn’t on campus at any one time. Rather, the senior teams were usually out on missions, working towards graduation by gaining real-life experience in long-term operations. Better for the White Fang, the sole team that was on campus had been redirected to help put out a fire in the botany garden.

“You do know that you and all of your companions will die or be captured here, don’t you? Is the death of Ms. Belladonna and Ms. Schnee worth your own lives? Your own freedom?” Ozpin asked, stalking forward. His limp was still apparent, but it was very obvious to Sung Sun, watching from behind a ruined shrubbery, that he also had played it up before this more than a little bit.

Tearing off the webbing around her leggings, Tia howled again and launched herself forward, while behind her, Mila and a few of the other bruisers from the freshman class also charged, even as Lorgar opened fire on them again. Seconds later, even as Adam threatened Weiss and Blake’s lives again, Lorgar found himself suddenly faced with Tia in near full Harribel form. She barreled into him, taking the rhino faunus off his feet, sending the massive man to the ground.

“Fucking hell, bitch, you want another round, let’s see how you do without your friends around!” Lorgar roared, using his gatling gun’s stock on Tia’s shoulder, then using the side of it to smash her to one side. Tia moved with it, and the two of them rolled around, snarling as Tia gave herself to her Semblance.

This left Trifa and Apacci racing ahead to the bullhead, firing and moving as they did, but there wasn't enough cover. Both of them took hits, their Aura flaring. Both though, had enough to absorb a few bullets and keep upright and moving.

As he spotted Harry Arc and his team coming around a distant corner, Ozpin decided he'd kept Adam talking long enough. His one good leg suddenly glowed with Aura as he funneled energy into it before pushing off the ground, rocketing towards Adam, who brought Wilt up.

To Ozpin's consternation, the blade, a chokuto, did not break as his own cane slammed into it with all of the force of a runaway freight train. *A kinetic energy-absorbing Semblance?*

That was actually only part of Adam Semblance. The other part was releasing the gathered energy. He could only do either with a bladed weapon, hence why he called his Semblance Moonslice, a purpose Wilt served at very well indeed.

A second later, a long slash of white energy flashed out, slamming into Ozpin's hastily raised defense, sending him flying towards Glynda. The blonde professor turned from where she had been shielding a group of freshmen to grab her boss out of the air, allowing two more explosive rounds from Greta to land among the students. Thankfully, they had already charged and had mostly gotten out of range.

"To the bullhead!" Adam shouted, and Deitrich obeyed, tossing the Blake and Weiss onto the bullhead and following quickly, just as there was a shout of "Here's Nora!" from out of the air.

Adam barely twisted around in time to raise Wilt to meet an incoming hammer blow from a pink-haired woman, the blow slamming into Wilt with such force that Adam felt his grip on the blade tremble and his knees nearly buckle. If not for his Semblance, he would've lost his weapon, or the weapon itself would've been shattered at best.

But with it, that attack simply gave him more energy. Adam twisted around, knee coming up into Nora, but Nora blocked it, then retaliated with a blow from her hammer that Adam barely ducked under. Instead of lashing out towards her, though, he sent another blast of cutting energy towards the freshmen who were coming towards him. The wide wave of energy was barely redirected by Glynda into the ground, and one of the freshmen cried out in pain as his Aura was overcome, the cutting energy cutting his leg entirely off just below the knee.

Then Ozpin was there, his staff slamming into Adam's side, causing him to grunt even through his Semblance absorbing the energy. His blade came up, blocking a blow from Nora, then stabbing forward towards her eyes, but she twitched away, the side of her head taking the blow instead, her own Aura flaring, as Ren, Harry and Pyrrha charged forwards.

“Stop! Stop, or I’ll kill her! I swear I will!” Deitrich shouted, holding one arm around Weiss’s middle, the other pressing a dagger into her throat again as they’d been doing a moment ago. Only this time, those close enough could see a small trickle of blood coming down Weiss’s throat from where the point of the dagger was pressing into her skin, which had been left bare, unlike the rest of her body and head. “I swear it, I’ll kill her!”

This did not go over well.

“Pyrrha, now,” Harry ordered, kneeling down on the ground. As he channeled his magic into the ground. An instant later, a series of large hands grabbed at the shark and tiger faunus, while another pair of hands hammered into Apacci.

At the same time as those hands grabbed at his legs, Pyrrha, now within range of her polarity, reached out for his knife, tugging it and the hand with it away from Weiss’s throat. Deitrich gaped in surprise, as no report about the Invincible Girl had mentioned her polarity powers, thanks to how she had very rarely used them openly before coming to Beacon.

In that moment, Apacci went down. Apacci fell to a blow to the kneecap that got through his Semblance from a hurled mace from Mila. His mask was hit by several bullets, shattering the bits falling away.

Mila growled. “Sung-sun told me it was probably you, but I didn’t want to believe it. Traitor!”

“You’re the traitor! You and all these other faunus students, you people who just toe the line, who bare your stomachs like dogs! You go along with the humans’ rules, the humans’ edicts, never caring, never understanding the plight of your people elsewhere because of those same humans!” Apacci yelled back as he pushed to his feet, while nearby, Greta found herself fighting the ground, while Deitrich was taking accurate fire from Ren and Pyrrha as the pair of them closed. Harry, on the other hand, was trying to grab at the bullhead, but was forced to defend himself as Greta fired a few incendiaries his way.

“This, this is simply us making certain a real traitor pays for it!” Apacci went on. “That Belladonna bitch, hiding what she was for so long for fear of being seen like the rest of us, and her fucking friendship with a Schnee of all things! You’ve heard that whiny little entitled bint! You know how she is!”

Apacci waved his hands in either direction, shouting out for everyone there to hear over the sounds of ongoing gunfire and the violence. “It’s not too late! Brothers and sisters, you can all—”

That was as far as he got before Ren shot him in the side of the head. His aura stopped it from doing much, but this was soon joined by a deluge of fire from his fellow freshman as Mila roared, "Oh, will you shut up, you weak-willed asshole!" bringing her mace around.

Apacci tried to dodge, but the number of bullets hitting him meant he was already badly off balance, and his Aura diminished enough that, had this been a combat class, Glynda would already have called a halt to the match. Even a glancing blow was enough to cause his Aura to break, and, before any of the shooters could stop, the deer faunus found himself riddled by fire. He fell, bleeding out, and Mila hastily knelt down, trying to do what she could to help him. "Fuck, fuck fuck, I didn't want you to die, just stop spouting your bullshit, damn it!"

Nearby, Deitrich was in a similar position. Pyrrha and Ren's accurate fire, guided by Pyrrha's polarity, had hit him around Weiss, forcing him to drop her as he tried to dodge their fire and the hands Harry was still raising from the ground. This left him open to another attack from Harry, a spear of stone slamming into his chest, shattering his Semblance. Another crashed into Greta's right arm, pinning it between the blow itself and the side of the bullhead at an angle that meant Aura could do nothing to protect the limb. It shattered right above the elbow, and the tiger faunus yowled in pain even as she fired back at Harry.

This let Ren and Pyrrha close, followed by a number of the other freshmen. Trifa tried her best, launching numerous web-based traps down into the ground, but Pyrrha leaped up and over them, and Harry just tore them apart, charging in himself now.

Growling, Adam's chokuto began to glow as his Semblance shifted the kinetic energy he'd taken from each successive hit. He used this to deliver miniature slashes, sending Nora skidding backwards and nearly taking Ozpin's hand off at the wrist. The cutting impact of it caused Ozpin to wince, as it nearly got through his Aura, and he backed away quickly, his Aura having already taken a few similar strikes in this battle. *Power to a point in a battle between a Semblance and Aura. I don't have quite enough Aura to think I can just absorb such attacks indefinitely.*

That brief break was enough. Adam lunged for the bullhead, grabbing onto its side and pulling Blake to him, holding Wilt to her throat. "I will kill her if you move, Ozpin! Greta, move!"

Greta grunted and pushed herself off the floor of the bullhead's cargo area, hurrying forward. Trifa fell back into the bullhead, using more webbing to deflect further bullets, but Detrich's luck ran out as Nora's Magnhild caught him with a grenade. The grenade struck and exploded on impact, removing the shark faunus' head and most of his upper body.

Lorgar was too far away, locked in personal combat with the blonde Grimm-like girl, and Adam cursed luridly. *We can't save him this time.* "Go, go! We need to get out of here!"

Wilt flashed out again and again, sending an attack towards Harry and a few others, halting their attacks, including Glynda and several of the teachers who had finally begun to show up, forcing them all to defend themselves even as the bullhead took off. Soon, they were into the air, and he pulled himself further in, cursing how the night had gone.

Down on the ground, Harry looked around quickly then raced over toward Nora, lightning arcing in his fingers. “Nora, Pyrrha, Fastball Special! Pyrrha, you know what to do!”

Harry might have used his Semblance to go after them, too, but there were a lot of wounded around, and Glynda was already shouting for help. His place, as much as Harry hated it, was here, letting Pyrrha take the fight to the White Fang infiltrators. “Get in, get them out and gone, okay? Don’t stay and fight Adam and the rest.”

“Leave it to me,” Pyrrha said, just as she reached Nora and Harry. A bit of lightning had her muscles bulging, and Pyrrha leaped up, putting her shield below her for just a second as Nora whirled, bringing Magnhild up into the bottom of the shield. With her Semblance boosting her strength, Nora’s hit launched Pyrrha up into the air like she had just been fired out of a cannon.

Pyrrha flew through the air, crouched on Akoúo, then, as she got close to the still ascending bullhead, reached out with her Semblance. It was but the work of a moment as a magnetic pull connected Akoúo to the bullhead even as they raced higher into the air and away from Beacon.

Inside the bullhead, Adam glared at Blake, who had woken up from her pain-induced unconsciousness and had tried to crawl towards bullhead’s still open backdoor. “You, you even have more to pay for now than before, Belladonna. You and the Schnee girl will pay for what happened tonight, adding that to your earlier sins.”

Blake tried to scowl, but given her injuries, it lacked any king of power behind it, an Adam sneered, caressing her cheek in a manner that both made her skin crawl and brought back memories. “People have been leaving me, disappointing me for my whole life, Blake. But you... you disappointed me the most. You left me alone. You won my heart, then left me alone, for what? The lives of some random humans?”

The cat faunus tried to speak, but her mouth was still wrapped up in Trifa’s spider web, and her efforts to loosen her mouth had yet to bear fruit. Instead, she tried to get her eyes to convey the message but it didn’t work. Adam simply continued to smile at her, causing the slowly waking Weiss to shiver as she realized the depth of Adam’s obsession. “Don’t worry. We’ll have all the time in the world to become acquainted again. You will never betray me again.”

He then pushed her against the wall near to the entrance to the cockpit, snarling, while Trifa sneered staring hard not at Blake, but at the other source of Adam's fury. "But you, unlike Belladonna, there's no way you can make up for the sins of your blood. You're a Schnee. The Schnee are a blight on faunus-kind, the worst of humanity!"

Weiss had done better at loosening her mouth than Blake up to this point, but she also couldn't quite respond verbally just yet. Instead, she glared, but unlike Blake, she wasn't trying to convey anything more than disdain and hate with her look, and succeeded far better.

Adam matched Weiss's hate with his own, leaning down to push his face practically against hers enough so that she could feel his breath from under his half-mask while Trifa pulled herself into the copilot's chair. "Would you like to see what your family did to me, Schnee? Your family's handiwork, that so many of you are proud of?"

"Adam, don't taunt them just yet, damn it, close the back door would you!?" Greta cursed. *Fucking obsessive ass.*

Growling, Adam pulled away, and nodded, moving to obey, not knowing that a certain redhead was nearby.

As she came close, Pyrrha switched Miló to its spatha form, while reaching for Polarity. **PULL**, she growled mentally, and in an instant, Akoúo, instead of being just dragged along like a flat plate, zoomed forward once more. It moved faster than the still-retreating bullhead, crossing the intervening distance quickly, so fast the wind actually began to sting Pyrrha's skin more than a bit.

Just as Adam reached out for the dangling door at the back of the bullhead, the center of Akoúo cracked into his forehead hard enough to send him stumbling.

Flipping up and off, grabbing at Akoúo with her Polarity power, Pyrrha slid to a halt next to the two prisoners, where she grabbed Weiss up, hurling her up and out into the darkness beyond before Adam could recover from the sudden assault. She then grabbed Blake up and hurled Akoúo ahead of her, charging back towards Adam, who'd gotten his feet under her. "Time to go!"

Adam dodged under the shield, smirking as he went sword to sword against the Invincible Girl. "No. It's time for me to kill a living legend. You may've freed the Schnee from her just desserts but--"

Pyrrha disdained talking and lashed out with Milò, so fast Adama had trouble keeping up. Not for nothing was Pyrrha a champion, and even burdened by carrying Blake, she was just as fast as the taller, stiffer swordsman.

The two exchanged several blows, with Pyrrha dodging whenever she saw Wilt go red, while carrying Blake, a feat few could have matched. The back of the bullhead and a significant portion of the interior was cut to pieces, with one miss nearly decapitating Trifa, causing her to pull back around the entryway rather than join in.

Before Trifa could try again, a blow got through Pyrrha's defenses as Blake's weight slowed her down. Just that one, half-powered blast of kinetic energy, was enough to almost break Pyrrha's Aura, and she hissed in pain, doubling over but still pulling Blake with her as she rolled to the side, kicking off the side of the bullhead and up to the other side to dodge a follow-on blow. This forced her to change her style a bit and she no longer went to hit Wilt or Blush instead, just dodging, which in turn let her dodge the small bolts of spider web that Trifa tried to hit her with.

One such nearly hit Adam instead, and he hissed out, "Trifa, watch it!"

He didn't realize that Pyrrha had twisted the pair just then so they were both standing right side toward the opening. As Trifa held her fire, Akoúo came back in, whirling through the air like a dervish for Adam's face, aiming for his eye.

As good as he was, Adam was still mortal. When something flashed towards a person's eyes, they flinched, closed them and twitched away. This he did now, dodging the side of Milo before it could smash into his half-mask.

That was enough for Pyrrha. Before he could recover his balance, she jumped. With Blake still under one arm, her shield underneath her, the pair fell through the darkness away from the bullhead.

"No! No! **BLAKEEEEEEEEEEE!!!!**" Adam howled, reaching forward with an empty hand, but then Blake and Pyrrha were shrinking rapidly, heading towards the edge available low. Leaving Adam alone. *Again! Again, she leaves me. Leaves me behind, leaves The Cause, the hatred. HOW!? How can she live like that, live next to a fucking Schnee!?*

For a brief second, Adam stared after them, then his shoulders slumped, and he slowly returned Wilt to Blush as he sat down on the back of the bullhead's area, pulling the doors closed. "Get us out of here. This entire mission's been a cluster fuck..."

"What about Lorgar? He was still alive back there, and Apacci might've been as much as that bear faunus was shouting and fussing about him," Trifa muttered, looking a little shell-shocked herself, not only at how one girl had been able to escape with their prizes, but the overall effect of the whole debacle. *A fucking bunk bed, a god damn engineer's nightmare of a lash-up of a fucking bunk bed, and the whole night went to shit!*

“...” Adam sighed as he pulled himself forward into the driver’s seat next to Greta, shaking his head slowly. “I doubt he’s going to be alive for much longer. Damn that bunkbed!” he continued, his thoughts mirroring Trifa’s. “That noise ruined everything!”

Greta looked at Trifa at that, demanding an explanation. Whether or not the spider faunus gave the older tiger faunus that explanation, Adam didn’t care. He slumped down against the inner wall of the bullhead, staring at where his prisoners had been, where Blake had been, reflecting how everything could go pear-shaped so quickly and dreaming of a day when he would have his vengeance not just on the Schnee, but on that redheaded bitch who had taken Blake away from him again.

OOOOOOO

Falling through the air, Weiss had desperately been attempting to slow herself down with glyphs, but had barely been able to do much more than cause a few to form, holding her up as much as string would have an elephant. Now she oofed as Pyrrha and Blake rammed into her, with Pyrrha putting her other hand around the shorter girl, Akoúo stowed away for now. “Let’s hear it for a successful rescue!” Pyrrha laughed gaily, even as they continued to plummet towards the ground below.

“Yeah, being captured by my crazy ex was most definitely not something I would want to happen again, zero out of ten would not recommend, but now, could I please know your landing strategy?” Blake practically babbled. She had been able to bite through the webbing while Pyrrha had basically been dancing around Adam while carrying her, a feat that Blake was going to need some time to truly comprehend.

Now, though, she stared down at the **very** rapidly approaching forest beneath them. The bullhead had been able to get out and away from Beacon, heading away from both academy and Vale, which meant they were about to fall into a forest. Forever Fall, perhaps? Even Blake couldn’t see any color down there, so she wasn’t certain.

“...Er, Aura is amazing?” Pyrrha mumbled, also staring down, a feeling of chagrin going through her. *Where’s Harry when I need him?*

At that moment, Harry was helping stabilize Apacci. Fen was busy elsewhere, as was Glynda with dozens of ongoing fires. But he had already sent Nora and Ren to grab a bullhead and head after Pyrrha. That was about all he could do right now, especially with Tia nearby, needing to be calmed down from going full Harribel to gut Lorgar.

That one blow that Adam had hit her with in their brief skirmish in the bullhead had practically shattered her Aura, and she could feel her Semblance didn’t have enough energy to

respond. It was rebuilding quickly, but quickly enough? *At this speed, to slow them down from this velocity?*

Weiss finally worked her jaw enough to bite at the top of the webbing around her mouth, pulling it out of her way and shouting, “Cut my hands loose, you buffoons!”

While they continued to tumble, Pyrrha did so, and Weiss hastily pointed below them with both hands. Glyphs began to shimmer into being, far more solid than Weiss’s previous attempts, which she’d only been able to create with her fingers. The first shattered as they slammed into it, but it slowed their descent, and was quickly followed by another, and another, finally until one of them was solid enough for Pyrrha to actually put her feet on for a moment. Several more followed until Weiss’s Aura gave way, unable to sustain her Semblance.

But this had allowed Pyrrha’s Aura to build up enough that her own Semblance became usable again. She slowed them down the rest of the way, landing with all three of them sitting on one another’s laps, essentially on top of her shield as it skidded across a large rock and down into a clearing, skidding for some time before it stopped.

Before it did, Blake rolled off the others, slowing herself quickly. She lay there laughing as Weiss and Pyrrha slowed to a stop, shaking their heads and staring over at the cat faunus. “Well, that was interesting,” Pyrrha mused.

Weiss and Blake stared at Pyrrha, then at one another, then back, before they finally began to laugh, shaking their heads, relieved to be alive and free, as a Beacon bullhead appeared above them, followed by Nora’s shout of, “Hey gals, going our way?”

OOOOOOO

As the heavily modified bullhead settled down on the ground near one of the entrances into Mountain Glenn’s subway system, the despondent Adam looked up as Greta grunted. “What?” he asked tersely, his voice raw-sounding almost, as if he’d hurt himself with that last shriek.

“There are no guards,” Greta answered back, staring around them as best she could through the canopy. She wasn’t in the best of moods either, but something seemed wrong here.

Scowling angrily as he looked over her and Trifa’s shoulders, Adam saw that Greta was right. “Keep the engine hot just in case.” Moving back to the back of the bullhead, he kicked open the back doors, hopped out and began looking around warily.

There were indeed no guards, not even deeper into the tunnel. There didn't even seem to be any lights leading deeper into the subway area, either. "Have they moved deeper inside for some reason?" he mused.

His whisper trailed off as Greta hissed, pointing deeper into the tunnel with her one good arm, visible only because of Adam's faunus heritage; it was so dark out. "I smell blood, lots of it. And not that old either, less than twelve hours old." With the door open, that smell had flooded in, making her hair stand on end.

"Wait here, Greta, and keep the bullhead's engine going," Adam ordered. "Trifa, keep an eye out. I'll head in and investigate myself."

Adam marched forwards Wilt out of Blush as he entered through the crack in the former defensive wall that had once made the subway a shelter and then a tomb. As Adam moved deeper, it became clear to the bull faunus that the underground tunnels had become a tomb again, only this time, for his fellows. Bodies littered the hallway, five at first, then more visible further down the tunnel.

Hissing, he turned away. *Fucking Cinder! She betrayed us, removed those Mask things that kept the Grimm away. But then... how did Bonesaw not get a signal out?*

Shaking his head and deciding to get the hell out of dodge, Adam turned, racing back out to the bullhead. However, just as he reached the open area where the bullhead had put down, a massive weight crashed down into the bullhead from on high, smashing into the front of the bullhead.

Greta saw it coming and pushed out of the pilot's chair she had taken over, hurling herself into the back of the bullhead. Trifa had already shifted to stand there, waiting to see whether she should go back up Adam or not.

Adam stared at the Gargoyle, which looked back at him, as his blood ran cold. *No, no, fucking Cinder!!* He raised his blade, but the Gargoyle shrieked, and Adam and his two companions fell to their knees. A sonic attack like that, even more than one meant to scare people, hit faunus hard thanks to their enhanced senses.

"ARGH!!!" Adam fell to his knees, then found himself slammed to the ground by the Gargoyle. It kicked Blush away, sending both sheath and Wilt away as its claws grabbed at the back of Adam's head. Still disoriented by the creature's scream and weakened by the battle earlier that night, Adam could barely try to fight back as he found his head slammed into the ground, then a foot kicked him in the head, sending him flying.

A second later, Adam found himself crashing into a wall, and the Gargoyle pounced, hitting him again and again. In the distance, he heard shouts, then Greta screaming in agony,

Trifa shouting, and then... silence. A silence fell, darkness closing in as Adam's consciousness fled.

An hour later, a crow landed on the wrecked bullhead. The few Grimm in the area ignored it for now, as the crow stared around. Hopping off the wrecked canopy of the bullhead, Qrow transformed back into his normal body. He looked around for a brief moment, taking in things with his human sight and better hearing, then Harbinger appeared in his hand in sword form from the small of his back, slicing a Beowolf in half.

Looking around, he could see that a fight had occurred here, but with the Grimm. *Huh... I don't think we worked through the whole implications of that brunette cunt working with Salem. If she can work with the queen, why can't she and others work with the Grimm...*

With that thought, he transformed back into his crow form and headed into the tunnel leading down into the subway. Deep inside, he stopped, landing on top of a subway train, staring all around him at the remnants of a base that the White Fang had built here. *Did they somehow hide this place during the Remembrance, or did they build this place right after?*

That didn't really matter, though. What did was that there wasn't any Dust here. Not a single pallet.

And I know Torchwick and the White Fang stole a shit ton of it. Hiding it out here makes sense, but it's gone now. That's not good. The kids might've handed mystery woman a lot of losses, and for sure cost them at least a few important pieces, and the White Fang are going to be mourning Adam sometime soon. But it looks as if she got away with the Dust, or, maybe worse, it's hidden in small lots all across Vale. Dammit, that is way too much Dust for me to be happy to be in any terrorist's hands for damn sure.

Flying out the way he had come, after making certain that there was nothing else here, Qrow alighted back down on top of the bullhead, staring at the corpses nearby. One of the three that invaded Beacon was there. The tiger Faunus, torn apart by Grimm. She had maybe gone hard, but it was impossible to tell since Grimm didn't leave bodies behind. *Damn shame, she was a looker too.* But for a moment, Qrow couldn't see any sign of the other two.

Transforming again, he checked all around the bullhead, needing to kill several more Grimm who came near to investigate him, but otherwise not seeing many. What he eventually saw was a trail. Two trails, as if at least one person was being dragged away by another. It didn't last long, but it and some blood spatters told him that at least one, maybe two of the White Fang had survived. *What the fuck happened here?*

Turning into crow form, he spiraled out, hoping to find something else, some hint that one of the two had dragged his or her fellow away and not the idea that had just jumped to his

mind. That they were hiding somewhere. He didn't see anything but more Grimm. *Fucking hell, did Grimm take them prisoner? Why!? Fucking Salem, she's changing the game too fast, and I don't know if even Ozpin will be able to figure out why before it bites us on the ass again.*

End Chapter