

A day later than I had hoped, but even so, thanks go to Hiryo for getting this back to me so quick. Beyond that, remember when you see the size of this folks, that these are episode type stories – smaller than a full chapter by a decent margin.

### Episode 5, chapter 20, Part 3: A Real Homecoming

With space on the boat so limited, Ranma had to become very creative in training Team Juniper. Luckily, he was aided in this by two things: the goal of the current training and the fact that the boat wasn't moving all that fast up the river. After all, right now, he wasn't going to training their strength or agility, only how to move silently.

As she hopped off the boat several hours after they had left Athenia behind, Nora shook her head, staring up at the evening, then turning around and peering at the boat. "You know, it looks almost like the giant ship we were on to come to Mistral done small. So why is one called a ship and the other a boat then? Is it just a size thing? Do people serving on boats get ship envy?"

Seeing the barge workers looking at Nora as if she was crazy, Ranma reflected. *Oh, look, someone's looking at Nora like she's an insane ball of murderous energy. That must mean it's a day ending with 'Y'.* Much like Ren and the rest of team JNPR, he ignored both Nora and the reactions of those around her with the ease of long practice, moving to stand in front of the group of young hunters.

He no longer thought of Team Juniper as hunters and training. By this point, they'd seen as much action as graduated B-grade hunters would see in years, since Ranma met them at Beacon. They still had a lot of learning to do, but that would always be the case.

"All right, you four. For my plan going forward to work, there is one thing above everything else that must happen. If it doesn't, I'm leaving you behind and going on my own. Understood?"

The looks he got in return were mixed, although generally positive. Ren simply looked amused and eager for the challenge in his normal, bland, passive way, his hands in his long cloak. Jaune looked worried, somewhat concerned and very nervous, knowing that he would undoubtedly be the weak link in this training. Despite that, Ranma anticipated that he would actually take to it pretty well, minus his shield, which was now in Ranma's ki-space, and once they figured out where he should carry his sword. *Heh, I guess we could call it the Arcscalibur, heh.*

As always when given something physical to do, Nora was smiling cheerfully. But Ranma had learned that the girl was actually quite a bit more observant than you might think, and she too looked a little nervous. You could tell by how Nora was simply rocking back and forth on her feet rather than hopping all around the place. Yet, it seemed as if she was more concerned for Ren than for anything else, if the glances she sent his way were anything to go by. *Huh, something to do with his having some way of helping us move out there without running into Grimm?*

However, Pyrrha's face when she heard that Ranma might still be willing to leave them behind was frankly a little frightening. Her eyes narrowed, her fists clenched at her side, and Pyrrha crouched down as if she was willing to fight him right there and now just for thinking about it. Given her earlier words on the subject, that shouldn't have surprised Ranma but it was still startling to see. And gratifying too.

Ranma sent her a small smile before turning his attention to the other four. "To go with me into the Grimm Lands, you all need to know how to move silently. And I'm not talking about moving quietly. I am talking about running at full speed or jogging without creating a lot of noise. That means your feet can't slap the ground, and your armor can't jingle. You need to know what kind of leaves will rustle when you brush them and which won't. You need to be able to move from running to hiding or running along the ground and up into the trees quickly and silently at the drop of a hat, and you need the patience to move slowly, undetected."

Ranma's voice became serious as he crossed his arms, ignoring the fact that three members of team Juniper had started to stare over one of his shoulders as the ship moved out of sight. Pyrrha wasn't looking away from him, though. Indeed, she was staring at him like an anti-air gun at a Grimm.

"I am not shitting you. Out in the Grimm Lands, even I would hesitate to start anything. We will be moving across the ground silently and unseen before we get into position, and then, we will start sniping, taking out specific Grimm quickly and efficiently., which itself is going to be tough as hell to pull off without bringing the grim down on our heads. If we have to fight a standup fight, while we're out there, that probably means we've lost."

He sighed, shaking his head. "I know I'm not saying anything new to you guys, that you all were there when I proposed the plan to the Mistral counsel, but I need to make certain that you'll understand how different this is going to be in comparison to your normal jobs. There's no one to defend but no way to retreat. No supplies and no room for error."

"We understand, and if we're going to start running, can I suggest we start now? Or else our ride is going to leave behind," Jaune pointed out, chuckling weakly as he quickly figured out what Ranma was going to have them do.

"Then you better get running," Ranma said, grinning even as he began to run backward, keeping his body facing them.

As JNPR started to run, Ranma counted off, but he wasn't counting off a cadence. Instead, he was pointing at each of them and counting the number of times when they made noises in their attempt to race to catch up with the river barge. The fact that when they came into sight of it, Thetis, her husband and her two apprentices were out on the deck shouting encouragement and lounging out on deck chairs did not make it any more fun for Team Juniper. Because when they caught up, Ranma's punishment began.

Every time someone made a noise, they would have to do ten push-ups followed by twenty squats for the next, the numbers going up with every time they made a noise. And unfortunately for Jaune and Nora, both of them had been called out on making noise more than a hundred times. Pyrrha had been heard only twenty times, while Ranma had only heard Ren four times. Three of those times occurred when he had stopped to help coach Nora in how to put her feet down without slapping them down even as they ran.

Thankfully, Ranma took pity on them, letting them all stop after the first hundred of each, hopping to his feet and gesturing them all to move away from one another for a second as Jaune gasped and rubbed at his arms while Ren looked as if he wanted to just forget he even had arms in the first place. In contrast, both girls looked unphased.

"Are you going to be doing our punishments with us every time?" Pyrrha inquired, smiling at Ranma, her earlier anger forgotten for now.

"Meh, what kind of leader would I be if I didn't?" Ranma answered easily, shrugging his shoulders.

"That kind of defeats the purpose of the punishment, though," Pyrrha teased gently.

This caused Ranma to smirk at her with a shrug, pointing at Jaune and Ren. "They don't seem to think so, but if you want, I promise to do better next time."

He then moved among them, pointing out how they could shift their equipment or weapons to be more silent, then showing them all how to move their feet, like Ren had been trying to do for Nora. The trick was to put their feet down in segments rather than all at once. As for the weapons, for those who had them, Ren's hidden gun holsters were tightened ever so slightly, the same going for Nora's hammer on her back. It rubbed her a bit where it now lay, but that was better than making noise. Jaune, to put his sword on his back now.

Then they were off again, racing after the ship. This was how the five Hunters spent the rest of the evening and into the night.

When Ranma was about to tell them to start on the punishment reps again and thus let the boat move ahead of them once more, Ren protested, saying, "We certainly won't be moving out there at night. I understand that we should prepare for it just in case, but this early in our training?"

"You need to train your instincts as well as your night vision. Raise your hand if any of you for have been out past villages or towns at night?" Nora and Ren exchanged glances, and both of them raised their hands reluctantly, causing Ranma to blink in surprise. But seeing the look on their faces in the fading light of a lamp set at the back of the barge, Ranma decided not to question it. Instead, he asked, "And how different was moving at night instead of during the day?"

Again, the two shared a glance and Ren answered simply, "Frightening."

"Exactly. You need to respect the trouble moving around at night can cause, but you can't be scared of it. And not just because that will make you jump at noises and make even more noises yourself, but because fear will attract Grimm. So, we're going to push on for another two circuits."

As they moved on in the dark, Ranma was much nicer about it. He stopped counting off instead following behind them rather than being in front. He moved among the team, patting shoulders here and there in encouragement, whispering instructions on how to keep moving at speed, while also looking where their feet were going, helping Jaune reset his armor. It seemed to need a bit more care from Thetis, as it shifted when he went down to do push-ups and then stood back up.

This training continued the next day, despite how sore and battered the team was. Ranma didn't let up, barging into their rooms and shouting, "Up! Up. Endurance is next to moving silently in the list of things you need when moving through the Grimm Lands! If you make a noise, if you become scared, the Grimm will come. The Grimm will swarm us. They will try to take us down. These are lands, where if you get pinned in place, you need the endurance to run or you will die."

While Jaune and Ren were ruefully acknowledging why Ranma had told the two apprentices to bed down on the deck, Nora hopped out of the room, shouting, "Renny, pancake!"

"With you around, I rather think that's a bit of an exaggeration," Pyrrha grumbled as she rolled out of bed. She was not a morning person and somewhat resented Ranma getting them up so early. They didn't even have any breakfast or coffee!

"No backtalk from you," Ranma said jokingly before smacking her on the rear. This caused Pyrrha to stiffen, whirling around and glaring and blushing furiously at him. Ranma smirked at her and jerked a thumb toward the door. "You're the last one, so be glad I smacked your rear instead of kicking it."

Pyrrha's lips quirked at that, still somewhat red in the face, as she moved to join the others on the main deck. A very quick breakfast followed, with promises of a larger lunch followed, after which they leaped off the boat once more.

Here, the riverbank abutted directly into the tree line, which would be making their training all the harder, unfortunately. But once more, Ranma was behind them as they started off, giving instructions on how to watch for tree roots and still keep up their speed, and then how to move from running on the ground to being in the trees. Jaune had a problem with that, but surprisingly, he wasn't creaking or jangling as he moved anymore. On the other hand, Nora still had issues keeping silent as they ran, becoming bored or wanting to strike up a conversation.

As they ran, Pyrrha felt Ranma's eyes on her more than once. Pyrrha was used to being looked at, to being watched, but she had never before had been watched like this by a man she was interested in. And as Pyrrha ran, a somewhat insidious thought ran through her mind as she remembered the party and Cinder's impact on the men in the room. For half the morning, Pyrrha fought the urge off, but finally, she couldn't contain it any longer.

Slowing down to move through several tree branches and roots that blocked her path, Pyrrha took the time to swish her rear from side to side just a bit, trying to emulate how she had seen Cinder move. It seemed to work because after a few moments Pyrrha heard an audible groan behind her, causing her to smile in pleasure and continue the teasing throughout the day.

The people on the boat watched all this whenever they could, while Thetis talked about a few of her apprentice's designs and finished a chest plate for Nora. Unfortunately, making a chest plate that wouldn't make noises as she moved was difficult, considering her normal combat style. But she had much better luck creating a heavier brigandine-style combat skirt and blouse combo.

Occasionally, she looked up at Pyrrha and Ranma, seeing the subtle flirtations between them. She also saw the not-so-subtle glances and had to giggle to herself. *I doubt you could say they are in love, but they certainly are moving in that direction. And there's certainly no shortage of desire going both ways.*

Later that evening, Ranma let the group off early, and after dinner, that urge to giggle came back with a vengeance. Coming out on deck to look for Pyrrha, she found her sitting among some of the piles of stuff on the deck as she watched Ranma exercise.

For him, simply running alongside the others or even going through the same punishments with them wasn't much of exercise. Now he stood on the sharp prow of the boat, balancing there as he moved through a kata. And for some reason, he was doing so shirtless.

Looking over Pyrrha's shoulder, Thetis had to admit that Ranma was quite a fascinating sight. While her own preferences led to the jolly, huggy sort, she couldn't deny that there was something almost mesmerizing by watching Ranma move. Every move he made was so fluid, controlled, and yet natural at the same time, it was like watching a horse run or a thoroughbred racer perhaps, or perhaps a panther, one moving through the trees, all fluid grace and speed.

At first, Pyrrha and Ranma had talked as Ranma exercise, with Ranma using the opportunity to show Pyrrha a few more katas, including two he would be introducing to the group because they trained coordination. That would be just as necessary as the ability to jump when moving through the trees instead of on the ground. Ranma had learned in his own days in the Grimm Lands beyond Vacuo that this area was a sort of neutral zone between Grimm types. Few Grimm stayed in trees beyond the bird types, who only slept in the uppermost branches. And if there were higher places to purge, even bird types didn't do so.

But after a while, Ranma had gotten into some of his own katas so much that he stopped talking, and Pyrrha did the same, just watching, taking a certain amount of delight in watching him like this as Ranma had done earlier that day with her.

As Thetis watched, Pyrrha bit her lip. The sensual sight in front of her began to impact Pyrrha's body, a flush coming to her face and tingles going up and down her body.

Deciding to leave the girl alone, Thetis turned back. After all, it would be incredibly rude for her to interrupt Pyrrha's enjoyment of the view right now. There would be time for girl-talk some other time and warn Pyrrha. More than enough time to warn Pyrrha about her father's anger at that last stunt. I just hope he doesn't do anything truly stupid about this...

OOOOOO

At the same time that Ranma and Team Juniper were making their way lazy way up the river, elsewhere, a clandestine meeting was occurring back in the town. Lil' Miss Malachite had set this meeting up to apologize for pulling out of the original agreement between her and Hazel, before wiping her hands of any further dealings with him and Tyrian.

The warehouse Hazel sat in now made the bar that Lil' Miss Malachite used as her main base of operations seem incredibly ritzy in comparison. Everything around them was momentary, set up to be taken down easily or just forgotten. The bar he sat at was just a wooden plank set up between two crates, with another crate of beer, obviously stolen, being dolled out to him and other customers as they came and went.

It was also obvious that beer wasn't the only thing on sale in the warehouse. Dust was being exchanged on a nearby table, weapons at a third, and luxury goods at a fourth caught his attention, even as he kept one eye on the man across from him who had sat down when he gave his name to the 'bartender'. *So, this place isn't a black market, not really, and not just because it seems that only one group is doing the selling here. It's a large fencing operation. A fencing operation for foodstuffs and clothing for the most part. Still, considering who I'm here to meet, that makes sense. It's probably difficult to run a farm out in the Grimm Lands.*

"The spider bitch told me you wanted to speak to a representative of the clan. Speak," the man across from him ordered.

Hazel cocked his head to one side, then without changing expression, reached across the wooden plank faster than the man could move. Grabbing him by the hair, Hazel slammed the man's head down into the wooden plank separating them. The man's head bounced back, and Hazel released his hair, fastidiously wiping his hands to get rid of the hairs that he had pulled out accidentally from the man's head. *Funny that his Aura protected him from being hurt but didn't protect his hair from being pulled out.* "When you speak to me, be polite."

The man growled at him and reached for a weapon at his side, but Hazel leaped up and over the wooden plank, coming to rest astride the man's downed body, reaching down with one hand to grab his knife hand and the other to grab his head again. "Would you like another lesson?"

The man still tried to fight back, and so Hazel turned, slamming him into a nearby wall twice, then snapped his knife, tossing it away before releasing him to collapse onto his knees. Again, the man's Aura had protected him but Hazel knew his point was made. "Two lessons on manners already. Would you like a third? Or perhaps would you mind listening to the business opportunity I have for you and the Branwen clan?"

All around him, several other people had paused at this, watching closely. A few of them had fingered weapons, including one young, angry-looking woman. But then there was a movement in the dark at the back of the warehouse, a gleam of a mask that almost looked like that of a Grimm and a flash of black hair so black that it stood out even in the shadows. The woman there made some kind of gesture to one side, barely discernable through the shadows.

In response, another man stood up, moving across the rundown warehouse to sit across from Hazel, taking the other man's place. That man retreated in shame, glaring at Hazel all the while as the newcomer announced blandly. "You are strong, and yet you have a request for our clan, something you cannot do?"

"I'm a straight-up fighter. I know next to nothing about woodcraft or tracking, let alone out in the Wilds." At the mention of the Wilds, the new man frowned, his brows furrowing. But Hazel went on undeterred. "Hence why I am interested in paying for you to follow someone who we believe will be taking to the wilds soon. In return, we will provide you with a bit of information as to why this individual is out there, and perhaps, how you can profit from it."

"Information first, and who are we following?" the man answered instantly.

Hazel explained about the Azure Warden and how he had gotten in the way of a criminal operation in Atlas, the cover story that he had given Lil' Miss Malachite to explain his interest in the hunter. After all, even criminal types would probably balk at learning that they were helping someone who worked with Grimm. As he spoke, he kept one eye on the shadows,

wary of Raven Branwen. She was known to him, a former follower of Ozpin who had returned to her tribe of origin after being put through training that even most hunters would believe where too difficult, becoming one of the deadliest warriors on the planet. Her Semblance was also incredibly powerful, uniquely so.

When he finished, the man fell silent, thinking but not looking to Raven for an answer. "The idea of Spartoi once more becoming inhabited is annoying and something we might want to stop and profit from at the expense of the weaklings. Your interest in this Ranma fellow is understandable too."

This was obviously an attempt to buy time until Raven made a decision, but Hazel allowed the man to speak. He paused after only a few more sentences as a sound chimed out from the darkness, a jingle of metal on metal. It was obviously a signal, and the man leaned forward. "What are you willing to pay for this service? The knowledge alone is not enough."

"What do you want?" Hazel gestured around. "You all don't seem to be using money, rather trade goods, so I'm open to suggestions."

"Dust," the man answered instantly. "Dust for a life, as it has always been. We will find and kill this Azure Warden..." The man sneered as if the very idea of someone being called a Warden both amused and disgusted him in turn for some reason. "In return for crates equal to his weight in Dust of at least five varieties, double the amount in Lightning Dust."

For a moment, Hazel thought about just agreeing instantly. That was enough dust to keep the clan going for several years of normal operation, or to fight a small war, but it was nothing to Salem's resources, and at this point, he and Tyrian were so behind the eight ball he wanted to get this part of the operation moving. But when Hazel looked around, he noticed the eyes on him and realized this was another test. If he caved in, if he appeared too needy, he would seem weak once more.

So he responded with a laugh, "Ha! That's hilarious, you think I'm weak enough to need to pay you that amount? Please! Especially considering that there's no guarantee that you will be able to overcome the Azure Warden at all."

That made everyone there growl angrily at him, and even Raven took a step out of the darkness, her chest and upper body appearing there for a moment, speaking aloud for the first time. Her voice was low and rasping as it came out of the mask, a sound as dangerous as its owner. "You overestimate this Warden."

"Perhaps. Or perhaps you and overestimate yourselves. Regardless, I'm not willing to pay that price. I will pay three crates of dust equal to your own weight," he said, pointing at the man across from them. "One of which will be Lightning Dust, and which will be paid only after your part in the bargain. A fair compromise, I feel."



The man across from them turned to look at Raven, and she looked back at him, nodding once before pulling her head back into the shadows. The man turned back to Hazel, and the haggling began. It went on for a few moments, with both of them using histrionics and vitriol and attempts at intimidation, but backed by the rest of his clan, the other man refused to back down as he probably would have with Hazel, and eventually, the deal was struck.

"Will here be acceptable for dropping off the dust in question?" Hazel inquired as he stood up, spat on his palm and shook the man's hand as the man did the same.

"Place a small paper-mâché red star on the window of wherever you keep it. We will remove it afterward," the man answered, standing up and moving into the shadows. There was a sudden color shift, a red gash appearing out of nowhere there. Within seconds, the clan Branwen were gone, including their leader, who was last through, her eyes remaining on Hazel as she backed into the portal she had created.

Several other people in the warehouse began to leave, although one moved towards Hazel, glaring angrily at where the bandit clan had disappeared. "Arrogant bitch! We should be killing her too, she was once a follower of Ozpin! Using Branwen like this is delicious irony, but afterward, we need to kill her too. We must get back in favor, my goddess! Acting like this on Cinder's information is even worse. How dare that bitch show us up again. It should be me who my goddess favors!" he snarled, spittle flying as he spoke. Then Tyrian's eyes glazed over slightly as he looked up at the roof in ecstasy. "Oh, my goddess, how I long to please you, please watch, watch as I do your bidding, as I kill for you."

"Don't worry, when we can present the Azure Warden to her and the maiden powers, Salem will be very pleased," Hazel soothed Tyrian, gesturing to a large backpack he carried. The pack contained several of the small specialized Grimm, which would drain the powers of the maiden, dormant for now but waiting to be used.

Reminded of that, Tyrian controlled himself once more, coming back from whatever red-painted world his mind had inhabited for a moment. Not that his thoughts truly changed direction or anything. He just became a bit more aware of the world around him. "And after? Can we kill Branwen and Malachite?"

"..." Hazel scowled but nodded, annoyed but understanding where the madman was coming from, at least. "Malachite is still going to be useful in the future, so there's no point in killing her now. We might have to deal with underworld types again and killing her would get out. As for Branwen, after we use her and her client, her usefulness will be at an end."

*Always be nice to the crazy man.* Hazel thought as he watched Tyrian grin, his mind going back to his own world once more, smiling politely as he stood up and headed toward the warehouse's entrance. *And maybe if I can put you in danger, your usefulness to our cause will be at an end too...*

OOOOOOO

Heading upriver was slow going but still far faster than walking would have been. Whereas it would have taken even most hunters more than two weeks to cover the distance they traveled, it took the boat five days to reach the place where they would be shifting from the main Mi'strach to a tributary. Doing so they passed through towns and villages occasionally and more especially five of the valleys that made up the nation of Mistral, seeing each defensive line as they did, with Ranma noting that all of the defensive lines, despite not having been used in recent years were well-maintained and manned.

Pyrrha didn't care about that. In the brief moments when she and the others weren't training, she enjoyed the view as they travelled both in the natural areas and the villages, but even that was secondary to the main thing she enjoyed: news of her travelling on the river hadn't spread. As the river barge turned onto the tributary, she and the others were taking a break on Ranma's training. Ren and Nora were going over their weapons, making sure all the parts were oiled and silent as Storm Flower came out of their wrist holders and Magnhild mecha-shifted. Jaune was working out with Ranma, practicing sword strikes as Ranma quizzed them about the type of Grimm they might see.

The redhead had been doing some katas earlier, but now she sat on the edge of the barge, her feet sticking over the side as she kicked them idly. "This has been nice. And the best part is we haven't been stopped by people wanting my photograph!" She bestowed a smile on one of the nearby barge crew. "I have to remember to thank the boat crew when we get to Nike for keeping my presence here a secret. I know it must have been a wrench to ignore the money some scroll-sites offer for information about my whereabouts."

"Heh, just goes to show that sometimes people really will understand that celebrities need privacy too, and will maybe put what's right over what will bring them money," Ranma said virtuously.

Pyrrha laughingly agreed, then hopped to her feet. "I think I'm going to go down to help with dinner. I'll call you all down when its ready."

Behind her, Jaune waited until Pyrrha had gone below before turning to give the same bargeman a look then turning that look on Ranma. "You didn't tell Pyrrha you threatened to remove their livers if the barge crew told anyone Pyrrha was aboard?"

"Meh, I figured a good deed is best done without tooting my own horn," Ranma quipped, shrugging his shoulders. "Besides, so long as the barge crew keep their word, they won't have to worry about how there's no anesthetics aboard as I remove critical bits of their anatomy. In which case, no one need know how I threatened him."

The bargemen within hearing all flinched, but continued going about their work without saying anything, sending him wary looks occasionally.

Another day passed, trailing from one even smaller Valley to another even smaller one, until Pyrrha woke them all up at dawn on a day after they had all been rained on the day before. The shock of Pyrrha being awake without someone having to hurry her along, was one thing, the smile she was wearing as she chivvied them all up onto the main deck made it even worse. All her friends were looking her as if Pyrrha had been replaced by a pod person, and she laughed. "I know it's odd, but look, we're here, the Valley of Nike!"

She pointed ahead of them, and Ranma saw the barge was about to pass under another defensive wall. This one looked old and was covered with vines, many of which drooped down into the air right above the river, causing Nora to laugh as they passed through. The AA gun up top still looked in good shape though.

Beyond that, the forest they had been passing through for the last hour shifted into a more open area, with larger but less numerous trees. In the distance through those trees, they could see a few houses scattered around the river, all of them massive two-story affairs with stone walls and outer walls protecting inner courtyards.

Here and there was evidence that sometime in the past, no more than ten years ago, the area had been ravaged by battle. A furrow there, a broken wall here. And yet, the people had very obviously rebuilt.

Most of the farms seemed to be orchard or herd-based rather than field, and there were people around working some of the trees, a few of whom stopped and watched the barge, waving at it as the barge neared. Accompanying several of them were large, powerful looking dogs who didn't bark, simply watching or helping in various ways around the area. This wasn't the first time Ranma had seen dogs helping like this on this trip but there seemed to be more of them here.

"So, your ancestors started here?" Ren questioned, always interested in history.

Pyrrha nodded. "My father's family were once headman of the Valley. When Mistral began to grow, we joined them willingly, and branches of our family began to move out after Pinnea, the last valley we passed through, finally capitulated. My father's generation are the first ones to have really moved entirely away from here, but my grandfather's house has been in the family for years, and thankfully, my great uncle has been keeping it up. You'll all like him I think and the locals."

Every other time they'd been near people before this, Pyrrha had pulled a hood Ranma had procured for her over her head to hide her features. Here however she was actually dressed in her new armor, standing at the front of the barge, her red sash floating gently in the wind, a sharp contrast to how she would normally be worried about her fame.

When Jaune called her out on this, Pyrrha shrugged. "I've never really minded my fame here, it's always been more like I'm a local girl who made it in the big city or something like

that, I'm not famous because of what I've done, I'm famous here because I'm famous elsewhere but am from here. Does that make sense?"

"Not particularly, but I think we can get the gist," Ren said dryly, while Nora waved to a group of farmers as they passed through an area made mostly of different types of trees.

At a word from two older women, several young boys and girls poked their heads down from the group trees where they had been plucking some kind of fruit from, and see Pyrrha, they all instantly dropped to the ground, shouting, "Pyrrha, Kalós órises spíti (welcome home)!"

"Geia sto vale tou nike! (Hello to the vale of Nike)!"

She shouted back in the same ancient tongue, waving her hands before greeting several of the children by name, saying "You've all grown so big since the last time I was here."

As Pyrrha continued to chatter happily away with the kids, with Nora joining in occasionally by teasing her, word of their arrival spread quickly. By the time they pulled up to the docks, a small thing here, but well-maintained, like the defenses they had seen, an elderly redheaded man was there. He was very old, his ginger hair mostly white with only a few spots showing its original color, and his skin was wrinkled and tanned, the kind of skin you got from working outside every day for decades. He walked with a limp, but his eyes were still clear, and his grin, which showed a few missing teeth, was bright and welcoming.

"Great uncle Alexander!" Pyrrha leaped off the barge, picking up the man in an exuberant hug, causing him and several of the other locals to laugh.

Next to the man were several massive dogs. Like the others they had seen in the vale, these were not pampered pets. These were guard and work dogs shaggy and large, big enough maybe to fight a Beowulf one-on-one. And when Pyrrha set her great uncle down she rushed them, again naming each of them, so fast Ranma couldn't make it out as the dwarves, at a single sharp whistle, leaped forward, taking Pyrrha off her feet as they started to lick and headbutt her into submission in pure doggy exuberance.

Seeing this, Nora bounced up from her place by the stern, clearing several dozen yards to land nearby. "Charge! For the floop and goodness!" With that she charged forward, and was soon delightedly wrestling with the dogs, with Jaune joining her. Ranma and Ren both looked at one another, then shook their heads, helping Thetis and the others ashore for a moment as several of the young kids joined in with a few other dogs following into what was rapidly becoming a large mosh pit of kids and dogs.

It took several minutes for the laughing locals to restore some order, with the older Nikos taking charge, barking out orders to the grinning locals. "What are you all doing, there's work to be done. Tie up the boat, and those supplies out, hop to it!" Turning away, he looked down at Pyrrha, smiling gently at her. Pyrrha hadn't been back to Nike in more than three years

now, and then it had only been for a few days. The last time she'd stayed here for any length of time was when she was young, where she spent several months here before she began training for the adult level tournament.

It did his old heart good to see her so happy and content her, away from the glamour of Athenia and demands of her life as a champion. *And I'm glad that the dogs remembered her somehow too. I think she would have been saddened beyond belief if they hadn't.* "How long are you able to stay, child?"

Pyrrha looked over to Ranma, who smirked and helped her to her feet despite the weight of one of the dogs trying to keep her on her rear, the dog stumbling to his feet and moving away reluctantly. "Not long I'm afraid. We'll spend the night, and then will have to push on over the Valley and out into the Grimm Lands. We're part of a plan we can't legally tell you much about, but it uses the word reclaim, and deals with an old city whose name begins with S."

"Wow, you're really trying to keep that secret, I can tell," Ren snorted shaking his head while Jaune laughed, looking up from where a few local girls had gathered around him asking questions about his blond hair. He was the only blonde there, and that seemed to fascinate the locals, who had brown and black and ginger hair.

"Over the mountains..." the old man frowned, shaking his head. "I... that will take you into the Grimm Lands. How are young Hunters like you being allowed on a mission out there at all? You are still in school, aren't you, my memory's not that bad."

"We, er, that is, I was kind of roped into being part of this operation as its poster girl. The mission we're actually on is something Ranma came up with, but which I basically refused to let him do on his own. It was my idea to come here, so we could enter the Grimm Lands from an angle that would let us bypass several of the known hot spots and get behind the... the area where the main portion of the mission is supposed to happen." While being more than willing to talk about why they had gotten this mission, Pyrrha wasn't willing to be so cavalier about the mission itself.

The old man looked over at Thetis who scowled then shrugged her shoulders. He sighed then turned back to Pyrrha. "Well, I suppose if you are old enough to go to war against the Grimm, I can't stop you from making your own decisions. But while I have said it before child, I will say it again now." He reached over and ruffled Pyrrha's crimson locks. "If you ever wish to walk away from your days as a Tournament fighter, and now as a Huntress, you will always have a home waiting for you here."

The wide smile on Pyrrha's face needed no words and the man chuckled, waving his hands at them all. "Go on, show your friends around the area. We'll be putting on a large feast tonight for your arrival."

That night, Ranma sat on the porch smiling as one of the large dogs laid next to him, having apparently decided to adopt Ranma for the duration of his stay. Nearby he could see Ren and Jaune, talking to the locals, with Nora dancing nearby with a dozen kids and teens in some kind of mad dance.

He looked up though as Pyrrha moved, waving goodbye to a few of the locals as she moved towards him, carrying a tray of food and two cups of wine. Ranma had noticed that most of the locals were well old or young. There didn't seem to be many middle-aged people like Pyrrha's parents or Thetis here. There were several teens though, and young men who hadn't been able to get away from the farm, for one reason or another. Others were apparently part of the local guard force, who watched over the valley's edges, making certain that no Grimm could get over the mountains or the walls that protected them. Despite that though, this place, there was something really homey and welcoming about this whole valley and looking at the smiles on the rest of JNPR, Ranma knew he wasn't the only one thinking that.

He smiled as Pyrrha sat down on the side opposite of the dog, leaning against his shoulder. "Hungry?"

"Already ate, but thanks." Despite his words Ranma took a few berries from the tray and a slab of bread, dipping it into oil. Oil, olives, grapes and wine were the main export of the valley, and were why it could afford up to date defenses and the Dust to work them.

Pyrrha gulped down a bit of the wine, setting it aside and leaning in to kiss Ranma's neck, humming in delight as Ranma turned to kiss her in turn. When they pulled back, she leaned away slightly, taking another bit from the tray. "So, what do you think?"

"I like it here. This kind of place, its where I could see myself retiring," Ranma laughed. "If I was doing a job that I would want to retire from, anyway."

"Oh? You don't ever see yourself walking away from being a Hunter?" Pyrrha asked slowly. "Settling down somewhere, maybe teaching for an actual career instead of as a stepping stone to getting something else?"

"Hmm... maybe? I suppose at one point I thought that becoming a dojo master was my future. I could see myself doing that, although I doubt I'd teach young kids, it'd be so boring I'd bite me own arm off to escape. And then there would be their parents, complaining about how I was training their kids. Ugh." Ranma smirked as Pyrrha giggled, shaking her head and leaning against him further, causing him to breath in her scent for a moment. "But well, maybe more experienced students, like you lot were at Beacon. Only I would want to choose my students, and keep the classes small. But um, there's the whole evil Over-Grimm or whatever out there so I don't see myself settling down anytime soon."

"But you wouldn't mind trying it, if you could?" Pyrrha asked, smiling up at him winsomely.

Ranma knew however that the question was a lot more important than it looked like at first glance. "I... yeah, I wouldn't mind coming back here, trying whatever you wanted us to," he answered, throat suddenly dry for some reason.

Smiling at that Pyrrha leaned in to kiss him, before pulling back. The two of them sat for a time, just talking about random things, while around them the night went on. When Pyrrha finally looked around once more, she noticed that most of the locals were already heading to bed, including her great uncle. And Nora and Ren had already disappeared to one of the guest houses near the river. Jaune also was nowhere to be seen, but last Pyrrha saw her team leader he was speaking with one of the local girls, a young lass named Marianne, if Pyrrha remembered right.

Thetis was an exception. she and her apprentices were busy in the local smithy, finalizing Pyrrha's weapon before tomorrow. She had already okayed each of the mecha-shift shapes though, so didn't need to be involved in the process. And Pyrrha had other plans for tonight. With that in mind, she stood up, pulling Ranma to his feet. "It's time to turn in, I think. Come on."

#### **Lime Start:**

With a faint smile, Ranma kept his arm around Pyrrha's waist as the two of them walked to her bedroom, stopping as they reached the door. He was about to say goodnight, but Pyrrha reached out and opened the door to the guest room she always used when she was here, pulling him inside. Ranma followed in some bemusement, then Pyrrha kissed him, pulling him deeper into the room, turning them so that she could close the door behind him and lock it firmly.

Ranma heard the click, and his eyes opened wide as he pulled away from the kiss quickly. "Pyrrha, what..."

"We won't be going all the way, and my panties aren't coming off," Pyrrha said matter-of-factly, so much so that if she wasn't also fidgeting and looking away with a red flush to her cheeks, Ranma would have been fooled. That faded instantly as Ranma's arms wound around her, pulling her into him, causing Pyrrha to squeak before going on much more stutteringly. "But, while on the trip here, well, my aunt gave me some ideas, and, un, we're going to head out into the wilds. So, I thought that maybe, that is, um doing something new and interesting, might be fun..."

Pyrrha hated that her voice trailed off the end there, but she needn't have worried. While Ranma was fully willing to let her take the lead, he was more than happy to take things a little further than they already had.

With that in mind, he swooped in, kissing her on the lips as he lifted her up by her rear, something that he had wanted to do for several days now. Being at the back of the party had

worked best in instructing them on how to move silently, but it also let Pyrrha tease him unmercifully with her skirt-clad rear, which annoyed him almost as much as the lack of privacy on the barge.

Giggling against his lips, Pyrrha wrapped her long legs around his waist, whimpering a bit as she felt Ranma's reaction rising against her. The kiss turned ardent, their mouths open, their tongues twisting around one another in her mouth. Ranma gently laid her down on the bed, and Pyrrha took the opportunity to start to control the kiss, turning them around so that he was laying down on the bed first, and she was on top of him.

Pyrrha slowly pushed away from the kiss, sitting upright with her legs on either side of his waist. Then, she reached behind her and started to unzip her blouse, tossing it aside. The moment she did, Ranma's hands moved from where they had been on her thighs up to her stomach, running fingers up it to her right under her bra, looking into her face all the while. She nodded, and Ranma's hands closed on her bra-clad chest, squeezing, his thumb flicking and slowly moving around the delicate nub he could barely feel through the fabric.

Whimpering at the entirely new sensations Ranma was giving her, Pyrrha slid her hands down her Ranma's chest to where shirt and pants met, pulling the shirt up. This caused Ranma to sit up. Kissing her again, one arm went around her back, as the other reached behind him and started to pull up a shirt before leaning back and pulling it entirely off, tossing it aside in turn.

The two of them continued to kiss as Pyrrha wrapped her legs around Ranma's waist once more, allowing her to grind her core against his rising shaft, which started to twitch. One of his hands moved down to her rear again, fondling and kneading it, pushing her harder against him. Pulling back from the kiss, Pyrrha giggled, shaking her head as she bit her lip, looking into Ranma's eyes from a bare few inches, their breath washing over one another's lips. "You really do like my rear, don't you?"

"I like all of you, Pyrrha. But you've been using your rear to tease me the last few days. I think the least I can do is fondle the heck out of it now that you're letting me," Ranma retorted.

That caused Pyrrha to laugh, and she muttered about how he should blame that Cinder woman for giving her the idea and her aunt for encouraging her. Then she reached down, unclipping her skirt and tossing it aside, with Ranma taking the opportunity to pull back a bit to shimmy out of his pants. Taking them off became a problem, as Pyrrha wasn't willing to move, leaning down and kissing him again, but when Ranma started to take command of the kiss and turn them to the side, she became more submissive, unwilling just yet to move to another position, and he was able to lift her off his waist for long enough to pull his pants down and take them away.

Then he slowly pulled away from the kiss, kissing down her neck and nibbling there, leaving a hickey very deliberately as he stared down at her cleavage. Still clad in her somewhat



straightlaced bra, there was still a good bit of skin on display from directly above, and he leaned down to kiss her collarbone, breathing in the scent of her as Pyrrha cooed in delight at the touch.

At that sight, Ranma was almost tempted to push things. To let his hands, which had come to rest underneath her breasts, just push up, to lift the bra out of the way to get at the rose-capped hills within. But Ranma didn't, instead, the captain to the rules that Pyrrha had set out, leaning down to nibble on her bra-clad breast, biting a little harder than he would have otherwise for the sensation to get through.

It worked, and Pyrrha moaned loudly, a stark contrast to her earlier whimpers and moans. Ranma could feel his cock twitch at the sound, almost popping out of his fly.

But Ranma wasn't done exploring his lover yet. Instead, turned them around so that Pyrrha was laying down, with Ranma sitting to one side of her. Pulling away from her chest, Ranma leaned down again and kissed her navel, then across her toned, taut stomach in several spots, delighting in the muscles he could feel there. Then he trailed his fingers further downward.

For a moment, Pyrrha watched him, a small part of her wanting to stop him. That part was probably her self-control, but as turned on as the redhead was, the best Pyrrha could do was to grab his hair, tugging on the pigtail, until their eyes met.

Then Ranma smiled at her, shaking his head, his tone both teasing and soothing as he spoke. "You said the underwear would stay on. You never said anything about touching you over the underwear."

Gulping, Pyrrha nodded, and Ranma continued his journey down her body until he was leaning over directly over her panties from the side. Then, he leaned down and kissed her very deliberately while his fingers began to trace down the panties, then pressing them against the moist wet slit he could feel within.

The sensation caused another moan from Pyrrha, muffled this time by Ranma's mouth on hers but far louder. A second later, she arched her back upward, her hips thrusting towards the sky. No one had ever touched her down there before, and while Pyrrha was no stranger to masturbation, the sensuality of the moment and Ranma's earlier kisses and touches were far more than she had ever felt before, even through the clothing.

Fumbling to one side, she found Ranma's own underwear, then traced up his thigh to Ranma's hardened shaft, pressing her palm against it, marveling at the size of it. His penis came out just a bit past her own fingers as she set the palm of her hand at the bottom where she felt his balls, and although his girth was harder to measure, it certainly felt thicker than Pyrrha's three fingers.

For a few moments, the two of them continued this game, kissing hard, Ranma's tongue flicking against Pyrrha's, investigating her mouth to the best of his abilities, while Ranma continued to stroke her panties up and down, and Pyrrha continued to palm his cock, letting it bounce forward once more before she started to give him a hand job through his underwear.

This couldn't go on for long. Both teens were too new to the sensations they were feeling right now. Moments later, it was Pyrrha who reached the end of her endurance first. She pulled away from Ranma's kiss, pushing him away with one hand as she closed her mouth, clapping her other hand over it, to keep in the loud moan Pyrrha made as she released. Her hips once again rose up off of her mattress as she came, the line wetness on her panties spreading quickly.

Ranma grinned down at her, removing his finger from where he had just circled her clit, and then pinched it through her panties up her body, circling her tummy for a moment, causing her to giggle weakly and smack his hand away. "Enjoyed that, did you?" he asked, smiling slightly smugly. It was the first time he ever got a girl off, after all.

Laughing, Pyrrha, leaning up to kiss him, then a sudden thought occurred to her. And she flopped back dramatically. "I did, but my legs and head arms are a bit too wobbly at the moment for me to want to continue. You're going to have to do all the work for yourself."

Brow furrowed, Ranma was about to protest that when she turned over onto her stomach, wiggling her rump at him, biting her lip again as she looked over her shoulder at him. "My Aunt calls it hotdogging for some reason?"

Ranma's brows drew together again in confusion, but he couldn't tear his eyes away from her rear or her magnificent legs. Then the name registered, and his mind, fully basted in his own arousal at the moment, actually came up with the correct image, and he chuckled before moving behind her. There, he allowed his cock to pop out of his fly, resting it on her panty-covered rear.

Feeling this, Pyrrha giggled, staring over her shoulder in unabashed interest, reflecting that her earlier estimation of Ranma's size was a bit off: he looked slightly thicker than Pyrrha had thought. Yet the sight of his penis aroused her a bit more, causing her to twitch her rear back against his shaft. Pyrrha's voice came out throaty as she whispered, "Well, what are you waiting for?"

Meeting no second urging now, Ranma began to work his hips backward and forwards, his cock between her butt cheeks, feeling the sensation of her panties against him, the toned yet supple nature of her rear causing Ranma to groan. "Fuuuck, Pyrrha!"

Somehow the sensation of her rear being fondled and used like this and Ranma's simple words caused Pyrrha to also moan, and Ranma leaned over, kissing her. The angle was a bit awkward for Pyrrha, her neck twisting backward and around, but even so, the added sensation

of Ranma's tongue once more against her own caused her to raise her hips and thrust them back against Ranma's in a rhythm, the two of them once more pumping against one another in this position.

Despite having a few moments to cool off, Ranma was still quite near the edge after Pyrrha's earlier ministrations. It didn't take him long to start thrusting all the harder, his hips going in a friend, until pulling back with a groan, he came, covering Pyrrha's rear and lower back with white gunk.

Spent, he flopped down on top of her, and Pyrrha giggled, cheerfully pushing back against him again. She hadn't quite reached a second orgasm of her own but was willing to let Ranma rest if he needed to.

He didn't, of course. Indeed, Ranma took her little giggle at his expense as a challenge. The two of them continued through the night, never crossing the line but coming very close until they both mutually decided to call it a night. They did, after all, have an early day of it tomorrow.

### **Lime End**

Needless to say, their activities last night made it even harder than normal to get Pyrrha up the next morning, although Ranma did have a certain amount of fun tickling his semi-naked girlfriend until she woke up enough to fight back.

However, walking outside to find her Great Uncle Alexander waiting for them was not as fun. For a moment, despite knowing he could break the old man in half one handed, Ranma quailed at the look he gave Ranma. then Alexander smirked looking over at Pyrrha. "Is this man your man by choice, Pyrrha?"

When Pyrrha nodded firmly and wrapped herself around one of Ranma's arms, he smiled, his look of anger disappearing. "Good. I trust you know that if you hurt her, you'll have me to answer to, yes? And I won't fight you fair and square. Even you hunters need to eat after all, and you'd be surprised how much I know about plants and what a few supposedly inedible ones can do to a man if they find their way into his food."

"And that's just plain scary. Still, no worries about that. We wouldn't be together at all if we weren't serious. Both of us," Ranma answered, with Pyrrha nodding firm agreement.

Alexander stared at the boy, then slowly nodded, liking the look in Ranma's eyes. Pyrrha too seemed serious about him, indeed, the look on her face as she looked at Ranma was the same Alexander had once seen in his wife, Olympia. She had been dead now for a year, gods bless her soul, but Alexander could nearly feel her fingers tugging at his ear demanding what he was thinking about, trying to threaten two people so obviously in love.

“Good. Come back safe then, the both of you, and like I said, you’ll always find a welcome here.” With that he clapped his hands on their shoulders and turned away, whistling sharply for his dogs as he headed to the other side of the farm to see to his trees. There was work to be done, after all.

When they eventually joined Ren, Jaune and Nora at the picnic table outside, it became quickly apparent that Pyrrha and Ranma were not the only ones who had spent the night experimenting. Jaune looked the most rested, and he was looking at the two couples at the table with beady eyes, his face puckered up in some annoyance and concern. But Ranma waved him off, saying aloud, "I see we all had a good night last night. But out in the wild, that kind of thing isn't going to fly. I want your game faces on when we cross that border, understood?"

Nora looked as if someone had given her candy. She was hopping all over the place, even though her lips looked almost bruised from too much kissing, and Ranma could spot several hickeys on her neck and forearms. "Roger that, bossy Warden! Just don't forget the cold pancakes, or else there will be trouble."

Ranma laughed, and Pyrrha giggled, staring at Ren, who was slumped over in his chair, his head on the table, right beside his plate. It was only thanks to a hasty push from Jaune that it was beside the plate rather than on. He looked as if death warmed over but roused himself a bit as one of the farmhands placed a cup of coffee in front of his face. Before the woman could turn away, Ren had drunk the whole thing, despite the fact it was still hot and thrust it back into the young girl's hands with a polite, "Another, please."

Judging by the look the woman gave Jaune and a blush on his face as she walked away, Jaune might have gotten some action last night, too, Ranma reflected. But he ignored that for now, letting the conversation wash over them. It seemed as if the entire population of the tiny valley had come out to wish Pyrrha and her friends well.

Finally, as the plates were being cleared away, Ranma decided the others were as energetic as they would get. He exchanged a glance with Pyrrha, who picked up her new weapon, nodding in reply. Thetis had handed it to her that morning without any fanfare as they were eating, and then walked off looking like a zombie and muttering about paying for the local smithy to be upgraded whatever her husband said about the cost, nearly stumbling into Shen's arms.

The weapon in question, which Pyrrha had named *Vrychómai* (Roar), was generally the same configuration as the original Milo. However, it was larger in each configuration. The gun was now a sniper rifle with a semi-automatic option, the caliber half again as large as it was before. The Xiphos had been enlarged into a *spatha* and was also a bit heavier. The spear form, originally the length of a javelin, was the same though thicker to allow for the larger caliber bullet and longer by a foot.

But the most interesting thing was two small metal cylinders set near the center of the mecha-shift weapon. They looked like a bit of decoration on the weapon regardless of which form it was in but within were two things. One contained dozens of small, metal darts. Each of them were thinner than a razor, and smaller than a nail, packed in rows of ten each. In the other, was a vial of blood, donated by Ranma and Pyrrha both, mixed and set in a metal vacuum tube. Offense and defense, surprises that no one, even someone who knew about her Semblance, would expect.

Ranma stared at the weapon for a moment, then looked up into Pyrrha's jade eyes. They kept that stare for a moment, then as one looked away, both smiling as Ranma tapped the table, getting the other's attention before gesturing with his head. "Time we were off troops."

Reluctantly, the others pushed themselves away from the table, and after another round of farewells, Ranma led the way over to the local Bullhead. It took them up into the mountains, a very quick trip here, considering how small the valley was, where the simple walls had been built, marked by anti-air guns placed here and there on them. The Bullhead set down well inside the wall so that its noise wouldn't attract attention, and Ranma led the others toward the wall, hopping up and over it easily.

The others did the same, and soon all five of them were moving back down on the other side of the mountains. Within minutes, the last sight of the wall disappeared behind them, and they were moving deeper into the heart of the Grimm Lands.

### **End Episode 5, Chapter 20.**

This was the final episode before we race into the action. I would estimate at least five, six episodes would give me enough to finish the action, then another one, maybe two before we get to the point where I can finish this story.